



Negotiating Identities Across Borders: A Collaborative Autoethnography of Afro International Women in U.S. Residential Life

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THIS COLLABORATIVE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY EXPLORES THE EXPERIENCES

of two Black international women, originating from Jamaica and Nigeria, respectively, working in U.S. residential life and housing. Drawing from Black feminist thought and Afro-diasporic ways of knowing, we unpack how cultural dissonance, immigration barriers, and institutional expectations impact our sense of belonging, leadership, and resilience in a field often shaped by U.S.-centric norms.

Guided by collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013), we each authored personal reflections and engaged in dialogue to identify shared themes. The four themes in our findings include: cultural dissonance in residential life; negotiating race, gender, and foreignness; community, care, and survival; and conflicting cultural expectations of independence and emotional expressions. Our narratives highlight both the challenges and opportunities faced by Afro international women in residential life, emphasizing the need for transnational mentorship, inclusive policies, and greater recognition of global perspectives in the student affairs profession more broadly.

This study contributes to growing scholarship on international staff and students in HESA, particularly those who navigate the compounded challenges of Blackness, womanhood, and foreignness. We call on student affairs educators and HESA programs to intentionally embed internationalization into their curricula and support structures. Our work ultimately expands conversations around equity, belonging, and leadership, positioning Afro international women's experiences as vital to the future of higher education.

INTRODUCTION

As Black international women in higher education and student affairs, our pathways into and through the field of housing and residential life have been shaped by a complex interplay of race, gender, nationality, and immigration status. Although our journeys began in different parts of the world—Jamaica and Nigeria, respectively—we find ourselves connected by our shared roles at higher education institutions in the U.S. Our work in the field includes experiences as F-1 visa¹

¹ A type of student visa with a nonimmigrant purpose for international students to attend an accredited educational institution in the U.S. (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2025).

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graduate assistants and one of us as an H-1B2² visa professional. Our stories provide a counter-narrative (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) of what it means to live, work, and lead as Afro international³ women in this functional area. Through collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al., 2013), we reflect on how our identities, values, and global experiences have shaped our resilience, our pursuit of belonging, and our contributions to the field of residential life and housing.

Grounded in international student and staff experiences, our narratives highlight the dissonance and discovery embedded in cross-cultural transitions. For one of us, entering the field as a Jamaican woman sparked a decade-long career in residential life that spanned the U.S. and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). For the other, beginning as a Nigerian international graduate assistant meant navigating anticipated, unanticipated, and “nonevent” transitions (Anderson et al., 2012) while adapting to new academic and social norms. Despite geographic and cultural differences, we have both experienced the challenges of negotiating visa processes, managing cultural adaptation, and building communities of care while striving to meet the demands of a profession not necessarily designed with our identities in mind. Our reflections are anchored in a commitment to amplifying international perspectives and challenging the dominant paradigms that often render our contributions invisible (Belle et al., 2025; Pandit, 2013; Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2017). While immigration and visa constraints are real dimensions of our experiences, these challenges have been thoughtfully documented in previous scholarship (Miao & Yang, 2023; Sim & Zhou, 2025; Tan & Koo, 2023). Instead, we center what remains less examined: the cultural, racial, and gendered layers of identity and belonging that shape how Afro international women come to know themselves and their work in U.S. residential life. Understanding the precarity of our identities is important, as cultural adjustments are at times tied to job performance, and thus security, which can affect our status in the United States.

We contribute to broader conversations about how Black international women in higher education come to know themselves and their work through a feminist and diasporic lens in residential life and housing. Our experiences urge Higher

² A working visa that allows U.S. employers to hire nonimmigrant individuals in specialty occupations that require certain expertise provided by at least a bachelor's degree (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2025).

³ We use the terms “Afro international” and “Black international” interchangeably to reflect our shared identification within global Blackness while honoring our distinct understanding of home—Afro Caribbean (Jamaica) and African (Nigerian)—as diasporic women.

Education and Student Affairs (HESA) educators and professionals to reconsider how internationalization is embedded in the curriculum, mentorship structures, and professional development pathways (Yao et al., 2022). In embracing our cultural heritage, building transnational support systems, and striving to foster inclusive residential communities, we aim to expand the discourse on what it means to belong, to lead, and to thrive as Afro international women in housing. Our manuscript shares the experiences of two Afro international women in residential life and housing.

Experiences of International Graduate Students in Student Affairs

Research on international graduate students in HESA remains limited, despite their growing presence in preparation programs (Miao & Yang, 2023; Sim & Zhou, 2025). Much of the existing scholarship examines racially minoritized graduate students more broadly, noting structural and interpersonal barriers that undermine their ability to thrive in graduate education (Bowers et al., 2020; Brunsma et al., 2017; Nyunt et al., 2025). For international graduate students, these barriers are compounded by challenges tied to immigration status, cultural adaptation, and limited access to mentoring opportunities (Bodine Al-Sharif et al., 2024; Koo & Nyunt, 2022). Such challenges show how international HESA students must navigate anticipated and unanticipated transitions (Anderson et al., 2012), often with little formalized institutional support.

Graduate preparation programs are designed to socialize students into the field through theory-to-practice experiences, assistantships, and mentorships (Hirschy et al., 2015; O'Neill, 2015). Yet, for international students, this socialization process frequently centers Whiteness and Americanness as the professional norm, marginalizing voices that do not align with dominant cultural expectations (Perez, 2021; Nyunt et al., 2025). Additionally, international graduate students who hold additional marginalized identities, such as being women or parents, also face intersecting burdens that deepen their exclusion from supportive networks (Koo & Nyunt, 2022). Black international students face a homogenization of their racial identity (Campbell, 2017; Changamire et al., 2022), often rendering their identity development invisible.

While HESA programs often espouse values of diversity, equity, and inclusion, international students still encounter environments where their contributions are devalued, their cultural knowledge is overlooked, and their labor in assistantships is underacknowledged (Briscoe et al., 2022; Nyunt et al., 2025). This disconnect between espoused commitments and lived realities reflects broader patterns of racialized and xenophobic climates within higher education (Mwangi et al., 2019). Given these gaps, the experiences of international graduate students in HESA remain an understudied area that requires deeper attention.

This narrow positioning not only undermines the professional growth of international staff, but also signals a missed opportunity for higher education institutions to leverage their intercultural expertise more broadly.

Black feminist thought provided a critical lens through which we approached data collection in our autoethnographies, grounding our reflections in the realities of our intersecting identities as Black international women in housing.

Experiences of International Staff in HESA

Existing studies suggest that foreign-born student affairs professionals (SAPs) bring unique perspectives to their institutions, shaped by lived experiences of migration, cultural adaptation, and—often—prior enrollment as international students themselves (Miao & Yang, 2023; Tan & Koo, 2023; Schiavo, 2025). These staff are well-positioned to contribute to internationalization at home by serving as educators in the informal curriculum, mentors for international students, and facilitators of intercultural engagement across campus (Shelton & Yao, 2019). However, their career trajectories are often precarious, hindered by limited institutional willingness to sponsor visas and narrow understandings of internationalization (Schiavo, 2025).

Foreign-born visa-holding staff frequently experience a “rocky journey” into and in student affairs, marked by visa insecurities, limited mobility, and unclear pathways for career advancement (Miao & Yang, 2023). The pressure to secure and maintain sponsorship ties professional futures directly to employers, creating constraints not typically faced by domestic colleagues (Cruz et al., 2020). Sim and Zhou (2025) show that international candidates must navigate unclear hiring practices, contradictory job postings, and limited institutional willingness to sponsor visas. At times, even when employed, foreign-born professionals are often channeled into tokenized roles that confine them to international offices, as opposed to other functional areas (Miao & Yang, 2023). This narrow positioning not only undermines the professional growth of international staff, but also signals a missed opportunity for higher education institutions to leverage their intercultural expertise more broadly.

Additionally, foreign-born staff in HESA encounter bias, microaggressions, and deficit narratives tied to race, language, and cultural difference. Participants in Miao and Yang’s (2023) study reported experiences of “double discrimination” when their foreignness intersected with racialized or gendered identities, creating additional barriers to belonging in their workplaces.

Afro International Women in HESA

For Afro international women, these dynamics are further compounded by the realities of race and gender in higher education. While Black women are the most represented minoritized group among U.S. HESA administrators (West, 2020), their professional lives remained shaped by misogynoir, workplace policing, and emotional labor (Williams, 2024; Williams et al., 2026). Black immigrants in U.S. education systems face an additional layer of erasure, as their distinct ethnic and national identities are often collapsed into a singular racial narrative—a process Mwangi & Onyewuenyi (2025) describe as being “Hidden in Blackness.” This narrowing of identity becomes even more pronounced for Afro international women, who navigate what has been described as a form of triple invisibility as they manage the intersections of Blackness,

womanhood, and foreignness (Bent et al., 2023; Peters, 2023; Smith, 2015). Amoateng (2023) argues that this process of adaptation represents a continual exercise in bridging cultures—an experience that is uniquely complex for Black international women who must also contend with race, gender, and immigration status simultaneously. Using our own stories and reflections as Afro international women in residential life and housing, we seek to extend these scholarly conversations.

POSITIONALITY

Hailing from Jamaica (Abigail) and Nigeria (Tobi), we are Afro international women with professional and para-professional experiences in the field of residential life and housing. We were introduced to each other in Spring 2025 by the editors of this special issue, given our shared experiences.

Abigail

My experience in residential life began as a resident assistant (RA) in my sophomore year of undergraduate studies as an F-1 international student. By my junior year, I was a senior RA, supervising 3–4 RAs and responsible for a building of about 80 undergraduate students. My leadership in residential life, along with other campus leadership engagements, fueled my interest to pursue my master's in HESA. In graduate school, I was hired for a two-year graduate assistantship with the residential life department, where I supported the operations of a hall and supervised RAs. After graduating, I was hired as a resident director (RD) on OPT⁴ and then matriculated to an H-1B employment visa. After four years as an RD, I moved to the UAE, where I worked as a complex manager, leading the development of a new residential engagement strategy. I have served in leadership roles in various regional, national, and international student affairs organizations. I am currently a full-time F-1 visa PhD student in the field of International Education Policy.

Tobi

I am currently a second-year F-1 visa graduate student working as a graduate resident director (GRD). I completed my undergraduate education in Nigeria; hence, adjusting to the U.S. higher education structure was quite the challenge initially. Through my experience, I help other international students in my residence hall with similar challenges as they acclimatize into U.S. higher education. I supervise 20–24 student staff, including RAs and desk receptionists, overseeing the operations of the front desk, programming engagements, and community-building activities. My building houses over 400 students, which also doubles as the residence for the international student body. I participated in the ACUHO-I summer internship program, where I worked with the housing and residential services at a large public school.

⁴ Optional practical training allows international students studying in the U.S. to have work experience related to their area of study before completing their academic studies and post-graduation (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2025).

The cultural differences between communal, relationship-centered practices in our home countries (Nigeria and Jamaica, respectively) and the individualized, fast-paced U.S. context intensified feelings of inadequacies not as a professional, but as one grasping the cultural undertones in the new context.

METHODOLOGY

We grounded our study in Black feminist thought and researcher identity development models (Evans, 2011; Evans-Winters, 2019) to guide both our methodological approach and data analysis. These frameworks helped us center our racialized, gendered identities, as well as immigration identities, as core to the research process, acknowledging ourselves as instruments of inquiry. Drawing from qualitative traditions that emphasize positionality and reflexivity (Chang et al., 2013), we engaged in intentional self-reflection and meaning-making rooted in our experiences as Black international women in housing.

While traditional autoethnography is often conducted by a single researcher using personal narrative to explore lived experiences, it serves as a powerful method for legitimizing the self as a site of inquiry. In this study, we extend that approach by using collaborative autoethnography (CAE), a qualitative method that invites researchers to examine their personal experiences in dialogue with others, fostering both self-inquiry and collective meaning-making to bring together multiple researchers to reflect on and analyze shared experiences (Chang et al., 2013). This approach enables us to explore how our individual narratives as Black international women in housing intersect and inform one another, shaping the research process itself. Unlike other qualitative methods, CAE emphasizes deep reflection and relational storytelling, allowing for a nuanced exploration of identity, context, and shared experience.

Data Collection and Analysis

Our study involved two phases of data collection. In the first phase, each of us free-wrote in digital journals, responding to the question: *How have we experienced working in residential life as an Afro international woman?* This prompt allowed us to reflect on our individual life experiences as graduate students and full-time staff. Black feminist thought provided a critical lens through which we approached data collection in our autoethnographies, grounding our reflections in the realities of our intersecting identities as Black international women in housing. This framework affirmed the validity of our lived experiences as both data and theory, allowing us to center our voices, emotions, and cultural knowledge throughout the process (Dillard & Bell, 2011).

We shared our completed autoethnographies using a shared Google Drive folder with each other to review and craft reflections, and we then drafted memos on shared themes. We dedicated two one-hour Zoom meetings to probe our individual journal reflections, sharing our thoughts on our experiences. These meetings allowed us to discuss first impressions, commonalities, differences, and themes that stood out from each of our narratives. Grounded in Black feminist thought, our Zoom sessions created space for relational, non-judgmental dialogue, and we were able to honor that

our Blackness is not a monolith while centering an ethic of care that allowed us to truly hear one another (Collins, 2000). During the discussion, we were also able to ask more questions about ourselves and each other, allowing for further reflection. Some of the questions included (a) *What made you choose a role in residential life?* (b) *What experiences did you have before?* (c) *Where did you find community?* (d) *What is it like living on campus and far from home?* (e) *How do you navigate the visa process?* (f) *What does it mean to be a Nigerian or a Jamaican woman in the U.S.?* (g) *How do you experience your race and gender in your role?*

FINDINGS

In this section, we share a thematic analysis of our narratives from our virtual sessions. We identify four themes: (1) cultural dissonance in residential life, (2) negotiating race, gender, and foreignness, (3) community, care, and survival, and (4) conflicting cultural expectations of independence and emotional expression. Our findings speak to some of the complexities of working in U.S. university housing and residential life as Afro international women.

Cultural Dissonance in Residential Life

Entering housing roles in the U.S. higher education terrain brought with it moments of surprise in the form of culture shocks, understanding gaps based on the new cultural context, and sometimes frustration from expected knowledge. Practices such as wellness checks, responding to alcohol and drug use, medical emergencies, or mental health crises were alien. Tobi found the onboarding process as a new graduate assistant to be incomplete. She described:

With my new job in housing, of course, there was training on “how to get started.” However, these trainings did not succinctly cover an international woman, per my job in housing in U.S. higher education. It seemed as though there was some expected preexisting knowledge on how to relate with residents from different ethnicities, especially the locals.

This “missing context” left Tobi feeling behind some of her U.S. peers, even while she was learning quickly on the job. Tobi shared wanting more information on the various dimensions of U.S. education and youth development, to have a better picture of how students may be transitioning to college. Abigail reflected on her own cultural comparisons when she began working as an RA, as well. She shared:

At first, it was just surprising to see how dependent students were on staff for things like wellness checks or even room conflicts. My friends told me it wasn’t like this back home in Jamaica. I was also confused about the alcohol transportations. I don’t know anybody who got so drunk that they needed to go to the hospital, and we’ve been drinking since a young age. We take take of each other.

Examining our individual stories highlights the cultural readjustments required as Afro international women transitioning into housing roles in U.S. higher education. Navigating through the expectations of our new realities, coupled with responding

to these student cases while still feeling unfamiliar, came with its own weight. The cultural differences between communal, relationship-centered practices in our home countries (Nigeria and Jamaica, respectively) and the individualized, fast-paced U.S. context intensified feelings of inadequacies not as a professional, but as one grasping the cultural undertones in the new context. Unpacking the layers of these cultural barriers, while also expected to respond as a professional, came with the reality check of processing our individual identities while embodying the expected professional expertise. The lack of training in unpacking these cultural dissonances became structural barriers to overcome.

Negotiating Race, Gender, and Foreignness

Our reflections also revealed how our identities as Black women from abroad shaped how we viewed ourselves as well. Abigail recalled feeling like a token on her staff team at the beginning of her first professional role. She shared:

When I was first hired, I was the only Black woman on the team, and two in the division. Sometimes, I felt like part of why I was there was so the department could say, “we have a Black person.” Thankfully, they were a great team, but I made sure to serve on our recruitment committee the following year to ensure it was a priority to recruit more Black candidates for our open roles.

Tobi noted how race in the U.S. demanded a different kind of awareness than she had ever needed in Nigeria. She expressed:

I realized there were some nuances in how I may have been perceived or categorized by outsiders, even before I got a chance to introduce myself. This also comes with a lot of redefining meanings and some reorientation, especially in the area of race, which is heavily about skin color. This was new for me.

Gendered expectations are further layered onto this experience. Tobi reflected on being the first responder to an attempted suicide event in one of the residence halls. She stated:

From my background, this was not even a popular conversation, and having to respond to such a matter firsthand left me confused and emotionally overwhelmed.

Abigail's reflection pointed to the emotional labor of always being seen as caring and available; she expressed:

In many ways, my womanhood was tied to the job expectations in housing, always being nurturing, always being “on,” even when I was struggling myself.

These experiences of our Blackness, womanhood, and international status intersect to make us both hyper-visible as symbols of “diversity,” yet invisible when it comes to genuine institutional support. At times, we felt that being both Black and

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international meant being misunderstood or judged before we even had the chance to speak for ourselves. There were also times when we felt unseen, when our opinions seemed to carry less weight simply because we were foreign and did not understand the U.S. context fully. We have both experienced how the same behavior can be interpreted differently, depending on whether it comes from a domestic or an international staff member. While fairness and inclusion are often celebrated values in higher education, living through these moments made us question what fairness and justice truly look like in practice.

Community, Care, and Survival

Despite these challenges, community became our anchor. Abigail recalled how neighbors and peers became chosen family. She shared:

Every place I went to I was lucky to have a next-door neighbor who was a co-worker or classmate. And how, for me living away from home, this was important. I know everybody in residence life lives away from home, but home, for me, is in a different country. So, I'm literally recreating home on these campuses and having a neighbor of some sort. I could just go knock on their door to have dinner. These were all women as well, which was really important.

Abigail noted that mentorship, especially from women leaders, also played a critical role. For her, such mentorship was crucial in building her leadership identity. She shared:

I know I take up a lot of space. So, if I'm in a meeting, I'm probably going to be one of the first people to speak or carry on a conversation or interject, because that's how we're taught to be. You're taught to ask questions. You're taught to take up space. You're taught to not be small. In Jamaica we say "nuh small up yourself!" Which means, don't make yourself small. And I have mainly had female supervisors who have appreciated that and encouraged me as well.

Tobi emphasized how important it was for her to recreate the community lifestyle she grew up with in Lagos. She shared:

Back in Lagos, the community lifestyle was a part of my upbringing . . . in the U.S., I had to rebuild that through friendships and people who reminded me of home. I had to learn to lean on people, to ask questions, and to trust that I wasn't alone in figuring things out. Luckily, I have another Nigerian student here that I have become good friends with.

Together, these reflections show that survival was not individual, it was collective. Community—whether through peers, mentors, or cultural connections—helped us navigate burnout, visa stress, and professional challenges. For us, community with new friends and co-workers on campus is instrumental in living away from home. The deliberate act of recreating home by seeking out women mentors and building chosen family reflects a form of resilience that sustains us in our roles.

Conflicting Cultural Expectations of Independence and Emotional Expression

A fourth theme that emerged was how cultural differences around independence and emotions shaped our work in housing. Both of us noticed that U.S. students seemed

to dwell more in their feelings, while our own cultural upbringings stressed moving on quickly, handling conflict directly, and becoming independent at a younger age. Abigail explained:

So, my last strength is empathy, right? And I used to tell my students that, I was like, my last strength is empathy. It is not what I lead with, right? . . . but I can be empathetic, but it's not something that necessarily I'm going to be like in the field . . . growing up in school in Jamaica, your body, you're not crying all the time like no, you just . . . the teacher, tell you to do something, you do it, and you get over it.

Tobi shared:

Interestingly, I don't even have empathy in my top five Clifton strengths, but I am empathetic... sometimes maybe I don't get it due to cultural differences, because I really try. Like, I try to bring myself into some context, but it's new for me. At age 16, I was already in the university. People get admission here at 17, 18, and then they don't act as mature or independent as they claim with some incidents, but I'm like, age should not be an excuse.

Abigail agreed:

I think the level of independence that we learn in the Caribbean and in West Africa comes earlier... so, once we get to college, yes, we're still learning a level of independence, but it's not very dependent on parents or teachers. Our personal beliefs and our professional beliefs kind of are at conflict, but also we have to follow what the role expects.

These different cultural baselines made it challenging to adjust to U.S. residence life expectations, where staff are expected to validate emotions and sometimes “coddle” students around life tasks and procedures in ways that conflicted with our instincts. As Abigail concluded, “Our personal beliefs and our professional beliefs kind of are at conflict, but also we have to follow what the role expects.”

DISCUSSION

Our reflections as Black international women in housing highlight how culture, race, gender, and immigration status intersect to shape our professional journeys. Rather than being isolated challenges, these dynamics constantly interacted, creating both obstacles and opportunities for growth. Cultural dissonance was a central tension in our roles. Entering housing in the United States required us to learn not just policies, but also cultural assumptions about independence, crisis response, and student support. The expectation of empathy as a professional default created an unspoken tension, one rooted in an assumed cultural alignment between Black womanhood and emotional availability that neither of our upbringings had prepared us for. Housing practices were framed by domestic expectations, and as international staff, we were expected to adapt quickly without acknowledgment of these differences. This reflects the broader tendency in higher education to presume domestic knowledge, leaving international professionals to navigate steep learning curves while balancing academic and job demands (Miao & Yang, 2023; Sim & Zhou, 2025).

At the same time, race, gender, and foreignness converged to shape our professional lives. Being marked as “diverse” often translated into tokenization at times, while the realities of our immigrant and racialized identities went unacknowledged. The expectations of womanhood in housing roles further intensified our experiences, requiring emotional availability and care. These realities mirror scholarship on “triple invisibility” (Bent et al., 2023; Smith, 2015), where Black international women must constantly negotiate overlapping systems of marginalization. Community and networks served as a counterbalance to these challenges (Schiavo, 2025). Networks of peers, mentors, and cultural connections provided belonging, practical guidance, and affirmation when institutional support was limited. These relationships were crucial for resilience, demonstrating that survival in housing for international staff is rarely an individual act, but a collective effort.

Finally, differences in cultural understandings of independence and emotional expression further shaped our experiences. Having grown up in contexts where independence was expected earlier and emotions were managed more privately, it was difficult to adjust to a system that emphasized extended dependence on staff and prolonged emotional processing. This tension between “coddling” and “coping” created an internal conflict, as our personal instincts and cultural values sometimes clashed with the professional expectations of residence life. The result was an additional layer of emotional labor, as we navigated how to balance cultural differences with institutional demands (Nyunt et al., 2025; Perez, 2021).

Together, our findings highlight how Afro international women in housing must navigate more than professional duties; they must constantly negotiate culture, identity, and systemic inequities. Immigration precarity compounds these challenges, forcing international women to plan “ten steps ahead” in ways domestic peers do not (Tan & Koo, 2023). Our experiences point to the need for intentional institutional practices that go beyond relying on individual resilience and instead address structural barriers in meaningful ways.

Implications for Practice

Our reflections suggest several implications for higher education and student affairs practice for Black international women. First, onboarding and training processes must be reimagined to account for international staff who cannot be expected to know U.S.-centric cultural and policy norms. Providing context, scaffolding, and mentorship can prevent the feelings of exclusion and confusion that many international professionals experience.

Second, institutions must address how race, gender, and foreignness intersect in staff experiences. Equity-minded supervision, mentorship, and professional development should move beyond symbolic diversity to genuinely support the growth and retention of international Black women. Recognizing their adaptation to emotional labor through their cultural identities is especially critical in housing, where crisis response and care work are central.

Third, community-building should be prioritized not only among international students, but also among staff. Formal and informal mentoring networks, affinity

groups, and cross-cultural connections can provide the support that institutional systems often overlook. Such networks are also spaces of resistance against isolation and tokenization.

CONCLUSION

Our narratives as Black international women in housing speak to the complexities of navigating student affairs through intersecting cultural, racial, gendered, and immigration-based identities. The findings reveal how cultural dissonance, racialized and gendered expectations, and immigration barriers are compounded by the unique cultural orientations we bring into residence life. While community and resilience strategies have enabled us to persist, they should not replace opportunities for growth in systemic support.

If higher education administrators in the United States continue to emphasize internationalization, they must recognize that international staff are central to this process. Our stories show that success in housing is not only about adapting to existing systems, but also about reshaping them to value and sustain the contributions of international professionals. Building equity-minded structures, rethinking onboarding, and addressing emotional labor and cultural adaptation are essential steps forward. By doing so, the field of student affairs can move closer to fostering environments where international Black women are not just surviving, but thriving. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What cultural norms within residence life (e.g., crisis response, hands-on student care and support, etc.) might feel unfamiliar or misaligned for international staff?
2. What would equity-minded onboarding and training for international housing staff look like in practice at your institution?
3. How do international staff's identity and immigration status affect their experience in residence life? How can supervisors better understand and support the unique needs of these staff?
4. What would it look like for institutions and residence life departments to take greater responsibility for intentionally creating and sustaining support networks for international staff rather than relying on individuals to build them on their own?
5. How might assumptions about prior familiarity with U.S. higher education systems affect the ways that residence life departments provide effective training, onboarding, and supervision to international staff?

Discussion questions were developed by Yolande Graham, Clemson University.