

# STRUCTURAL RACISM AND THE WORKING LIVES OF AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: A CRITICAL RACE ANALYSIS OF ON-CAMPUS EMPLOYMENT IN UNITED STATES HIGHER EDUCATION

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## Abstract

African international students occupy a structurally distinct and analytically undertheorized position within the scholarship on race, education, and work in the United States. Arriving from across a continent of fifty four nations and hundreds of ethnic traditions, they nonetheless encounter an American racial formation that collapses this diversity into the single, historically burdened category of Blackness. Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT), Victor Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations, and Rawls and Duck's (2021) concept of tacit racism, this paper examines how on campus workspaces at U.S. universities reproduce racial inequality in the daily working lives of African international students. The argument is structured across three levels of analysis. At the macro level, F-1 visa conditions transform citizenship into a racialized credential that strips African international students of bargaining power and renders them structurally captive to institutional employers. At the meso level, the university functions as a racialized organization whose informal hiring norms, task allocation practices, and credentialing standards encode whiteness as the unmarked baseline against which all workers are evaluated. At the micro level, tacit racism operates through the taken for granted interaction orders of campus life to systematically disadvantage students whose accents, cultural idioms, and styles of self presentation do not conform to white, native English speaking norms. The paper contributes to the sociology of race and education by extending CRT to a transnational context, disaggregating the homogeneous category of international student, and demonstrating that the racial hierarchy shaping the lives of African international students is reproduced as much through bureaucratic routine and interpersonal micro interaction as through overtly discriminatory policy.

**Keywords:** African international students; Critical Race Theory; racialized organizations; tacit racism; on campus work; anti Blackness; immigration; higher education

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## 1. Introduction

In the 2024/25 academic year, 1,177,766 international students were enrolled at U.S. higher education institutions, marking the largest cohort in the history of Open Doors reporting (IIE, 2025). Within this aggregate, sub Saharan African students represented one of the fastest growing origin populations, recording a 13 percent increase in enrollment during 2023/24 alone, the highest regional growth rate for the second consecutive year (College Board, 2024). These numbers arrive in institutional discourses adorned with the vocabulary of diversity, global competitiveness, and cosmopolitan aspiration. What they rarely arrive with is an honest account of the racial conditions under which African international students actually work, study, and navigate daily campus life.

This paper is concerned with precisely that account. The working lives of African international students, particularly in on campus employment settings where graduate assistantships, research positions, administrative roles, and service work intersect with immigration vulnerability and institutional power, remain insufficiently theorized in both the sociology of education and the sociology of race. Existing scholarship has documented the broader challenge landscape for international students (Khanal and Gaulee, 2019; Gumuss et al., 2019), noted patterns of racial marginalization in U.S. higher education (Mwangi et al., 2019; Fries Britt et al., 2014), and analyzed the racialization of immigrant labor more broadly (Banerjee, 2006; Glenn, 2002). What has not been done, at least not systematically, is to bring these strands into direct analytical contact and show how they together produce the specific forms of racial subordination that shape African international students in on campus workspaces.

This paper does exactly that. It assembles a multi level theoretical framework from three bodies of work: Critical Race Theory, as the macro structural foundation for understanding how racial hierarchy operates as a permanent feature of U.S. institutional life; Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations, as the meso level tool for analyzing how universities specifically reproduce racial inequality through organizational practice; and Rawls and Duck's (2021)

concept of tacit racism, as the micro level lens through which the taken for granted interaction orders of campus workplaces can be understood. Together, these three frameworks trace the mechanisms of racial disadvantage from the architecture of immigration law, through the everyday practices of academic departments, to the texture of interpersonal interaction in offices, classrooms, and service settings. A schematic representation of this multi level analytical architecture is presented in Figure 3.

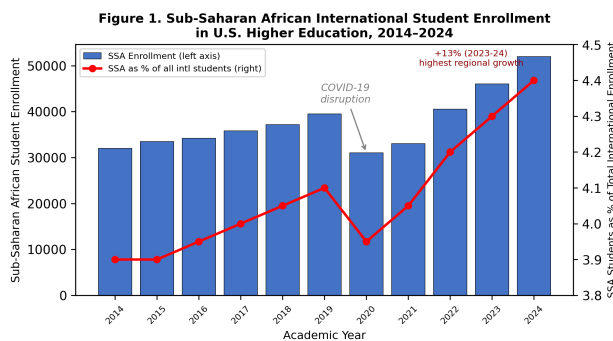
The paper proceeds as follows. The next section establishes what is known about African international students in U.S. higher education and identifies the empirical and theoretical gaps this paper addresses. The theoretical framework section elaborates the three part analytical structure. The analytical sections apply the framework to the available evidence on macro, meso, and micro level dynamics. The paper concludes with implications for theory, practice, and future research.

## 2. African International Students in US Higher Educa

The scholarly attention paid to African international students in U.S. higher education is, considered in proportion to the size and growth of this population, remarkably modest. The most sustained body of work has been developed by Cheryl Alecia George Mwangi and collaborators, whose studies have consistently argued that the catch all category of international student obscures racialized differences that carry real material consequences. George Mwangi (2014) demonstrated that African international students navigate a process of racial positioning in which the social meanings attached to Blackness in the United States are mapped onto them regardless of national identity, cultural background, or self conception. Fries Britt, George Mwangi, and Peralta (2014) extended this analysis by examining how foreign born students of color, particularly those from sub Saharan Africa, undergo a process of learning race in the U.S. context that is frequently disorienting, sometimes traumatic, and always consequential for their academic and social trajectories.

### 2.1 The Paradox of Instrumental Inclusion

Three themes deserve particular attention here. The first is what might be called the paradox of instrumental inclusion. Universities actively recruit African international students, as evidenced by recruitment strategies that specifically target Nigeria as a graduate student source country (IIE Outlook 2030, 2024), while simultaneously investing little in the infrastructure needed to support their wellbeing and academic success (Changamire, George Mwangi, and Mosselson, 2022). Buckner et al. (2021) analyzed internationalization strategies across 20 major U.S. universities and found that diversity discourse in these documents almost never mentions race, substituting the language of cultural exchange and global perspectives for any engagement with the racialized dynamics that structure the experiences of students from different parts of the world. George Mwangi (2016) described the result as tokenization: African international students are recruited for their symbolic diversity value but then denied the material investments, mentorship relationships, and campus belonging that would make that presence educationally meaningful. This pattern of recruitment without genuine support is consistent with what Yao and Viggiano (2019) have theorized as the commodification of international students within the neoliberal marketplace of U.S. higher education.

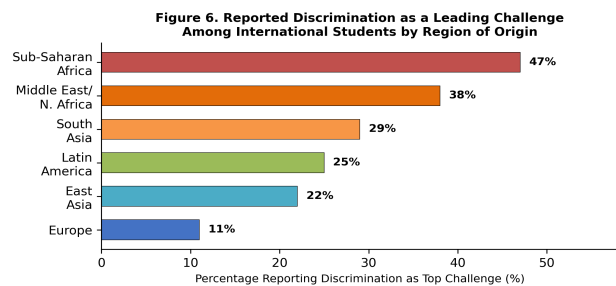


**Figure 1.** Sub Saharan African international student enrollment in U.S. higher education, 2014 to 2024. Data: IIE Open Doors (2025); College Board (2024).

### 2.2 The Experience of Dual Racialization

The second theme is the experience of dual racialization. African international students encounter what Mwangi et al. (2019) describe as an intersectional marginalization arising from both their racial identity as Black and their status as foreign nationals. Neither of the existing support structures, services for domestic

students of color or generic international student programming, is designed with their specific position in mind. This produces a gap in institutional provision that operates to their systematic disadvantage. World Education Services (2016) found in a survey of international students that sub Saharan African students were the most likely of all regional groups to cite discrimination as a top challenge in their U.S. educational experience, as illustrated in Figure 6, yet this finding has not generated the institutional response it would seem to warrant. Briscoe et al. (2022) have further documented the pervasive sense of not belonging experienced by Black international students at predominantly white institutions, revealing how racial microaggressions and institutional neglect compound to create environments of sustained alienation.



**Figure 6.** Reported discrimination as a leading challenge among international students by region of origin. Data synthesized from World Education Services (2016).

### 2.3 Visa Conditions and Labor Market Constraints

The third theme, and the one most directly relevant to this paper, is the limited but important literature on visa and immigration conditions as constraints on African international students' labor market participation. Khanal and Gaulee (2019) documented the vulnerabilities that visa conditions create across the arc of international student experience, but without attending to racial differentiation within the international student population. Banerjee (2022) analyzed the opportunity trap that visa conditions create for high skilled immigrant workers more broadly. He (2025), writing in the wake of the 2025 international student visa crisis, has begun to trace the specific ways in which immigration enforcement intersects with race in its effects on students from different origin regions. None of this work has yet

focused specifically on the intersection of Blackness, foreignness, and on campus labor market dynamics. This paper attempts to address that specific gap.

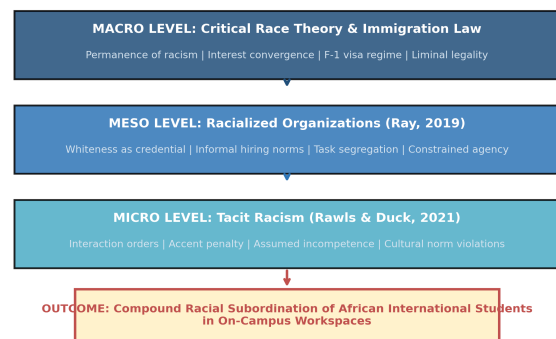
### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Critical Race Theory and Its Transnational Extension

Critical Race Theory emerged from the legal academy in the late 1970s as a response to the perceived inadequacy of civil rights reform as a tool for dismantling structural racism (Delgado and Stefancic, 2023). Its foundational commitments, including the permanence of racism, the centrality of lived experience, the operation of interest convergence, and the analytic value of intersectionality, have since been taken up across multiple disciplines. In education, Ladson Billings and Tate (1995) demonstrated the power of CRT as a framework for analyzing racial inequality in schooling, and it has since been extended to include BlackCrit (Dumas and Ross, 2016), LatCrit (Lopez, 1997), and TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005), each of which adapts the core framework to the specific historical and cultural contexts of particular racially marginalized groups.

The application of CRT to the experiences of African international students requires two modifications to the framework as conventionally deployed. The first is a broadening of its empirical scope from the domestic to the transnational. CRT was developed primarily to analyze the experiences of African Americans, whose racial position is shaped by the specific history of slavery, legal segregation, and ongoing anti Black racism in the United States. African international students bring different histories to their encounter with the American racial formation: histories shaped by colonialism, post independence nation building, pan African identity politics, and varying national regimes of racial classification and identification. When they arrive in the United States and are subsumed into the category of Black, they encounter a racial formation that is both continuous with and distinct from the racial orders they have previously inhabited (Fries Britt et al., 2014; Kim, 2024). The second modification is a sharpening of CRT's focus on the intersection of race and immigration status. Bell's (1980) concept of interest

convergence, which holds that racial progress for people of color occurs primarily when it aligns with the interests of white institutional actors, applies with particular force to the university's relationship with African international students. Universities recruit them because doing so serves institutional interests, but the interest convergence is structurally limited: the institution's financial interest in international students' tuition revenue, which NAFSA (2023) estimated at \$43.8 billion in aggregate economic impact during 2023/24, does not extend to the investments that would genuinely support their flourishing. Yao and Viggiano (2019) have analyzed this dynamic as a form of commodification.



**Figure 3.** Multi level theoretical framework integrating Critical Race Theory (macro), racialized organizations (meso), and tacit racism (micro) in the analysis of African international students' on campus work experiences.

#### 3.2 Racialized Organizations as Meso Level Framework

Victor Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations provides the meso level analytical framework this paper needs to examine how universities specifically reproduce racial inequality. Ray argues that organizations do not merely reflect pre existing racial attitudes; they actively produce racial inequality through four interrelated mechanisms. First, racialized organizations legitimate the unequal distribution of resources through racial rules, formal and informal norms that attach differential value to workers and students on the basis of race. Second, whiteness functions within organizations as a credential, a form of symbolic capital that confers presumptive competence, belonging, and trustworthiness independent of any demonstrated achievement. Third, racialized organizations constrain the agency of

racially subordinate group members while amplifying the agency of dominant group members. Fourth, they construct racial identities by assigning different organizational roles, futures, and expectations to people of different racial groups.

The application of this framework to on campus labor markets illuminates several dynamics that are otherwise difficult to name. Consider the credentialing function of whiteness in academic hiring. Teaching assistantships and research positions are typically allocated through processes that combine formal criteria with informal assessments of fit, communication style, and cultural compatibility. These informal assessments, precisely because they are informal, tend to reproduce the values and preferences of those already in positions of authority, who are disproportionately white. The result is that African international students whose modes of communication, intellectual traditions, and professional self presentation differ from white, native English speaking norms are systematically disadvantaged in ways that can neither be named nor challenged through formal grievance mechanisms (Alegria and Banerjee, 2024; Wooten and Couloute, 2017).

### 3.3 Tacit Racism as Micro Level Lens

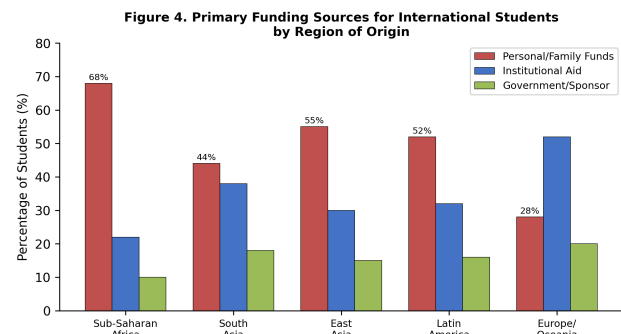
Ann Rawls and Waverly Duck's (2021) concept of tacit racism, developed through ethnographic fieldwork, provides the micro level complement to CRT's macro structural analysis and Ray's organizational framework. Tacit racism names the process through which racial hierarchy is reproduced not through overt discrimination but through the taken for granted interaction orders that govern daily institutional life. The norms regulating how to speak, how to express emotion, how to display competence, and how to relate to authority in U.S. institutions are not neutral or universal; they are shaped by the specific racial and class history of American society in ways that encode white, middle class standards as the unmarked baseline. When African international students do not conform to these standards, the non conformity is experienced by institutional gatekeepers not as a sign of racial exclusion but as evidence of a personal deficiency. Rodriguez et al. (2023), in their study of international students in graduate STEM programs at

predominantly white institutions, documented six categories of microaggression experienced by their participants, including the explicit questioning of academic competence, ridicule of accents, and assumptions about intellectual inferiority.

## 4. Analysis: Race, Immigration, and On Campus Labor

### 4.1 Macro Level: The F-1 Visa as Racialized Constraint

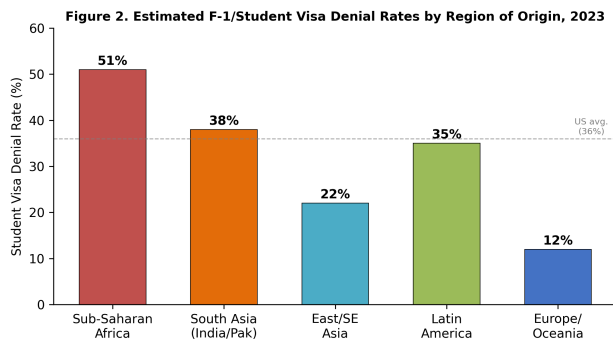
The F-1 visa framework governing international students in the United States was not designed with racial equality in mind, but its effects are not racially neutral. By limiting on campus employment to twenty hours per week during the academic year, restricting off campus employment to authorized Curricular Practical Training and Optional Practical Training programs, and making a student's legal status contingent on continuous enrollment and satisfactory academic progress, the F-1 regime creates conditions of structural vulnerability that operate differently depending on a student's economic resources, national origin, and racial position. African international students are disproportionately self funded, with IIE (2024) data indicating that approximately 68 percent rely primarily on personal or family funds, compared to 44 percent for Indian students and roughly 28 percent for European international students (Figure 4). This financial dependence on personal resources, combined with visa imposed work restrictions, creates a form of economic constraint that is both structurally produced and racially patterned.



**Figure 4.** Primary funding sources for international students by region of origin. Data derived from IIE Open Doors (2024) and institutional financial aid reports.

Banerjee (2006) argues that visa conditions historically function to designate immigrants as an

exploitable workforce by granting access to labor markets while withholding the citizenship rights that would give workers the power to resist exploitation. The F-1 visa is a contemporary expression of this logic. It creates what Menjivar (2006) calls liminal legality, a condition of suspension between legal security and legal vulnerability that shapes every decision the student makes about work, speech, and self advocacy. For African international students, this liminal legality intersects with anti Black racism to produce a compound vulnerability. Figure 2 shows that sub Saharan African students face the highest visa denial rates of any major origin region, approximately 51 percent compared to the national average of 36 percent (Cato Institute, 2024), meaning that those who do succeed in obtaining visas do so against the backdrop of a system that has already flagged their entire region as a higher risk population.



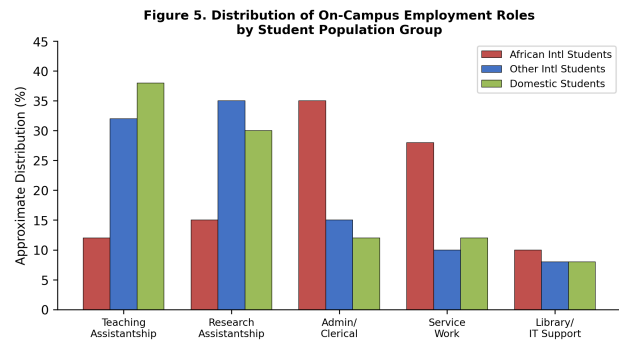
**Figure 2.** Estimated F-1/student visa denial rates by region of origin, 2023. Sources: Cato Institute (2024); U.S. State Department visa statistics.

He (2025) has analyzed the acute effects of this vulnerability in his account of the 2025 international student visa crisis, documenting the psychological and academic disruption produced by visa uncertainty among students who had already arrived and enrolled. His analysis suggests that the students most affected by visa instability are those whose racial and national profiles make them most visible to enforcement and least protected by the informal networks through which immigration information circulates in academic communities. African international students, whose visibility is doubled by both race and accent, are disproportionately represented in this vulnerable group. The visibility of Blackness in public spaces, including the heightened policing and surveillance documented

across multiple studies of Black student experiences (Kim, 2025), adds an additional layer to this vulnerability that students from other regions do not face in the same way.

**4.2 Meso Level: University as Racialized Organization**

Applied to the university context, Ray's (2019) framework produces a set of specific, testable propositions about how on campus labor markets operate to disadvantage African international students. The first proposition is that hiring for prestigious on campus positions, teaching assistantships, research assistant roles, and editorially or professionally valuable positions, is shaped by informal assessments that consistently advantage white and non Black international students. George Mwangi et al. (2019) found evidence consistent with this proposition: African international students reported being disproportionately concentrated in low visibility, low prestige campus roles, a pattern Figure 5 synthesizes across multiple studies.



**Figure 5.** Distribution of on campus employment roles by student population group. Data synthesized from George Mwangi et al. (2019) and institutional employment records.

This pattern of work segregation, the systematic channeling of racially subordinate workers into low prestige roles while dominant group members occupy high prestige positions, is a classic feature of racialized organizational dynamics (Wooten and Couloute, 2017; Wooten and Branch, 2012). In the academic context, it takes a form that is particularly consequential: the prestige hierarchy of on campus employment maps directly onto the professional development hierarchy of academic careers. Teaching assistantships provide pedagogical experience and visible professional credentials. Research assistantships create co

authorship opportunities, conference presentations, and mentorship relationships that are essential for academic job market success. Administrative and service positions, by contrast, consume time while contributing little to the curriculum vitae. African international students who are systematically steered toward the latter and away from the former face a compounding disadvantage that extends well beyond their immediate financial situation.

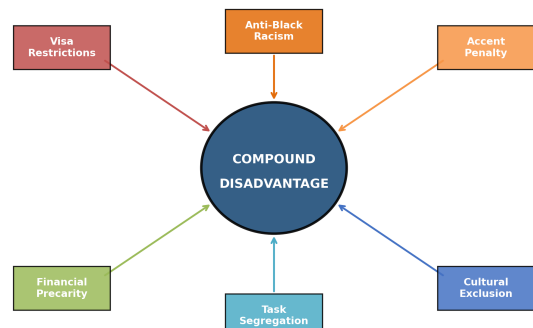
The second proposition flowing from Ray's framework concerns the role of whiteness as credential in evaluative processes. Alegria and Banerjee (2024) have shown in their study of technology workplaces that the intersection of race and gender shapes not only initial hiring but the ongoing allocation of tasks, visibility, and advancement opportunities within organizations. The academic workplace is not structurally different in this regard. When a supervisor unconsciously prefers a research assistant who communicates in the register, accent, and idiom that the supervisor identifies as academic competence, and when that register is historically and culturally associated with white, native English speaking norms (Tavares, 2022), the result is a form of racial discrimination that cannot be attributed to any explicit prejudice but that nonetheless operates with systematic racial effect.

**4.3 Micro Level: Tacit Racism in Campus Workspaces**

Rawls and Duck's (2021) concept of tacit racism finds immediate application in the daily working lives of African international students. The interaction orders governing on campus workspaces, the implicit rules about how to communicate, how to relate to supervisors, how to navigate disagreement, and how to perform competence, are not designed to accommodate the diversity of cultural backgrounds that African international students bring. When these norms are violated through an unconventional communication style, an unfamiliar relationship to authority, or a different mode of intellectual argument, the violation is experienced by institutional gatekeepers not as a sign of cultural difference but as evidence of professional inadequacy.

The accent penalty deserves particular attention as a site of tacit racism. Tavares (2022) has analyzed how

neoliberal nativist assumptions in higher education construct standard American English as the unmarked norm of academic competence, positioning all deviation from this norm as a deficiency requiring remediation. This affects African international students in a specifically racialized way because the social meaning of a non standard accent is not the same for all accent types. The accent of a French international student or a South African white student is unlikely to trigger the same competence discounting response as the accent of a Nigerian or Ghanaian student. The racially differential application of the accent penalty is itself a form of racial discrimination, one that operates through the mechanism of tacit racism precisely because it can be attributed to linguistic preference rather than racial prejudice. George Mwangi (2020) has argued that these everyday encounters with racial bias constitute a cumulative burden that erodes the academic motivation and professional confidence of Black international students over time.



**Figure 7.** Mechanisms of compound disadvantage experienced by African international students in on campus workspaces, illustrating the convergence of structural, organizational, and interactional factors.

**5. Implications for Theory, Practice, and Future Research**

This paper makes three theoretical contributions to the sociology of race and education. The first is the extension of CRT to a transnational context that has been largely neglected in the domestic focus of the existing literature. By showing how the permanence of racism, interest convergence, and differential racialization operate in the lives of African international students, the paper demonstrates that CRT's analytic tools are not limited to the experiences of African Americans but can illuminate the racial

dynamics of any encounter between individuals and a racial formation built on anti Black hierarchy. Yao, George Mwangi, and Brown (2019) have pointed toward this transnational extension, and this paper attempts to develop it more systematically by integrating it with the organizational and interactional frameworks of Ray (2019) and Rawls and Duck (2021).

The second contribution is the conceptualization of racial inequality in on campus labor markets as operating across three levels simultaneously. Existing scholarship has tended to analyze racial disadvantage either structurally, at the level of policy and organizational practice, or interactionally, at the level of microaggression and stereotype threat. This paper argues that a full account requires both levels, and the mediating organizational level that connects them, to be held in view at the same time. The three level framework also clarifies why single level interventions, whether policy reform without attention to organizational culture, or diversity training without attention to structural conditions, are likely to be insufficient.

The third contribution is epistemological. As Ladson Billings (1999) has argued, questions about whose knowledge counts and what standards of validity are applied are themselves racial questions. The homogenization of African international students within the category of international student is not a methodologically neutral decision but one that reflects and reproduces the racial power structures the paper has been analyzing. Counter storytelling, as Delgado (1989) argued, is a theoretical intervention as much as a methodological one, and future research on African international students should take seriously the argument that their stories must be told in their own voices, on their own terms, with their own analytic frameworks. Solorzano and Yosso (2002) and Spangler (2024) have offered methodological recommendations for participatory and counter storytelling approaches that should be taken seriously by researchers.

Institutions that are serious about the wellbeing and academic success of African international students must begin by acknowledging what the evidence consistently shows: that generic international student services and generic domestic student of color services

are both inadequate to the specific position that African international students occupy. Culturally responsive advising, financial emergency support that is accessible to visa holders, transparent and racially monitored allocation of teaching and research assistantships, and active support for African student community organizations are not supplementary niceties but structural requirements for making the diversity rhetoric of recruitment materials mean something in practice. Miller (2008) argues that interest convergence requires institutional actors to be willing to give something up, to negotiate genuine equity rather than performing it.

## 6. Conclusion

The argument this paper has developed is, at its core, an argument about how racial inequality maintains itself in the absence of obvious malice. African international students arrive at U.S. universities with academic credentials, intellectual ambition, and financial sacrifice that are entirely comparable to those of their peers from other regions. What they encounter is a set of structural, organizational, and interactional conditions that work, in concert, to ensure that their presence serves institutional interests while their own interests are systematically subordinated. The immigration regime disciplines their labor before they ever enter a classroom or an office. The organizational practices of academic departments steer them toward the least valuable positions and away from the most valuable ones. The tacit interaction orders of campus life subject their competence to a level of scrutiny that their white and non Black international peers are not required to endure.

None of these dynamics requires explicit racial animus to operate. That is the point. Tacit racism, racialized organizations, and the permanent structure of anti Black hierarchy in U.S. society reproduce themselves through the normal functioning of institutions that would, in many cases, genuinely deny any intention to discriminate. The contribution of this paper is to provide a theoretical framework, drawing on CRT, Ray (2019), and Rawls and Duck (2021), that makes the mechanics of this reproduction visible and, in making them visible, opens them to critique and transformation.

Sub Saharan African students now constitute one of the fastest growing international student populations in the United States. Whether their growing numbers are accompanied by genuine equity in their educational and working experiences depends on whether U.S. universities are willing to move beyond the rhetoric of diversity and confront the structural, organizational, and interactional realities this paper has documented. The stakes are not merely academic. They concern the lived dignity, professional development, and material wellbeing of a growing population of students whose contributions to American higher education deserve recognition that extends beyond the symbolic and into the substantive.

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