

MOVING FROM RACE TO IDENTITIES IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Despite the rise of identity research in applied linguistics, race still remains a topic relatively unexplored in both TESOL and foreign language learning. This exploratory study seeks to investigate the discursive identity work done by four African-American learners of different foreign languages as they progressed in their studies. The participants' interview and language autobiography data were analyzed using a narrative inquiry approach. The findings show that the learners contested and employed a variety of identities as they became salient in different contexts. Thus, while race was one aspect of their identity, their other affiliations were often more oriented to their experiences in the classroom and abroad.

INTRODUCTION

Until the 1990s, scholars in the field of applied linguistics took on a very narrow view of identity in second language learning (Firth & Wagner, 1997; Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004). Since then, the list of publications has risen exponentially as authors have borrowed theories of identity from the social sciences to explore the relationship between identity and second language learning (Block, 2007). Numerous aspects of identity such as gender, ethnicity, and social class have been explored, reflecting the boundless diversity of second language speakers and learners. However, while critical scholars have “mostly focused on unequal linguistic and cultural relations of power,” issues of race, racialization, and racism in applied linguistics have been conspicuously absent even as these other aspects of identity are increasingly explored in depth (Lin, Grant, Kubota, Motha, Sachs, Vandrick, & Wong, 2004; Kubota, 2010). As a result, there is a fairly limited amount of inquiry in applied linguistics related to African-Americans in foreign language study and teaching, and even less concerning their identity work. This exploratory study seeks to fill a gap in the research, by exploring how these learners actively contest, explore, and modify their various identities as they progress in their language learning.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Discursively Constructed Identity and Learner Agency

Traditional views of identity have generally taken an essentialist approach, which deems “the attributes and behavior of socially defined groups can be determined and explained by reference to cultural and/or biological characteristics believed to be inherent to the group” (Bucholtz, 2003, p. 400). However, the postmodern turn in the social sciences, and in applied linguistics in particular, has brought upon new views on how identity is conceptualized, rejected essentialism and positing identity as more of a “performative accomplishment”: identity a thing to be ‘done’ rather than to intrinsically hold (Butler, 1999). In defining identity, many researchers within the field draw upon Weedon’s (1987) concept of subjectivity, which she defines as “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself, and her ways of understanding her relation to the world” (p. 32). This subjectivity is a constantly changing site of struggle, redefinition, and contradiction for the individual as they navigate a wide range of discourses, in which “competing ways of giving meaning to the world and of organizing social institutions and processes” provide opportunities for individuals to contest, explore, and reinvent multiple identities over the course of time (Weedon, 1987, p. 34; Norton Pierce, 1995).

Our increasing technologically advanced, globalizing world means that people are migrating to all corners of the world, and crossing cultural barriers both physically and digitally, eroding traditional ethnic and nation-state borders. As Mathews (2001) argues, we can now view identity as developing in what he calls a *cultural supermarket*. Individuals are able to pick and choose the ideals and value they live by, the institutions they join, their mannerisms, ways of dress, or the people with whom they associate. However, unlike a true supermarket, people do not have a totally free choice of which identities they can take. A Bakhtinian view of agency stresses the dialogic aspects of agency: one is an individual, but positioned within dialogues (Bakhtin, 1981; Vitanova, 2005). Individuals can make use of different discourses and practices to position themselves, and when positioned by others, can choose to accept, resist, or even actively fight against that positioning (Norton Pierce, 1995; Kim & Caet, 2011). Thus, while individuals have a multitude of identity choices available, they are not completely free of the constraints of discourse. According to Jan Blommaert (2006):

Whenever we talk about identity, we need to differentiate between 'achieved' or 'inhabited' identity - the identity people themselves articulate or claim - and 'ascribed' or 'attributed' identity - the identity given to someone by someone else. (p. 238)

Harré and colleagues offer the theory of positioning to describe this push and pull. Positioning can be defined as “the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines,” with discursive processes being everyday interactions with others (Davies & Harré, 1999, p. 37). Individuals situate themselves in these discursive processes in addition to being situated by others in subject positions that are considered appropriate to the particular activity in a specific place and time. In addition to activity, time, and place, time scale is also an important component in positioning. A speaker’s storyline begins in the past and develops with each positioning and speech act, and continues into the future. In this respect, identity is a not static, but rather a dynamic and frequently transforming performance.

Bucholtz and Hall (2004), as a supplement to existing theories of identity, recently proposed their *tactics of intersubjectivity* model to account for the way individuals accomplish social goals through identity work. Two of their tactic pairs present a framework through which we can understand how collective identities, such as race, are defined, contested, and transformed. First are *adequation* and *distinction*: the “pursuit of recognized sameness” and the pursuit of distinctness, respectively. Second are *authentication* and *denaturalization*: authentication is one’s assertion of one’s own or another’s identity as legitimate or genuine, while denaturalization is the process through which an identity is declared as inauthentic. Third are *authorization* and *illegitimization*: authorization concerns how cultural groups impart or claim structural power, while *illegitimization* is a disavowal of such a claim. These tactics “pertain to three different but interrelated concepts central to identity: markedness, essentialism, and institutional power” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). This framework provides a way to examine the relational ways identity categories, practices, and ideologies are performed via any facet of identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). In particular, essentialism is important to the discussion of race this paper seeks to explore.

Essentialism and Race

The postmodern concepts of multiple subjectivities and positioning are at their core anti-essentialist: they defy notions that people possess singular, defining identities, instead suggesting that identity is rather a hybrid, multi-layered combination of varied, socially constructed and negotiated characteristics. In addition, as people engage in these discourses, they “strategically deploy different selves” through “available discursive, semiotic, and representational resources” (Luke, 2009; Gee, 2000).

Essentialist notions of racial categories still remain pervasive, however. In everyday discourse, racial categories are seen as differentiated by phenotypical features such as skin color or facial structure: in a word, it is viewed as a biological or genetic trait. While genetic research has dispelled the myth of race as having a biological basis, it still exists as a social construct. As Omi and Winant (1994) argue, “race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies” (p. 55). Concepts of race, like any other form of identity, are historically and situated, their boundaries created, modified, and retired by societies over time.

Although postmodern researchers recognize and widely critique the serious problems of essentialism, it has the potential to be an important and useful tool, both in social life and for research purposes. Essentialism, like any other ideology, is both situated and strategic (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). This ideology can be drawn upon to bring attention to groups and identities that may be otherwise overlooked or oppressed. One such example of this “strategic essentialism” (Spivak, 1988) is the rise of research on African American Vernacular English in the 1970s, using the highly marked social group as the focus of research in order to legitimize their linguistic practices (Bucholtz, 2003). Some scholars have maintained that using race as analytical category further legitimated racism and racialization (Miles, 1993; Darder & Torres, 2004). However, others have argued that while race is not a static or homogenous category, it still has use in strategically creating solidarity among racially oppressed groups (Kubota & Lin, 2009). Therefore it takes great care on the part of the researcher to use essentialism to further understanding about a particular population, rather to further perpetuate existing hegemonies and disempowering ideologies.

However, researchers and theorists in applied linguistics have not always been successful in finding this balance, and essentializing research continues to persist throughout the field. As

Davis and Skilton-Sylvester (2004) argue, the underlying positivist ontological and epistemological assumptions of many researchers drive this trend. Within this paradigm, which dominates much of the field, knowledge and scientific endeavor are not contextually situated but should be independent of any “historical, social, cultural, and institutional contexts and locations” (Lin et al., 2004, p. 495). Thus the recognition of identity and other human and social phenomena as complex, contradicting, and ever changing is eschewed in favor of operationalizing and quantifying them so that they may be treated as variables and used to test and verify hypotheses (Lin et al., 2004).

Minorities in L2 Learning

There has been relatively little qualitative research on minorities in foreign language learning, and especially African-Americans, in foreign language classes. In an ethnographic study of a Spanish study abroad program, Talburt and Stewart (1999) examined the experiences of an African-American girl who was a target of sexual harassment due to her race, and how her teacher and classmates’ dismissal of her complaints led her to become isolated from her environment. More positively, Moore and English’s (1998) ethnographic study of ten black males studying Arabic in a middle school found that, in contrast to reports of low motivation and interest among black learners, the boys were active and motivated learners. In addition, they found that a supportive instructor who allowed the students freedom to explore different topics and be leaders in class helped the students to learn. In a survey and interview study of black high school students studying Spanish, Kissau, and Quach Kolano, Wang (2011) found that students had positive attitudes toward Spanish, but their motivations were more instrumental than other students’. Students and teachers also felt the curriculum wasn’t culturally responsive, which might discourage some learners. A study by Anya (2011) used autobiographical language journals to explore the experiences and motivations of successful black language learners studying Portuguese. It was found that they had “positive formative experiences in which they felt a sense of investment, belonging, and engagement with others in a community of learners” (Anya, 2011, p. 457), and the one unsuccessful learner had in fact felt the inverse, leading the author to suggest language pedagogy that fosters these feelings for black students.

THE CURRENT STUDY

Participants

The participants in this study are three African-Americans in their 20s and 30s, currently living in various places around the United States. All of them identified as and were recruited as black or African American. I also view myself, and am generally oriented to, as African-American or Black. I had a close relationship with Nicole and Maison before the study, while I was introduced to Wanda through a colleague. Wanda and I still occasionally keep in touch, and our chats about language, culture, race, politics, and a variety of other topics have, in particular, helped to shape this study.

Maison, who is in his early 20s, studies Japanese Education major at a large local university. He is half-black and half-Hawaiian, and although his grandmother spoke Hawaiian at home, he himself does not speak it. His first exposure to Japanese was in fifth grade, when he visited Japan for a week through a special program. He then began studying Japanese at his local high school, where he received another chance to visit Japan. He then studied the language at college level for a few years, before studying in Tokyo for a semester. He is now finishing his final year of the program, and plans to continue his Japanese study.

Nicole, also in her early 20s, is currently finishing her last year as a double major in English and Psychology at a Southeastern university. She studied French for a short while in middle school, then changed to German and continued it until the end of high school. Her only language experience in college was to take one semester of German in order to test out of the language requirement. However, her recent semester in England, and her travels around the European continent revived her interest in languages. She hopes to continue onto graduate study in the field of psycholinguistics.

Wanda is a professional in her 30s who lives in a major city on the Mideast coast. She started Spanish in elementary school and studied it until she entered college. Her previous job working for a major airline company allowed her to travel around the world for some time. A few years ago, she decided to take up learning Japanese due to her interest in *anime* and *manga*, and now she is currently one of the leaders for a Japanese language and culture club in her area.

Data Collection and Analysis

I use a narrative inquiry approach to the collection and analysis of the data in this study. Narrative inquiry refers to “research practices that show how oral and written stories of historical episodes help the individuals understand themselves as well as the studies that deconstruct narrative stories” (Park, 2011, p. 176). Because this study is in part a reflection of my own experiences learning languages, as well as those of other African-American language learners, the sources of data are in-depth interviews and a language autobiography. The interviews were semi-structured, and took place either face to face or via Skype with video. A pilot interview was conducted with the first participant, and an interview protocol was developed from the data in this interview. The protocol was then used in interviews with all of the other participants. A few weeks later, each participant was asked to write a language autobiography. No parameters were given for writing the autobiography besides that they should write about any language experiences at any length they were comfortable with. The language autobiographies were requested and submitted digitally within a week by two of the participants. I used the questions from the interview protocol as writing prompts, free-writing about each. Furthermore, as the study progressed, the participants were asked to respond to additional questions, usually through email or other digital means.

In order to analyze my data, I used content analysis within the theoretical frameworks of identity and agency to find salient themes within the data. As Pavlenko (2007) cautions, I do not treat these narratives as facts, but as the participants’ discursive understandings of their experiences. As Wortham (2001) argues, narrative allows the speaker to reinforce who they are and position themselves through interaction with other speakers, as well as to reinvent themselves into who they would like to be or how they would like to be seen (Park, 2011).

FINDINGS

What Does It Mean to Be Black?

My shared group status meant that for most of the participants, the ethnoracial label of Black/African-American¹ went unquestioned and unsaid throughout most of the interviews,

¹ The terms “Black” and “African-American” will henceforth be used interchangeably.

despite (or perhaps because of) the racial premise of the study. However, Wanda discursively built up her concept of Blackness throughout the interview. In particular, she felt that African-Americans in general were experiencing a kind of identity crisis.

We're so afraid of losing ourselves we don't want to understand anybody else. We're just afraid of losing ourselves because we're um we're afraid of losing our identity. But our identity was lost a *long* time ago. And you can't really identify yourself as African because you're an American and Africans are totally different. You can identify well we're descended from Africa but...

Wanda recognizes the legacy of slavery in America, and how it could affect the way people view themselves and their ethnic history. She also felt that because of this, African-Americans might be hesitant to take up activities such as language learning because they represent a threat to their already precarious social position in relation to the dominant group. This ideology does not come from a vacuum: policing of the Black (and White) racial limits has been quite prominent in public and political discourse. Thorton (2009) found that a common theme in Black-oriented newspapers was to criticize multicultural Blacks who emphasized other parts of their heritage over their African-American one, and to position them as destroying "Black solidarity" against Whiteness. Through this discourse, those who do not conform to certain ways of doing Blackness are seen as impostors, or even traitors. Wanda, in opposition to this view, argued that one did not have to be pigeonholed into the dominant stereotypes of Blackness to consider themselves African-American.

W: Well you said you wanna be white cause you always hangin out with white people.

A: I'm hanging out with everyone.

W: Right. It's not that I wanted to be white, but I knew what I liked and didn't like. "Why are you talking this way, why are you dressing this way? You're black, you're not- "You're not this, you're not that," but who says I supposed to be that?

In her dialogue, Wanda presents certain ways of doing as being seen as category-bound to African-Americans by others. She rejects this, instead maintaining that even if she doesn't talk or

speak in a certain way, or like specific types of things, she can still claim identity as an African-American. In addition, she also identifies elements of what she views as a widespread but problematic in Black ideology:

As African-Americans we get stuck in that “oh well I’m not supposed to learn” but how are you supposed to get ahead if you’re not supposed to learn? We try to limit ourselves because we don’t want them to get ahead. And why? And then we talk about people who have got ahead and you talk about them like “ehh those.” Why? Shouldn’t you be applauding them?

In her experience, African-Americans do not value education especially when it leads to someone leaving behind the environment or social class from which they are thought to belong. Some educational researchers, in trying to ascertain the reasons for the Black-White achievement gap, have also noticed similar discourses. In particular Ogbu’s controversial “burden of acting White” hypothesis stipulates that minorities may socially punish peers who engage in behaviors that have been situated as characteristic of Whites, such as getting good grades, or showing interest in activities such as dance or art (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Fryer Jr & Torelli, 2010). Although Wanda did not experience any resistance to her language study in particular, her involvement in activities that were not considered “Black” or “inner city” by her African-American peers was at times questioned or ridiculed.

While placing some onus on African-Americans for the failure to encourage social mobility through education, she does not, however, deny that there is overt and institutional racism at play against people of color:

We have to be a lot smarter, we have to work a lot harder than the average Caucasian because no matter HOW much you don’t wanna think about it, it’s always in your mind, if you’re a minority. It’s always there if you are a minority, be it race, be it gender.

In a way, Wanda views African-Americans as both victim to and perpetrators of an ethos that prevents minority groups as whole from pursuing opportunities that may give them the capital necessary to achieve success in modern America. While she studied Japanese for her personal enjoyment and interest, she also stated that she always thought about how she could use Japanese

as a tool for her own advancement, whether in social or economic ways. For her, being able to speak another language was useful for minorities so they would have a change to succeed despite the societal and institutional barriers in their way.

Furthermore, although Wanda discusses race in America at length, she also downplays its importance, positioning it as secondary to national identity:

As I learned about different cultures, I learned about different people, I hung out with different people, I came to the realization that um, I'm not necessarily an African cause it's always about race. I'm not colorblind, but it's not always about race. I think one of the problems that we have here in America is that we always attach "oh, I'm Armenian-American" or "I'm this, I'm that" but you're actually an American. Totally. There should be no distinction.

She contended that the idea of America as a melting pot has caused people to insist on maintaining their individual ethnic identities as a way to maintain differences. However, she felt that this inundation of the idea that "we just have to learn about our culture" was detrimental on two levels. First, it helped to cause African-Americans to feel as if they lacked a cohesive identity of their own, without comparison to the dominant group. Secondly, it undermined the fact that all Americans have a shared national identity that can be shared across groups. She lamented that because people are busy creating individual, ethnic, or racial distinctions, they can't see the commonalities between them.

The Contradiction of Being American

One difficulty that the majority of the participants discussed encountering while studying abroad was the right to speak. During her study abroad in England, Nicole took the chance to travel to various countries on the European continent. Although she had studied it for almost 5 years, she had never had a chance to use German outside of a classroom setting, so while she had some confidence in her ability to speak German "correctly," she felt flustered when she did speak it. The times she did get to use the language, however, were quite limited.

Most of the time they could tell that English was my first language. I don't know if they saw the way I was dressed or they assumed I was American or English or Australian or something, but they would like- everywhere I went people would start speaking in English to me.

In addition, she felt it would be strange if people talked to her in English, and she responded in German. Therefore, the German she just used was only simple words and phrases like "hello" and "thank you." Her feelings about this situation were somewhat ambivalent.

It's just polite, it shows that you make an effort when you're in a country that doesn't speak English to at least try. [...] But some people get really offended if you try to speak their language and you butcher it, so I wonder if it's really worth it to try. Would they be mad if I spoke it and it was terrible, or would they be more mad that I just spoke English and assume that they know how to speak English too. So it was a weird kind of conflict.

Despite her positive attitudes towards using other languages, Nicole's perceived status as an English speaker meant that there was a high chance that she would be spoken to in English. Added to the fact that she did not view herself as a fairly competent speaker, she rarely extensively used German. Thus, while she still kept a positive attitude towards language in general, her limited language proficiency and time spent using a foreign language meant that her identity as a foreign language speaker did not necessarily develop during her stay.

On the other hand, her subject position as American gave her many chances to interact with a variety of people.

Many of my British classmates, other international students, or people who would hear my accent at the grocery store or other public places liked to talk to me about life in America. They were genuinely interested in my personal experiences and how I felt in England compared to America. I was often approached by African students studying at Leeds who wanted to know what it is like being black in America and if there is a noticeable difference in the way native African-Americans and African immigrants/students are treated. My status as an international, though it instantly marked me as an outsider to British students, made me

feel immediately accepted in the ‘semester internationals’ group. Though we came from all over the world, we were all in the same situation and became friends easily.

Because she was positioned as an “American,” Nicole was treated as a representative of a range of American experiences, although she wasn’t always a willing or comfortable participant, especially when it came to issues of politics. In addition, her American subject position also made her feel somewhat alienated from local British students at the university. This experience resembles the challenge that faces many international students who attend schools in other countries seeking access to the local community (Brown, 2009). However, because her status as an “international” allowed her access to a group of students with similar experiences, she did not necessarily view her limited access to local British students as an obstacle to her goals in England.

Contesting “Gaijinization”

In contrast to Nicole’s study abroad experience in an English-speaking country, Maison and I both traveled to Japan for the purpose of language study. Our subject position as *gaijin* (foreigners) there sometimes made it difficult to use Japanese, especially with the locals. As Siegal (1996, p. 377) notes, “foreigner identity” in Japan is a salient category, which can result in “code-switching” from native-like norms to foreigner-speak or English (Iino, 1996). So, while learners may seek to gain communicative competence, native Japanese speakers may position visibly different speakers so that they cannot access the linguistic resources needed to do so. As Maison discussed in his interview,

M: I think there’s a way of thinking in Japan that if you’re not Japanese you can’t possibly speak Japanese. For example there was a McDonalds near our dormitory, and so we’d go there all the time. And the lady that worked there, she *knew* we spoke Japanese but every time we went up there she would try her hardest to speak to us in English. [...]

A: Was it frustrating?

M: It was *really* frustrating sometimes because um a lot of times like Japanese people – I *know* that they’re maybe just trying to be nice and communicate but in the opposite way it makes it difficult to communicate [...]. It would have been better if they could just relax and

we could speak in Japanese. I'm *pretty* sure my Japanese is at a good enough level it could've happened.

While Maison viewed himself as a fully competent speaker of Japanese, native speakers positioned him as a foreigner, instead choosing to communicate with him in English, which he called a "speed bump" during his study abroad. In fact, this was one of the most frustrating things that happened to him during his stay in Japan.

My own experiences were somewhat similar to Maison's. Although for the most part, my Japanese peers and friends accepted me as a legitimate speaker of Japanese, I also had encounters with those who positioned me as unable to speak Japanese because of my status as a *gaijin*.

There were times that people wouldn't speak to me in Japanese even if I spoke to them in it. Like when I went to Okinawa, and my friend's dad refused to believe a foreigner could speak Japanese until I'd been there almost a week, and despite everyone in the family arguing that I could... it was super weird.

Like Eva in Norton Pierce's (1995) study, I was positioned as an illegitimate speaker, and could not take part in that community. However, my reaction was more similar to Eva by the end of the study: instead of accepting this positioning, I actively "claimed spaces" in my interaction with the family with whom I stayed and contested my categorization as "a typical *gaijin*" (Suzuki, 2009; Norton Pierce, 1995). I continued to assert myself as a Japanese speaker, choosing to speak in as much Japanese as possible, even when responses came in English or were ignored. In the end, I finally claimed acceptance of my role as Japanese speaker, and by the end of my stay in Okinawa, I was able to hold conversations with my friend's father.

It is important to note that this foreigner identity is not limited by race, and in fact most anyone who is not seen as ethnically or nationally Japanese can be positioned as (or make claims to a position as) a *gaijin* (see Suzuki, 2009 for the case of White Americans or Kashiwazaki, 2008 for ethnic Koreans in Japan). Therefore, while we would occasionally receive race-related comments or questions while we were there, it was our position subject as an outsider that was the most salient.

The Right to Teach

The right to speak and linguistic and/or cultural legitimacy is site of contention only as a language learner, but also – or perhaps even more so – as a language teacher. In TESOL, the narrative of the native speaker as the White ideal, has led to the racialization of professionals of color (Kubota & Lin, 2006). The same ideals and subsequent problems most likely exist for teachers of other languages. When Maison first began his studies of Japanese at the college level, one of his teachers was a White man who had studied Japanese for several years, a situation which he said “threw him off” at first. However, as the semester continued, and he found that he could indeed learn just as much from this teacher as any native Japanese speaker, his own ideologies began to shift. The current Japanese teacher at his old high school is currently Filipino, and many of the students taking the class resisted the teacher’s position as a legitimate source of Japanese language knowledge. Now, Maison’s response to this situation is quite different than before:

But I think that’s part of the job of the teacher and in spreading cultural awareness, you know to teach students that you *can* learn another language and it is *not* weird that someone else can speak and understand a language, and it’s something we have to teach students.

His conception of an authentic language teacher has moved from that of one who belongs to “target culture,” but rather of one who has expert knowledge on the subject, through study or time spent in or using the language. He has also come to some realization that the subject position of “Japanese teacher,” since students may view him as inauthentic, is one that will have to be negotiated through classroom discourse.

Wanda was quite emphatic in her views on this subject. In her Japanese culture club, she had many requests for Japanese speakers for their offered language classes and conversation partner program despite the very limited number of native Japanese speakers, and in spite of the many advanced-level non-native speakers in the organization. She did not believe that a native speaker was necessarily the best teacher:

They can't tell you *why* something is, it just is. Someone who's learned how to teach or who's learning a language, you're gonna ask why. You're gonna find out "oh, it's because this is how they speak." You're gonna explain that a lot better than someone who's just "oh, this is how it is." So why don't you change it? That's just how it is, that's the rules. Because they cannot correctly explain the rule[s]...

In opposition to many existing ideologies about the native speaker as expert, Wanda in fact privileges the non-native speaker as a more legitimate teacher of a language. She believed that the process of learning a language gave a distinct advantage in terms of knowing why or how to use the language in a certain way. She also felt that people who went over to teach English in countries like Japan were doing the children a disservice: if they didn't know Japanese, or from what frame of reference they were coming from, they wouldn't be able to properly teach.

Studies have shown that both native and non-native ESL teachers have their own particular advantages and disadvantages in the classroom, and students – but not always administrators – generally feel positively about both depending on the context (Moussu & Llorca, 2008). It is important to note that only about 28% of Japanese teachers overseas are native Japanese speakers, so this reality may have influenced her opinion (Japan Foundation, 2009). Despite this, the belief that the native speaker is best still seems persistent, but is one that both Wanda and Maison reject.

Developing a Cosmopolitan Identity

Throughout our interviews and discussions, the participants repeatedly positioned themselves as culturally sensitive, forward-looking, and globally minded, particularly in comparison to other Americans and Blacks. This subject position can be viewed as akin to a cosmopolitan identity. A concept dating back to the times of the Greeks, modern cosmopolitanism suggests "a way of being in the world, a way of constructing an identity for oneself that is different from, and arguably opposed to, the idea of belonging to or devotion to or immersion in a particular culture" (Waldron, 2000). As Spisak (2009) argues, all humans perpetuate culture and society through their participation in discourse, but the cosmopolitan develops a sense of awareness of how they participate within their different discourses and how they can become responsible and agentic in shaping them.

All of the participants felt that their cultural and language study and experiences abroad had changed the way they thought about race and culture, and the way they dealt with cultural difference.

I think that living abroad made me more aware of the subconscious stereotypes I held about people of different ethnicities and nationalities. A sizable percentage of England's population is people of Indian, African, and Middle Eastern descent— groups I am not frequently interacting with in America. After meeting families who lived in my apartment building, fellow students, and random people around the city, I realized that my perceptions [of] different groups are more strongly influenced by American ideas of ethnicity, culture, and race than I had ever thought (or hoped).

Nicole's experience in England helped her see past the American discourse of race ethnicity in terms of a Black/White dichotomy (Marrow, 2009). Her encounters with a variety of people, especially those of groups with whom she had limited contact with in her usual environments, caused her to not only realize American ideologies regarding race and ethnicity, but to also evaluate her own role in perpetuating those ideologies.

Wanda in particular positioned herself as a cosmopolitan, with a vast variety of acquaintances from all different walks of life, and a good understanding of—or desire to understand—different cultures. She was somewhat critical of people who would be impressed by her decision to learn Japanese, but did not know who was Japanese and who was not.

Then they say, “Oh, what do those people say in the-?” And then I think, oh what *ignorance*. Then they say, “Oh well what do those people say in the nail shop?” “They're not Japanese. “And what do those people say in the restaurant?” They're not Japanese.

Wanda spoke quite strongly against essentializing practices and ideologies. She suggested that schools should start to teach language and culture classes at a very early age; she felt that when children were exposed to an array of languages or cultures early in life, that they would become more understanding of other cultures. According to her, “you can have culture without language, but you can't have language without culture.” In fact, her own early experience in

language classes, in addition to her parents' encouragement to explore all kinds of activities that weren't necessarily the norm in inner city life, influenced her opinion regarding how to make young children (and eventually adults) more culturally understanding and globally-oriented.

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

During our interview, as we discussed race and ethnicity in American society, Wanda said something that truly reverberated with me: people are often so focused on race that they "don't see the forest for the trees." This is not only true for the public sphere, but also within the academic community. While researchers may make strategic use of essentialism to bring attention to previously overlooked groups, they must also take care not to make *a priori* assumptions about all members of a particular group. The current mainstream positivist epistemological stance of applied linguistics means that researchers often assume that class, race, gender, and other social and human phenomena can be treated as variables, and simplified enough so that relationships between them can be clearly discovered. This approach assumes that members of these groups can be seen as heterogeneous, and their members possessing particular traits that in turn allow them inclusion (Lin et al., 2004).

However, as this paper highlights, while race was indeed a point of reference for the participants, it was not the only subject position they inhabited. As they moved through different environments, contexts, and discourses, and even throughout our interviews and communications, the participants both employed and contested a variety of identities. This negotiation of identity was not an internal one: other social players positioned the participants in a variety of ways, highlighting that race is not an overriding aspect of identity, but one that can be attended to or ignored at will. Even the ethnoracial labels of African-American and Black, while generally accepted by the participants due to our shared in-group status, did not go without some evaluation. This reinforces the social reality of race: a construct found not in biology or genetics, but rather through discourse, and one that can be ascribed, contested, and strategically employed.

These findings echo those of many previous postmodern studies regarding the relationships between identity and language learning (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000; Block, 2007; Norton & Toohey, 2011). However, while these studies touch upon a variety of identities, ranging from gender to nationality, race remains one subject that has been left relatively untouched. Even as

discussions of neo- and post-colonialism through language spread and the racialization of students and teachers of color have somewhat increased in recent years, African-Americans and their experiences in language learning have remained largely unexplored (Kubota & Lin, 2009; Anya, 2011). While work in applied linguistics on identity has indeed shown the dynamic nature of identity, race still remains as one aspect of such that is essentialized—and perhaps even ignored—in the literature. The status of applied linguistics as the “nice, multicultural field” does not exempt it from examination of issues of race and racialization. The particularly subtle and hegemonic nature of racism in fields such as TESOL means that it is especially important for the voices of minority groups to be heard and their experiences investigated as a way to combat injustice (Kubota & Lin, 2009).

It is important to note, that the participants in this study represent only a small subset of the heterogeneous group that identifies as Black or African-American. While there are certainly similarities in their narratives, there are many differences as well. As African-Americans are underrepresented in advanced language study and language education, it would be good to see what role identity (and ideologies about identity) has in this trend. In addition, most of the participants were relatively economically and educationally privileged: while some could be described as growing up as working class, they still had opportunities to study language in school, travel abroad, and even live in different countries. Since African-Americans are, on average, of lower socioeconomic standing than White Americans, and travel, study abroad, and even special local language and cultural programs often present a great financial burden, their chances to engage in such activities may often be out of reach, despite the benefits for minority students (Brux & Fry, 2010). In addition, while foreign language study, and especially experience abroad, has given the participants a more cosmopolitan outlook in regard to racial, national, and ethnic identity, it can't be relied upon as a panacea for all essentializing practices. Just as shared minority status does not guarantee that immigrant groups and racially marginalized groups won't perpetuate racism, foreign language study is not a guarantee for intercultural understanding (O'Neill, 2000; Kubota, 2001). By examining a larger spectrum of those who consider themselves African-American or Black, we can come to understand how accessible language cultural programs for minority studies can be implemented, and how language education pedagogies can be modified so they will be more responsive to the needs of these students.

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