

Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis

ISSN: 2325-1204. Journal homepage: <https://www.iastatedigitalpress.com/jctp/>

Volume 10, Issue 2, 2021, Article 9, <https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp.11602>

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Recommended Citation

Osei-Tutu, A. A. Z. (2021). The “Sider”: Narratives of marginalization and power. *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis* 10(2), Article 9. <https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp.11602>

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The “Sider”: Narratives of Marginalization and Power

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The outsider

She had waited so long! She could not believe it was finally here. It was an opportunity she was going to take full advantage of. Her first year in the graduate program, Umlo walked into her first class and immediately, it hit her – like when cold water hits the face in the early morning wash. *It’s just me, just me, the only Black person in the class. My race, gender and class has not been so clear or alluded to in any of my academic experiences until now.* Umlo learned and experienced gender, class and social stratification issues in her parts of West Africa but this was different – the color of her skin. She recalls the surprised looks on the faces of her students in her university in West Africa when she walked into the room. The faces said “What is this child doing here? She looks barely out of high school. She cannot be the lecturer for this class.” But she is. There is a shifting in the image of the lecturer they know. But here, she is *black* – the only one in all her classes; and she is not African American, she is African.

Umlo!

You are different but you belong here.

Your views and perspectives may be different, but different is good.

A different voice is refreshing.

Her war chant before she fully immerses herself in the class, to be a part of that class community. Over the course of her study, Umlo’s chant continues but with a different sense of belonging “it is my chant, my history, a part of who I am, I can never let it go”. She and others have had conversations about race and being a foreigner and how that influenced their experiences in the classroom; examples that are so American centered it is hard to follow or understand, becoming the black/African voice, etc. Umlo is tired. Tired of knowing she is black. Tired of being aware of the color of her skin. To constantly think, rethink, think again through situations before making statements. She recalls the conversation she had with a colleague who put on a balaclava and was going to ride a bicycle home after class at 8:30 pm.

It was one of those very cold, icy winters. Such a cover over the face would have been nothing but apropos. But that was and still is not something she has the privilege to wear- a balaclava.

“It is really nice that you can actually wear that. Your face will be safe from the cold. But I can’t wear that,” Umlo observed.

“Why not?” he asked

It took a while for Umlo to respond because he is white, and she didn’t know how comfortable it was going to be to bring up an issue of color, especially since she didn’t know his views on the police and people of color. He waited, as he took in her hesitation, probably wondering why. But. She. Went. For. It.

Umlo replied “I can’t wear that because I’m black. That, the probability of being mistaken for a criminal is high. A friend of mine told me about how a police officer

kept driving up and down the same street for about four times because he was dressed that way and walking around a place close to a bank. It was only when he took off all the covering, that the police officer went away. Would the officer have done the same thing if my friend was white? We’ll never know... maybe he would have; but we’ve learned not to be seen in public like that for our own safety.”

“I am sorry you have to go through that. I guess I’ve never had to think about anything like that,” he answered.

The in-out-sider

When racialized figures walk into historically white spaces as figures of authority, they generate unease. The boundaries that have contributed to a privileged sense of whiteness are jarred. This confrontation of the previously outside now on the inside contains the potential to move people out of entrenched positions. But it can also be received as a terrorizing threat. (Puwar, 2004, p.48)

She walked into the classroom – *her* classroom. She had already been briefed on what to expect. She knew it was going to be tough, but knowing and experiencing are never the same. They did not seem to be bothered by her until she stood by the instructor’s desk.

“Good afternoon and welcome to the class.”

The look on the faces of the students said it all: “when racialized figures walk into historically white spaces as figures of authority” (Puwar, 2004, p. 48). She could deal with the faces, but what next level of challenge had yet to rear its head. She was the racialized figure, standing in front of a class filled with the “superior” race, and going to facilitate a class with the focus of drawing attention to historical racial discrimination and segregation: to even suggest that their socialization inherently makes them racist in ways that they had not really considered.

As she ponders the dynamics of this encounter, another level of complexity reverberates. She is black, not African American but African. It might be easier for her students to swallow the pill if she were African American; then, they could just say she might have experienced something or disregard some of her comments and responses as just emotional. They were probably wondering how an African could tell them about their own history and socialization. But how could she not? She did not think that if she were stopped by a police officer who had a problem with her race, she would be spared because she was African. Any kind of discrimination that an African American woman faces she also does, coupled with discrimination that comes with being African. She never thought that she would be treated any differently from those Hill (2016) calls *Nobody*. All that officer will see is a black person that needs to be feared – a Nobody.

Turning her attention back to the classroom, she remembered all the training that had been given, how to make the classroom a comfortable place, creating an atmosphere that is conducive to learning; and gently leading her flock to a new and critical way of looking, thinking, and discussing issues of multiculturalism. There were several resources available to help teachers and instructors in the multicultural field to be able to teach or make an impact in these classes, especially in classrooms where the students were predominantly white. So, she wondered where the training materials were for the minority teacher who must teach a white majority class. She had learned a lot about the educational system, changes that had occurred and what remained. She had also learned to teach differently. *There is more to learn as the journey continues. Does the*

power structure stabilize? Does it become “normal” for a racialized figure to be in a position of authority?

The bus-out-sider

It was a Tuesday afternoon, it was not one of her busiest days but after spending three hours in a writing group, Maame was tired. She stood at the bus stop, in the frigid cold weather, waiting for the bus to show up. She was thinking about home, settling on that special spot on her sofa, watching the kids play, and intermittently reporting a wrongdoing or an exciting thing. There were other people around her also waiting for a bus. And as the bus drew closer, it was obvious others were also waiting for the same bus. She gestured as the bus drew closer: it stopped. And as courtesy demanded, she waited for the driver to signal that it was ok to come in. He did not, so she inquired with a head movement, but there was still no response. Then she finally decided to get on the bus.

“Hello,” Maame said as she stepped onto the bus.

No response

The lady behind her says, “hello.”

And there was a resounding, “hello!” back

She didn’t make much of it, maybe he didn’t hear her or maybe he did: it didn’t matter. She tried to play scrabble with friends as she waited to get home. The bus drew closer to her stop and another person rang the bell for the same stop. At least she did not have to do it. The girl was the first to get off the bus.

“Thank you,” said the girl.

“Welcome,” the driver responds

Maame got closer as she was getting off the bus and said, “thank you,” loudly this time.

Still no response.

As she stepped off the bus, she heard the driver say welcome to another person, this time, a man. She paused: What just happened? The only difference she saw was the color of her skin.

Author Note

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