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Chapter 9: Essentialism and Respecting the Other

Gertrude Tinker Sachs, Georgia State University

Who Am I?

*I AM of blackness
The blackness of the darkest parts of Africa
I am of darkness – the darkness of India
The darkness of Chinese when the skin is golden brown from the hot summer's sun
I am of darkness of white skinned folk when they tan to burnt copper from the glow of the
suntan oil and the fierce rays of the sun
I am of darkness, all the others in between, black, red, white, brown, pale and **DARK**
I am of wealth, I am of poverty
I am of privilege as well as non-privilege
I am of status, status as in majority, Non-status as in minority
I am of knowing and unknowing
I am of travels far and wide
Yet I am of home and all my kinfolks' landmarks
I am of woman and of man
I am of people
Milo Boughton Butler, Lynden Oscar Pindling, Doris Johnson, Nelson Mandela, Desmond
Tutu, Dionne Warwick, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Margaret Thatcher, Martin
Lee, Christine Lee, Pierre Trudeau, Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, Hillary Rodham Clinton,
Barack and Michelle Obama, The Fergusons of Farm Road, The Cosby Show, Good Times
and Sanford and Son
I am of New Orleans' Katrina's Ninth Ward
The starving distended bellies of every black child you see, the pimps, the prostitutes,
gangsters and rappers' evil lyrics on international and local TV and in movie theaters
I am of global and of the local, history past, present and future,
I am of sadness and despair, of hope and freedom
Of family, of friends, of colleagues old and new
I am of home, where I am, where I have been and where I have yet to go
So don't put me in a box and tell me who I am
Or try to make me what you want me to be
I am who I am*

*Let me be what I am
And if that challenges you to rethink who you are
Then be challenged!*

Introduction

The poem, “Who am I?” was written in reaction to the continual essentialising¹ of my personhood. Essentialism at its simplest, signifies breaking something down to its smallest denominator, a way of seeing or viewing what one perceives to be its basic essence or to put it crudely, the stereotype. Fuchs (2001, 13) describes essentialism as “making either/or distinctions rather than variable distinctions in degree” and he proposes a much more dynamic and interdisciplinary theory of culture and society that means “dissolving natural kinds and their essential properties into relationships and forces” (15). The notion of dissolving and allowing for various multiple permutations in one’s perspective is a very appealing one as I consider the boundaries that I need to traverse in my personal and professional journey.

In this essay I revisit examples of the essentialisation of my personhood and my emotional, psychological and cognitive interpretations of them. I interrogate the reactions of others to me which according to Fuchs (2001) are based on their observer-dependent interpretations and relations “to the world *in* the world” (18, his italics). My reflexive understandings of these observations also puts me in the shoes of an observer, as I recall my location in that time and place as I examine my past and current frames of reference. From our observations, Fuchs (2001) contends that a complex theory of observation can be proposed, one that is based upon a social structure connected in clusters through networks.

This paper is written with an awareness of my own subjectivity in reporting how I see myself in the world. It is my skewed renditions about resisting the essentialisation of one’s selfhood and how I counter the forces that try to pigeonhole me into one square peg as I try to make my way in the world. Stuart Hall (1996) echoes Fuchs on the constructivist variable nature of our being as humans. In speaking in particular about the essentialising of Black people he says:

What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences, and cultural identities which compose the category “Black”, that is the recognition that ‘black’ is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed trans-cultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in diversity and differentiation of the historical and experiences of black subjects... (443)

As a person of African descent, I live, feel and have experienced the compelling urgency of Stuart Hall’s (1996) words. I know the sting of being categorized, stereotyped and essentialised in mainly the non-Black majority settings where I

¹ In this chapter I choose to utilise the British form of spelling, the spelling choice of my country and schooling.

have lived including Canada and Hong Kong. Unfortunately, this is not a unique phenomenon. Here in the United States where I am currently located, and in countries around the world someone is being stigmatized and measured against the social mores of the dominant world or local culture probably every minute of the day. What is troubling is when some of these other ways of seeing seep into our subconsciousness and we internalize and accept them without self-critique.

I knew from the time I was a young teenager that I would not forsake certain elements of my being. There is a calypso song that is played in the Bahamas that talks about how people suddenly change the way they speak after visiting the United States or the United Kingdom for a few days. When they return home, they speak with an affected American or British accent. I felt amused that someone would do that, was it perceived as a better way of speaking or was it that life in these places was already deemed to be better?

In interrogating the pervasive Eurocentric tradition in American education, Evans (1997) tells how non-European cultural groups are “trained to support the European American cultural effort” at the expense of marginalizing their own (273). Non-dominant world cultures and those that represent them must consciously work at resisting and challenging those that would seek to make us appear like who they want us to be. As Evans (1997, 274) raises a very important question which I endeavor to answer throughout this paper: “how does one decenter a self-identity that, until recently, consisted primarily of truncated and distorted notions of African and African American history and culture?” Atabaki (2003) makes a similar point when he writes about how the “Other” (the Oriental in Middle East and /Central Asia) was framed by early British travelers through their ideology of “circumstantial inferiority” and with an inferior history (4). Atabaki (2003) cites Karl Popper whom he says was the first to define essentialism as anti-nominalist theory. Atabaki (2003) states that:

Essentialism in the historiography of the Middle East and Central Asia is, in my usage, an indication of false universalism: the characteristics of the dominant subset of a group or a society being attributed to all members of the group of other societies either by over-generalizations or by unstated references. (6)

Much earlier than Atabaki (2003), Edward Said’s 1978 seminal work, “Orientalism” also portrayed how European colonists framed and stereotyped the Orient and their people which now we are all called to contest. As a Bahamian of African descent, many of the issues raised by Atabaki (2003) and Said (1978) are the same for someone who was brought up in a British West Indian or Caribbean colonial society for the most part under white minority rule where I never got a chance to study my own enslaved past and where the framing by Europeans of Black people from Africa and in the Americas and the whole world predated my existence but still goes on today and which we are all called to contest as I do in this chapter (Howard 2007; Moore 2008; United Nations 2009).

My Early Roots

Our national, cultural and global identities are shaped by a host of interactive, contextual and complex factors that all combine to make us who we are (Banks 2004; Finkbeiner 2009). I am the sum total of my experiences even if I do not want to be. I am firstly of my grandmother.

My grandmother was a very proud woman who believed that “manners and respect get you through the world,” “time will tell,” and “if you start something, finish it!” Her admonitions were drilled into my head from a very early age and whenever my learning appeared to get in the way, she reminded me of what really mattered in this world and whenever I felt too weary to complete a difficult project, like finishing my doctoral dissertation, her words carried me through. She was a tall, serious woman of great stature who believed that children should be seen but not heard. She travelled with her “husband”, a big black umbrella that protected her from the fierce sun or the heavy rains as she walked to and from then Sheraton British Colonial Hotel where she worked as a maid (today that hotel has been renamed British Colonial Hilton Hotel). She prided herself on being an outstanding maid who worked hard and she complained when her good work merited very little or no acknowledgement of her services. When she came home she brought with her the leftovers, treats from her affluent hotel guests, Perrier and tonic water, small jams or preserves, strange tasting cheeses in silver wrapping, chocolates, and other exotic edibles. My brothers, cousins and I relished this taste of the unfamiliar.

Even though my grandmother, the person who named me after her own mother and with whom I lived from birth, was a maid, she would let you know in no uncertain terms, that “common sense was not common” and that she had good learning. In fact, sometimes, she used to teach her husband’s students the three Rs (reading, [w]riting, and [a]rithmetic). My grandfather was a head teacher on one of our Family Islands and in those days, this was a position of great status in our archipelagic nation. His daughter, my mother, followed in his footsteps and I am told that she was a no nonsense excellent teacher. Likewise, her daughter, that’s me, is said to have a serious face as an educator and from the outset, it seems that I was predestined to follow in my grandfather’s and mother’s footsteps as I started teaching from the age of twelve² and in my high school year book I was voted as the one “most likely to become a teacher.” I am of those teachers that preceded me: my mother, grandmother and grandfather and those that influenced them.

² I taught summer school at my home for at least four years during my time in high school. I was encouraged to do this by my mother as a way to make some money to pay for my high school textbooks and to help give my neighbours and younger cousins something to do for three weeks in the summer.

Contextual Insights

I grew up in the 1960s under the Union Jack in the traditional British school and system of government but I was also imbibing cerasee³, a medicinal bush from our backyard, for the common cold. When we had sores and skin rashes we were bathed in shepherd needle or sage, another local bush or what we generally called, bush medicine (Lowe et al. 2001). And so, from the outset, I had two contrasting cultures imbued in me, African and Eurocentric traditions. For dinner we often had fresh goggle eyed fish which my mother bought at the downtown market or purchased from the fisherman who passed our house on his bicycle as he yelled out “fresh goggle eyes, snappers, grouper, conch ...” The fish were fried and steamed in tomato gravy with onions and we ate that with home grown pigeon or black-eyed peas and grits.

We had an outhouse in a far corner of our backyard which had no electricity and was a good distance from the main house and when one had to go late at night, you had to travel with a kerosene oil lantern through our rocky backyard. I did not know the luxury of indoor home plumbing or television for that matter, until I was a teenager when my uncle built a stone house for my grandmother. Our wooden house with many rooms added on as the family expanded housed my mother, grandparents and brothers and any visiting uncles, aunts, or cousins who were in the area. We hand pumped our water from our pump which I remember was red in colour with a seat for our bucket. We toted water from the front of the yard where the pump was to the back of the yard for dishwashing and clothes washing or inside if we were cleaning, cooking or bathing.

Our neighbours had to use the public faucet which was located near the edge of my grandmother’s property. We washed our clothes under a huge casuarina tree on a washstand that held three sturdy large tin tubs, one with a scrubbing board for washing the clothes, another for the bleach and one for the blue rinse. If there were school uniforms to be starched, then a bucket with the starch liquid was squeezed on the washstand too. Our clothes were allowed to dry naturally on the numerous clotheslines which crisscrossed our large backyard. We used wooden pins to hold our clothes in place and there was an order for hanging out clothes. Our school shirts were all strung together by the ends so that the wind could blow through them and the sun would have no difficulty drying them. Our underwear and other delicates were hung in the inner lines away from main road and prying eyes, and our whites stayed together too as did socks and other clothing.

When my mother felt extra energetic, after she was finished with the washing, the rinse water was used to bathe us. She felt, as small children, we did an inadequate job bathing ourselves during the weekday, so she would give us a good scrubbing once a week on the weekend, until every inch of our wriggling bodies from head to toe, were tingling and shimmering with cleanliness. After my bath, my hair was usually guinea corn rowed or braided for the week. My mother rowed my hair so tightly sometimes that it was impossible to smile because the muscles in my face would hurt.

³ Cerasee is also known as *Momordica charantia* (cucurbitaceae); shepherd needle is also known as Spanish needle or *Bidenspilosa* (Asteraceae); sage is also know as *Lantana amara* (Verbanaceae).

When it was time to iron, my mother used a coal iron. Our pale green and dark green Catholic school uniforms were always stiff with starch and my brothers' well-creased pants could almost cut you. I can vividly recall the steam hissing from the iron while my mother sang her lament, "Oh Lord I am Not Worthy," "Jerusalem the Golden" and "The Sacred Heart of Jesus", in a strong beautiful alto voice. In our four-bedroom house, my mother and I shared a big bed. She loved to decorate our bed with beautiful spreads especially on a Sunday which was always a special day with regulatory morning mass, followed by a special Sunday meal, a nap and then Sunday school and benediction in the late afternoon. When we got home, there was a special hot home-made dessert waiting for us.

During the summers, my brothers and I went regularly to early morning mass; my brothers to be altar servers and me to look longingly at them while they lit the candles, genuflected, carried the cross and participated in the ritual on the altar. During the summer days as the only girl child, I was not allowed to play on the streets as my brothers did. After our chores were done, I had to find something to do. My mother said that if we could not find anything to do, she would find something for us. So we engaged ourselves by playing Tarzan and Jane in our yard which had numerous trees. At the front, we had a pomegranate tree, a huge sea grape tree, and a gooseberry tree from which my Auntie Monica made jam. On the sides of our yard, we had numerous sapodilla trees all of which yielded different tasting dillies.

Our favourite tree was the one that was against the house and whose branches crossed the roof. These dillies were very big, round and sweet. They contained big black seeds which we spat out on the ground as we ate the fruit, skin and all. For Tarzan and Jane, we used the trees that were to the left of the house and which were so close together that we could cross on the branches from one to the other without getting down to the ground. There was one special tree on this side that was my favourite; not because of its fruit but because at the very top of that tree there was a branch that cradled me and I could sit there for hours, swaying in the breeze while I looked at the tops of the other trees, thought my thoughts and read my weather worn and well-aged ancient smelling Nancy Drew or Famous Five storybook which I had borrowed from the public library. We also had some cassava, eddoes, banana, hog plum, guavas, coconut trees and marmee supporter trees growing in our yard. We all hated the marmee supporter trees which created a yellow mess when their ripened fruit fell to the ground attracting buzzing flies. We seldom ate this fruit.

As small children during the summer holidays, my mother would walk with us to the nearest beach which was about two miles from our house. We took a homemade picnic lunch of tuna fish sandwiches, limeade drink and cool watermelon. When we got tired of playing in the water, we played ring play, rounders and other games such as "Mother May I". My mother, the teacher was always the organizer and storyteller especially on the beach by the light of a big full moon with the sounds of the waves gently lapping against the shore. At Christmastime, we cleaned our yard with a scratcher broom from our coconut tree. We would walk to Market Street to buy our new linoleum and recovered our kitchen and living room floors. We walked about three miles to the store and walked back with the linoleum on our shoulders. I can still recall the smell of new

linoleum in our main family areas with the smell of a freshly cut Christmas pine tree in the corner.

My mother would put the gifts out after midnight mass and when we awoke in the morning, we saw what Santa had brought. Usually coloring books, dolls for me, toys for my brothers or a new item of clothing. After the children returned from morning mass, we had a special Christmas dinner of ham and turkey with peas and rice, stuffing, potato salad, macaroni and cheese, beets or corn followed by rich homemade fruit cake steeped in Caribbean rum. On Boxing Day morning, the day after Christmas, we awoke around three and put on our corduroys to walk to the junkanoo parade which was held on Bay Street about four miles from our house. As we got nearer to town, we could hear the cowbells and the goatskin drums and the more excited we became as we quickened our steps to see the groups of colorful masqueraders.

On New Year's morning after watch night services, we went back downtown to welcome the New Year with more junkanoo festivities. Our junkanoo parade confirmed who we were as Black people because this was the event that the slaves celebrated on their only day off for the year, Christmas Day and they dressed up in pasted newspapers and paraded around to the sounds of goat skin drums with a rhythm reminiscent of their ancestral homeland. Today junkanoo continues to be a major celebration with huge legendary groups such as the Valley Boys, Saxons and One Family competing for prizes. Paraders are dressed in colorful themed costumes made of crepe paper and cardboard and accompanied by drums, cowbells, horns and a brass section (Bahamas Handbook 2013).

Perspective

My early pre-academic life story may appear exotic to some, ordinary or even "backwards" or "deprived" depending on one's cultural orientation and understanding of "Others" who are outsiders of their own cultural background. Postmodernism encourages us to rethink traditional modernist theories of the master or metanarratives of history and the hegemonic shaping of cultural identities (Said, 1978; 1994). In its place are the importance of local narratives, the legitimization of alternative or different family units, classless subjugations, and the challenges and messiness of multiple and conflicting identities. These hybrid identities (Bhabha 1994; Said 1978) are shaped by our cultural histories, in my case my colonial and post-colonial heritages singing and loving the British national anthem and folksongs as well as learning to love and foresee the exciting possibilities of the emerging identity of a newly independent country governed by its own people the majority of African descent. The process of articulating nation building and identity formation, the discarding and coming to terms with our British selves and taking on a new national anthem, passport and currency helped in concrete ways but did not address the psychological trauma of self-governance and national identity formation.

Becoming an Educator

When I was eleven I was fortunate enough to be awarded a scholarship to attend high school, but the cost of books was not included and my mother told me that I

could have summer classes for my cousins and neighbours to raise money to help pay for my textbooks. I charged my cousins and neighbours one dollar a week and we held classes for three weeks of the summer holidays. The first summer we had about forty pupils and every summer thereafter, the numbers increased so I recruited one of my younger cousins, Rosie, to help me. We were soon making more than seventy dollars a week. We started at nine and finished at 12:30 p.m. We had one break. My mother gave us access to all her old school textbooks and we got some discarded benches and desks from our church school and put them in an unused room at the back of our house which became known as “the classroom”. My mother put a blackboard in there and my uncle who was in the construction business, got a huge telecommunications cable spool for us to use as a table and with the large washstand, and desks we had enough table space. We used the dining room chairs from the house and benches from “the classroom” as our seats.

My mother did not assist or intervene and it seems that I was a natural teacher because I knew how to manage the learners who were from ages 5 to 10 years. I gave them reading, writing and arithmetic and I had everything prepared for the different age groups before they came. They did exercises and I checked them and I explained when they did not understand. One time we held a talent and fashion show to culminate the summer classes. Another time we took the children to the beach. So, this is why at the end of high school, I was chosen as the person most likely to be a teacher and that is what I became, even though I had considered law but that was not accessible to me. What was immediately accessible was the Teachers College because those who qualified were paid to study to become teachers. So, while many of my high school friends went off to college in the United States, I went to the local teachers college. My mother had died of cancer two years before I finished high school and my financial options were limited so I went to what was available, the local Teachers College.

Perspective

Everybody in my immediate family had graduated from high school but nobody had ever been to an overseas College or university though all of our local leaders had studied in the United Kingdom, Canada or the United States. My mother had done her teachers’ training at home, part time, and my aunts and uncles had done various post-secondary local courses. Options for me were never discussed in my presence, as it was somehow understood that I would be a teacher and go to the government teachers’ college which allocated a stipend for those studying to become educators. Our high school did not have structures in place to support students in reaching for something beyond the local so how did my classmates know what to do? The classmates who were closest to me all had older siblings who had gone off to school and so the path had been paved for them. I had a cousin who was off at school but even though I corresponded with him, I did not know the first step in applying for an overseas school, what to do, what would it be like, or how I would be funded and supported. In retrospect one should question the assumption that young people need to go overseas to improve their career chances. Every country should be able to offer post-secondary opportunities to their citizens. Even though in many contexts, local knowledge

and local institutions are relegated to a lower status than overseas ones, the assumed supremacy of the foreign over the local needs to be questioned. At the same time we all need to work to dismantle the visible and invisible structures of power and the subjugation of local knowledges (Foucault 1979; 1980). As educators we should ensure the respectful dignity of the local and ensure access to the undiscerning through critical emancipatory and participatory approaches in teaching and learning (Boyd et al 2006).

Post Teachers' College

After my two years at Teachers' College I started teaching at a secondary school where I stayed for eight years. It was a brand new school and most of us were young energetic teachers. I opted to teach in the government system because of my private Catholic school experience, I wanted to work with those children whom I perceived to need "uplifting" as I saw it in those days. Not all the children attending the school were working class; some came from middle class backgrounds as the area was newly developing with modern three bedroom one bath housing and conveniences. I drove from my "over-the hill" area to the Southern area of the island to teach. I invested a great deal of energy in my students organizing the drama club, the debate club and the library prefects club.

We energetic teachers were most fortunate in this school because the administrators allowed our creative energies to flourish. Two years into my teaching of English, I was assigned responsibility for the library and appointed as the chair of the newly created reading department at the school. I had many challenges, most of them related to defining what could be reasonably accomplished with the time allocated for teaching reading with the nearly one thousand plus student body. I was also younger and much less experienced than most of the teachers working in my department but I persevered.

I became a member of the International Reading Association and became an avaricious reader of their publications. Also supporting me was the opportunity to begin a degree programme in education right at home with the University of Miami. This program was developed in conjunction with the College of the Bahamas and the Ministry of Education because we did not have a full degree in education available to us at that time. On the day of registration for the bachelor's degree, I was amongst the first in line. I was a member of the first BA and MA graduating cohorts. We went to school every weekend and every summer for about six years. The professors left their Miami campus every weekend to be with us. Beyond living in a hotel on the beach, they seemed to enjoy working with us. We were told often that we were more motivated than their students on campus.

Perspective

My grandmother always told me that when one door closes, another opens. My studies at the Teachers College and later the University of Miami, endorsed my beliefs that one could learn regardless of where one went to school. As long as one is motivated to excel, the chances are, that s/he can and will. My learning and teaching experiences have made me especially attuned to those students who feel insecure, disenfranchised and disadvantaged because they did not go to "Ivy

League” schools or did not go “overseas” to school. I also feel a special kinship for those first generation college attendees having been one myself both in the Bahamas and in Canada. In the Bahamas, moving forward is very often related to one’s capacity to galvanise the forces of people in strategic places whom one knows through family or connections. If one does not “know anyone” then one must rely on one’s own resources and agency to propel oneself which is what I did. There are definite disadvantages to “not knowing anyone” or having social capital (Bourdieu 1983) and educators need to assist the disempowered in learning how to acquire the economic and cultural resources to move forward with their lives.

What might be seen as an “unusual” path compared to ones that most education professors take, I see as a personal asset. My spiritual beliefs influenced my decision to teach in a setting that was going to be a challenge and I take a special joy in working with those who feel disenfranchised or marginalised. Opting to teach in a school setting that was different from my own schooling brought another set of challenges but I felt that I had something to offer.

I never liked the “assumed superiority” of certain select high schools and I wanted the students at my secondary school to understand that they were just as good as those students with whom I had studied. And indeed, it was a great personal satisfaction and vindication when my Debating Society students beat students from my alma mater to win the intercollegiate debating society championship one year. However, during my time at the secondary school I believe that my greatest reward came from seeing our students buy and read books at our annual book fairs.

Every year we held a huge book fair with low cost fiction and non-fiction books imported from Scholastic. I knew that our tiny library could not reach many of the kids and I wanted the students to have access to books which they could call their own, and which they kept in their own homes. The nonprofit book fair was an exciting week-long event at our school and it took place in the school’s auditorium. The books were displayed in booths which were organized by genre and decorated with huge posters and colorful balloons. To add to the allure and excitement of buying books, my drama club and library prefects performed skits and talented acts to encourage students to attend the event. There is often an assumed belief that children in public schools or children characterised as “poor” or coming from “working class” homes are “less than”, or “not as good as” the other children in high income or private schools. Teachers who buy into this stereotype and essentialist thinking will not necessarily commit to the extra effort that is required to provide access to the resources that are needed to propel students to the next level (Delpit 1995; King 2005; Wong 2012).

Pursuing a Doctorate Degree

My first overseas experience as a student was in Toronto, Canada where I did another master’s degree and completed my doctorate. In Tinker Sachs (2006) I discuss some of my graduate study experiences in more detail but this sojourn brought me face to face with James Gee’s (1990) notions of discourses and the inequities of different starting points. As an international student, I got a chance

to experience immigration procedures and hegemonic discourses of another country.

It is very humiliating to come from a perceived “third world” or “developing country” context and study in a so called “first world” setting. It is assumed by authorities that you come from an adverse “backward” country and that you want to stay and while this may be the goal for some international students, it is not the case for all. I also experienced what it was like to be the “only person of color” and “an outsider” for the first time in my life. It is a very humbling experience to leave a place where one has status and high regard to go to a place where “nobody knows your name”.

In my classes it was the norm that I was never asked about my own cultural context in discussing educational issues, and my fellow students and professors were equally uninterested or too busy to enquire. I learned very early to become a listener and not a speaker. Out of class, I learned how to navigate the extensive library systems and to do research. I was “behind” my fellow students in knowing how to use such a university library for research but I learned quickly. I learned the discourses of academe and how to speak comfortably with academics (who wanted to be called by their first names, and all of whom were White North American or European) and I learned how to develop further, higher level academic writing skills through trial and error on my own.

Luckily for me, we had a very strong international students association as well as a vibrant graduate students association and I became an active member serving on the executive committees of both. Here I socialized and discussed the trials and tribulations of graduate school with both international and local students. Belonging to a community of people with the same goals is essential for attaining success. Leaping outside of one’s comfortable cultural space is also important for learning about “Others” and learning to acculturate in a new culture and discourse community. Brislin et al. (1986) in their culture-general framework include emotional anxiety, knowledge of the new context’s rituals and social hierarchies as well as ingroup/outgroup distinctions amongst the many attributes that one must confront in adapting to a new culture. Berry (2005, 698) acknowledges that acculturation at the individual level requires that one learns how to negotiate and compromise in order to reach “harmonious engagement.” It is not a small adjustment to make.

Perspective

James Paul Gee’s (1990) notions of the varying discourses (Big “D” and lower case “d”) come to my mind and also Foucault’s (1990) “subjugated knowledges” as I recall these experiences and how they influenced me. I also became conscious of what “the third world appellation” meant, when people outside of my home country in supposedly “first world” countries automatically assigned me this classification. These people had never traveled to the Bahamas and knew little beyond the tourism ads but yet they felt they knew the Bahamas. I learned to deconstruct others’ expectations and impositions of how I should be speaking when they heard a brand of the Queen’s English coupled with my Bahamian lilt and my own version of the way an English teacher should speak.

In Toronto, English speaking children from the Caribbean were routinely misunderstood because of their accent and dialect and placed in English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) or Special Education classes (e.g. McClaren 2003). I was asked by one of my classmates to give a talk to teachers from the Toronto Board of Education about the Caribbean and during this talk, I sought to familiarize teachers with the different histories, languages and cultures of the diverse people from the West Indies. I also talked about dialect variations and the differences and similarities with the standard English dialect (Nero 2006; Schneider 2008). The lack of knowledge and unfamiliarity inspired me to do a masters dissertation on the topic, “Dialect and the question of interference” and later I went further with my doctoral dissertation to examine ways of processing, constructing and exhibiting knowledge when Bahamian and Canadian sixth graders worked with culturally familiar and unfamiliar texts (Tinker 1984; 1989).

Post-doctoral Years

In the two years following my doctorate, I worked as a Language Arts consultant and coordinator in a primary school in my home country. These were two very rewarding years because I had a principal who gave me room to experiment. I started several projects, the main ones being, the Language Enrichment Centre, Peer Reading, Parents Education Programme (PEP) and Lock away the Books Programme (Tinker Sachs in press). The Language Enrichment Centre was developed to support the early language development of our lower primary students. The idea was to provide working class pupils with opportunities to enrich their language through experiences in creative play such as listening to stories, reading, participating in drama and playing with educational toys. This programme was especially designed to support our (ESOL) students who came to school speaking Creole but in the end, all the grade one students participated. The Peer Reading program solicited the support of the high achievers in the upper classes to teach low achieving mid-primary students reading, writing and arithmetic under the supervision of the teacher once a week.

The Parents Education Programme gave interested parents an opportunity to work with a teacher in Math and English. The premise was that if parents were familiar with what their kids were being taught at school, they could provide more support to them. Through strengthening parents’ literacy skills, their children would be strengthened. The Lock Away the Books Project lasted for one month and all the teachers in the school did not use any of the US-based school texts to teach but instead created materials from culturally familiar topics to teach the skills and strategies that they would have taught with their textbooks. This project encouraged teacher professionalism, efficacy and creativity across the curriculum. All of these projects were very well received with the Language Enrichment Center still continuing in various formats in a few local schools today.

Perspective

When I returned home, armed with a doctorate, I was expecting to teach in the Education Division of the College of the Bahamas where I knew there was a

place waiting for me. Even though this position could have been had, the powers that be thought a placement in a primary school, even though I had never had any primary teaching experience or training, was best for me. A lot of people felt that this placement was an indignity to all my years of study but the personal and professional satisfaction that I gained from this experience cannot be denied. While I felt the undeniable sting of a bureaucrat's display of power, I gained the greatest respect for primary teachers especially those who teach the lower grades. Secondary teachers are almost always made to feel superior to primary teachers just as college professors are deemed to be superior to all teachers.

I found that without the very strong foundation that the primary teachers need to establish in our learners, the life of a secondary teacher would be that much more difficult. As for we college/university education professors, if we cannot work collaboratively with both primary and secondary teachers, our professional lives are almost doomed to failure. By that same token, primary teachers should never belittle the significance of the important work they do and secondary teachers do need to develop a healthier respect for those who build the foundation for their learners. We all need to be far more respectful of each other and recognize the interconnections of the commonalities of the work we do.

The culturally familiar work that I did also reinforced for me how we need to work harder against colonialist forces, as well as the internalisation and easy acceptance of texts from other countries which do nothing to build on the resources and local identities of a people. Small countries need to be particularly vigilant in this regard and devote resources to the building up of local literatures, knowledges and other artistic expressions. This is crucial where Black populations take on Eurocentric teaching content and practices without question and which serve only to reinforce the illusion of the supremacy of White people and that what is good can only come from outside of one's own country (Burney 2012; Sefa Dei Simmons 2010; Woodson 1933).

A Beginning Professor and a New Cultural Context

I left my home country to work in Hong Kong. In my second departure from my home country to live elsewhere, I was better prepared for life abroad. Even though there were language barriers and other sharply divergent cultural differences, I persevered and adapted. I learned enough of the language to survive and I became culturally comfortable. My first job gave me a wonderful initiation into the educational context as I worked with both secondary and primary in-service teachers in a government sponsored 16-week English as a second/foreign language refresher course. From there I was hired as a university professor to work with pre-service teachers and graduate teachers of English as a second/foreign language (Tinker Sachs 2002; 2006). My research projects, teaching and administrative responsibilities afforded me some invaluable opportunities to be a cultural ambassador for my country and for dark-skinned people in general (Tinker Sachs and Li 2005; Tinker Sachs 2002; 2006) while I learned the politics of being a dark-skinned foreign female TESOL academic in a Chinese and European male dominated place (Lin et al. 2004).

Perspective

I was a reluctant cultural ambassador for the Bahamas, Black people and dark-skinned people in general. As an educator, I was propelled into taking a critical stance to the work I did simply because I could not let certain understandings and ways of thinking go unchallenged. As educators and academics we need to reflexively consider the points in our career when we leave our comfort zones and stick our necks out. As the only person of African descent that my students had ever been exposed to or had had contact with, I knew that I represented the entire Black race. From the racism with dark-skinned people reported in the press and from my own personal encounters, I could not let my teaching continue to be sanitized or disguised as “apolitical.” I became overtly political in my teaching by incorporating a more salient critical perspective in all my course readings, activities and local examples at both the undergraduate and graduate levels; I became political in my conference presentations (for example Tinker Sachs 2003; Tinker Sachs and West 2004) and in specific aspects of my research by going beyond the cognitive to include socio-cultural orientations which addressed both the local and the global; and I became political in my writing by incorporating a personal critical reflexive stance to my usual remote third person academic voice (for example Lin et al. 2004; Tinker Sachs 2006).

This movement was far beyond the ways I had been instructed in graduate school and initiated into the academy and it took some time to develop the insights, confidence and courage to see beyond the cognitive, practical and the methodological lens to get to the sociocultural and historical perspectives that I now hold and its resultant impact on the work that I do. I wear the cultural ambassadorship more easily and now see myself more clearly as a “critical intercultural worker” (hooks 1994; Freire 1998; Freire and Macedo 1996; Robbins et al 2011).

A Foreign-familiar Cultural Context

After working in South East Asia, I came nearer to my cultural roots by sojourning to the south eastern United States. Here in Georgia, I am into my tenth year as a university academic where I work mainly with graduate students. There are many hurdles yet to overcome. I have to overcome the externally and internally imposed characteristics of my dark skin. I have to overcome both external and internal pressures of adapting to a new academic cultural context as a mature academic and not as a novice academic. And I have to address the internal and external pressures of being foreign and learn to navigate all aspects of living in a different culture while striving to bridge both my cultural and specific knowledge gaps.

Perspectives

Unlike graduate school in Canada and life in Hong Kong where a dark-skinned person like me was not the norm, here in Atlanta, in the community, I am outwardly, quite ordinary and no exception to the norm. Because of this, I can hide easily. I can disguise myself as an African-American and thus be privy to

their ways of thinking. And from the African Americans, I am learning how they see themselves and others, both White others and dark-skinned Black foreign others. As an unspeaking Black person, I am often perceived as an African-American by unsuspecting Whites and when I speak, there is often a quandary of how to receive me as the initial perceptions are challenged. As a person who has never subscribed to the culturally imposed “minority” complex, I strongly resist being minoritised (Sleeter 2011) and most of all being essentialised. By this I mean, viewing all Black people as a single cultural group. American Blacks, as well as Whites and other ethnic groups, need to appreciate that Blacks who reside in the US are a very mixed, culturally diverse and complex group of people coming from different classes, backgrounds as well as countries.

John Ogbu’s (1983; 1985) distinctions between voluntary and involuntary minorities might be helpful for appreciating some of the cultural differences between American local Blacks and immigrant Blacks while Stuart Hall’s (1996, 443) emphasis on the diversity of subject positions of Blacks, in general, challenges essentialist views beyond geographic boundaries. At the same time, while recognizing my differences, I cannot deny my Blackness and the commonality of the experiences of Black people worldwide (Tinker Sachs et al. 2011) and the salience of Martin Luther King’s words are emblazoned on my mind, “*a threat to justice anywhere, is a threat to justice everywhere.*” This is the cross that Black people bear no matter where they are and who they are.

Acculturating and accommodating oneself to a new culture, requires psychological, social, emotional and cognitive adjustments but some adjustments can be self-negotiated depending on how far one wants to accommodate or acculturate within the host community (Berry 2005). When I came here, it was with a certain degree of awareness of American racialism. But visiting for brief periods, studying about the place for extended periods do not ever come anywhere near to the experience of actually living in a place. I am now learning how to be as a foreign Black academic in the highly volatile historically racialised context of this country. I am working very hard not to buy into or internalize any aspect of being “a-minority-who-needs-special-help-to-make-it-in-academe” because “you-people-can’t-make-it-if-we-don’t-help-you”. Or buy into “the-foreigner-who-came-to-the-US-because-this-is-the-best-place-to-be.” What those who are against the grain need is genuine respect for being there not a self-effacing “feel good help” by those who feel obligated to make up for the past offenses of their forebears. This respect is accorded to someone who deserves to be there and has gained a rightful place there.

Being Here

Despite the external and internal tensions of being in a new place, like in all the places I have lived, I have a purpose for being there. As always, I am here to make a difference in the lives of those in my circle of influence while simultaneously learning as much as I can about education in this country. I believe that we make a difference in education when we work for the best school experiences for our children especially those children who are marginalised and disenfranchised. This means that in my work with teachers, I expect high standards of performance and strive for the adoption of best culturally appropriate

practices, attitudes and non-essentialist understandings and ways of teaching that will empower the youths and adults of this land and beyond to reach their potential. I bring my understandings and experiences of living in other countries both as majority and as minority to this place. I believe that exposure to diverse experiences and viewpoints broaden and deepen the local and global knowledge base of educators which is important for enriching one's understandings when working with fellow educators and children in both local and global cultural contexts (Merryfield 2001; 2002). The need for interculturally competent educators in today's world cannot be denied as is the need to draw on the rich resources of all our learners wherever they may be (Sleeter 2011).

Conclusion

When we come to a new country, we bring our own subjectivities (and biases). If we expect to contribute in positive ways, we must prepare to be challenged by the internal and external tensions as we strive to adapt. Our subjectivities need to be interrogated by ourselves as we critique the new encounters. Learning to understand the school culture for example, where blue jeans are the norm contrasts sharply with my own "uniformed" experiences. This challenges me to an "opening-up" of my own viewpoints about the non-uniformed culture and to understanding why students have a voice above their parents about their participation in a research project which is designed for their own development. At the same time I feel compelled to resist the common assumption and essentialisation by others that my service should perpetually embrace serving on Diversity committees. My grandmother always told me, "If you want to know me, come live with me." This statement certainly has strength. One cannot know the "Other," just by looking from the outside, but one must strive to get to know the other by walking in his/her shoes, becoming familiar with him/her and even "living" with him/her. In other words, we all must go beyond, "talking the talk" but actually "walking the walk" (Cochran-Smith 2004) in our everyday practices as we teach, serve and engage in research for the good of the people of this world.

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