

Race, Gender, and Religion in the Performance of Self in an ESL Program

Tamara Chung-Constant

Through autoethnography, I explore the performative constitution of being a visible minority teacher in an English as a second language (ESL) program. Whenever a teacher enters a classroom for the first time, all eyes are always reading her/his performance of self. Students' interpretations and evaluations are based on larger ideological struggles within various spaces they have occupied. These struggles work to complicate identities that occupy shared spaces. In this essay, I focus on two particular incidents that took place in the program in order to locate and specify the interworking of race, gender, and religious identities within whiteness in an ESL classroom and program. Through a close examination, I highlight how social identities, particular race and religion, are instituted and maintained through repetitive meaningful acts that (re)produce oppression and uphold whiteness.

As I walk down the hall of the Linguistics Department, I feel slight tremors run through my body because this is my first week back on U.S. American¹ soil and my first day at the university. I hear the clicking sound of my shoes on the tile floor in the quiet hallway. I look from right to left at the names on the doors as I am walking in order to make sure I stop at the correct office. I have a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach, signaling my nervousness. This is my first time in this part of the country. I have never been to the Midwest, so I worry about my reception because I have heard many stories about this region related to race, gender, and religion. From a distance, I hear a voice—soft, low, and soothing. As I approach the door, I look at the name on the door and realize this is the director's office. This was the woman who offered me, on the basis of a phone interview, a position as a graduate teaching assistant in the Center of English as a Second or other Language (CESL) in the Linguistics Depart-

Tamara M. Chung Constant is a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst in the School of Education in the Language, Literacy and Culture Program. Ms. Chung Constant's research interests include language and identity, performance studies, critical race theory, global multi/intercultural education, and cultural studies. She is currently working on research that examines race and gender in Teaching English as a Second/Other Language (TESOL).

¹ I have chosen to use the term "U.S. American" because "America/n(s)" refers to the New World, which includes North, South, Central America and the Caribbean, and many people from countries in these regions identify as Americans even though the common naming and labeling practice identifies only people from the United States of America as Americans.

ment. I knock on the door and she tells me to come into her office. I walk in, extend my hand, and say, “hello, my name is Tamara. I am the new T.A.” She looks up and her eyebrows lower, showing her confusion. Just as quickly, her eyebrows raise and she pastes a smile on her face as she says, “Oh, I did not realize you were black. You do not have a black sounding name. It sounds like a European name, and you did not sound black on the phone.” Her comments place me on center stage, and I am positioned to perform a certain role, a role I do not really know how to perform. I feel like I am being accused of not performing my ascribed racial identity appropriately on the basis of my name, accent, and dialect.

Performance as a Political Act

Performance is used by everyone in everyday life. Performances are the daily rituals, procedures, and customs people engage in to [re]define and to maintain cultural and social identities. In his writings, James Baldwin² has shown how people are always performing for each other. However, it is Dwight Conquergood’s work (1989) that identifies the dramatic nature of everyday life. This dramatic understanding of performance enables performance studies scholars to examine everyday action through performance vocabulary. Conquergood (1989) offers poetics, play, process, and power as key terms that obtain their meaning from other terms they resist and displace in order to show the interconnection that collectively defines performance while providing a counter project to textualism and logical positivism. These performance vocabulary indicate the ways cultures and selves are made and are not given entities as they are constructed, invented, fabricated and imagined (Conquergood, 1989). Cultures and people are not only created but they are creative. However, the creative play aspect links the way the world is limiting and limited in categories, hierarchies, and restrictions within societal power structures so people use methods to breach norms and taboos. In performance, culture is no longer a noun or mimesis but a verb or kinesis. Power emerges through performance because performance is public, a site of struggle for competing voices, viewpoints, and interests. Educational institutions are shared public spaces where competing ideologies, voices, and interests intersect. The public site provides a location where these intersecting interests can articulate their positions. Furthermore, theories of performativity allow the use of performance as a metaphor for subjectivity (Warren, 2010). Warren (2010) reminds us that “performance is a community - as a method, this marks a way of encountering the doing of our everyday lives, a performance metaphor of how we live, how we research, and how we reach across our academic divides to engage, to debate, to learn” (p. 221). Like all social locations, schools, classrooms, and research are sites where participants are not immune to performance.

Alexander (1999) writes that educational institutions, particularly classrooms, are contexts in which “dense particularities,” whether imagined or lived, are engaged (p.

² Baldwin, J. (1985). *The price of the ticket*. New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press

307). Although race and gender are socially constructed, they are powerful concepts that have denied certain groups rights through social processes and institutions, and these group performances have always been measured against groups that are seen as the norm. According to Butler (2006), the political construction of the subject aims to legitimize some and exclude others who are then concealed and naturalized politically through certain performances. My lack of performance as a black person during the phone interview allowed me access I, otherwise, would not have gained if I had performed blackness. My linguistic performance legitimized me as a candidate for the position since I provided a linguistic performance that is attached to a certain subject. Many critical theorists have acknowledged schools as forms of cultural politics through representation. That is, schools introduce, prepare, and legitimize particular forms of social and cultural subjects and performances. These performative acts implicate schools in maintaining power relations, knowledge distribution, and social practices.

For this paper, I utilize performance autoethnography to connect the personal with the political through a narrative format in order to address race, religion, and whiteness. I turn to performance autoethnography, as “it gives life to people in context, makes embodied practices meaningful, and generates analysis for seeing the conditions that make the socially taken-for-granted visible as a process,” to explore the performative constitution of being a visible minority teacher in an English as a second language (ESL) classroom (Warren, 2006, p. 318). Performance autoethnography texts use montage to simultaneously create and enact moral meaning as “they move from the personal to the political, from the local to the historical and the cultural” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5). Moreover, they require an active audience to create spaces for give and take between the reader and the writer. Performance autoethnography allows me to speak about acts of social transgression through the body where the telling of the story itself becomes a transgressive act to reveal what has been kept hidden and to speak of what has been kept silenced. This narrative provides a counter discourse that complicates preconceptions borne from dominant politics. I examine the politics of cultural identities that are present in many aspects of my life as an ESL graduate teaching assistant by making the personal political and by providing a self-reflexive analysis within the social context where I am positioned in the recent development in globalization, culture, language, religion, race, and identity. Therefore, in this paper, I highlight two particular encounters that have reshaped the way I see ESL education in higher education. These encounters sparked my journey into critical examination of human language development, the process of acquiring language through learning and mimicry, in light of social factors that have had an impact on individual expression of self-growth.

ESL and the body

Teaching English as a second language (TESOL) is part business and part education involving many groups of people who negotiate numerous social identities and nation

state affiliations. Interestingly, the capital and business components of TESOL seem to be absent within the research in the area even though they heavily influence the various levels of TESOL in both the public and private domain of education, which is situated within contemporary globalization. Globalization is often used to refer to the interrelated and interconnected relationships that are accompanied by the circulation of signs and symbols, people, and commodities (Appadurai, 1990). Globalization and capitalism have changed the conditions in which language learning takes place. In the last couple of decades, English has become a commodity that is bought and sold at high frequency, in the process creating a new global workforce.

Before I decided to return to graduate school, I was working for a Japanese company where I was an English language cultural trainer. I would meet individually with Japanese engineers who were going to be transferred overseas, so my lessons with the engineers allowed them to practice English while developing cultural understanding. I quickly learned that English as a second and a foreign language had become a commodity in the global market as English had become a medium to accomplish actions in a world where certain business commodities are globalized. I saw the commodification of English in the vast numbers of English schools in Japan and multinational corporations' use of ESL teachers. However, it was the Japanese Brazilian school where I volunteered on the weekends that opened my eyes to the high value that is placed on English. The purpose of the school was to develop the academic ability of Latin American students of Japanese ancestry in Spanish and Japanese or Brazilian Portuguese and Japanese. However, the majority of the parents preferred English even though their children were not performing well in the Japanese public school system, and students in the community had a higher drop-out rate compared to Japanese students. For the parents, English became a necessary commodity for them if they wanted their children to enter competitive industries, even for those whose children will never have a chance to use the language.

Considering the current global environment of transnational travel and global citizenry, it was surprising to me that the English as a second language (ESL) administrators and educators I encountered at my new university had not taken into consideration the world of the learners who are entering the program nor the classrooms which are heavily invested and embedded in histories, representations and identities. Tahiwai Smith (1999) reminds us that all research has a sordid colonial past, particular anthropology where ethnography originated, as it allowed for the collection and classification of knowledge about the "Other" which was then (re)presented to the West and the people (Others) themselves. People in the field should remember that English is a colonial language with a history and a culture that is transmitted to the new learners. English (re)presents the West, "Others" within the West, and "Others" outside the West during the language learning process. I was surprised by this lack of consideration since I specifically chose this program because it highlighted the program's diversity and had many professors who were researching issues surrounding language and identity in language learning.

I became interested in language, identity, and performativity because of the stories I had heard from ESL teachers of color I had met while working in Japan. They described certain practices such as lower pay for non-white teachers and outright discrimination by schools and parents. Unlike these colleagues, I was fortunate enough that the people I worked with at the company and the schools where I volunteered focused on my native English ability, but I believe that had to do more with my nationality, dialect, and ambiguous physical features than my skin color.

Race and gender scholarship in TESOL has not fully affected everyday practices in ESL programs, schools and classrooms even though scholars like Bonnie Norton, Jerry Willett, and Carlos Bulosan have been addressing the issue of race, gender, and representation since the 1980's. In her study, Amin (1999) ascertains that ESL education continues to focus on the race, gender, culture, and ethnic identities of learners, yet the area has made the social identities of teachers invisible, thereby leaving the differences experienced by visible ethnic and racial minorities in the field unaddressed. According to Kubota and Lin (2006), race is stigmatized in the field and is associated with overt bigotry rather than structural and institutional inequalities, an association that generally prevents dialogue about the issue.

According to critical sociocultural theory, which argues that the individual cannot be separated from the social level of analysis, especially the social and cultural context of learning, human language development and language learning as communicative tools are less private, less competitive, and less mechanistic since pedagogy is not only limited to what goes on in schools and in classrooms but also within other institutional structures. Many people learn of the self and cultural others through mediating tools. I once had a student who told me he was relieved when I spoke because I did not speak hip hop English. He probably did not even understand the implications of that confession, but I understood what he meant.

The outing

I walk through the hallway looking at the numbers on each classroom door to make sure I find my classroom. I pull my cell phone from my jacket to make sure I am on time. I see that I still have about 5 minutes to set up. Finally, I arrive in front of my classroom. I feel flutters in my belly and tingling in my arms. I take a deep breath. I feel nervous thinking this will be my first experience teaching ESL at the college level in the U.S. Before I enter the classroom, I look around and the students are smiling and laughing at jokes in mixtures of English and Arabic, English and Chinese, and English and Japanese, which I recognize from my own language background and experience as code-mixing, where a speaker uses two or more languages simultaneously, and code-switching, where a speaker switches between two or more languages. I walk slowly into the classroom, see a desk at the front of the class, and walk directly to it. I place my lesson plan and bag on the desk, and hang my jacket on the chair. More students begin to slowly enter the class and take their seats. Everyone is trying to find a place to sit. In front of me, a young man who looks East Asian asks, "Where are you

from?" I say, "The U.S., and you?" He raises his eyebrows, then replies "Taiwan." During that brief interaction, I know my body is not muted and invisible like the white English speaking teachers whose bodies indisputably represent English. Using Gramsci's definition of hegemony, the complex relationship, which is both political and ideological, between the masses and the leading groups of society, Sprague (1992) explains that cultural hegemony has a very strong influence on the ways people perform in classrooms. I have to quickly decide how I should perform in this particular classroom as the only non-white teacher in the program.

My gender and skin color have certain sociopolitical implications that are very visible to each student sitting in the classroom. A tall lanky guy with straight hair and cinnamon colored skin asks, "Are you the teacher?" I automatically smile, playing into the stereotype of the U.S. American female teacher subject, and say, "Yes." I stand in front of the class with a smile on my face, which is required of ESL teachers in the department to make the students feel comfortable, while waiting for everyone to take a seat. Before I even introduce myself, a short round guy with sepia colored skin and a massive head of curls abruptly stands up and says, "I did not come to America to learn 'bad English,' and everyone knows that black people in America speak 'bad English.'" Some students look embarrassed, while others unconsciously or consciously shake their heads. Through his announcement, the student highlights that the history of the language he is learning is as important as the culture of the language. The culture of the language provides "a circuit of power, ideologies, and values in which diverse images and sounds are produced and circulated, identities are constructed, inhabited, and discarded, agency is manifested in both individual and social forms, and discourses are created, which make culture itself the object of inquiry and critical analyses" (Giroux 2004, p.60).

As the words penetrate my mind, I think about the meetings I attended earlier when the director and senior instructors informed the new teaching assistants about the Saudi students who were not as bright as previous program participants from East Asia and who might be suffering from developmental issues based on their level of work, particularly in writing. I was surprised by the rhetoric and tone of the meeting since the program was located within a linguistics department and the writing issue has to do with deeper structural linguistic differences. Moreover, there are some cultures that are more "literate" than others. Said (1978) refers to this as "textual attitude," which explains the tendency of or preference for text, rather than human encounters, for schematic authority to reinforce the fallacy that people's lives can be understood based on what books and texts say even though human life is messy, unpredictable, and fluid. Furthermore, the meeting reminded me too much of the way Latino/a American and African American students are treated in the U.S. American school system by administrators. "How ironic," I think, as I look in the direction of the student, who is looking for support from his classmates.

Although my brown color is similar to that of many of the Arab students sitting in the class, my presumed history within the U.S. is very different from theirs. All of them came on private or commercial airplanes, while they assume my family came

packed like sardines on a slave boat. I am quickly read as African American just because of my complexion and my assumed English monolingualism. You can see the look of surprise on the four East Asian students' faces, their eyebrows raised to the point where they are almost touching their hair lines, while the students at the back of the class break out into a loud chorus of Arabic. Unknowingly, the student positions my body and voice as inseparable from dominant U.S. hegemonic discourse regarding race that moves, restricts, and marks my body in particular ways, keeping it enslaved through language and discursive practices.

When does one become African American?

Does a person become African American when they cannot trace their roots to a specific country or tribe in Africa?

Why does African automatically mean "black?"

Doesn't Africa have people with a variety of skin colors, hair textures, and facial features?

Who decides what African is?

Does a person have to have brown skin and be from the continent of Africa to be black?

What about brown-skinned people who are indigenous to other continents?

Who is black?

Is it a skin color or a political position?

Why is it I am black and they are not when we both have dark skin?

How does education influence black ascription?

When do you become black in America?

Who judges and then assigns blackness?



I wonder what they would say if they knew many people in my family use Hebrew and Syriac racial terms to designate people whose complexions were darker than what they considered the norm, whatever that might be for them. To this day you can hear my grandmother, even my nieces, use terms like "tafu'ab" (pitch black) to describe a Sudanese man we once saw at a supermarket; "mefubam" (dark like coal) to refer to the Nigerian woman my grandmother disapproves of; "shabor" (black) to describe people of African descent in the Americas who, according to my grandmother, have forgotten their own history because of circumstances. I am not sure whether it is a way to maintain the languages or not. However, whenever I would challenge her about her labeling, my grandmother would tell me that these people are not like us even though we share the same pigmentation. This would confuse me since U. S. American society has always positioned me as being similar to "these people." Then my grandmother would remind me that we are Jews, God's chosen people and the guardians of

the divine promise. We will always know our history, interpellating the Jewish common myth of origin. I always leave the discussion feeling a sense of loss. Should I even play into the U.S. American racial binary, the paradigm that dictates minorities must compare their treatment to that of African Americans to gain redress, by explaining to her that in the U. S. we are black people, "just" black, since we have inherited a history that is not our own through her family's emigration? However, I have to keep in mind that my grandmother did not grow up in the U.S. and she was originally labeled a Hebrew when she first arrived to this country. Furthermore, she grew up in the Caribbean where she was labeled "Jesus killer" by brown skinned non-Jews. Based on what I know about Jews in the Caribbean and my experience as a small child living there, we have always been segregated, self and other. As a result, I have always questioned this cloak of blackness that I feel forced to wear, but I find myself embracing it because U.S. American racial politics has penetrated the Jewish community, creating a division between white and non-white Jews with a slow erasure of non-white Jews from the U.S. American consciousness.



I think to myself, "here we go again...another student questioning my ability to provide adequate instruction." I do not know if I should address the stereotypes they have learned. I do not want to start this class with a lesson on representation and global politics. Instead, I say, "Excuse me" loudly enough so they can hear me over the noise. I ignore the outburst; after all, I do not want to be the overtly emotional, sensitive, angry black woman, especially since I am the only non-white person teaching in the program. I continue with a broad smile, "My name is Tamara, and I am a graduate student in the Linguistics Department here at the university." I turn around to write my full name, the title of the course, my office hours, and class meeting times on the board for everyone to see, and I can still hear muffled Arabic coming from the back row. As I write on the board, I think about whether or not to address the outburst. Before I even finish writing the meeting times, which follows my surname, a student says, "You are Jewish." I guess the muffled Arabic has to do with my name. I stiffen and look over my left shoulder to see a short slender chocolate brown skinned man with woolly hair lounging in his chair.

I slowly turn around to address him since I am not sure whether or not this is a question or a statement. He turns to look at the group of Saudi males sitting to his left, slams his hand on the desk chair, stands up suddenly and then says, "I will not take a class with a Jewish teacher. Jews are liars, and they control everything in America." A feeling of annoyance passes through my body; I feel dumbfounded and a little bit irritated by being outed as a Jew. I have always had control over the exposure of my ethnic and religious identities as a brown skinned Jewish person living in the U.S. My surname is not usually associated with Judaism in the U.S. since it is not the typically recognizable Ashkenazi Jewish family name of German, Polish or Russian origin. In college, there were two people with my last name, me and another Jewish person from Canada. Am I annoyed because my Jewishness is blatantly on display, a spectacle like my blackness, which is always on display? Giroux (2004) and Freire (1974) stress

that schools are the sites where ideas and human experiences come into contact, and this is especially true in the ESL classroom.



My grandmother understands her political identity as a black person even though it is difficult to be both Jewish and black in the U.S. because of the way Jewish identity is framed within whiteness and European Ashkenazi Judaism. Many brown skinned Jews have encountered this problem including myself. There is always uncertainty about your alliance from black and Jewish people. You are either black or Jewish; you can never be both. The stories I grew up hearing were about the plight of Assyrian and Lebanese Jews in the Ottoman Empire and in the Caribbean. I always become annoyed when I have to explain many times, to Jewish and black people alike, that I am of Syrian and Lebanese Jewish ancestry and then have to explain why I have brown skin or "African features" or "good hair" or how my family converted or who in my family is white (insinuating an Ashkenazi heritage). Apparently, brown skinned or black people are not supposed to have ever lived in the Middle East, according to common understanding of "race" in the Middle East, and the fact that I claim such an ancestry seems outrageous to some. I have been told directly and indirectly that people from that part of the world are tan, bronze, yellow, and white, not black or brown. It is ridiculous since these are colonial concepts and understandings based on European colonizers' division of colonized people into racial categories based on racist research claims in which the goal was to uphold Europeans and their white race as superior. These ideas of skin color, ethnicity, religion, and regional location, which are continuously interpreted as static even in the face of continuous migratory movement to that part of the world, have manifested themselves into our contemporary understanding of race globally. These conversations always show me the power of ideology and the way it is internalized and eventually becomes common sense; even the most critical scholar is not immune. I believe my grandmother has been trying to prepare her children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren to deal with such issues through her stories and her emphasis on our Jewish identity, culture, and ancestry. I call it the burden of the Jewish mother – to belong and yet not to truly, legitimately, belong.

For my grandmother, her Jewish identity has always been the uniting identity for the family as many members are from a number of countries with various combinations of physical appearances. She has a strong sense of self as an Assyrian Jewish woman, and she wants her children and grandchildren to have that as well regardless of the way they look. My grandmother understands that Jews are ethnically and racially mixed, according to U.S. American understanding of race, and she understands racial politics in this country, which is the reason she tries hard to foreground our Jewish identity to remind us that the tide always turn on Jews by highlighting historical instances of such events in the Caribbean, Europe, Middle East, and other locations because comfort can become devastation.



In that instance, the complexities of my Jewish identity and thousands of years of tension between the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac, between Hebrews and Arabs, between Jews and Muslims, in THAT region of the world was foregrounded by the student's performance.

Yes, the Middle East was brought forth!

I am no longer the African American teacher who speaks bad English. I am no longer an individual but a Jew by simply writing my name on the board. I am no longer an American, but a Jew with shared history. Can I continue to perform the American English teacher? I stand there and look at the student until he pushes away from the desk and storms for the door, leaving behind a deadly silence. The East Asian students are looking around with puzzled looks on their faces, while the Saudi students appear embarrassed by the outburst since many cannot meet my gaze. I choose to ignore his outburst and continue with the introduction. Although I struggle with my identity like all Jews in the U.S., I am aware of my Jewish identity more than other identities because of both internal psychological ideas of self and external social classification of identities. In that instance, my identity as a Jew appears to surpass my blackness as the identity of offense for some in the classroom.

In the classroom, teachers need to use power effectively in order to keep students from deviating from task so they can learn. Therefore, teachers need to make conscious and rational choices of what behavioral altering techniques to use in their classroom (Sprague, 1992). I take a deep breath and straighten my shoulders, point to my name, and formally introduce myself to the class. I say, "My name is Tamara. I have been teaching English as a second language for several years in the U.S. and overseas in Europe and Asia. I have also taught Spanish and Japanese as second languages too. I also speak Hebrew." Admitting my ability to speak Hebrew foregrounds my Jewish identity and, in the process, shifting the classroom power. However, I am thinking how am I defining Jews in connection to language. Does my ability to speak Hebrew validate my Jewishness since my skin color does not represent Jewishness in the U.S.? How should I perform between two cultural understandings of my identity as a brown skinned Jew at this moment?

Looking around the class, I can see the East Asian students' faces relax with relief while the Saudi students continue to speak in rapid Arabic while occasionally looking in my direction. According to Sprague (1992), power is often seen as an instrument at the disposal of the teacher to be used effectively in the best interest of the student to facilitate instructional success. However, the relational power that plays out in the classroom between teacher and students goes beyond the creation of an agreeable environment for study. I ask the students to introduce themselves and explain their reasons for studying English. I quickly reposition myself as the "native" English speaking teacher, the holder of knowledge in order to reclaim control and reestablish power over the class. Through this repositioning, the production of cultural meaning places them as "students," forcing them to interact with the performance while underscoring my performance of "teacher." Was my body and religious identity forcing me to impose the traditional methods of teaching? How can I be a critical teacher when I have to impose this strict power dynamic in the classroom? Who is performing for whom?

The black teacher's body

A week later, one of the senior instructors approaches me and asks to meet with me about my class. I tell her, "I want to talk to you about that class too." We walk into her office, and she sits at her desk and offers me a seat across from her. She tells me that there are some issues with my class. Some students are not very happy with the class and whether it would be possible for me to give more examples on the board. I tell her that the students have to do the homework if they really want to understand the material. I only have 50 minutes to go over several points, so I do not have time to give more than 6 or 7 examples on the board before they join groups to do practice exercises. As a teacher, I have to follow the syllabus I received, and the syllabus does not give me a lot of room to deviate. My position has been de-skilled, which casts me in the role of a technician who implements "teacher-proof" curricula designed by others to manage classrooms. I have a certain number of objectives I have to meet every day within a certain period of time. My skills as a teacher do not really matter since the designed curriculum only requires that I play tapes and videos, provide new vocabulary weekly, answer questions according to what the director of the program feels is culturally appropriate, and keep race outside the classroom.

ESL has changed and narrowed to the point where some educators have failed to ask a number of important questions about how English works in combination with social and political forces that deprive and define it. ESL curricula are set by professional ESL educators, corporate businesses and policy makers who want to make certain the English dialect, the recognized standard form, that is taught to ESL students is best for the students, the society, and the leading group of that society in order to maintain the social arrangement and to reproduce existing social arrangements (Sprague, 1992). ESL teachers do not make educational decisions about what is taught, how it is taught, or how to evaluate whether or not it has been taught.

The senior instructor folds her hands and places them on top of the desk. She looks directly at me with a sympathetic smile and says, "I know that African-Americans have difficulty with grammar since it is difficult for them to learn another language." She pauses for a couple of seconds and continues with a saccharine sweet smile, "You guys do not speak English very well; maybe this is not for you." The senior instructor positions herself as sympathetic even while she disempowers me as a teacher by reinforcing certain notions based on race. I am never surprised by the way people in administrative positions in educational institutions address "problems." Instead of trying to have a dialogue with me about the situation, she questions my English ability in order to avoid talking about the ways hegemonic discourse about race, religion and gender is playing itself out in the classroom. She denies that maybe my gender, race, and religion are possible contributing factors to the "issues." I wonder whether or not ESL education, like public and private education in the U.S., has be-

come consumer driven, where students are paying customers whose demands come first. Business and profit are hardly ever mentioned in TESOL scholarship even though they greatly impact the language learning process through the workforce and curriculum. I think about the ways capitalism and profit seeking are influencing aspects of the conversation. As a senior instructor who works closely with the director, this woman is very much aware that the university receives millions of dollars from governments around the globe to bring these bodies to the classroom.

As I sit there and stare at her, she tells me that there are no differences between me and her, so she does not understand why I am having difficulty with the Saudi male students. As a white female in her fifties, she is confused because she cannot understand why I am having difficulties. She tries to position my body as muted like the other teachers when it was not to many of the students. This disproportionate interest in the teacher's subjective position shows how "race" is what belongs to cultural, ethnic and racial "others," and these "others" have to adjust to the norms in the ESL classroom or in other academic classrooms. The senior instructor tries to discard her white privilege by positioning both of us as teacher. White privilege, according to McIntosh (1997), is "an invisible package of unearned assets," a system of opportunities and benefits that is given to individuals for being white (p. 120, as cited in Delgado-Bernal, 2002, p. 111). In other words, white privilege provides special advantages or benefits to white people while withholding those same privileges from others within white supremacist societies. This senior instructor discards her white privileges to unify us when in fact whiteness is the root of the problem.

Conclusion: Reflexive Analysis

As a new graduate teaching assistant in my department, I was continuously confronted with my racial and religious differences. Due to my experience, I started to think about TESOL programs as spaces in need of critical communication pedagogy and sociocultural awareness. I was informed directly and indirectly through covert methods and approaches that my body did not belong in the ESL space in that department. Furthermore, the people in the department never openly acknowledged the fact that I was the only non-white and non-Christian ESL instructor in the entire ESL program at the university at the time.

Throughout my life my religion has been an issue for me so I have learned to downplay it. However, this experience has made me embrace my Jewish identity and challenge European Ashkenazi understandings of Judaism and its connection to whiteness. This idea of Jews as white is an idea that is deeply embedded in the U.S. American consciousness. My encounters with people who have a very different idea of Jewishness have made me think about the future implications for non-white and non-Ashkenazi Jews³. How will the changing demographic in the U.S. affect these

³ This is not referring to those who have converted to Judaism or who have been adopted. This is in reference to those who are Jewish according to Halakha Law.

Jews? Will they become more visible within U.S. society and Jewish American communities?

My Jewishness is intertwined with my blackness. The students were very much aware of the fact that I was the only non-white teacher since it was brought to my attention by a number of students inquiring into why I was teaching in the program. These inquiries might appear harmless, but Amin (1997) found that visible minority female teachers made the following observation about what ESL students in their classrooms assumed of ESL teachers: “(a) Only White people can be native speakers of English; (b) only native speakers know ‘real,’ ‘proper’...English; and (c) only White people are ‘real’ [citizens]” (p. 580). According to Amin (1997), these observations made the teachers in her study feel disempowered by ESL students’ stereotypes of an authentic ESL teacher.

Some of the Saudi students chose to change teachers, while others threatened to change schools if they had to take a class with me. The director came to observe me and discredited me in front of the class. This action surprised me and reinforced the students’ belief in my incompetence as a [black and Jewish] teacher. The director and several senior instructors continuously observed me and discredited me until I had no power in and no control over the classroom. When I approached the director about the administration’s tactics and the students’ issues with my race, gender, and religion, she informed that it was my imagination since the Saudi students were black like me.

My situation became more frustrating, and I felt disempowered by both the students and the administration. I understood that my body, a graduate student of color, was taking money from the university, not giving it and was, therefore, dispensable. After all, I was only a graduate student leeching off of the university. Those in ESL instruction need to approach the field with a commitment to examine inequalities in society and social systems that are in place to perpetuate inequities that eventually emerge within these programs. Fay (1987) writes that “a commitment to a critical social science is an attempt to understand, in a rationally responsible manner, the oppressive features of a society such that this understanding stimulates its audience to transform their society and thereby liberate themselves” (p.4). Instead of addressing the issue in a critical manner, the program chose to discontinue my teaching assistantship, providing me instead with a scholarship that would cover my studies. The administration hired an inexperienced white male teaching assistant to replace me. Members of my cohort saw the outcome as positive because I was getting funding without having to teach. However, I did not see this as a positive outcome since the approach did not attempt to enlighten and emancipate through “the rational investigation of alternative descriptions of reality” but chose to perpetuate inequities and whiteness within the program (Bochner, 1985, p. 50). In addition, the program changed the hiring process to appoint teaching assistants on a semester basis, selecting only white teaching assistants. The change in policy reinforced and upheld inequities. ESL educators need to critically examine whiteness in order to transform the way students perceive and learn English in order to liberate students, teachers, and

administrators from oppressive associations of English with the West, white bodies, and whiteness.

As an ESL teacher, I was reminded of how language often serves the interests of the dominant social groups, and these interests are generally not a reflection of social realities (Schneider, 2005). Increasingly, critical scholars have started to understand that human speech is a mechanism that not only signifies and symbolizes but reveals, constitutes, and embodies worlds between people (Sprague, 1992). In other words, students come into the classroom with their “world” and “worlding” within the context of their own language, and then ESL teachers create a new “worlding” within the context of the new language. “Worlding,” coined by Stewart (1995), is a process that happens in address-and-response, in speaking-and-listening, and in verbal and non-verbal talk. My understanding of the world as a brown skinned U.S. American woman is very different from that of a white U.S. American man or woman. This process can be understood through Althusser’s concept of interpellation, the hailing of subjects by ideology. When subjects are hailed, they unwittingly respond to the call, thus, acquiring subjectivity in relationship to social identity categories and definitions. In this case, it would be the hailing of non-dominant ideologies from non-white teachers. Has the ESL industry purposely tried to leave out bodies of color for fear of hailing? This hailing of [dominant] ideology by two of my Saudi students occurred when they used language to position my body as African American and black within the U.S. and as a Jew within the Middle East context.

Gadamer explains that “the world as a world exists” depending on languages and the cultures attached to languages (as cited in Sprague, 1992). However, the prior “world” of the student does not change. Every student who enters a classroom comes in with many preconceived notions about others and him/herself which he/she has acquired within different institutional or communal spheres. Buber emphasizes that humans do not exist in a subject-object relationship with their world but rather as humans inhabiting this world (as cited in Sprague, 1992). Performance allows humans to construct and to co-construct their environment through a subjective relationship with the world. Gadamer agrees with Buber that humans have a world that differs from other creatures in that are only embedded into their environment with no relationship to it (Stewart, 1995). Based on these ideas of “world,” students cannot change their physical coherent sphere, and they have difficulties changing their ideas regarding things and persons within the sphere, particularly ideologies.

Everyday coping differs in different cultural spheres and languages; hence, teachers, along with administrators, have to take into consideration learners’ backgrounds, life experiences, social practices, identities, prior schooling, and other social factors in the ways they deal with students and teachers. That is, they need to understand the role and impact of ideologies in the classroom. Scholars in the area of TESOL must critically understand the global world, the role of representation of social groups and social identities, and the impact of whiteness on ESL curriculum, students, and teachers. There should be some focus on the language of the classroom in terms of meanings that are created through the nature of the discourse rather than the continued

focus on teacher clarity, repetition, phrasing of statements and questions (Sprague, 1992). Researchers must examine the ESL classroom in order to understand how the curriculum excludes and demeans groups based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other social identities. The discourse of a “correct,” “right” or “good” English continues to persist; we must complicate this discourse because languages are never “correct,” “right,” or “good” but rather standardized. The exclusion and debasement of groups based on gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation create an uninvited environment in ESL for teachers who belong to these groups that are positioned as non-normative.

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