Becoming a Black Researcher
Reflections on Racialised Identity and Knowledge Production

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Abstract Critical race theory (CRT) emerged from the U.S. context, and many question the validity of its application to spaces beyond the United States; however, for many black academics in the UK, it has a powerful resonance. Where many in the academy have dismissed the viability of the concept of race in favour of the term ethnicity – or they privilege class – in any discussion of inequalities, CRT recognises the salience of race, cen-tralising it and analysing the ways in which race and racism continue to shape life experiences. CRT has provided an intellectual space for a growing community of academics in England to explore not only our own racial positioning within the academy and wider society but also that of the communities we work with in our research to achieve greater social justice. This paper explores the significance of CRT to the author's biography and intellectual journey.

Introduction

Being embodied in the world is a condition of my philosophical voice. It is
a voice that is located in, and a voice that is shaped by, a

thick web of political sedimentations and other value-laden

commitments. (Yancy, 2002, p. ix)

You can't see it, but sometimes you can feel it. (Kwebena Boateng, a barber, as cited in Dodd, 2012)

Before I begin my reflection, it is important that I contextualise the notion of 'becom-ing a Black researcher'. Some time ago I had a conversation with a white colleague who told me about his African friend who had only just realised he was Black. Now this African man had come to England to study as a postgraduate student. He found that people would stare at him whenever he entered predominantly white spaces. My

colleague seemed to find it strange that this man did not realise that he was Black. I said to him that maybe it was not so much a question that this man did not know he was Black but that he never had to think of himself in this way before. His experience in England had negated his identity as a man or even an African man and had subjugated him to something other. His individuality was now stripped down to the category of Black, dislocating him from his humanity and projecting him into a new position, obliging him now to think of self as Black. Perhaps the experience is best captured by Jamaica Kincaid's words:

> In the blackness, then, I have been erased, I can no longer say my own name. I can no longer point to myself and say 'I'. In the blackness my voice is silent. First, then, I have been my individual self, carefully banishing randomness from my existence, then I am swallowed up in the blackness so that I am at one with it. (as cited in Wright, 2004, p. 1)

Wright (2004) highlights the 'in between space' (p. 2) which Blackness occupies, which is captured by Kincaid's prose poem. For Wright, this space is one of contra-diction, so whilst it is a location where one's individual sense of self is erased and silenced, it is also a space from which one can affirm one's identity and speak as a way of resisting that othering, racializing process. It is in experiencing and negotiating Blackness within the contradictions of visibility/invisibility, erasure/presence, individuality/collectivity that this 'in between'/ liminal space becomes one of possibility, engendering alternative ways of seeing, thinking, and doing, hence the 'becoming a Black researcher'.

I am a Black female research fellow, working in a small,

supportive research institute, yet nevertheless I became increasingly frustrated by the lack of impact of research on race and racism. This paper emerges out of a number of previous reflections and a troubled sense of self and dissatisfaction arising from my induction into the academy from doctoral study to engagement in a number of funded research projects. Experiences of being in the field and analysing data collected from a range of projects have led me to question not only my own positioning in the research community but also my understanding of self as 'raced' and the ways in which being 'raced' shapes knowledge production.

In a discussion of ethnographic research, Coffey (1999) argues that the research 'can problematize and force a reconceptualization of the self, which goes beyond the narrow confines of the fieldwork itself' (p. 24). Certainly, my experiences of engaging in research and interacting with research participants have reinforced the salience of Blackness in my being in the world, but it has done so in a rather unsettling way,

somehow leading to a reorientation of my positioning and direction in the world of research. Strangely this reorientation does not mark a new path; rather, it has steered me back to a place I have always been. Not only that, I have also been moved to question the role of the research projects investigating experiences of racial discrimination in objectifying and reifying stereotypical representations of communities experiencing discrimination. I found myself feeling discomfort at what seemed a growing gulf between my desire to impact the status quo and the abstract theorising in academic rewriting of those lived experiences. Moreira and Diversi (2010) explore their experience of disembodied knowledge construction. The authors argue that knowledge production of the other reifies the oppression it seeks to counter. Diversi comments:

> Even many self-proclaimed postcolonial scholars privilege detached analysis of lived experience over visceral knowledge, where the very humans suffering are deemed, by self-appointed intellectual superiors, too emotional and atheoret-ical to be logical and sensible. (p. 458)

This 'visceral knowledge' recalls Yancy's (2002) embodiment in the world, quoted at the beginning of the article, an embodiment which gives rise to emotions, a knowing in the flesh which 'you can feel', as noted by the barber quoted above. Others have also observed the need to re-examine embodiment and affect if we are really to understand why rationalist and wholly cognitive approaches to social science offer such limited purchase on social issues and the process of social change (Clough & Halley,

2007; Grosz, 1994). However this work tends to arise from feminist theorising and turns to philosophers such as Deleuze for further insight (e.g., MacLure, 2011; MacLure, Holmes, Jones, & MacRae, 2010). For me, critical race theory makes more specific sense of similar general issues, as I shall illustrate below.

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged from the U.S. context, and many question the validity of its application to spaces beyond the United States. However, it has a powerful resonance for many black academics in the UK. Where many in the academy have dismissed the viability of the concept of race in favour of the term ethnicity – or they privilege class and gender – in any discussion of inequalities, CRT recognises the salience of race. It places race at the centre of analysis and explores the ways in which race and racism continue to shape life experiences. CRT has provided an intellectual space for a growing community of academics in England to explore not only our own racial positioning within the academy and wider society but also that of the communities we work with in our research to achieve greater social justice. This paper explores the significance of CRT to the author's biography and

intellectual journey. I wish to chart and reflect on those instances where I became unsettled and confused. To begin to make sense of racialised identity and the impact this has on knowledge production, I intend to revisit data to explore the ways in which 'race' circulates and 'operates as part of lived individual/social identities' (Knowles, 1999, p. 110).

Moving from Solid to Shaky Ground:
Initiation into 'Race'-related Research

> As a positioned and contexted individual the ethnographer
> is undeniably part of the complexities and relations of the
> field. (Coffey, 1999, p. 22)

Some time ago, whilst engaged in doctoral research, a broadly qualitative investigation of the transition from trainee teacher to newly qualified teacher (Roberts, 2004), I was asked by one of my research supervisors how I related to the participants' accounts of their experiences. Was I a sympathetic listener or a critical observer? I know that, at the time, I wanted to tell the participants' narratives in such a way that their 'in the flesh' experiences (Moraga, 1983) were acknowledged and the emotions displayed during the interviews were captured. It seems to me that the question raises issues about the kind of researcher I am and the nature of knowledge production. It raises the old dichotomies of objectivity and subjectivity. Am I to be a researcher who writes 'only for those who have degrees, read certain journals, and engage in philosophyspeak' (Yancy, 2002, p. xi), a researcher who is perceived as 'being outside of the flows   between   experience   and   discursive   contexts'

(Gunaratnam, 2003, p. 7). I believed I was engaged in an activity that would contribute to a transformation of the status quo; I wanted to give voice to stories which I thought were not always heard. However, my initiation into 'race'-related and funded research prompted me to question my motivation and the extent to which I was deluding myself. I was no longer at ease with myself in this endeavour (Parker & Roberts, 2005).

This discomfort was to resurface again a few years later when I was involved in a funded national project investigating reasons why Black and minority ethnic trainees withdraw from teacher training in the UK (Basit et al., 2006). This time I did not have a personal relationship with the participants in question. Questionnaires were distributed to trainees who had withdrawn and to those who had successfully completed the course; trainees were promised retail vouchers if they returned their questionnaires within a specified time. One particular questionnaire was returned long after the project had been completed; a note was attached to explain the delay in

responding. The individual had had a particularly traumatic experience and found it very painful revisiting that particular period in her life for the sake of completing the questionnaire. This took me back to my first funded 'race'-based project, undertaken while still a doctoral student, where at least two participants broke down in tears during the course of the interview (Roberts, McNamara, Basit, & Hatch, 2002). Some participants confided in me as someone who might be able to intervene in their particular situations. I felt powerless, and like a fraud. On the one hand I wanted the research to have an impact, to be able to transform their situation; on the other I found myself asserting my researcher identity, making it clear that I personally had no power to change their curriculum. What I could do was collect the evidence and make recommendations to inform future practice. At other times I found myself conversing with participants not as a researcher but as someone who had also experienced racism and discrimination. It seemed to me that I had a different experience of engaging in this type of research to that of my white colleagues.

Not only did I have to manage the emotionally charged nature of the experience, I also had to contend with the disruption caused to my fixed notions of Blackness, 'race', and what it means to be 'raced' or Black. I began to notice the silences the notion of 'race' seemed to engender – within both the white and Black individuals who featured in the foreground and background of the research projects. I noticed the various ways in which some Black and minority ethnic (BME) research participants

assumed culpability for the negative experiences they narrated. Where I interpreted their accounts as evidence of racism or discrimination, they found alternative explanations, which usually involved pathologising self. It was only through recounting and reflecting on experiences during the course of the interview that some participants began – without prompting on my part – to ponder the possibility that maybe the tensions/difficulties they were experiencing arose as a consequence of their racialised positioning, but this reasoning came as a last resort, if at all.

For some participants who recognised that they had experienced racism during their teaching practice in schools, there was a reluctance to raise it with course tutors. For some of these students, denial or refusal to acknowledge their experience of discrimination was a coping strategy; it was a way of progressing through their teacher education programmes without drawing further attention to themselves. It was about safeguarding, ensuring that they were not seen as troublemakers 'playing the race card'. For some, race and racism were no longer issues or, as one trainee put it, 'colour is no longer an issue'. Where public policy discourses present a rhetoric that sanitises and solves the 'problem' of race and racism, as reflected in some participants' views of themselves, evidence of its existence nevertheless persists.

Reflecting back on these experiences and the anguish I felt has made me question my research practice. To what extent was I pillaging from the lives of those who agreed to participate in these projects to advance my own career? How far was I contributing to the process of marginalisation and othering of my participants (Fine, 1994)? I realised that I was far from being dispassionate about projects focussed on 'race' and ethnicity issues; I seemed to be more emotionally attached, particularly to BME research participants. I also noticed that there was something different about my interaction between BME and majority ethnic research participants. Why was this? Why did I feel such discomfort discussing data with white colleagues? Why couldn't they see what I saw in the data? How was 'race' circulating and shaping daily actions and interactions? What was wrong with the framing of these research projects?

Disrupting the Self/Other Divide in Research

Some years prior to applying for a studentship to engage in doctoral study, I completed a master's degree (Roberts, 1997). This study was a phenomenological hermeneutic exploration of what it meant for an individual to be socialised into a community of practice. The central focus was my own practice, working as a lecturer teaching on a Black Access course[1] for mature students in a Further Education (FE) College and later as a development officer in a Continuing Studies Department of an inner city university. Inevitably the study was deeply entangled with self and issues related to Blackness and equality.

Although the suggested reading proved useful, it did not seem to help me work through or explain the dilemmas I was

experiencing at the time as a Black woman. I found myself turning to literature written by Black academics and authors (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992; Bambara, 1970; Bhavnani & Phoenix, 1994; hooks, 1989, 1990; Wa Thiong'o, 1986). This body of literature spoke to me; it resonated and helped me to better articulate issues of racialised identity, processes of othering, and marginalised knowledges. My master's journey allowed me to unravel a complex tale of the ways in which self, other, and structure are mutually constituting (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Giddens, 1984; Mead, 1934) and the dominant ways of knowing become normalised (Foucault, 1972; Wa'Thiongo, 1986). I came to the conclusion that research also played a role in framing the very phenomenon it sought to investigate (Roberts, 1997). I began to think about standpoint epistemologies (Hill Collins, 1990).

However, when I embarked on the doctoral study, the wisdom gleaned from Hill Collins (1990) and hooks (1989, 1990) strangely found no place. My doctoral

research explored trainee primary teachers' transition to qualified teacher status (Roberts, 2004). At the time, it seemed to me that looking at the experiences of others would not be such a personal project; rather there would be an outward movement away from self and a shift towards the other. There would be less of the involved participant's introspective reflection and more of the external observer's dispassionate gaze. At the time I curiously thought that although 'race' would have some bearing on the project, it would not be the main focus. Certainly not in the way it figured in the master's study. I took the simplistic, uncomplicated view that I would be able to access the 'truth'/ 'reality' of transition as experienced by the research participants through interviewing, analysing, and interpreting the interview data. The emotional investment would not be so great. How little I understood or recognised the processes that would come into play!

It became clear to me that I was implicated /embedded in the stories that emerged through the research process. I listened to the research participants narrating their experiences and could not help but be moved by the intensity of feelings. Trying to make sense of my data, I found myself returning to a point I had reached some years earlier during my master's study, a position which is captured by Yancy's opening quote: 'Being embodied in the world is a condition of my philosophical voice'. Moya (1997), citing Moraga (1983), explains that our theories and knowledge are shaped by the 'physical realities of our lives' (p. 135). This certainly has resonance when I contemplate my reading of

accounts given by research participants.

Labouring To Be / To Find a Voice

> Race was always salient and part of the dynamic in my interviews, because of and in spite of the subject matter of the study. (Tamale, as cited by Twine, 2000, p. 1)

My own ontological positioning, it appeared to me, sometimes facilitated interac-tions, as in the case with a number of the minority ethnic trainees I interviewed. Yet at times I have felt that my role in the research was 'an act of betrayal' (Islam, 2000), as with a trainee who was upset by my pen portrait representation of her, or on those occasions when I felt participants' voices were silenced by final research reports (Parker & Roberts, 2005). That sense of betrayal was keenly felt from my first research project. What follows is a brief outline of the projects to which these ex-amples refer.

Project A (Roberts et al., 2002)

I discuss my experience researching this project in Parker and Roberts (2005, 2011). It was during this project that I was faced with two participants who broke down in tears as they recounted their experiences of teacher training. It was recognised that Black and minority ethnic trainees withdrew from training at a disproportionate rate to their white peers. The then Teacher Training Agency, concerned about recruitment and retention of teachers generally, funded institu-tions to explore factors impacting the recruitment and retention of trainees. In one institution, funding was used to investigate the reasons for the disproportionate withdrawal rate of BME students. The small-scale research project principally aimed

> to determine factors that may have been instrumental in the failure, drop out, or intercalation of minority ethnic students, with a view to early identification and support of 'at risk' students; and secondly, to discover what barriers were experienced as a result of, or were exacerbated by, cultural/religious factors.
> (Roberts et al., 2002)

African/African-Caribbean and Asian students who were, at the time of the research, still on the programme and those who had recently left (withdrawn or completed successfully) were selected using self-identification data relating to ethnic origin. It was envisaged that the research findings would inform the development of the undergraduate teacher education degree programme.

Still a doctoral student, I was asked to be part of the team and

to do the inter-viewing. At the time there was much discussion about cross-cultural interviewing and whether it would be more appropriate for interviewers to share the same ethnicity/race as interviewees. I discuss the doubts I had about the reasons I was invited to be part of the research team in Parker and Roberts (2005, 2011). I analysed the data and wrote the first draft of the report. This draft was subsequently revised and 'toned' down so as to avoid too negative a picture of the institution. In this way the data was sanitised and made more palatable.

Although the purpose of this research was to explore the factors that may impact minority ethnic trainee teachers' progress, I became very interested in the data that seemed to illuminate the complexities with identity categories. I asked the trainees how they would define themselves. Some trainees described themselves in ways that disrupted official categories:

I'd just say I was black (Tracy)

I'm a teacher, I'm a Muslim and I'm Indian Muslim . . . that's the way I'd say it Indian Muslim . . . or British Indian Muslim [laughs] I think. (Fatima)

I would definitely say that I was black. I would have to mention it some way and I don't know if that would be because I'd want to, but it's just because I'm so conscious of being different. (Evadney)

I'm a black Britain? . . . I'm not sure that's how I see myself but that's what I tick [laughs]. . . . I see myself as a human really. (Anne marie)

I'd say as a woman of colour really, I like to use that term because it's what embraces. . . . It sounds kind of spiritual, it kind of embraces how I feel inside. (Joyce)

I remember raising this as something I felt was significant but was told that, that was not the purpose of the research. The purpose was to identify those factors related to cultural or religious difference which impede students' progress.

Project B (Planned Longitudinal Study, 2001–2005)

This project grew out of Project A. Those who were instrumental in driving this project decided it was important to develop the work from Project A. Funding was sought to undertake a four-year study of all Black and minority students in one university's 2001 undergraduate cohort. The proposal was to track and record a range of variables such as entry qualifications, ethnic background, languages spoken, for-mal course assessment,

main curricular area of expertise, age, gender, marital status, dependants, absences, etc. In addition interviews would be conducted at strategic points during the course – this could be before and at the end of the school practice. The dean of the institution supported the initiative and sanctioned the start of the research whilst funding was being sought. Unfortunately, funding was not secured for the subsequent three years of the project. Being committed to the work, I tried to continue the study, but the scale and scope had to be significantly reduced as I also had to maintain employment on another project.

I was asked to draft a letter of introduction, which I gladly did but was very uncomfortable when it was suggested that I include my picture on the letter. The project leader drafted a letter explaining the purpose of the research and introducing me as the researcher who would be conducting the interviews. My letter of intro-duction was attached to this and sent out to a total of 19 minority ethnic students.

Fifteen students agreed to participate in the research. I interviewed these students three times, twice in the first year of study (2001–2002) and once in the second year of study (2002–2003). The first interview was very open and invited students to talk about their experiences of the course with supplementary questions to clarify or probe the evolving narratives. I decided it would be useful to capture the discussions in pen portraits, which I sent to the participants prior to the second interviews, which took place in May 2002. I had given each student a pseudonym and asked them to change the name if they did not like the one I had given them. The pen portraits served as a point of entry in the second interview and was a way of checking that I had not misrepresented the information from the interviews and captured what I had been told. I tried to highlight what I perceived to be the salient features of their experiences in the first term. Typically the sort of information included biographical details and specific issues raised such as work load or difficulties balancing home and study.

Overwhelmingly, students found that I had captured them accurately and they were able to recognise themselves. Some had shared the portraits with family members and friends and stated that they also recognised them. One student commented about the mirror effect: 'It was quite interesting actually to . . . it's like self-reflecting on myself and it was very close to how I felt and what I'd experienced'. There was, however, one student, Yvonne, who responded negatively to the portrait. In writing the portraits, I had intermingled the students' words in my narrative of the inter-views. Yvonne perceived the representation as very

negative. Looking back at the pen portrait I can understand why it had the impact it did on Yvonne.

> Although she is finding it hard work she thinks 'things have been alright'. . . . Yvonne is 'really . . . struggling' financially. When she began the
> course she had a job, but found it 'difficult to work . . . ', 'there was a lot of pressure at work' and she 'was falling behind' in her academic
> studies. . . . Yvonne is not clear on what she should be doing in terms of the audits. (Audit of the students own curricular knowledge and understanding.) She did not feel confident about the work she is doing and did not know if she knew enough.

It certainly was not my intention to present a negative image of Yvonne; I think I was trying to capture her perceptions of how she was experiencing the course. Yvonne felt the research was going to do me good in career terms, but she wanted to know what she was going to get out of the experience.

Project C (Basit et al., 2006, 2007)

This project was funded by the English Teacher Development Agency (TDA, the successor to the Teacher Training Agency) and investigated the reasons why minor-ity ethnic trainees withdraw from training. I have already referred to this project earlier when discussing the participant who found it too upsetting to complete the questionnaire that was sent to her. The main aim of the research was to enable teacher educators to recruit and retain minority ethnic trainee teachers. The research drew on a national survey of ethnic differences in initial teacher training (ITT) course completion rates. Teacher educator programme leaders were interviewed. A ques-tionnaire was sent to 450 minority ethnic and 450 majority ethnic withdrawers from ITT courses between 2000 and 2003. In addition, a small survey was conducted of successful completers, a sample of whom were interviewed. Minority ethnic trainees who had withdrawn were also interviewed individually or in focus groups. Whilst the funders were interested in qualitative data, there were difficult negotiations as to what could be accepted as valid data. For instance, one questionnaire respondent wrote a detailed account of what she perceived to be systematic racism operating in the institution where she had trained. This letter was appended to an initial draft of the research report submitted to the funder. However we were advised that the letter was not data but opinion. The report also took on a boomerang effect in that the funders returned it several times to be rewritten or reworded –

again a sanitising effect.

Can Research Engender Change?

Researching for impact is fraught with tensions; my ontological positioning shapes my values and the ways in which I understand the world. Edwards and Ribbens (1998) capture the dilemma:

> The notion of a perspectival view of knowledge (that is, that who you are, and where you are situated, does make a difference to the knowledge you produce), but that we then have to assess the best ways of seeking to communicate this knowledge to someone else, situated differently. (p. 4)

In her essay, 'Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness', hooks (1990) speaks of the difficulties she experienced in finding a theoretical voice as a Black woman. She is speaking within the context of oppression, the oppressed other, namely those positioned on the basis of 'race', gender, and class. Hooks argues that 'space and location' are significant concepts for those who want to move 'out of

LORNA ROBERTS

[their] place' (p. 145) and transgress the boundaries imposed
by race, gender, and class. According to hooks, addressing
issues of 'space and location' evokes pain:

> Moving, we confront the realities of choice and location.
> Within complex and ever shifting realms of power relations,
> do we position ourselves on the side of colonizing
> mentality? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance
> with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and
> theorizing, of making culture, towards that revolutionary
> effort which seeks to create space . . . where
> transformation is possible? (pp. 145)

For hooks addressing the issues 'of space and location'
'compelled difficult explora-tions of ''silences'' ' (pp. 145–146).
Before hooks could consider answers, she had to confront the
'ways these issues were intimately connected to intense
personal emo-tional upheaval regarding place, identity, desire'
(p. 146). Much of the emotional intensity I experienced is linked
to a failure to realise my desire to achieve a trans-formative
practice and to the borders created by the operation of 'race'
processes. I am both visible and invisible.

Furthermore, as Alcoff (2000) notes:

> Social positions of marginalized people give rise to new
> questions concerning dominant points of view that
> members of dominant groups are not likely to consider
> otherwise. If a scientific research community, for example,
> is homogenous enough to share common assumptions and
> approaches, these may well be invisible since there are no
> contrary assumptions present by which they come into
> relief. Marginalized social groups, then, entering this

community, may well not share all of these assumptions, and may find some of them implausible, thus yielding new and potentially fruitful questions for research. (p. 250)

Narratives of Silences/Invisibility: The Experience of Being Black

In this section, I now reveal the collision between normative and marginalized per-ceptions. Here I draw on data from Project A and my own personal encounters. Joyce, a politically aware trainee, spoke to me about an incident which she perceived as racist. She spoke about unintentional racism, and when she tried to raise issues, she was always made to feel that the problem lay with her. One of the episodes Joyce spoke about concerned a white trainee and work in school:

One of the [other, white] students was saying that there was a black girl in her class and she thought that she was racist and I said why. And she said because every time she wants to draw an image it has to be a black image . . . and I said could it not possibly be that because we're living in a society that is inherently racist, there's a climate of racism in this country, that maybe her parents are just teaching her to be proud of being black and being who she is and that's coming through in the work that she's doing. And she was like, oh well I think it's inverted racism.

Here the question becomes why is it racist to draw a black image, but it is not racist for most other images encountered or produced in schools to be predominantly white? What does this episode tell us about the way the white trainee is reading the world?

Joyce also had personal experience of an episode in her training that she believed to be racist. She had been advised to speak to a member of staff who was deemed to have expertise in this area:

And when I spoke to him, I wished I hadn't, because it's subtle and a lot of things are subtle and unless you're walking in another person's shoes, you don't know how it feels. And he's white and he's middle class, and he's written loads of books, he's a professor, and we're sat, and we're having this big highbrow conversation, picking up and dissecting everything that I've said. And basically saying to me, without evidence you can't say whether that's racism or not. And I'm trying to say, well unless you've got this,

you've got your badge on and you've got to walk with it
every day, you won't know. Half the time these subtle
things you won't even be aware of. . . . And that really
frustrated me 'cos I walked off feeling paranoid like I was
the one with the problem because I'd highlighted it.

Joyce's comments encapsulate the paradoxical nature of racism – on the one hand it appears illusive, but on the other it is intensely felt. There are two experiences of the world here; the professor takes a scientific objective approach to determine the existence of the phenomena. Joyce calls upon her subjective lived experience in the world. How can one begin to make visible something that eludes scientific measures? How can one set about revealing that those very objective scientific measures are indeed 'located in, and . . . shaped by, a thick web of political sedimentations and other value-laden commitments' (Yancy, 2000, p. ix). Alcoff (2000) notes that:

knowledge cannot be completely disentangled from social
location and the pretension to abstraction only conceals
the relevant context, preventing the

> productive dialogue between contexts that is the only
> means by which true agreement and understanding might
> emerge. (p. 245–246)

I am not alone in the dilemmas I faced as a Black woman entering the research community. Others have pointed to the problems encountered doing qualitative research on race or ethnicity (Stanfield & Rutledge, as cited by Islam, 2000, p. 36; Twine, 2000). In addition to being a 'researcher', however, I am also a university teacher and as such experience racialised understandings and behaviours in more routine day-to-day interactions. Some years ago I attended a meeting in London where I found myself in conversation with a white male professor. He asked me if I had noticed that both our institutions had been in press accused of institutional racism. During this conversation it emerged that an individual who had brought a case against the institution was apparently 'off his head'. Within a week of that conversation, I found myself sitting in on a professional development training event round equal opportunities. Curiously, I was again engaged in conversation with another white male professor who surprisingly raised the same issue. In this conversation, the professor expressed his belief that our institution was not racist. In my mind I paused and wondered how he would know. Why are we automatically assumed to be insane if we dare speak out to say, 'This is what is happening to me and it is unjust, it is racist'?

'By Mentioning It (Race) Aren't You Making It a Problem'?

Further evidence to illustrate notions of visibility, invisibility, and

silence comes from a teaching encounter. A department within the university runs a programme for European Union (EU) exchange students. I was approached to deliver a session on multicultural education and experiences of teaching in a multicultural society. I shared some of my data from the projects I had worked on and introduced key concepts from CRT, then opened the floor for questions and discussion. One of the participants asked if I was not creating the problem by talking about it. This partic-ular class of exchange students came from Sweden, and the majority of the group insisted that in Sweden everyone was accepted as Swedish; racism was not an issue. However, one young man in the group, of Indian origin, disagreed and became very angry. The space where race was put out there on the table, where a black woman was leading the discussion and fighting to reveal the material effects of the social con-struct 'race', enabled this young man to say to the group 'that is not my experience'. But the group just did not relate to the issues at all; their antipathy to the ideas

seemed to interfere with their capacity to engage with them. As a black person interacting with nonblack individuals, it is very hard to get people to recognise and engage with what you are saying. There is a tendency to try to explain the racist nature of the encounter away by identifying other possibilities, for instance person-ality clashes. In this way the problem is nonexistent for there is no proof, as in the case of Joyce previously discussed, or we are seen as causing the problem since we have named it. This state of affairs can create a hypersensitivity to Blackness/other-ness of self which then mediates interactions. For the researcher this can obstruct critical thinking, and it is this I want to explore in the next section.

Reproducing or Disrupting the Status Quo?

Whilst I do believe that speaking from the margins can disrupt the status quo and open up new possibilities, my experience of research has also taught me that there are dangers. Just as dominant ways of thinking/seeing can drown out other voices/pos-sibilities, one can also become myopic in one's marginality. I came to realise that Edwards and Ribbens' (1998) notion of a 'perspectival view of knowledge' presented its own problems for me in that my biography had narrowed my field of vision. To illustrate this point, I will take an example from my doctoral study (Roberts, 2004). This study explored the transition of final-year primary (elementary) school teacher trainees into the first year of teaching. The purpose was to gain a sense of their perceptions of developing professional identity. The

majority of participants were white; there was one male, and ages ranged from 20s through to 40s. Marcia, an African Caribbean woman who participated in my doctoral study, spoke of her transition as soul destroying. Whilst she never mentioned race or racism throughout her interviews, I continued to read her experience as raced. It was only the final interview that I believed the evidence to support my reading of her accounts became clear. Here she contrasted the experience of working in a predominantly white school with that of working in more ethnically mixed school.

On reflection it occurred to me that in considering Marcia's narration of her experience of transition, I had become so intrigued by one aspect of her identity – namely her sense of loss of self – that I lost sight of the many other complexities within her story. MacLure (1993) states:

> If you look closely at the surface of people's talk about themselves – rather than trying to peer beneath it or rise above it to locate the real self – you find that they describe themselves in ways that are more complex than the 'categorical' identities that we often bestow upon them. (p. 381)

Being some distance from the context of our discussions has enabled me to move beyond the emotions which to some extent framed my interpretation of Marcia's account. Not untypical, her account of transition contains contradictions which were difficult to make sense of. Initially I accepted the accounts at face value – perhaps a naı̈ve thing for a researcher to do – thus my task was to understand the processes at work, making Marcia conform to a particular way of being. This applied equally to me as researcher.

On reflection I believe I had taken for granted that unspoken element which I felt structured our experience and facilitated the connection between us – namely our 'Blackness'. Fine and Weiss (1998) discuss their data which support a 'floating sense of race' yet which suggest race is 'entrenched' in the daily patterns of life. They suggest that

> race is a place in which post-structuralism and lived
> realities need to talk. Race is a social construct, indeed.
> But race in a racist society bears profound consequence
> for daily life, identity, social movements and the ways in
> which most groups other. (p. 18)

The world of academia is no exception. As an 'always already presen[ce]' (Winant, 1994), race enables the researcher and the researched to position one another with direct implications for the relationship (Bhopal, 2000), as demonstrated by my inter-action with Marcia and the knowledge produced.

Enter Critical Race Theory

In the UK there has been concern about the educational attainment levels for Black and minority ethnic pupils and concerns about the plight of Black males in particular. Developing role models in schools as one possible solution for this state of affairs has led to calls for a more diverse teaching profession. There has been research over the last 30-plus years exploring the experiences of BME trainee teachers coupled with research into reasons why individuals from BME backgrounds do

not enter the profession or leave initial teacher training. My involvement in some of these projects has led me to seriously question the point of the research. For someone who got involved in this area because of the desire to contribute to a more socially just society, it was very disheartening to see that far from transformation, the inequalities were being reproduced. Research data repeated the same themes project after project. Why? For me, critical race theory has offered part of the answer. It provides a language and tools to explore the operation of race in society today, to unpick why there

is formal equality – in terms of legislation and institutional policies – but lived experience of inequality.

Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2005) review the implicit and at times explicit visceral feeling of positioned oppression that BME groups (people of colour) rou-tinely experience. They write:

> We seek a methodology and a theory that seeks not merely reversal of roles in a hierarchy but rather displacement of taken-for-granted norms around unequal binaries. . . . We see such a possibility in Critical Race Theory . . . a new analytic rubric for considering difference and inequity using multiple meth-odologies. (p. 291)

When I encountered critical race theory, I found a framework that provided an intellectual space to explore not only our own racial positioning within the academy and wider society but also that of the communities we work with in our research to achieve greater social justice. Critical race theory emerged from critical legal studies and the activism of scholars of colour. CRT is not one theory per se but an interdis-ciplinary approach which has key unifying themes (Delgado & Stephanic, 2001; Parker & Roberts, 2005, 2011). As an interdisciplinary framework, CRT draws on postmodernism/poststructuralism, Marxism, feminist theory, postcolonialism, and queer theory. CRT places race at the centre of analysis, and there is a recognition that racism is endemic to life. Notions of neutrality, objectivity, colour blindness, and meritocracy are viewed with scepticism. This approach questions ahistoricism. It stresses the need for a contextual and historical analysis of the law.

CRT places emphasis on the experiential knowledge of

people of colour. Narra-tive analysis is key to this. As something akin to a 'thought experiment', I insert below a patchwork of data knitted together from a range of research projects, some of which I have been involved with and mentioned earlier and some not. The research ranges from 1998 to 2008 and across different geographical areas. I am struck at how easy it was to weave a seamless narrative from the individual voices – both male and female.

Patchwork data

I don't think that they'd have that respect for
me as a teacher. they won't see me as the
teacher that I am
I want them to see me as a teacher.
Because then I'll have the same status as everybody else.

LORNA ROBERTS

If they see me as an Afro-

Caribbean teacher, they'll

probably nit pick and find some

faults

. . . From her perspective the school had
unrealistically high expectations of her,
'picked on' her relentlessly . . .

If you are the only ethnic minority staff in the school
I think people look at you in a different way.
You have to prove what you are capable of. . . .
I don't think they really expect high
standards from you, so you have to prove
that.

When I went first I think they were quite shocked to see me
in my dress
. . . I think they expected me not to be able to fit

into the group or be able to converse or

whatever, or generally sit with them . . .

And then I think they had this

assumption that I wouldn't really be

able to shout out to the class

. . . shy little Asian girl and I don't know where it
comes from really I don't know where the roots of it
are
I think we have to fight a lot of implicit stereotypes like that . .
.
Because I wear a scarf I think I have to sort of break through
  a lot of stereotypes and sort of prejudices.

. . . because of the way you choose to dress,

you are making yourself very different
to the pupils and that doesn't make you
really fit in well here,
but you should fit in quite well there because of the mix.

I can remember submitting a paper in 2006–2007 for publication. In this paper I voiced my frustration:

The desire to develop an alternative framework is borne out of curiosity as to why, even after Swann (DES, 1985) and more recently MacPherson (1999) and a range of other research and widening participation initiatives, it appears the same questions are being asked with the same stories being reiterated. Why the apparent inertia?

The paper was rejected, but one of the critical referee's comments focused on my statement that the same questions were being asked and the same stories reiterated. The reviewer felt that I had not taken on board the complexities which were now

recognised. But recognising and documenting new complexities does not bring about change. The call for 'more research' has echoed across the last 40 years without the visceral nature and experience of racism being addressed.

The type of research I was involved in and various policy interventions to address racism and increase representations of various groups in teaching and other profes-sions tend to project the problem onto the very groups who experience discrimina-tion. Bhavnani, Mirza, and Meetoo (2005) argue that interventions fail to tackle racism because they do not address the roots of the problem. The authors also make clear that categorising groups solely according to race or ethnicity does not take account of the complex identities as demonstrated by Project A previously discussed. Looking at intercultural barriers does not take account of the structural and attitu-dinal barriers Black and minority ethnic groups encounter on a daily basis. So it is no surprise that I am able to produce a seemless account from data spanning a 10-year period. It is interesting to note that in 2011, Wilkins and Lall also comment on the similarity of their data to previous research undertaken. Piecing together fragments of data across time and geographical space reveals a pattern, a pattern that repeats endlessly and counters the rhetoric of formal equality.

Considering the framing of research problems reveals the lens through which the problem is being viewed. As with the white trainee, Joyce spoke about someone who thought a Black child was racist because she drew black images. Such a framing

misses the target and will continue to reproduce the kinds of data discussed here. Focussing on the voices and narratives of BME students shines a light on the daily microaggressions experienced. It becomes possible to see how one's sense of self is expected to be adapted to fit with the stock narratives. Alexander (2004) asked:

> To gain entry into the academy, to what degree must I engage a particular performance of language and McLarens's notion of an 'articulatory whiteness'? To what degree does that gain me entry as a testament of my ability to perform academic, to perform teacher, to negotiate and display the scholarly apparatus of institutional (cultural) membership, to be socially accepted – in exclusion to other aspects of my performative Black self? (p. 662)

Critical Race Theory and Community-based Research

Critical race theory has given me a framework through which to talk back. It has enabled me to think about the ways in which my intellectual being had been colo-nised through my educational career and how my practice may objectify lived

experience. I recognise the knowledge and expertise of those on the edge, excluded. It means that I adopt alternative approaches to research. As Ladson-Billings and Don-nor (2005) argue, 'intellectuals must move into spaces beyond the academy to participate in real change' (p. 297). An example of such an approach can be seen in a recent small-scale project where I worked with a community organisation to gain young people's perceptions of their educational experiences. The community group is a voluntary organisation which works to improve educational outcomes for African Caribbean young people. Our starting point was not one where the young people were problematised or seen as having some deficit which needed to be identified so an appropriate remedy could be found. We wanted to look at the lived experiences of young people's lives expressed in their own words and actions – exploring barriers, access, aspirations, gaps, and achievements. We decided to take a workshop approach. The workshop was facilitated by a teacher who used poetry and drama to engage the young people in an exploration of their educational experience. I as the researcher also participated in the activities. This was one of the most invigorating projects I had ever worked on. I did not interview young people but observed and participated. Young people were given particular topics and asked to work out a dra-matisation of the theme, which was then performed. In one session, young people performed raps to express their aspirations. The data produced challenged many of the stereotypes of young black men as at risk. Counter to the prevailing discourses of a lack of

aspiration, we see young people with dreams and ambitions, and we saw how school processes impacted some negatively.

Young people were given a space in which they could reflect creatively on their lives and educational experiences. Through this experience the young people were empowered. For many it was the first time anyone had ever engaged them in a dis-cussion about their educational /career futures. They were excited by the workshops and were very disappointed when we reached the endpoint of the six-week pro-gramme. The sessions were videoed and photographed. Young people were invited to take part in the editorial decision-making and editing process. We envisaged that the end product would be used to speak back to policy makers.

Here I see a way in which critical engagement in the academy can meet critical engagement on the ground. Engagement in creative approaches enables an alterna-tive way of doing, thinking, and seeing. For me a space is opened up where a dialogue can emerge – a space for further thinking about what counts as data and what it means to research when the tools of research change. With CRT I make no apologies for foregrounding race. I see how I have been framed and how such framing influ-ences my movement through the world. I am free to see through my lens but not be

limited. I continue to work with community groups and see the way forward as building research from the ground up.

Note

1. Access courses are designed for mature students wishing to return to education and enter university courses. The Black Access course I worked on targeted African heritage and Asian students and had an Afrocentric interdisciplinary curriculum.

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