

## **The Immigrant as Outsider-Within: Exploring Identity and Place in Academe**

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### **Abstract**

Perhaps the least visible and understood experience in the academy is that of immigrant women of color. This absence is connected to issues of power, privilege, discourse, and practices that silence nonwestern voices in an increasingly globalized world. This paper explores the creative tension immigrant women of color face as they try to negotiate identity and place in US higher education.

### **Introduction**

The position of an immigrant woman faculty of color in the academy, though ambiguous, and often tenuous, is filled with challenge and hope. The complex identity of an immigrant woman of color can be a source of frustration and confusion, and yet it offers opportunities for growth. She often is an object of sexism and racism because of her gender, color, and her immigrant status. She suffers the chill and oftentimes brutal animosity from minority colleagues who believe that her position has taken away one slot from among the few available. Students who harbor their own biases from their upbringings often treat her with disrespect. They often challenge her knowledge and competence because of their unwillingness to understand her accent. However, those who survive, stand a chance to contribute to the depth and breadth of knowledge in the academy. Our contributions in research and service often transcend international borders, and our contributions to a rich and varied classroom discourse leave a mark that positively impacts both the university and the world. (Nomsa Geleta).

Nomsa, one of the participants of this project, has opened a small window through which we can begin to understand how immigrant women interpret their experiences in academic spaces. These academic spaces, also known as “academe,” are characterized as the sterile hallways of a research university, and lower down the order is the teaching university, followed by the community college or the technical college (Alfred & Swaminathan, 2004). Similarly, the position of the full professor is at the top with the triple A’s below – the associate, the assistant, and the adjunct professor. Immigrant students also occupy spaces in academe, and they, by virtue of their presence, challenge the taken-for-granted assumptions of Western reality. Although there is emerging a strong presence of immigrants in higher education, their experiences remain untold. Therefore, this project sought the narratives of immigrant women of color who were experiencing the academy in various spaces to explore the interconnection among epistemology, transformation, and identity within the context of migration.

### ***Context of This Project***

This paper stems from the narratives of 14 women who were participating in US institutions of higher education in various capacities. They consisted of nine faculty members, one department chair of an academic program, one Associate Dean of a large urban technical college, one program director from a teaching university, and two doctoral students who were at the dissertation stage. The participants, who originated from Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America, were initially invited to contribute to a book that explored immigrant women’s experiences with US institutions of higher education and how they were faring in the academy.

The book, *Immigrant women of the academy: Crossing borders, negotiating boundaries in higher education* by Alfred and Swaminathan (2004) highlights their struggles, triumphs, and transformations. Because of the power and richness in their narratives, I asked permission from some authors to use their data for further analyses and to share the results through other media.

Using the women's narratives, I wanted to further explore the process of identity formation and development within the context of transnational migration. It was important to explore the ways in which issues of race, class, gender, language, and nationality intersect to affect how women make meaning of their transnational experiences. Furthermore, I wished to examine the women's concept of "home" and how they negotiate the multiple constructions of "homeplace." Since most of them used the biographical approach in writing their experiences, I felt it appropriate to use the life history methodological framework to guide the analysis.

### ***Methodological Framework***

The life history approach highlights the importance of recognizing how learning experiences, meanings, and identities are socially constructed and reproduced through particular structures and power relations (Dominice, 2000). The methodological perspective used in this project falls within the domain of narrative analysis (Rossiter, 2002). The narrative perspective is a broad orientation grounded in the premise that narrative is a fundamental structure of human meaning and making (Sarup, 1996). Therefore, identity formation and development can be understood in terms of narrative structure and process (Rossiter, 2002). Moreover, Sarup explains that when we tell our stories, not only do our stories unfold, but we also construct our stories and, hence, our identities. As a result, our identities are revealed in the telling of our stories.

### **Retelling Women's Lives**

In analyzing the women's narratives, three primary themes were highlighted. The first focuses on the notion of self as shaped by both internal and external definitions. The second theme emphasizes the struggles the women face, the battles they fight, and it centralizes the various strategies and tools they use to craft a space in the academy. The third theme reveals a struggle to define "home" and their view of self in the various spatial locations of "homeplace." Overall, their stories reveal a commitment to social justice and the necessity of carving out a research agenda that educates and, ultimately, dismantles ideologies of white supremacy.

### ***Reconstructing Self Within the Diaspora***

To talk about our identity, we try to answer the question, "Who am I?" Stuart Hall (1993) argues that there are two kinds of identity: identity as being, which offers a sense of unity and commonality, and identity of becoming, a process of identification which shows the discontinuity in our identity formation. It is this experience of rupture, displacement, and discontinuity that constitute identity formation and reformation for immigrants of the Diaspora. As immigrants, they navigate their dual positions of "subject" and "other" and such positioning influence the concept of self within various contexts of homeplace.

Not surprisingly, the women discussed identity in two ways: the first focused on the ways others defined them and the second was the identities they constructed along the way to manage their bicultural life structures. They all reflected on who they were and how they were viewed as immigrants. They lamented that members of the host country had certain expectations of them as foreigners—expectations that were often framed from the stereotypical images of their race,

ethnicity, and nationality. Zandile, for example, noted, “There is a certain image that people are looking for when you say you are from Africa. You must act “African,” whatever that means. Omi and Wanat (1986) point out that how one is categorized is far from a merely academic or even personal matter. They further note that being named is a political issue that has an impact on access to opportunities as well as access to both public and private goods.

The women understood the politics of naming, and many resisted being named by others and chose names that they felt were safe. However, they soon discovered their idea of safety was an illusion, as they could not escape the external definitions imposed by others. Many, for the first time, were identified as a minority, and they were expected to take their places as such. They initially resisted the identification, but later came to terms with the contradictions of internal and external definitions of self. Here is an excerpt from Janice’s story.

As a Black Caribbean immigrant female doctoral student, I was categorized as a minority and had become an alien resident. I had come from a society in which I did not know what it was to be considered a minority, and I resisted being placed into that category. I had never had to think about my ethnicity before, and now it seemed I had to define and redefine myself constantly as I struggled with the hyphens. It is within this sociohistorical cultural context that I began the educational journey that would put me in touch with diverse characters, texts, and a range of discourses that would contribute to my constructions and reconstructions of self.

Janice spoke of her annoyance at being identified as African American, for being submerged in an identity that was not her own. Yet, at the same time, she understood the possibilities for racial profiling as a result of her black body. As she noted, “I was filled with contradictions.” Of course, Janice was in America, a country that Waters (1999) describes as a “contradictory place for the immigrants—a land of greater opportunities than their homelands, but simultaneously, a place of racial stigma and discrimination” (p. 79).

Like Janice, Ming-yeh, too, struggled with the constructions and reconstructions of self and place upon inhabiting her new country. She, too, tried to resist the stigma of racism by positioning herself away from the “minority” label and adopting a national identity. She said,

As an international student from a racially homogeneous society, I had just begun to grapple with the meaning of race and racism. When I first came to the US, I used to position myself as a Chinese student from Taiwan, or an international student, who did not self-identify with any one racial group. The label of being a Chinese student from Taiwan, an international student, a foreigner, I believed, suited me better than “Asian-American” or a woman of color, not only because I did not have American citizenship, but also because these non-American labels seemed to create a comfort zone to distance myself from the racial politics and oppressions in the United States.

However, through her mentoring relationship with an African American professor, Ming-yeh began to reflect on her identity from within her perceived place of safety. By witnessing the endless battles her mentor endured as a woman of color, Ming-yeh, then, began to question her own self-definition, recognizing that she could not escape the stereotypical images that society has of her as an Asian immigrant woman. She wrote, “The longer I worked with Juanita, the more similarities I could draw from our backgrounds, cultures and experiences. Eventually, I decided to identify myself as an Asian American and a woman of color, adding a new layer to my changing identities, and to form alliances with my respectable colleague and sisters like her.”

From the women’s narratives, there was a revealing sentiment that identities are multiple, fluid, contradictory, and strategic. They are constructed and co-constructed in and out of our

academic environments, and we often strategically evoke identities that help us negotiate particular spaces and contexts. However, as immigrant women, we find it difficult to de-identify and at times we are not always aware of how we are constructing ourselves or how we are being constructed in and out of relationships.

### ***The Immigrant Experience in Academe***

Several of the women evoked DuBois' (1990) concept of double consciousness to describe their bicultural existence in and out of academe. They described the process of entering academe, the culture shock they experienced, their struggles to make sense of the American classroom dynamics, their alienation and marginalization as students and professors, and the disheartening realities of an academic culture that encourages the subordination of ethnic cultures and worldviews for the more Eurocentric, elitist ways of knowing. According to Alicia, Academia is a context of alienation which has never been an open institution. It is an elitist system that scrutinizes participants, duplicating the divisions and categories of the larger society by reproducing, even enforcing, immigrant status and colonization. As newcomers, signs of our culture, class, and other distinguishing origins make us different than most professors and students and, consequently, we feel self-conscious as outsiders. Thus, we are pressured to assimilate to the culture of academe . . . Our success within the academic environment means losing much of our native power and grace.

Similarly, Otrude shares her views on the politics that envelope the immigrant female faculty of color in higher education. She said,

I believe that African women migrant scholars possess “multiple consciousness” as they connect their lives and work within a global world structured by race, gender, class, and other such methods of categorizing and therefore “othering” people. It is through our experiences and understanding of the ways in which power and domination have influenced our lives as African women scholars that we have gained this multiple consciousness. While living within the hegemonic world defines our marginal lives as African women scholars, multiple consciousness define ways by which we resist oppressions and actively engage in creating our own centers.

While Alicia's sentiments represented those of several of the women who viewed the academy as a place where cultural knowledge and nonwestern ways of knowing were subordinated with intent of extinction, Otrude along with some others saw opportunities to expand the discourse, thus creating new knowledge as a result of their marginal positions. Hooks (1990) emphasized that sentiment, noting one does not need to shed his/her identity in order to make a contribution in the academy. Zandille agrees, noting that immigrant women intellectuals must insist on history and memory of their own heritage as the basis of their identity and their scholarship.

### ***Reconstructing Homeplace within the Academy***

How the women named themselves and their place in the world changed as they better understood their own positions vis-a-vis local and global politics. Through all this came the awareness of their own privilege in the midst of their marginalization. They acknowledged the experience of being an “Other” also provided new vistas of opportunities to build social and political agendas that would connect the traditional home with home in the Diaspora. Nomsa, in summarizing the experiences of the immigrant faculty of color, speaks of her scholarship as a place of resistance, a place where she connects the old home with the new home. She notes,

As a scholar who is Black, a woman, an immigrant from Africa, I too have contended with uneasy paradoxes in my life and work, which often marginalize me in the U.S

academy. However, instead of being buried in this paradox, I have been conscious of it. Through my experiences, I have developed a “knapsack of strategies” which allows me to engage my politics. Such an engagement begins from an understanding of practices and consequences of global regimes of domination, which are ever present in my day-to-day relations.

Understanding the politics allows Nomsa to reposition herself in the academy. She further noted that through her research, she bridges issues from Africa with those of the U.S. to create new forms of knowledge, thus broadening the discourse in higher education. Her political and social agendas for expanding the knowledge base in the academy was shared by many of the women engaged in this project. For example, Otrude noted,

It matters to me to continue to strive to attain respect for all humanity, to expand my horizons, to propose new ideas, and to succeed in my endeavors, no matter how modest they may be. These are some of the motivations for engaging in the academic discourse as an African, as a woman, as a scholar, and as a transmigrant straddling multiple borders, networks, and multiple roles in the country of my residence, the United States as I link experiences from the country of my origin, Zimbabwe, and the African continent.

Similarly, Xae also draws from her bicultural experiences as a Puerto Rican to weave a professional life that encompasses the possibilities offered by her two cultures. As she said, “Through my teaching, I help students reflect on the experiences of the ‘Other’ through dialogue. Reflecting on these practices is crucial for providing reliable information to shatter stereotypes about those of us who continue to be perceived as the “Other.” Drawing from the margins to inform the center appeared to be the overall agenda of these women’s activism. By so doing, they are validating home in the country of origin while creating new images of home among members of the host country. The notion of place, therefore, continues to be a powerful force that preoccupies immigrant women of color in their continued search for home and the struggle to retain real or imagined images of home. Home, therefore, becomes a multilayered, permeable phenomenon. It is paradoxical, in that, various dimensions of home intersect to inform reality.

I end this section with Helen’s reflection of “homeplace” and what it means for her as a British Afro-Caribbean immigrant. To Helen, home is not just as a physical space, but a place where one can be true to self without having to succumb to external definitions or stereotypical expectations. Here is an excerpt from her story.

Lately, I have been thinking about “place” and the idea of one’s place in the world, in the academy, and in teaching. This is a phase in life that everyone reaches as a combination of life’s experiences. I have reached a point in my life where I need to be myself. The term ‘place’ is used synonymously with “home” as the physical place as well as a place you might call the geography of the soul, where I can be free, a place where I would always feel welcomed or taken in. It is a place where my African-American brothers and sisters would welcome me as a relative and not feel threatened by my presence as a “new” hyphenated Black American. The result is finding one’s own voice and one’s own values, without having to oversubscribe to societal norms.

Similarly, Papastergiadis (1998) reminds us that the question of belonging in the new country requires a fundamental shift of our thinking in relation to place. Today, the notion of belonging is drawn from the perspective that transnational migration and globalization have resulted in more fluid social affiliations and more hybrid cultural formations. Papastergiadis also cautions that the questions, “Who I am?” and “What I am?” can no longer be answered by identifying our place of origin and the time of living there. Therefore, it may be appropriate, as Helen noted, to

move beyond the physical space to the geography of the soul in our search for home.

### Conclusion

Through their narratives, the women revealed that their travels have been both geographic and intellectual, a movement integrated into the search for one's roots, the struggle to find common ground, and questions of identity and place. Through autobiography and life history approaches, they interpreted their experiences in the contexts of home, the academy, society, and community. The approach taken is first, woman-centered, as they describe their experiences as women and problematize the institutional and social construction of those experiences.

By telling their stories, they offer an alternative to the traditional canon of the great White male or White female; instead, the stories of women of color from around the world affirm diversity in the category 'academic woman,' recognizing that many such tales are yet to be told. The stories are, as Clandinin and Connelly (1994) suggest, a fundamental educational tool. They note, ". . . stories . . . educate the self and others, including the young and those, such as researchers, who are new to their communities" (p. 415). Using stories as an educational tool means undertaking a responsibility for creating spaces for cross cultural communication, where the recurrent themes of identity, journeys, and homeplace are discussed. Making space for such discourse becomes an important agenda for US adult and higher education because of the increasing presence of immigrant students and faculty.

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