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## **Blackness is Not Monolithic: “No, But Where Are You Really From?” Enacting Change by Taking up Space**

By Mellissa Gyimah-Concepcion, Judson University

*As a Black British woman living in the U.S. I have come to realise that I occupy many spaces—some I understand, and some I am still discovering and learning to adapt to. I am a Black immigrant in this academic space. In the U.K. I am not considered fully British because I am first generation Ghanaian. When I say “Black immigrant” I mean a Black person living in a country outside of their birth.*

*This has made me consider my Blackness, what it means to others and in different spaces. I thought about whether I had a voice, and whether my voice held different weight in these different countries, regions, platforms, and places. As an English teacher in the U.K. (Dover, Kent) in a predominantly white school, my Blackness was always brought up. The students were not concerned with my being of Ghanaian descent, but more that I was born Black in London and now teaching in Dover. My students positioned me in a certain way—the cool Black teacher with a London accent. When I got to the U.S., the same thing occurred—I was a Black British person with a British accent. I quickly concluded that being a Black immigrant would always affect my work, teaching, and research. I recognised I had to be cognisant of my positioning towards students, as well as how I positioned them towards each other and myself based on how I was seeing them react towards me.*

*Compared to teaching in predominantly Black schools in the U.S., I noticed that the students often related what they learned back to my cultural background. Many questioned my ethnicity because of my accent,*

*“No, but where are you really from?”, or “you ain’t Black; you don’t sound Black”. They were curious about my accent and multiple identities sparked a myriad of questions. I began to embrace that I was a Black woman from England occupying a Black immigrant identity in a different country, which seemed to serve as a catalyst for dialogue and actually helped students better contextualise some texts, and make global and local connections. This was especially apparent when working on a project that involved exponentially growing elementary Black boys’ reading levels using a multidimensional reading model. I found that because of my cultural background I naturally gravitated towards texts that were global or involved my immigrant identity, which continued to expand the classroom dialogue and inquisitiveness of the boys. I saw that my lived experiences and my nuanced identities created rich discussions in the classroom. Many times, it exposed them to, and corrected assumptions about different types of Blackness. I saw that these discussions invited the boys into the texts, they were learning to understand their multiple identities through my instruction as a Black British woman. I not only realised but embraced the fact that my praxis and identity could not be separated.*

## **Being a Black British Woman Educator in America**

My learning and instruction have been impacted by my identity as a Black British immigrant woman scholar and educator teaching American students in the U.S. There are layered challenges female scholars face, but there is also an undeniable dearth of Black women’s voices and experiences in the field (Baker-Bell, 2017; Collins, 1990). Black immigrant women scholars’ lived experiences are also absent from the field (Louis et al., 2017). There is little discussion on how our language practices and accents are perceived in classroom spaces, and how this positions us as classroom instructors and scholars, which furthers the single story ideology around Blackness. Black immigrant scholars and educators are essentially the invisible Black population (Louis et al., 2017). Conversations around the many linguistic practices of Latinx communities, African American communities are becoming more frequent (Bauer et al., 2020; Garcia & Kleifgen, 2010; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Rosa & Flores, 2017), but we are still discovering the language practices of Black immigrant students and

teachers (Esnard et al., 2019; Kumi-Yeboah & Smith, 2017; Louis et al., 2017).

As an immigrant with a British accent, who speaks multiple Englishes, and three additional languages, I have had to navigate many spaces that do not afford me the opportunity to explore the complexities of my identities in this U.S. space. My accent and identity are perceived as inextricably linked. Literacy classrooms are sites where language and words are closely observed and taken up or rejected (Lamar et al., 2017); being a Black immigrant typically means we use the English language differently, and/or we have different accents, which helps to further “other” us in a literacy classroom context. Many Black immigrants are the subject of systemic institutionalised racism and marginalisation (Jean-Marie, 2014; Kumi-Yeboah & Smith, 2017; Louis et al., 2017); we are tokenised, and exoticised, or often perceived through a deficit lens and deemed incapable—simply because of how we sound (Lippi-Green, 2012). The matter of accents and language practices, in conjunction with Black women scholars rarely having a voice in the field (Baker-Bell, 2017; Collins, 1990) indicates an urgency to explore the relatively unknown (Louis et al., 2017) intersectionality of Black immigrant women scholars’ identities and linguistic practices in the classroom.

## **My Positioning and Experiences in the Classroom**

### **Black Feminist Thought**

I ground my thinking in Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990) and draw upon specific tenets of this theory as they resonate with my development of being a Black immigrant scholar and educator, but also seeks to understand the identity piece of a Black immigrant woman scholar and educator.: (1) self-definition and (2) needing affirmation. The rejection of the dominant group's definition of Black women and Black women's imposition of their own self-definition indicates a ‘collective Black women's consciousness’ (Collins, 1990). Collins speaks of moving from an internalised oppression to the ‘free mind’. This is a layered process as a Black immigrant must unlearn colonisation in multiple countries and spaces to understand what it means to be a Black immigrant in a U.S. classroom.

For example, I noticed my British accent was initially a distraction for the boys in the aforementioned literacy project. They did not believe I was Black because “you don’t sound Black”. Thus, I turned these moments into teachable ones--explaining there are different types of Black people from different countries who have different accents. I used this as an opportunity to teach them that there are 196 countries in the world, and America is only one of them. Many people do not sound like Americans. This conversation then turned into a discussion about regional accents. This practice broadened their learning not only of the course content, but the complex situational contexts in which they existed.

Collins also discusses self-definition, which is the power to name one’s reality. It is important to get to this place of naming one’s reality in order to name what one is experiencing in classrooms (being othered and/or exoticized, void of being understood), and realising the power of one’s individual story in the U.S. classroom context. Black feminist thought seeks to reject the dominant group’s definition of Black women or Black womanhood, which could mean that a more complete, well-rounded understanding of Blackness is accepted and explored. In a lesson I designed about Black diaspora history and countering “single stories” (Adichie, 2009), a boy questioned the text, “Wait, we were kings and queens? We weren’t always slaves?” Creating these globally focused lessons that linked the past to the present, as well as Blackness across the globe was part of my intentional pedagogical moves toward critical and global literacy development with the boys.

## **Positioning Theory**

Davies & Harré (1990) define positioning as:

the process of ongoing construction of the self through talk, particularly through the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person’s actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts and within which the members of conversations have specific locations. (p. 183)

Based on this, I grapple with how Black immigrant educators are possibly positioned by students and places of work based on where we come from and how we sound. Our multiple identities are not seen in their fullness and

complexities (Louis et al., 2017), but separated out and fragmented. We are labelled and often othered by being seen as less knowledgeable, positioned as less capable, or tokenised and exoticised simply because of how we sound and whether our students easily understand us. In the same Black Diaspora lesson, the boys were shocked to hear of Adichie's opulent life in Nigeria. This is not what they expected of someone living in Africa. Conversely, they thought I lived luxury in the U.K, but when I told them that I lived in the British version of the projects, they were stunned. I expressed that the houses I had in Ghana were far more luxurious than anywhere I lived, with marble flooring and many bedrooms. Juxtaposing England to Ghana and Nigeria caused the boys to experience cognitive dissonance. I questioned why they had such assumptions about the different nations and many of them responded, "That's what they show on T.V! Black kids starving in Africa!" Or "But the Queen is in England! So how were you poor?" The boys had a notion of who I was based on how I sounded and where I came from, which caused them to position me as "other".

By confronting and disrupting their narratives of Blackness through questioning and exposure, the boys repositioned themselves towards me. Once aware, the boys had the opportunity to make an educated effort to transform their understandings of self, how they were positioned in society, and how they positioned others (Freire 1970; Tatum, 2003; Ladson-billings, 1998; van Langenhove, 1999).

## **Discussion**

Exploring the intersectionalities of Black immigrant women scholars' language practices and identities can be a powerful tool in repositioning Black immigrant teachers in the classroom and within conversations. Through the practice of discussion, questioning, I have learned that my lived experiences and global perspectives can help broaden students' understanding of Blackness across the Diaspora. In addition to questioning and discussions, I often challenged students' preconceived notions of what it means to be Black by exposing students to different types of Blackness both globally and locally. Teachers need to be willing to challenge students through questioning and authentic discussions, but to do this, they need to understand Blackness in a broader context for themselves.

Teachers need to read and introduce students to literature by Black people across the Diaspora, actively engage in discussions around Blackness, and question their students' assumptions and assumptions in order to build this understanding and knowledge in their students. Black teachers and students especially, need to do the internal work of asking themselves why they expect Black people to sound or act a certain way, and if they do not, why they think that person "ain't Black". This work will contribute to helping to value the diverse linguistic and cultural practices of Black immigrant women in literacy classrooms, possibly holding implications for why we need a more diverse teaching pool. This, in effect, should enrich students' learning experiences, developing their critical consciousness and global perspectives.



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