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## First Generation Africans in the 21st Century “A young Somali American’s journey growing up in Atlanta, GA”

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## First Generation Africans in the 21st Century

*“A young Somali American’s journey growing up in Atlanta, GA”*

Biibi Aweys Muse



## Statement of Purpose

“At the heart of this thinking is the realization by [B]lacks that the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” (Steve Biko, 1971).

I have no desire to be sweet

soft

supple

If I was to be either of these things,

God would've made me a fruit,

But instead, he made me

a

**Black** w o man

**Keywords:** Nigrescence, identity formation, Endarkened Feminist Epistemology, First-generation, Black Atlantic, race, gender, Blackness, Refugees, Immigration, colonization

## I: Introduction

As the daughter of Somali refugees, I was made aware that home for my family was a place they had to forcefully leave behind, and I was being tasked with discovering my own identity in the face of being born “American.” My access to American citizenship did not mean much to me as a child other than having access to welfare benefits and being teased by my siblings born outside of the United States (U.S.) for it often. My mother has 11 children, 8 girls and 3 boys, and I am her tenth child. She had five children in Somalia before the war, two while living in a Kenyan refugee camp, and four in Dekalb County, Georgia after she came to the US. There are 13 of us including my parents and my oldest sister is 18 years older than I am. I have one sister who is two years older than me and one sister who is four and a half years younger than I am. Growing up with a family that large most times feels like a gift and a curse, and I didn't always have words to describe the things I witnessed and experienced.

With age, and my time at Macalester, I have been able to come to terms with my transnational identity and gain a better understanding of the physical, as well as the psychological places my family and I come from. Despite often feeling lost and displaced within my familial and educational journey, these experiences allowed me to see the new ways of knowing that I have access to in the West, potential identities that can make me feel whole. My experiences at Macalester opened the door to the various amounts of scholarly works, including those related to race and identity formation, that highlighted how my experiences as a first-generation Somali American were neither new nor isolated. At the start of my research, I realized that my experiences as a racialized human being were simply a small piece of a very large puzzle.

The creation of a form of Blackness on the international stage and the discourse between Africans and the diaspora has existed for hundreds of years. In this paper, I will explore my own experiences as a first-generation Somali American in the U.S. as a microcosm of the long and mostly violent history of Africans crossing the Atlantic into the “New World” while highlighting how the African diaspora has maintained their heritage and spirit through various forms of passive and active resistance. Furthermore, I will focus on the impacts this has on community formation for recently displaced

people with the existing Black population, and the relationship these people in turn have with their new state.

## **II: The Nigrescence Paradigm and Becoming Black<sup>1</sup>**

As a Black woman, I am constantly facing the reality that there are different types of Black people and wondering if and how the lived experiences we have link us together outside modern nation-states. For this paper, I will use my lived experience as a means of highlighting how the fifth step of the William Cross' Nigrescence Theory<sup>2</sup> is necessary for African descendants and their survival, especially as it pertains to our climate concerns. Some of the questions I will be posing include: How do the lived experiences of Black people, especially in response to the violence and brutality in the face of colonization and settler colonialism, white supremacy and racial injustice, and capitalism compare and contrast the different ways humans worked towards globalization over the centuries? What commentary is there on the process of racialization and how can it be expanded into a potential contemporary Pan-Africanist mindset? What is the Black experience as it relates to African refugees who are seeking asylum in the West? What relationship(s) existed between Africans and the diaspora previously? How does the process of racialization and the overwhelming expectation of assimilation in turn impact first-generation youth born outside of their ancestral homelands?

## **III: Black internationalism<sup>3</sup>**

The 19th century saw a multitude of African descendants in conversation with one another on the fluidity of a Black identity they began to develop in response to white supremacy and colonization. This process of African people becoming Black is representative of the thought process of those who were forcefully enslaved grappling with their newfound reality. Those of African descent who had been removed from their ancestral homelands were able to engage in discourse on the impacts the colonial sphere had and continues to have on them. One of those people happened to be Jane Nardal, a woman who inspired creation of the Negritude Movement in France, which

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<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon *Black Skin White Mask* (1952)

<sup>2</sup> Refer to page 6 for a detailed explanation of the Nigrescence Theory.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Nardal's Essay *Black Internationalism*

was a movement that was led by Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas and the former Senegalese President Léopold Senghor. The movement was an anti-colonial, cultural, and political movement founded by African and Caribbean students in Paris in the 1930s as a means of reclaiming the importance of African culture and Blackness while also critiquing imperialism and imperial art to establish a new world that was forward looking concepts and developments in art expression. Their vision was to encourage African people to question the “French doctrine of civilizing and assimilating their black colonial subjects” (Elnaiem, 2020) the same way Africans did in the Americas. Nardal highlights that the end of the first World War when they “brought blacks together, it was only to share a sense of disillusionment. They were no longer just colonial subjects but exile, dispossession, and the expectation to assimilate brought about new forms of self-identification of blacks” (Elnaiem 2020).

In 1928, Jane Nardal published an essay called Black Internationalism. In this essay, Nardal analyzes how and why Black people went from identifying as “negro” to calling themselves “Afro-American / Afro Latin.” Jane Nardal also had 6 sisters, and all of the sisters ran a salon in Paris that centered discourse on Black identity. The Nardal sisters: Paulette, Jane, Emilie, Alice, Lucy, Cécile and Andrée are remembered for “the intellectual and activist legacy initiated by their parents [...] [Nardal Sisters reinvigorated] this legacy with a pan-African lens that was informed by the 1920 Harlem Renaissance which would go on to inspire the Negritude Movement in the 1930s catalyzed by the sisters” (Mora, 2022). The sisters were in conversation with Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), a Martinican psychiatrist and philosopher who was also the student of Aime Cesaire became “one of the most influential writers in black Atlantic theory in an age of anti-colonial liberation struggle” (Drabinski 2019) and William Cross (1940), an American theorist who conducted significant research on Black and racial-ethnic identity development. These researchers are only a few examples of the ways Black and white people, with more proximity to institutions of wealth in the west, can look at the impact of racialization on African people and the nuances of identity. across borders.

As forcefully kidnapped African descendants in the West were coming to form their own identity development process, Africans who were still on the continent were tasked with finding ways that they could produce and regain autonomy and agency on

their side of the colonial project. Colonial powers systematically decimated the African continent since the arrival of the Dutch and the English in southern Africa in 1652. From King Leopold of Belgium and the historical accounts of the atrocities he committed in what we now refer to as the Congo to the facilitation of "The Scramble for Africa" (1885-1914) and "The New Imperialism" (1870-1914) that resulted in Europe acquiring significant amounts of control overseas. There is a multitude of scholarship on the sheer destruction European powers and their control has caused in Africa, Asia, and the Americas and for my paper I am focusing on how this has influenced the mindset of African people today entering the U.S. as refugees. More specifically speaking, I will look at how contemporary understanding of Pan-Africanism has promoted transnational discussions between African people in the West and the East to take proactive steps toward defining the ways that African people can exist outside of the colonial carnage they've been left with.

In his book, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon considers the conditions "Black" people grow through psychologically, especially as they are introduced to whiteness. He remarks on the role language, bodily schema, and psyche play in the traumatic experiences that force one to become Black because of the lived experiences they've had to endure. I found Fanon's work to be particularly captivating because I could see overlap with Cross' Nigrescence Paradigm and viewed it as a transnational perspective. This theory of Nigrescence, also recognized as the four/five stages of identity development, is the process in which someone "becomes Black". Cross specifically studies African Americans engaging in encounters that begin their identity development process. This theory is considered foundational to today's psychological conversations and has been used to analyze the ways people gain consciousness of their socially constructed identities. Progress along this spectrum isn't linear and tends to be extremely emotional for the people involved. The process of becoming a racialized being is honestly so fucked up to even wrap my head around in large part because I see how much it manages to completely derail and uproot the lives of people who have no other option. The choice to identify as Black has always been a political one, looking at the history of the US will clearly show you that. However, the ability to then use that identity to connect with Black people domestically and internationally is where I see a

shift in my generation's identity development. Factors like social media have allowed people to feel a sense of closeness and community that is attractive to people who feel as though they have lost themselves. With an increase in the number of African people migrating to the US, it is apparent to me that first the Black Atlantic is still going on and second, it will impact how the West manages to move forward especially as crises in Africa continue to develop and/or worsen.

While Fanon, the Nardal sisters, and Cross pushed forward with the intellectual and psychological development of displaced colonized people, Pan-Africanism can be seen as a tangible social movement to unite all Africans who have been deemed as Black from around the globe, while also giving them the chance to have a place of origin. Pan-Africanism, or the idea that peoples of African descent have common interests and should be unified, can be seen as an umbrella term for the internalization of race and the need for a committed plan of execution.

This social movement, coupled with the 5th stage of the Nigrescence Paradigm, is where I believe First-Generation Africans are tasked with finding meaning in their transnational identity. The Nigrescence Paradigm discusses the emergence of Black consciousness development in late 1960s in response to the Black Power Movement. The Nigrescence Paradigm theorizes and outlines the numerous pathways that African people and the diaspora confront and react to once they are racialized in five steps. For my paper, I will look specifically at the difference between Step 4: Internalization and Step 5: Internalization-Commitment of the Paradigm is crucial to one's understanding of how to navigate the tumultuous feelings that come with this process while also encouraging forward movement. My interpretation of the fifth stage helped me recognize the necessity in producing a multifaceted Black community with some type of obligation to said community. This obligation is based on the idea that there is strength in numbers and necessary for Black people facing and responding to structural oppression around the globe. This is important because of the tendency for people to be racialized based on appearance. First-generation Africans are in unique positions to try and acquire the American dream and tend to gravitate towards education as a means of harnessing traditional forms of success.



#### **IV: Predominantly White College from the POV of a Racialized Refugee**

As a child who was raised in the United States, I was made to believe that college would be a steppingstone for me in the workplace and career. My time at Macalester has revealed that institutions of wealth have the potential to be glass doors for those who come from vulnerable backgrounds. With the added layer of being the child of refugees, the need to find some type of stability within day-to-day life is masked by my ability to be a great “member of society” and how much I am able to produce. Something I had to realize and come to terms with is that Macalester exists as a microcosm of the existence and history of wealth in the United States. As someone who is low income, I have always been tasked with acquiring money without being able to witness what real wealth looked like, let alone what it would feel like. I had yet to find words capable of explaining and naming the internal turmoil that Black people go through trying to make ends meet within a capitalist structure built on their dehumanization. I realize that my time in Higher Ed has made me significantly bitter with constantly feeling as though I am not entitled to being a human being.

With the political landscape that I am currently forced to exist within, I realize that my humanity has been taken from me in every system and every structure that currently exists within this world. I find solace in knowing that other people are positioned as “Black” and as “women” recognize that these social constructs and identities can be new ways for us to dismantle the racial capital system we are being suppressed by. The work of Dr. Cynthia B. Dillard’s *Endarkened Feminist Epistemology* (EFE), is a transnational Black feminist approach to “healing, identity development, cultural histories, spirituality and the evolution of the phenomenon over time” (Militz-Frielink, 2017). Dillard created the EFE as a teaching and research paradigm in 2000 and centered it on four frameworks: Black feminist thought (Hill-Collins, 1990); standpoint theory (Harding, 1987); the tenets of African American spirituality; and the work of Parker J. Palmer (1983) on non-religious spirituality in education. I believe that the power of this methodology is the ability to actualize and make meaning out of the experiences that I have as a Black woman in Higher Ed and what that means for Black people in the position of any type of whiteness and wealth anywhere in the world. Dillard had intentions of this paradigm also being used to also “work toward the formation of

new paradigms without compromising one's spiritual, cultural, or historical roots" (Militz-Frielink 2017).

I found it powerful that Dillard places healing and the emancipatory needs of Black women are constantly denied at the base of all academic pursuits. The deliberate use of the word "endarkened" in Dillard's work is meant to contrast with white feminisms term "enlightened" to "articulate how reality is known when based on the historical roots of Black feminist thought, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socialization of race, gender, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African American women" (Dillard, 2006b).

As first-generation Africans attempt to become American, I believe that they are also tasked with the choice of assimilation. I have been forced to bear witness to the continuous direct messaging presented to me throughout my educational experience in the US (K-12) telling me to choose western traditional forms of success grounded in capitalism. This was done without considering whether my specific cultural heritage and background could support me reaching this version of success. The power of the EFE is rooted in the ability to contradict the ways that academia can be elitist in its attempt to suppress black and brown voices. This paradigm is a way of taking back power, by redefining what we consider to be valuable while simultaneously allowing people who struggle to find value within their racist, sexist, and classist society. I view the EFE as a contemporary branch of the Pan-Africanist school of thought that centers non-men and creates the opportunity for Endarkened (African) people transnationally to find some type of unification in their imminent racialization, especially in the face of globalization. Globalization captures the scope of the economic and social changes that have come about as a result of the advancement in trade and technology that had made the work more connected and interdependent.

### **V: Somali People Reckon with Police Brutality**

On May 25th, 2020, Derrick Chauvin brutally murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota while being recorded by Darnella Frazier, a 17-year-old girl. Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, many Americans were paying close attention to circulating media, and the response to Floyd's murder felt instant. The Black Lives

Matter Movement has shaped much of my life, and it was in 2020 that I realized that wasn't the case for many people in the US. For me, Trayvon Martin's death on February 26th, 2012, was the moment I began to recognize the state's relationship to Blackness and Black people. I was only 11 years old when it all took place, but I was 13 when Michael Brown lost his life. The response of the people of Ferguson, Missouri showed me that the state can and will systematically execute Black people, and then proceed to punish the public for any "violent" response. It is important to highlight that as a child, my blackness was defined by being of Somali background, but being born in the US meant that being Somali wouldn't be enough for me to understand the nuances of my American identity.

Growing up in one of the largest cities in the South allowed me to see other people of African descent as an extended form of community. These African populations in Clarkston all had their refugee status and the reality that America would be their new home, at least until the civil unrest they fled was resolved. In an article for Voice for America, Salem Solomon writes, "between the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 and 2017, the African-born population in the United States grew to 2.1 million people". In addition to that, there is also a projected increase in the rate of migration for the upcoming decades. As these populations arrive here, many of these refugees will have to grapple with what it means to be something other than who they previously identified with before coming to the U.S. How exactly does becoming American force African immigrants and refugees to become racialized?

In May of 2020, I saw how thousands of Somali people (and other ethnic Africans here and around the world), after years of refusing to identify as Black, take to the streets against the brutalization that "Black" people face in the U.S. I remember having conversations with my cousins, specifically those who identify as men, who admitted to me that they felt their previous views on refusing to identify as "Black" no longer resonated with them. Minneapolis has one of the highest populations of Somali people in the U.S. and seeing them take to the streets that May is when it began to click for me that as a community with no plausible plans of returning to Somalia, we would have to come to terms with our newfound American identity to survive. To truly be American, we must first be Black, mostly because that's how this country sees all Africans and the

diaspora, including us. For Somali refugees coming to the United States, I believe that there is a different expectation for how you are to conduct yourself and be resilient.

Somali youth, especially those born in the United States, are starting to reject these notions. In Hamida Ahmed's dissertation, he writes, "Since their resettlement in America started in the 1990s following the civil war, the community has struggled with different manifestations of that trauma; substance abuse and gang violence among the youth, prominence of depression and suicide rates, rise of domestic violence, as well as other direct and indirect results associated with mental health" (Ahmed 2021).

Identifying as Black is only the first step for the Somali youth to find some type of stability to move beyond the trauma that they and their families have endured. This will help them find the scholarship and historical accounts of people who have gone through similar racializing experiences that can help them find a new sense of identity rooted in something more positive. Black people have managed to resist brutality for hundreds of years here in the West, and for us to keep doing that, we must find ways to ground ourselves in new forms of community and attempt to dismantle all forms of white supremacy.

#### **VI: Contemporary Black Consciousness<sup>4</sup>**

There is a fluidity to identifying as Black. I recognize that the different customs and traditions that exist within Black communities in the US, the Caribbean, South America, and Africa speak a different language to me. From the foods we share, the way we dress, dance and sing, and our vernacular are all forms of "Black" nationalism today. It looks like Black boy/girl joy, it looks like Black pride/Black power, Black girl luxury, it looks like the Pan-African flag, BLM/Say Her Name, etc. It's my mother's recipes and my elementary school teachers who were all black women. It's Brian, the Black bus driver I made as a friend freshman year who tried his best to not leave me behind. I have felt safe being Black among other Black people. Blackness is a political identity that has evolved into a form of community specifically for racialized youth coming of age in Today's America and the worlds of social media that now exist that have moved the Black sovereign online. It's allowed me to find joy in my Uber driver is

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<sup>4</sup> Pulling from Steve Biko's "Black Consciousness"

Black, especially if they're not a man seeing as I associate this with the chances of me being SAFE. I am Seen. A human being. I have found a community in those who recognize that the world is a brutal place, and that the only way to dismantle any structure is by doing it together, and out of the influence of white supremacy, patriarchy and capitalism.

European and other major world powers have controlled the planet for so long and while I would gladly watch a meteor wipe this all away, I know that doesn't get me and anyone else anywhere. I can choose blinding rage, or I can commit to making each day a day if I prioritize by preserving myself and uncovering my own version of survival. I have agency in choosing what that looks like to me, and as long as I have my basic needs met, I am conquering the day. As a First Generation American with a bachelor's degree (fingers crossed), I have learned enough to know that there are many forces at play and that I don't have to be in survival mode 100% of the time because of the identities I hold. I recognize and release generational trauma that has affected my parents and their parents and will work on what I need to for me and my community in the US and back in Somalia to not just survive, but to potentially thrive. These past few years have highlighted my need for community, and I am constantly trying to find it in people who are open and honest about the challenges and failures of our society and how we can improve it day by day. I think there is a certain urgency I am looking for in others, a conscious awareness and commitment to changing the world by starting with ourselves. By starting local. I see that overall, Macalester was never a place for someone like me to feel a sense of belonging, and that it was never built to serve that purpose. I have always been intentional with my studies, but I am sick and tired of constantly existing in places where my needs are not met, and even worse, ignored when there are students and other people who are being coddled simply because they are either white or wealthy, and most times both.

I deserve the luxury of feeling safe, having stability, adequate housing, and access to food without working 60 hours a week. So does every other person racialized as Black on the face of the Earth, simply because we've all had everything set out to crumble beneath our feet from the start. As the current structures we have are brought into question, I see that my peers and I are at least attempting to reimagine the world,

and that makes me hopeful that solutions are still out there waiting to be expanded upon because of the roadmaps left behind by our predecessors.

### **Conclusion**

When I started this paper, I initially expected to find solace in the different ways that the African diaspora has maintained itself in the face of white supremacy and the epistemic violence that comes with it. Dillard's epistemology resonated with me when I first learned about it in the spring of 2022 of my willingness to ground Blackness as an identity and means of political recognition and self-fulfillment between Endarkened people through our history and now through social media and internet. I unexpectedly found solace in the realization that history does in fact repeat itself and that there's no need trying to create something new since it probably already was confronted by another Black person at some point. This felt like a breath of fresh air as a Black undergraduate centering the lived experiences that have shaped my life and provided me access to this scholarship and the awareness and confidence I needed to get through my time at Macalester and help me navigate this ever-changing world.

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