Teaching while Black: navigating performativity and authenticity

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Abstract

Diverse faculty recruitment has become one of the ways through which universities in the Global North perform anti-racism, often framed within broader equity, diversity, and inclusion initiatives. However, Black female academics continue to experience racism, tokenism, and systemic inequities, contributing to psychological distress and high turnover within the academy. This paper utilises the theories of Critical Race and Performativity to investigate the concept of authenticity for Black instructors teaching 'English for academic purposes' in higher education. Through autobiographical counter-narratives of classroom incidents in two institutions in the United States, this paper examines how a teacher's race and gender shape their experiences in the workplace when racially charged incidents occur. It also highlights the role of institutional non-performance and impact on teacher authenticity, advocating for a more inclusive conceptualisation of authenticity.

Introduction

Higher education (HE) in the West has seen an upsurge in efforts towards anti-racism and decolonisation (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2022, 2020; Doharty *et al.* 2021). In the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), institutional commitment towards equity, diversity, and inclusion have taken on various initiatives including the hiring of faculty from minority backgrounds (Bhopal and Pitkin, 2018, 2016; Rodgers and Liera, 2023). However, despite

institutional inclusive reforms, faculty of colour who embody the diversity universities claim to value continue to report overt racism, tokenism, microaggressions, bullying, and harassment, as well as mental and psychological stress within their work environments (Mahony and Weiner, 2019; Rollock, 2018, 2019; Settles et al., 2020; Showunmi, 2023). The weight of embodied diversity and racialisation has led to high turnover rates for Black female academics (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Bryan *et al.*, 2022; Bhopal and Chapman, 2018; Showunmi, 2023; Stockfelt, 2018). For those who choose to remain, discussions on authenticity remain under-researched, particularly for those who teach English at HE.

This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse of Black female academics while advancing it through the theory of performativity. Drawing from personal accounts of classroom incidents that took place in the US, this article examines how racialised incidents are reinforced or challenged in the workplace from the perspective of a Black female academic, inevitably shaping the boundaries of teacher authenticity.

Positionality

Although this article is grounded in a few theoretical frameworks and analytical discussions, it is autobiographical – hence the use of the first-person pronoun, 'I', in the sections that follow the literature. As a Black African whose teaching career has been, primarily, shaped in predominantly White institutions in the US and the UK, I have quietly endured microaggressions, othering, invisibility, and misrecognitions in various academic spaces. My understanding of race, gender, and Blackness has evolved as result of significant time spent in the US as a student, a university lecturer, an immigrant, and a citizen. I gained firsthand experience of not only racial dynamics, but also, the societal perceptions implicit in those identities. As such, my doctoral research examined the racial and linguistic positioning of Black teachers of English as a second language (ESL) in the US through the lenses of critical theory and positioning theory (Nabukeera, 2020). My scholarly work, since then, has built on those findings with current research and scholarship focussing on decolonial ideologies and Eurocentric knowledge hierarchies embedded in the field of English for academic purposes (EAP), in which I teach. Despite this work, I have seldom had the opportunity to directly confront, challenge, or make space for personal reflection on my lived experiences. This paper is an attempt to give voice to those unspoken realities. And while the narratives presented are not intended to

be representative of Black female teachers or academics, the literature suggests that what will be described is far from unique. It is my hope that this article will resonate beyond my individual story, contributing to broader conversations on the intersection of race, gender, and the negotiation of authenticity within academia.

Theoretical frameworks

This article draws on three different conceptual frameworks: critical race theory (CRT), performativity, and Kernis and Goldman's (2006) multi-model concept of authenticity.

Critical race theory and counter-narratives

One of the core principles of CRT as an analytical framework is the use of counter storytelling, to centre lived experiences of individuals living and working within White dominated environments (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001; Solorzano and Yosso, 2002). As such, this framework will be employed in the analysis presented in this paper, as similar work focussed on race and racialised perspectives within education systems in both the US and, more recently, in the UK have demonstrated its suitability for narrative inquiry (Bryan *et al.*, 2022; Doharty et al., 2021; Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Andrews *et al.*, 2024; Mahony and Weiner, 2019; Rollock, 2012, Showunmi, 2023). The power of storytelling in scholarly work cannot be understated as it 'exposes deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color' (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 26). It is through our subjective realities that we, as Black educators, can make sense of our experiences; theorise the multiple ways in which we have been named, labelled, positioned, and racialised; highlight the pervasiveness of everyday racism in the workplace; examine the impact on our identities and authenticity, and challenge the status quo.

Race and performativity

Butler's (1990; 1993; 2004) theory of gender performativity challenges essentialist ideologies, arguing that male/female gender categories are not pre-determined but created through naming and defined by societal norms of behaviour. Performance is examined through utterances (labelling gender) and acts (conscious and unconscious behaviour), with societal expectations instrumental in shaping individual behaviour. As such, not only is gender identity performed but it is often simultaneously negotiated by the sometimes contradictory identities imposed by others. Butler's

more recent work (2010) extends performativity theory in a way that can be applied to race and racialised bodies, highlighting the systemic devaluing of those from minority backgrounds. The argument is that just as gender is not inherent but constructed through performance, racial categories are neither fixed nor natural but are socially created and reinforced through the ways people 'perform' or 'do' race. The perception of race as a fixed construct is problematised through the concept of racial frames that link physical characteristics of those from racial and ethnically minority backgrounds to stereotypical representations of racial identity (Chadderton, 2013; Rich, 2004; Nayak, 2006). In the US, racial perceptions are often based on one's appearance, where if you look Black, you are Black. And you are Black because you look Black. Perry and Bodehausen's (2008) study on mixed-race individuals highlights this issue with the equation: White + Black = Black. These normative frameworks inevitably influence public perceptions and policy and contribute to the complex lived experiences of those who are deemed 'other' in this society.

Research on Black faculty in US HE has highlighted examples of students' assumptions and perceptions of Black teachers' racial identity – regardless of whether the instructor self-identifies as Black American or non-American Black. For instance, a Black male professor in Han *et al.* (2018) study observed, "When people see me, a Black male, it appears like a 'CD' comes on that expects them to experience 'Angry Black Male Syndrome.' But when I open my mouth and they hear my accent, they get confused. It's not just a Black male, but one with a foreign accent. So, they assume that they cannot understand me. Some of them assume that I cannot be intelligent enough to be in the position that I am in." (p. 88). Penn's (2017) work on Black women in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) highlighted similar sentiments, as expressed in this comment by a participant's student who remarked, "You're so pretty…you must be from Africa – not just Black American" (p. 122). Chung Constant (2012), a Black-Jewish English language instructor, recounted a similar interaction with a new student who remarked, "I did not come to America to learn bad English, and everyone knows that Black people in America speak bad English" (p. 172). In these examples, Blackness is both essentialised (bad English = African American English) and subject to hierarchical categorisation (a Black male with an American accent might be perceived more favourably than one with a foreign accent, or an African might be considered more attractive than an African American). My doctoral study on Black English language educators, most participants reported that students questioned their

Blackness, perhaps because they were light skinned, mixed race, spoke other languages fluently, or had a non-American sounding name (Nabukeera, 2022). For these teachers, their professional lives became a performance – a balancing act that involved self-affirming their own Black identities while also managing the stereotypical impressions in the classrooms and work environment.

Authenticity

There are numerous conceptualisations of authenticity, but for the purposes of this paper, I will draw on Kernis and Goldman's (2006) multi component model where authenticity is defined as 'the unobstructed operation of one's true – or core – self in ones' daily enterprise' (p. 294). In other words, true authenticity as congruent between one's actions and one's true self. Four components of authenticity are highlighted: 1) awareness, which entails an ongoing self-exploration of one's desires, goals, strengths, and weaknesses; 2) unbiased processing, which involves the ability to objectively evaluate oneself without distortion or denial of external feedback; 3) behaviour informed by one's self-awareness and unbiased processing; and 4) relational orientation, which determines the level of openness, sincerity, and vulnerability that an individual brings into their close relationships with others.

In applying relational components 3 and 4 to the field of education, authenticity has been conceptualised in the relationships between students and faculty. Examples of authenticity include relational fidelity – ensuring that teachers take students' unique perspectives into consideration as they relate with them (Barnacle and Dall' Aba, 2017), attuned responsiveness – being fully present during student interactions, and approachability (Dall' Alba, 2009). Gravett and Winstone's (2022) research in the context of HE noted that while some of the principles may be difficult for teachers to apply, considering workload and class sizes, genuine dialogue and attuned responsiveness are important factors for demonstrating authenticity. Ultimately, 'for the students in this study, being accepted as an individual is very important' (p. 369). The underlying implication is that authentic teaching involves not only self-awareness, as Shakespeare's 'know thyself' suggests, but also to recognise and acknowledge students' individuality in order to engage with them through responsiveness, attunement, and respect. But what happens when the teacher's own identity is under scrutiny in the classroom? To what extent can they fully embody their authentic selves in this space to extend care to their students? The narratives that follow are taken from two classroom

incidents that happened in the US, where I spent more than a decade of my English language teaching career.

Narratives

Narrative 1:

> It was one of my first teaching jobs in the US, following three years of teaching in HE abroad. In one of my intensive English classes was an older (late 40s) male student from a Middle Eastern country. A few weeks into teaching, I was called into the Head of School's (HOS) office and informed that this student had issued several complaints about me, saying I am 'not a good teacher'. This was surprising, as he had never communicated any concerns to me, but I also knew that his English proficiency was relatively limited. I told the HOS I would address the issue with him directly. The next week, when I approached him in class, he refused to speak to me, responding in Arabic to another student instead. The student translated the comment as, "I came to learn English in America; why is she teaching me"? In subsequent lessons, he began to shout and berate me in front of his classmates, and on one occasion, shushed me like a pet when I tried to approach his desk to speak with him. He continued to criticise my teaching in every lesson, often being so disruptive that I was not able to continue with class. Because I was relatively new, both to the country and the institution, I was not entirely sure what the protocol was for these kinds of situations, as I had asked the student to leave, and he had refused. I had also spoken to the HOS a few times and requested that he be transferred out of my class. No action was taken and, for a month, this student's behaviour persisted. Already grappling with grief over a recent family loss, I developed intense anxiety and considered resigning. Eventually, a senior White colleague noticed my distress and spoke to the HOS on my behalf, which led to the removal of this student from my class.

Narrative 2:

> Four years later, at a different institution, in the third week of teaching my EAP postgraduate writing course, I noticed that a male student who had never attended

> any classes was sitting alone at the back of the room. In the small group of twelve students, his presence stood out as he remained focused on his phone while others participated in a group task. When I approached to ask if he was in the right class, he ignored me. I asked him, again, to put his phone away and he continued. Thinking he had not heard me, I repeated myself, and then, he flatly replied, “No.” Surprised by his abrasiveness, especially because I did not know this student, I told him he either needed to join the group or leave the class. He looked at me and said, “I’m not leaving.” Not wanting to escalate the situation in front of the other students, I let it go. Later, I emailed his advisor, who immediately arranged a meeting with myself and the department head (HOD). I subsequently learned that this student had already had several meetings concerning his non-attendance that had been flagged up and could not be ignored due to visa requirements. When his advisor had asked why he was not attending my core class, he’d apparently said, “I don’t like her. There’s nothing she can teach me.” Although this was told directly to the HOD a few weeks prior, I had not been informed. The HOD admitted, “I’ve had several conversations with him. He has said some racist things, he’s clearly got issues”. She then offered me two options: “the student could be asked to apologise and thereafter remain in my class or simply transfer to another. It was up to me”. I chose the latter. Later, another colleague shared that this student, who was also taking his class, had made derogatory comments about me while in his class. Although the student did not mention my name, my colleague assumed the comments were directed towards me as I was the only Black person on the teaching team.

Discussion

Race, gender, language

In both stories, I experienced a frustration common to most teachers – students challenging authority in the classroom, but the racialised bias implicit in these interactions is worth exploring. The comment, “I came to learn English in America; why is she teaching me?” reveals two things: the first, that I am perceived as ‘unqualified’, based on the students’ perception of what an English teacher in America should look like, and simultaneously, their

assumptions about what someone like me should be. I wondered if the comment could simply have been a cultural misunderstanding, potentially arising from my femaleness and race, which conflicted with his perception of the role of Black women. These roles may dictate that more deference is accorded to male teachers, for example. However, the emphasis on 'she' in that utterance does suggest an understanding that goes beyond my perceived competence or lack thereof. To this student, I am not the right kind of teacher, I do not belong in the role of an educator, and while there is never an overt racial slur, his defiance implies a bias that is largely informed by what he can see – a Black woman who speaks English with a non-American accent. These three intersecting identity markers, possibly, shaped the dynamics in this interaction. Crenshaw's (1989) theory of intersectionality examines how the multiple marginalities that Black women embody often determine the overlapping oppressions they are subjected to.

While the student's limited English proficiency might have impacted his ability to express his concerns either directly to me or in a more constructive manner, it is notable that he perceived me as inherently incapable of teaching him the language he sought to learn. This further confirms that his comments were not just about my teaching abilities. The racialisation of my competence is also evident in the second story with the statement, "there's nothing she can teach me". These words are a rejection of my authority based on my racial identity particularly because, unlike in the first narrative, this student had never attended any of my classes, and did not have an informed opinion of my teaching. As such, his preconceived judgment, and then his open defiance while in the classroom, confirm his bias, as well as a racialised hierarchy in which he positions himself as superior. Thus, Black educators in HE globally must contend with not only the biases or prejudices that students may have towards any teacher of any race or gender, but their linguistic identities, nationality, and sexuality are also called into question (Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Han *et al.*, 2018; Rollock, 2023; Stockfelt, 2018; Showunmi, 2023).

Competence, power, resistance

Students' behaviour and resistance to authority in these narratives demonstrates the subtle underpinnings of racialisation. In the first story, the student shouts, is disruptive for several lessons, refuses to speak to me directly but is able to make several complaints to the HOS. While this behaviour is not atypical as student complaints are part of teaching, his actions are not merely an expression of a

personal grievance. It is both the refusal to communicate directly with me even when I suggest that his classmates translate, and the dismissive behaviour, berating, belittling and disrespect that leads to a breakdown in our relationship. It is interesting that he can communicate very politely with the white female HOS, a detail she later shares with me. He also rejects the hierarchical structure implicit in my position as a teacher and instead chooses to question the legitimacy of my role. The question then becomes, 'would this student have behaved differently if I was White, male or both?' With the second incident, the racial prejudice is more direct, though not apparent to me during that interaction in class. And it is clear that his refusal to engage in the class, or comply with instructions, is mostly driven by his belief that a Black woman cannot teach him or tell him what to do. The repeated comments made to others – his advisor, the department head, and my colleague – are not isolated incidents but are a continuous rejection of not only my authority but my identity. Both stories highlight how, through words and actions, whether consciously or unconsciously, students construct and reinforce racialised and gendered perceptions of competence and authority. This raises broader questions about issues of power and authority in the classroom. How can educators who do not fit expected racial, linguistic, and cultural norms navigate challenges to their legitimacy without reproducing oppressive power structures?

Non-performance performance

These narratives demonstrate how administrators seemed to downplay or dismiss the racial undertones in these cases. The failures from both- one who does not intervene on my behalf until another colleague raises the issue, and the other chose who does not take immediate action despite her own admission of racism is telling. In the second story, the option for the student to apologise and remain or be transferred to another module is also revealing; the former option is presented to me as a viable or reasonable option despite the awareness of the racist undertones in the incident. Although I was marginalised, responsibility for resolving the situation was still placed upon me. The department head did not directly confront the student regarding his racism, which inevitably simplified this issue to atypical student behavior. In both incidents, there was no effort made to address the underlying racial dynamics that played a role in these incidents beyond the statement he's said some racist things. Mostly, there was no clear understanding of the mental and psychological stress caused. This fits in with other studies that highlight instances of institutional denial- or non-

response where administrators either lack awareness about the full racial implications of reported racialised incidents or are unwilling to take a stronger stance (Ahmed, 2016; Bhopal and Pitkin, 2020; McShane, 2021). Instead, the admission of racism is instead viewed as a solution. Mahony and Weiner (2019) and Gabriel and Tate (2017) highlight anecdotes from racialised Black or Brown staff who reported incidents of students' racist remarks and were instead instructed to apologise to the students. In my case, it took a senior colleague to intervene before any support was offered. The lack of appropriate action is a powerful example of the on-going performance of racism, a dynamic non-performativity, "a way of not doing something by appearing to do something" (Ahmed, 2018; p.334). In the sense that inaction is still an action that institutions use to reinforce the status quo and prevent meaningful change (Doharty, *et al.* 2021). Black academics who are often the sole faculty or one of very few in their departments, faculties, and schools, sense this performativity allyship as it shows up as either fake outrage (the promise to do something but no real action is taken) or silence (the refusal to engage in explicit discussions of racism in the workplace). But "silence is as much a withholding as it is a vernacular" (Ohito, 2024, p.1). Inaction communicates that we are not important enough to be taken seriously (Arday, 2021; Arday and Mirza, 2018; Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Kubota and Motha, 2024).

Black Authenticity

> "The world saw blackness in me before it saw anything else and operated around me with blackness in mind" (Varaidzo, 2016, p.12)

Authenticity, the way society understands it to be, is a tremendous ask for faculty of colour working in academia in the West. In their review of the literature on Black authenticity, Nguyen and Anthony (2014) argue that although what it means to be Black differs depending on context, cultural ideologies and societal expectations, Black authenticity has been commodified and reinforced white norms through the Othering of Black culture and the imposition of white ideals on Black bodies. These representations constrain Black identity to the extent that Black students in HE report feelings of alienation attempt to find their own authenticity within the narrow parameters and socially constructed group norms of race and class in British HE. The researchers further advocate for similar research on "Black women's sense of an authentic self- whether or not Black women can be authentically Black while adhering to

white standards" (p.776). Within the US context, Duran's (2022) further builds on this argument by critiquing the narrow concept of authenticity in HE that does not consider the perspective of the racialised. The argument is that not only do systemic inequalities and microaggressions weigh heavily on our psyches, but "the assumptions about how to be authentic tend to align with a dominant culture ideology" (p. 13). It is not just about bringing our authentic selves to white dominant spaces, but it also about "how much" of our authentic selves are safe to display without enduring further interrogation, stereotyping, or judgment (p.15).

Hence, my criticism of the Kernis and Goodman model (2006) presented earlier, because in order to be authentic one must feel safe. In both incidents, I made the effort to confront these challenging situations objectively. In the first one, I tried to address the student's concerns directly and reason with him, and in the second, sought immediate support from the administration. However, the administration failed to provide the transparency and validation needed for unbiased processing. My decision to transfer the student rather than continue to subject myself to continued hostility showed a level of self-awareness- the resolve to protect my well-being and professional boundaries- but the failure of both administrators to hold students accountable created a barrier for genuine relational orientation.

As has been shown throughout this discussion, my race precedes me in the classroom as encapsulated in the quotation at the beginning of this section. Thus, when discussing authenticity in the workplace, several questions arise: How can I bring my genuine self into the classroom where my Blackness could be subject to scrutiny and interrogation? To what extent can authenticity exist in such a space? As the narratives illustrate, my race is problematised, weaponized, and reduced to a racialised construct, yet the racism is completely ignored, or not directly addressed. Butler's (1999) theory can be used to argue that authenticity is itself performative. As such, authentic racial or gender identity does not exist prior to its performance but is continually constructed. This concept resonates with my experience during the first few weeks of meeting new students. I enter classrooms more guarded, aware that my Blackness may lead to stereotyping or being perceived as a space invader (Puwar, 2004)-an anomaly in an environment where Black women are underrepresented. I intentionally smile more, adopt a friendlier, more approachable demeanour, to counter the angry Black woman trope while also emphasising my qualifications as a kind of reassurance to students that I am twice

as good. In doing so, I perform a version of Blackness shaped by perceived societal expectations in order to allow my work to fairly speak for itself. Beyond this continued negotiation and impression management is the lasting psychological toll that impacts mental wellbeing, and professional engagement. Research highlights racial battle fatigue for educators of colour that reverberates inward through personal health impacts and outwards in shaping academic careers (Arday and Mirza, 2018; Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Mahony and Weiner, 2019; Rollock, 2023; Showunmi, 2023; Stockfelt, 2018). The question then is not how to 'be authentic' in the classroom, but how our performance of Blackness is shaped by the social and institutional forces that define and redefine it. Thus, while authenticity demands that we create safe spaces for students to be themselves, classrooms may not always be safe spaces for Black educators to embody their true authentic selves.

Finally, in reflecting on authenticity as I write this paper, I am acutely aware of my professional image and the ways in which I may be perceived by those who might read this piece. I am mindful of the weight and implications of the words I share here, knowing that they may take on a life of their own, even within the structured confines of academic discourse. I am also mindful of the societal constructed limits on my personal authenticity-the boundaries and the necessity to remain boundaried. There are inherent risks to showing the level of authenticity I wish to express- my unfiltered thoughts, emotions and reactions towards the events and the people I have discussed. When you are used to being the only one in the work environment, these are important considerations (Doharty, *et al.* 2021; Gabriel and Silva, 2017; Kubota and Motha, 2024). It must be mentioned that even though my Blackness is performed in response to social contexts, it is a source of pride. It is not simply a constructed identity based on external expectations; but is both curated and true to who I am, even in situations where I actively perform it. As Varaidzo (2016, p.20) poignantly states, "my authentic self is my default performance, the person I am when I'm not thinking…my authentic self stays black. She stays black when people are present, and she stays black when people are not".

Conclusion

Using performativity theory and its application to race within the context of English language teaching, this paper has examined the intersection of race and gender identity in a work environment where the instructor is a Black woman. The narratives presented here are subject to various interpretations. Nonetheless, they

illustrate how performative utterances and acts may shape racialised perceptions of English language educators, the role of institutional performative neutrality in perpetuating racialisation, and the constraints of teacher authenticity within these dynamics. Future research and scholarship of teaching and learning could explore how educators from other minoritised backgrounds navigate authenticity and the tensions between institutional expectations and personal identity. More importantly, there must be system where Black academics are comfortable enough to report incidents of racism without fear of judgement or repercussions. While students often have clear policies and support structures in place, similar protections are often absent for instructors of colour enduring different forms of injustices. Ensuring that such policies exist and are actively upheld is essential to fostering a safe and supportive environment for Black educators.

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