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Beyond the Book 2011 Research Proposal

Cultural Exchange and its Effect on Ghanaian Perceptions of African-Americans

Since the end of slavery, the United States of America has gone through a long and emotionally charged series of terms for the African diaspora in our country. The current politically correct choice is "African-American," but the one word that has survived the years of tumult is a simple description of color: "black." In America, the two terms have become essentially interchangeable. As the child of a white American mother and a black Ghanaian father, I have seen how being physically "black" often means being categorized as ethnically "African-American," and the social and cultural confusion created by this false homogeneity. Though African-Americans clearly feel unified with the continent from which their ancestors were taken, my experiences have led me to wonder whether Africans identify with the black American community in the same way. The research I propose will examine Ghanaian perceptions of African-Americans, and discover where their impressions come from and how cross-cultural interests – such as the tourism industry, cultural traffic in art and music, or the election of a black US president – have affected the African conception of black America.

I plan to investigate this through interviews in Ghana, West Africa, and thereby gain an intimate understanding of the various perceptions of different social groups. Though Africa contains many countries and peoples and therefore many influences and perspectives, Ghana has a much closer cultural bond with the United States than most African nations, which has resulted in a wide range of experiences with Americans. Ghana's success as the first African country to liberate itself from colonial rule has gained the respect and support of the Western World and established Ghana as a "model" African democracy. Culturally, this has made Ghana a symbol of black success. For post-slavery blacks it epitomized the Africa they imagined, and it became and still is a popular destination for black American heritage-seekers. This long and complex relationship with the States and the

opportunities available through my own connections make Ghana the most effective place to execute my research. I will conduct a series of oral interviews with a cross-section of Ghanaian society that represents a relatively comprehensive perspective. My family's community will represent the upper and business class, while Dr Edmund Abaka and Professor Brenna Munro have provided contacts in academia and the arts. I will also speak with students at the University of Ghana and from several summer exchange groups. Finally, I will interview the working class, especially those in tourism, where Dr Abaka's local understanding will help me communicate effectively.

Through these interviews, I hope to understand the sources affecting the Ghanaian, and more broadly African, cognizance of black America. From my experiences with my Ghanaian family, I thought that America's equation of the terms "black" and "African-American" was actually offensive to African blacks. However, when I visited Ghana myself I saw a profound connection to black American pop culture, as well as sweeping excitement over the election of a black President of the United States. Clearly, a polarity exists in Ghanaians' perceptions of black America, which creates opportunities to explore the dichotomous stereotypes that reach Africans. My intention is that this research will furnish a better understanding of the exchange between these two particular cultures, as well as provide valuable insight into the concept of cultural exchange as a whole and encourage further discussion of this crucial sociological question.