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“What Colour is Your English?”

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“What Colour is Your English?”

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Abstract. This paper reports on discussions in two focus groups held with 12 women of African origin in Vancouver who had been resident in Canada for between two and thirteen years. The women experienced difficulty in transporting their 'African English' to Canada, and suffered demeaning responses in everyday life. Moreover, accent emerged as a significant barrier in seeking employment, and beyond this contributed to a more general sense of social rejection in Canada. The prejudicial response to African accents becomes a means of consolidating an 'outsider' immigrant status and precludes a sense of belonging in Canada. Some focus group members identified a neo-colonial tactic, where a demeaning view of accent is a tool 'to put us down.' As such, accent becomes a means for social exclusion.

Keywords: Africans, accents, language fluency, racialization, social exclusion

When you come here, you come from a continent or a country that was originally colonized by the British. You had your education, you were taught by the British. You speak your good English, but somehow they ask you “what colour is your English”? (Focus Group, August 1997).

For many immigrants and refugees in Canada, language acquisition is a pressing issue. Until someone masters sufficient fluency in English – or French in Quebec – access to jobs, public institutions, social services, and information is very limited. Government-funded language classes are designed to provide basic language skills to help new immigrants integrate into the communities in which they settle. For those who migrate from countries in which English or French is an official language and a primary language of instruction in the school system, familiarity with English or French is not a problem. Indeed, fluency in one of Canada’s official languages is rewarded in the points system through which prospective applicants are selected to immigrate to Canada. But language, and perceptions of fluency, remain contested in everyday interactions. This paper explores ways in which the social construction of language fluency, evoked through a disparaging of extra-local accents regardless of language mastery, is bound up with racialization processes that mark one group of recent immigrants, African women in Vancouver, as perpetual outsiders.

Methodology

This research draws on two focus groups conducted in Vancouver during the summer of 2002 with women who are recent migrants from Africa. The main purpose of the focus groups was to explore issues facing women in the African community, a small community compared to other immigrant groups in Vancouver, and one to which few services are directed. The women who participated in the focus groups originated from seven different countries with diverse cultural traditions, linguistic backgrounds, and political histories. In spite of their diverse origins we identify the participants in this study, as they identify themselves, as members of a single, though clearly not homogeneous, African community in Greater Vancouver.

The process of settlement in Vancouver has created a redefined sense of themselves as ‘African,’ drawn together, often in spite of significant political and/or cultural tensions, by similar experiences within Canada. Some members of the African community also identify themselves as ‘Black,’ sharing a similar racialized location as others whose ancestors, if not they themselves, originated from Africa. Others reject a ‘Black’ identity because it has no culture. Adoption of an

African identity, and explicitly not an Afro-Canadian identity, reflects cultural distinctiveness as well as negotiation of the political and social landscape in Vancouver.

The 12 focus group participants migrated from diverse African countries previously colonized by Britain (Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Swaziland, Uganda, and Zambia), and one previously colonized by France (Congo). Almost all define themselves as fluent in English,¹ and in 2 cases also French, before arriving in Canada. The length of residence in Canada varies from 2 to 13 years; six had been in Canada 4 years or less, and five for 8 years or more. Most have advanced post-secondary degrees undertaken in English-language institutions. One focus group is composed of professional women, five of whom have Master's degrees completed in English; three of these women have Master's degrees from Canadian or American universities, and a fourth has a Canadian Bachelor's degree. The second focus group is mixed in terms of educational background: one has a Master's Degree, two have post-secondary diplomas, and three have grade 12 certificates.

One of the authors of this Working Paper is a member of, and a well-known community activist within, the African women's community in Vancouver. The other author is a (white) sociologist who has been conducting longitudinal interviews with immigrant and refugee families in Vancouver since 1997.² Our collaboration on this project develops out of five years of conversations about integration issues, goals, accomplishments, employment, education, child-rearing, gender relations, housing, coping strategies, and women's community activism, as part of these family interviews.

How to conduct research with women, particularly women in highly marginalized social locations, has been the subject of considerable debate among feminist scholars. Many feminist researchers critique the notion of 'objectivity' in research, pointing out that what Donna Haraway calls the 'god trick,' or viewing everywhere from nowhere, is a myth (Collins 1990, 1999; Haraway 1991; Harding 1987, 1998; Harstock, 1987; Mohanty 1991; Smith 1987). In addition, researchers point to the myriad ways in which hierarchical power relations are reproduced in the research process, a critique that qualitative research techniques, such as interviewing and ethnography, do not escape (DeVault 1999; Reinharz 1992; Razack, 2000; Smith 1999; Wolf 1996). In the context of the partiality of all social locations, some feminist scholars have argued that marginalized social locations

¹ One participant had some knowledge of English but was not fluent, and another was fluent in French but not English. 10 were fluent in English before arriving in Canada.

² For the past 6 years Creese has been working in a team of 6 researchers (with Isabel Dyck, Dan Hiebert, David Ley, Arlene McLaren and Gerry Pratt) conducting interviews with immigrant and refugee families in 5 Lower Mainland neighbourhoods: east Vancouver, Kerrisdale, Richmond, Surrey-Delta, and the Tri-Cities (Coquitlam, Port-Coquitlam, and Port Moody). This research is funded by the Vancouver Metropolis Centre (RIIM).

provide a form of epistemic privilege.³ Others argue that epistemic privilege is itself problematic. Donna Haraway argues, in our view persuasively, that we should strive for ‘embedded objectivity’ in the context of consciously and politically engaged ‘situated knowledges’ (Haraway 1991). If we seek to create knowledge for women, and not just about women, we must acknowledge that women are subjects and knowers and begin from their actual experience (Smith 1987; DeVault 1999). As Beverley Skeggs (1997) reminds us, beginning with women’s experience does not mean we end there; the researcher has an ‘epistemic responsibility,’ by virtue of ordering, sifting, and analyzing the data, and should acknowledge authorial privilege.

Mindful of these debates over feminist methodologies we sought a method that would put African women’s experience in Vancouver at the centre of our analysis, limit the power dynamics at play between researchers and focus group participants, and acknowledge our own authorial privilege. One author shares the participant’s ‘outsider-within’ status; the other author does not. Although centrally involved in designing the research and analyzing the findings, the white co-author did not attend the focus groups. Sensitive to how power relations of gender, race, class and status can shape focus group discussions, we chose to construct the focus groups as African-women-only spaces.

We conducted this research through focus groups rather than individual interviews for a number of reasons. This is preliminary research, with a limited budget, and focus groups allowed us to talk to a larger group of women about their experiences than would otherwise have been possible. Focus groups also have a number of methodological advantages: as a group process, focus groups provide spaces in which power relations are more amenable to negotiation and attenuation; the focus group facilitator is less directive than is typical in interviews, providing more space for the participants to shape the discussion; and focus groups provide a relatively ‘safe space’ for the collective generation of knowledge among participants (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999; Pratt 2000). The collective nature of focus group discussions was particularly appealing to us because we brought together women who have few contexts to engage in such discussions. In that sense, the collective process of the focus groups tended to affirm the individual women’s views as they built on each other’s comments.⁴

³ For example, early feminist standpoint theories by Sandra Harding (1987) or Nancy Harstock (1987) argued that women’s social location provided a preferred vantage point for the production of knowledge. More recently, Patricia Hill Collins argues for greater insight offered from an African-American women’s standpoint, based on her status as an ‘outsider within’ (Collins 1990; 1999)

⁴ Of course power relations among focus group participants may also empower some to speak while silencing others (see Pratt 2000). We are not aware of such practices in our focus groups, but subtle forms of silencing may have occurred.

The quote that begins this paper, and provides its title “What colour is your English?” was uttered by one author to the other at our initial meeting, a focus group of immigrant women from diverse backgrounds conducted in 1997 as a prelude to the longitudinal family interviews. We did not set out to frame this research around the issue of language and only recovered this earlier exchange while analyzing the focus group discussions. Instead, language was part of a broad range of open-ended questions that focused on employment, housing, settlement services, mothering, changing gender relations, and policy recommendations. It was the women in the focus groups who clearly identified language as an ongoing barrier to integration in general, to feelings of ‘belonging’ in Canada, and to access to good jobs in particular. By pursuing themes identified by women in our focus groups, and making extensive use of their own words, we have attempted to put African women’s experiences at the centre of our analysis.

As women who are among the most marginalized in Canada – marginalized through processes of migration, racialization, class and gender relations – African women’s social location produces new insights from voices that are seldom heard. At the same time, we acknowledge our own authorial privilege in framing this ‘situated knowledge.’ Although this is preliminary research, and generalizations drawn from a small sample must be viewed with caution, the findings suggest a complex process of racialized assumptions about language proficiency that merit further research. According to our focus group participants, perceptions of fluency in English, and thus perceptions of competence as potential employees or indeed as citizens, are mediated through extra-local accents. The act of speech simultaneously marks them as Africans/Black, as immigrants, as women, and as less competent/desirable than those with local accents. As a result, our focus group participants find opportunities limited by virtue of their language, in spite of high levels of English language fluency.

Situating the Research

Processes of immigration, like the projects of colonialism and nation-building in which they are entwined, are simultaneously racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed (Agnew 1996; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Bannerji 1993, 2000; Boyd 1997; Calliste and Dei 2000; Creese and Dowling 2001; Ng 1986, 1990, 1993; Stasiulis and Yuval Davis 1995; Strong-Boag et al. 1998). Immigrants entering Canada today, like those in the past, must negotiate a complex and changing terrain of relations between and among variously identified communities, social institutions, state policies and practices, and local discourses of citizenship, multiculturalism, and nationhood. How immigrants negotiate this terrain will depend on many factors, including immigration/citizenship status, economic

resources, ethnic/racialized identities, social geography, gender and sexuality, and local and transnational networks.

Research into immigration has undergone significant change in the last two decades with assumptions about homogeneous or unilinear one-way processes of migration abandoned in favour of a more fluid, diverse, and complex appreciation of migration experiences (Miedema and Tastsaglou 2000). Immigrants, like all Canadians, are embedded in processes of racialization located within an historical and spatial context. Scholars have mapped out the shifting processes of racialization in Canada and connections to changing immigration policies and discourses (for example, Bannerji 2000; Henry et al. 1995; Satzewich 1998; Stasiulis and Jhappan 1995; Strong-Boag et al. 1998). The language of racialization changes over time, as do struggles over who fits what category at a given time, but the privileges attached to whiteness, relative to others, prevails in Canada.⁵ Roxana Ng (1986, 1990, 1993) points out that the common-sense meaning of immigrant is socially constructed and inherently racialized. State practices and popular discourses help to construct people of colour as immigrants and immigrants as people of colour. Moreover, to be positioned as immigrant in the Canadian imaginary is both different from, and less desirable than, positioning as 'Canadian.' The relationship between ethnicity/racialization and class/power is by no means as simple or one-dimensional today as it once appeared, but there is little question that African immigrants, and particularly women, enter a racialized landscape somewhere near the bottom (Agnew 1996; Brand 1993; Thornhill 1989).

Considerable attention has been paid of late to processes of globalization and transnationalism as increasing numbers of people move back and forth across national borders and develop diasporic networks, communities and identities (Kennedy and Roudometof 2001). As Patricia Pessar and Sarah Mahler (2001) point out, in spite of its absence from much of the literature, both migration and transnationalism are gendered processes. Within the Canadian context, interest in transnationalism has concentrated largely on entrepreneurs, and particularly on recent immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan who have reshaped major cities like Toronto and Vancouver (Mitchell 1993, 1995; Olds 1998; Olds and Yeung 1999).⁶ For many immigrants and refugees, in Canada and elsewhere, the context of migration, limited economic resources, downward mobility, and the size and density of communities, continues to reinforce the importance of the local context, and the territoriality of the state, even while producing transnational identities.

⁵ The changing definition of whiteness illustrates the fluidity of these concepts, and the privileges at stake. See for example Jacobson (1998).

⁶ See Hyndman and Walton-Roberts (1999) study of Burmese refugees in Vancouver for an example of developing a transnational perspective with a smaller, and much poorer diasporic community.

Canadian research on how immigrants and refugees experience migration and settlement processes has concentrated on the major urban centres of Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver.⁷ Most of this research focuses on larger and/or geographically concentrated ethnic communities. In Vancouver, for example, the South-Asian and Chinese-Canadian communities have been the subject of considerable research while we know much less about smaller groups (Winders 2000).⁸ There is little research on African immigration to Canada, and even less on African immigration to Vancouver. The importance of gender and the experiences of women have received considerable attention in the last two decades, but, with some notable exceptions, scant attention has been paid to women who migrated from Africa.⁹

Recent immigrants from Africa are often lumped under the broader category of ‘Afro-Canadian’ or Black, highlighting the importance of racialization, but also erasing the specificities of migration experiences. As Margaret Cannon (1995) suggests, and our focus group participants affirm, such practices suggest a false sense of homogeneity:

Canadian Blacks come from many lands with many cultures and histories. Jamaicans don’t always see eye-to-eye with Africans. Émigrés from Britain or the United States have little in common with immigrants from Trinidad or Guyana. There are middle class Blacks and very wealthy Blacks and extremely poor Blacks. What there isn’t is a single group, focus, or entity that speaks authoritatively for the entire Black community. Even as seemingly simple an issue as the term Black takes on monumental proportions. Many Americans now prefer African Americans, which is also preferred by many African Canadians... Africans, on the other hand, do not like to see the word African attached to people born away from Africa (Cannon 1995:140-141).

What little research there is on immigrants from Africa suggests that they face particular difficulties tied to barriers in the labour market, low socio-economic status, and racialized discrimination. In addition, African women face additional demands of negotiating paid work, family demands and childrearing in a foreign and often unfriendly environment. For example, Ransford Danso and Miriam Grant (2000) explore access to housing among African immigrants in Calgary. They argue that, in spite of high educational levels, African immigrants experience under-employment, have lower incomes than other Canadians do, and face overt discrimination in the housing market. Housing is such a problem that Danso and Grant identify a “housing crisis” whereby the “core housing needs” of African immigrants are not being met (2000:32-33).

⁷ See Hiebert (2000) for a review of the recent literature on immigration and cities in Canada.

⁸ See Winders (2000) for the review of the literature on immigration in Vancouver.

⁹ For exceptions see Agnew (1996) and Elabor-Idemudia (2000). Other research focuses on Afro-Canadian women more generally, for example see Brand (1993), Bristow (1994), Calliste (2000), Daenzer (1997), and Thornhill (1989).

Patience Elabor-Idemudia (2000) addresses the challenges that African immigrant women face in the Toronto labour market. Most were in low-wage, low-status, non-union, labour-intensive jobs in the manufacturing and service sector. The top three employment barriers that participants identified in her study were non-recognition of foreign credentials, having an “accent,” and lacking “Canadian experience” (2000:101). The result was downward mobility for the majority (60%) who were unable to find work in areas for which they had trained.¹⁰ She concludes:

It is, therefore, easy to conclude, from this study’s findings, that the social construction of African immigrant women’s race, the interaction of cultural norms, the experience of being transplanted into a new community, lack of perceived English language skills, pressures of raising a family, limited resources, lack of family connections and community support networks have exacerbated their marginalization from the labour force, limited their growth and development and, undoubtedly, have made their assimilation into the Canadian society more difficult. The numerous unsuccessful attempts to enter their profession or trade has inevitable and deleterious effects on their self-esteem (2000:107)

Though research is extremely limited, the findings from Calgary and Toronto appear to be consistent in Vancouver. Senyo Adjibolosoo and Joseph Mensah (1998; and Mensah and Adjibolosoo 1998) have conducted the only study of African immigrants in Vancouver, providing a demographic breakdown of the community and surveying settlement needs and the provision of services. In 1996 there were just over 20,000 African immigrants living in the Lower Mainland, 85% of whom came from South Africa, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Egypt, Ethiopia, Somalia, Zimbabwe and Ghana (Mensah and Adjibolosoo 1998:23). Three-quarters (74%) came to Canada as independent (39%), assisted relative (12%), and family class (23%) immigrants; 16% arrived as refugees (1998:43).¹¹ Educational background varies with immigrant class, but overall 13% have university degrees, similar to the Canadian average (47), while 85% spoke English upon arrival in Canada (1998:54). African immigrants are residentially dispersed across the lower mainland, with small concentrations in Vancouver, Surrey and Burnaby (65). Adjibolosoo and Mensah highlight the barriers that African immigrants face in employment, such as non-recognition of educational credentials, cultural and racial discrimination, particular difficulties facing refugees, and the inadequacy of existing settlement services, few of which are directed specifically toward African immigrants or refugees (1998:20-24).

In the 1996 Census, only 1.2% of the population of greater Vancouver was born in Africa; 0.5% claimed African ethnic origin, and 0.7% identified themselves as Black (Hiebert 1999). The

¹⁰ Agnes Calliste (2000) has conducted research on the history of labour market discrimination and resistance among two groups of African-Canadian workers (immigrant and non-immigrant): male porters on the railways and female nurses. She documents a range of discriminatory practices at work, including targeting and differential documentation, which continues to affect Afro-Canadian nurses.

¹¹ The remaining 10% were entrepreneurs, self-employed or retired.

small size of the community, its national, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity, with a dispersed residential pattern, provides no spatial ‘centre’ for the community for shopping, worship, or other forms of congregation. Community organizing occurs largely at informal levels. There are a small number of African cultural associations that offer some help to new immigrants,¹² and groups of African women have created support groups attached to larger settlement agencies.¹³ Transnational networks are bounded by specific national borders (Nigeria, Uganda, Kenya, etc.); social networks within Vancouver are much more diverse, and help to constitute a broader African community. The pan-African identity that develops in this context is clearly transnational, but firmly rooted in a local landscape that speaks directly to negotiation within those borders. The community’s low socio-economic status makes repeated border crossings (in the physical sense) difficult, while increasing the likelihood of state involvement in family life (Daenzer 1997).¹⁴ Hence, the often constraining nature of local institutions, practices, and discourses remain central for understanding African immigrant experiences, and the development of transnational identities.

Sociologists who have studied migration have not addressed the complex issues involved in *perceptions of language fluency* or processes by which racialization mediates embodied ‘markers’ of immigration. English accent is one such marker. It at once marks the speaker as either local or extra-local, and thus Canadian or immigrant. In the Canadian imaginary, as we have seen, these are constituted as mutually exclusive entities. Moreover, speech is by nature an embodied performance (Butler 1990). As such, perceptions about its performance cannot be separated from racialized perceptions about its embodied speaker.

This raises an important question that we use our focus groups to address in the remainder of the paper. Are some extra-local accents markers that justify exclusion – by demonstrating incompetence/undesirability in a potential employee, tenant, or neighbour simply by virtue of embodying the immigrant ‘other’ – irrespective of mastery of the English language? Or, as one focus group participant (Mabunda¹⁵) asks so pointedly, is the accent barrier “a systemic barrier ... to put us down?” Our focus groups provide some new insights into this question by putting African women’s own experiences and understandings at the centre of our research agenda. From this vantage point it

¹² According to Adjibolosoo and Mensah (1998), the cultural associations are financially precarious and have limited patronage.

¹³ There are few specific services available for African immigrants. Notable exceptions are an African Women’s Support Group run by Multicultural Family Centre, and a program for Somali women run by MOSAIC.

¹⁴ One of the things that has recurred in longitudinal interviews with working class immigrant and refugee families is the difficulty of physically crossing borders, both for themselves and their families abroad, and the often arbitrary nature of state border practices. The cost of travel is often prohibitive, and relatives wishing to visit Canada find it difficult to attain visas even when the monetary requirements have been met.

¹⁵ Pseudonyms are used for all focus group participants.

seems clear that perceptions of language fluency are indeed ‘coloured,’ forming tangible dimensions of racialization processes that have real consequences in African women’s daily lives.

Border Crossings: Negotiating Localized Language

Language is lived as a significant problem for the African community in Vancouver. Concerns about language were woven throughout focus group discussions as women recounted incidents from their daily lives that affect their sense of belonging, frustrations with a range of social institutions, and bigotry on the part of some individuals. In so doing the women simultaneously illustrated their English language fluency and their frustrations at being marginalized, and often humiliated, due to their speech patterns.

Language is performed and interpreted within a localized context. As such, the focus group participants distinguished between ‘Canadian English’¹⁶ and ‘African English.’ Migration from Africa to Canada might require some initial translation difficulties for ‘African English’ speakers, in terms of colloquial phrases, pace of speech, intonation, syntax, but this ought not to be a long-term problem. The women in our focus groups were initially quite willing to make an extra effort to understand the local version of English and to make themselves clearly understood, but they expected this border crossing to be a two-way process. As Linda, who has been in Canada for 2 years, commented:

In my country I spoke English and also French and also our local languages. But when we come to Canada they say that our English is so hard they cannot understand it, we have to learn their English. Yes we are willing to learn their English ... I hope that they will get to understand our language too. (Linda)

The speed of ‘Canadian English’ was identified as a particular problem initially, making comprehension more difficult for Africans. The solution seemed simple enough to Linda: “they should be able to slow down.” Over time one’s ear becomes more attuned to the localized language, but ensuring mutual communication still remains a problem. Speakers of ‘Canadian English’ appear to find the syntax, tempo, and elocution of ‘African English’ more difficult to follow. Linda suggests that this could be remedied if listeners would “have patience in understanding our English so they can

¹⁶ This concept of ‘Canadian English’ is itself racialized; most often it implies ‘white’ Canadians, though at other times it may refer to anyone with a localized accent.

get what we are trying to say.” Instead, focus group participants recounted daily encounters of rudeness and what seemed at times to be a willful refusal to understand.¹⁷

Linda, who identifies herself as fluent in English prior to arriving in Canada, attended English language classes in order to help ‘localize’ her English more quickly.¹⁸ In classes to teach English-as-a-second-language, her prior mastery of English was never acknowledged except as an impediment to learning ‘correct’ English:

Even in school, when you attend school you try to *speak their English*, they will tell you that *your English is not well spoken* (Linda)

This failure to acknowledge existing English fluency at any level, while quickly demanding conformity to localized English, occurred in and out of the classroom. Always it is experienced as demeaning. Indeed, Mabunda refers to it in the stronger language of “dishonor.”

The most unfortunate part is that *they want us to be like them*, to put ourselves in their own way they speak, even an immigrant who just gets in Canada! They will talk to you “pou pou pou” and then you don’t understand. *You are totally dishonored.* (Mabunda)

Many of the focus group participants talked about a common form of demeaning response to ‘African English’: being corrected rather than listened to. Similar to the way adults might correct a small child’s grammar rather than dealing with the content of the speech, such practices between adults have a quite different connotation. The following comments by Mapendo and Muhindo illustrate this point:

It seems that somehow they put you in a spot where you become defensive. You have to defend how you talk. When they correct me, I just say well this is the way you pronounce it, but this is the way I pronounce it. You continue to pronounce it the way you do and I will continue my way I do. We are from different schools so why should I listen to what you have to tell me. *It becomes ridiculous when people are correcting you and not listening to what you have to say.* (Mapendo)

¹⁷ This willful refusal to acknowledge language mastery reminds Creese of her experience in Japan, where she was accompanied by a (white) Canadian man who spoke Japanese and a Chinese woman who did not speak Japanese but was clearly mistaken for being local. As he spoke to the server in the restaurant or sought directions from someone in the street, all eye contact and verbal responses, and sometimes these were lengthy exchanges, were directed to the presumed local but silent woman, as if she were a ventriloquist. There seemed to be an inability to acknowledge that the white man could make himself understood in Japanese, though clearly as we successfully negotiated meals or directions to our destination, he did indeed manage to communicate effectively.

¹⁸ English-as-second-language classes, through the federally funded LINC program, are designed to provide basic English language skills. There are no classes in elocution for those who already speak English but might wish to ‘localize’ their accents. As far as we know the other 9 women who were already fluent in English did not attend any language classes.

I feel the same way as you all do about accents. After finishing my [university degree] I feel I don't want to go and work in institutions where *people will not listen to what I say, but only to correct my accent* which I have no control of. (Muhindo)

Correcting the grammar or pronunciation of an adult, at least outside of a language classroom, reflects power relations that re-establishes social hierarchies. Both Mapendo and Muhindo experience such 'corrections' as demeaning and adopt strategies of resistance to assert their own identities.

Mapendo asserts her right to continue to pronounce words as she sees fit, and indeed to argue for equal validation of 'African' and 'Canadian' styles of English. This was a common strategy pursued by the women in our focus groups. Consciously maintaining the 'African' flavour of her speech means resisting the pressure to become like others, refusing to change herself on someone else's terms. At the same time, intentionally expressing her 'African' accent celebrates her own African identity and asserts a claim for respect and dignity on her own terms. Muhindo identifies another strategy of resistance: refusal to work in a context where she is not listened to because of her accent. The consequences of this strategy are not insignificant, however; so far Muhindo has not found work in her field, in spite of her education at a Canadian university.

Perhaps unexpectedly, language difficulties such as those discussed above have not disappeared with time. At the time of the focus groups Mapendo has been in Canada for 8 years and Muhindo has been here 10 years. Over the years Mapendo and Muhindo, like the other women in the focus groups, familiarized themselves with localized versions of 'Canadian English' and have mastered high levels of localized fluency.¹⁹ Three, including Muhindo, have degrees from Canadian universities, and Mapendo has a Master's degree from the United States. However, as our focus groups suggest, other peoples' perception of their fluency in 'Canadian English' has undergone little change. Having successfully negotiated the border into 'Canadian English,' their 'African accents' continue to mark them as outsiders and remains a significant barrier in their everyday lives.

Boundary Maintenance: The Accent Barrier

The women in our focus groups discussed the barrier posed by an 'African accent' in two related ways: 1) as a barrier to full or equitable participation in particular institutions, particularly in the

¹⁹ The focus group of professional women all had very high levels of fluency in 'Canadian English.' The second focus group is more mixed, including some participants who have been in Canada for shorter periods of time and whose English skills at present are less 'localized.'

labour market; and 2) as a more general barrier to acceptance or belonging. Below, comments by Caroline and Kabugho exemplify the first accent barrier:

English is a major barrier because it is the major language of communication. The accent which is part of the language, my accent is very heavy...when you don't have *their own accent*, they don't want to accept you in areas where you have to speak like receptionist, teacher of English, customer service. It is a big barrier. (Caroline)

The language is a barrier to integrate in the society because if you *speak English in your accent*, people will know that you are from Africa... and by the accent they can not give you a job, or a house. (Kabugho)

Caroline identifies particular types of occupations that are more difficult to enter for those with extra-local accents. Since these jobs require speaking with the public, she suggests, colloquial or 'Canadian English' may be seen as a job requirement. Some of these positions, such as customer service and receptionists, form a significant portion of entry-level jobs typically available to women in the Canadian labour market. Moreover, the public one serves in Greater Vancouver, and to whom one speaks, is itself very diverse, linguistically and otherwise.²⁰ If it is the case that those with a 'heavy accent' are typically barred from such employment it poses a problem for large numbers of Vancouverites, both as workers (inability to get jobs) and as customers (inability to be served by people like themselves).

While Caroline points to specific sites on the accent barrier, Kabugho provides a broader picture of how accent mediates opportunities in the labour market and elsewhere. For Kabugho the extra-local accent tells people who you are, "they will know you are from Africa." She does not assume that every extra-local accent leaves its speaker open to the same consequences. Instead in her experience the difficulty is the identification of an 'African accent,' from which it follows that she will be denied the job she is hoping to apply for, or the house she is seeking to rent. Kabugho's observations lead us away from the particularities of the accent (is it really, as Caroline suggests, 'too heavy' for most Vancouverites to understand?) and toward the processes of racialization (how can an 'African accent' be separated from an African body?).

Nora provides an example of how the embodied accent cannot be separated from its bearer. She recounts her frustrations in searching for employment:

What I also find is I made my resume and when they read it, it was excellent and then they called me for the job interview. When I started to answer some of the questions they asked, they said, "where are you from?" Then I said "from Africa." "When did

²⁰ In the 1996 Census, 35% of the population of greater Vancouver was foreign born, two-thirds of whom were born outside of Europe or the United States (Hiebert, 1999).

you land as an immigrant?” Then I said “in Africa we also are trained in English.” “No wonder, your accent is too heavy, we cannot understand you.” (Nora)

Among our focus group participants Nora’s experience was not unusual. Her qualifications appeared good on paper, but seemed to be discounted in person. Her command of English reached an appropriately high standard on paper (or she would not have been called for an interview), but was so disparaged in person that it became an insurmountable barrier to her employment. Yet Nora has been in Canada for 13 years and has a high level of ‘localized’ language fluency.

Just as language is embodied, so are the consequences of marginalization. For Nora, the physical toll of repeated rejection for jobs for which she is qualified has contributed to a serious medical condition:

I developed medical problems because of rejection, not being accepted and not getting the jobs that I was qualified for. I developed medical problems and now I will not be able to work again. I have to take care of my medical problems. (Nora).

Nora’s comments also illustrate the second dimension of the accent barrier, a barrier to general feelings of acceptance or belonging in Canada. As she suggests, rejection wears down the body and the spirit, and creates, at best, an ambiguous sense of place within Canada:²¹

For you, who is trained to be integrated, you want to be friendly, you want to be accepted. But what you get is rejection...So I don’t know. I love Canada, but I haven’t gained much. I don’t know if I ever will. (Nora)

Experiences of rejection were identified in other domains as well. Many participants talked about how dispiriting it is to have educational credentials and employment qualifications earned in Africa unrecognized in the Canadian labour market.²² Others discussed difficulties they had renting houses in greater Vancouver, where they argued that landlords prefer to rent to members of their own ethnic communities and discriminate against African tenants.²³ Kathy recounted a particularly chilling story of how communication difficulties resulted in rejection from a medical professional:

One doctor told one of these patients: “I can’t communicate with you please book another doctor because I cannot help you.” That was very difficult for her in the situation that she was sick. The doctor said “I cannot continue with you because I

²¹ See Aycan and Berry (1996) for the health impacts of downward mobility, unemployment and under-employment among recent immigrants.

²² Failure to recognize educational credentials is a significant problem for most immigrants who are educated in countries other than Canada, U.S.A., Australia, or Britain. For example, see Basran and Zong, (1998) and Hiebert et al. (1998).

²³ A number of issues around housing emerged, including the greater difficulties facing refugees, single mothers, those with large numbers of children (more than 3), and discrimination against Africans.

cannot understand what you are telling me.” But I told the doctor that she was my friend, she was my neighbour and I could help her. I think this happened because she was a black person, the doctor wasn’t interested in taking her as a patient. (Kathy)

We might understand how communication difficulties lead to considerable frustration for a doctor, but surely patients are in charge of choosing their doctors, not doctors their patients? As Kathy notes, suggesting a patient find another doctor is both demeaning and potentially harmful to an already ill patient. Moreover, in her account, she offered to act as a translator so the physician could communicate more effectively with his/her patient, but was ignored. In Kathy’s experience this incident is clearly racist; an example of rejection that must be rooted in reaction to an African body, because it is surely an inappropriate reaction to whatever communication difficulties exist.²⁴

Through the act of speech, and even without the visual marker of skin colour, African women remain perpetually marked as immigrants. Regardless of the legal intricacies of citizenship legislation it is clear to them that the categories of ‘immigrant’ and ‘Canadian’ are socially constructed as mutually exclusive and unequally valued entities. When women in our focus groups talk about the way their ‘African accent’ underscores their status as immigrants, they see it a form of boundary maintenance, a barrier that prevents full acceptance as Canadian citizens. Mabunda is particularly eloquent on this point:

I think it is the fact that you remain an immigrant which is the main obstacle because *you never become either citizen or Canadian*. This remains a big block, because you really have to belong. It is a kind of stigma; it is how I see it. *So you are not in although you are among*. (Mabunda)

In Mabunda’s experience an embodied ‘African accent’ renders her an ‘outsider within’: “not in although you are among.” Regardless of her legal citizenship status, she argues that she will never belong. She will never be a ‘Canadian.’ This status of immigrant ‘other’ is embodied in multiple ways, as a series of interlocking bodily attributes: accent, skin colour, gender, poverty, the bodily traces of daily experiences of marginalization, all seamlessly woven together. As Mabunda sums up her experience:

I am an immigrant, I am a woman and I am an African. So I have these three blocks.
(Mabunda)

²⁴ Kathy, or other focus group participants did not use the term racist, but her meaning is clear enough. There is sensitivity within the African community to labeling incidents as racist because such claims are often dismissed out of hand and can be used to discredit the speaker.

Systemic Barriers: Language as a Tool ‘To Put Us Down’

These examples of disparaging ‘African English’ recounted by our focus group participants are not occasional random acts, they are daily encounters. While each instance might seem minor, taken together, these examples point to systemic processes of marginalizing African women. As Mabunda notes above, the ‘African accent’ cannot be separated from the African woman who bears it. Indeed, she argues, language is a tool “to put us down”:

I find this *language as a tool that has been used against us* and it is unfortunate that at this time we are still held accountable because of our accent. None of us talk English in the first place. This is *another aspect of colonization*. But if they could understand that, Canadian government which accepts immigrants, this language shouldn’t be a barrier for people because *it is dehumanizing*. It is not that we don’t know English. I think I know English. It is about Canadian or English accent. If the British can not speak Nyangore as the way I speak it. I had an English lady in high school, she spoke my language fluently but when it came to accent it was different... So I think these people who are doing this research they should highlight the language barrier as *a systematic barrier that was put within the system to put us down*. I went to the university, I did all the papers, and you discriminate against me. (Mabunda).

Mabunda traces the systemic use of language against African women in Canada to its roots in colonialism. She notes that “None of us talk English in the first place. This is another aspect of colonization.” British colonizers in Africa consciously used linguistic/ethnic divisions to divide and conquer, and mapped out new nations as they saw fit, superimposing English dominance while inferiorizing local languages and groups. It is perhaps ironic that migration to another nation with British (and French) colonial origins would render the forms of ‘African English’ that emerged in one colonial context unacceptable in another colonial context. In Canada it is again made clear to Africans, now as immigrants or refugees, that their language is inferior.

Mabunda argues: “It is not that we don’t know English. I think I know English. It is about Canadian or English accent.” She critiques the everyday denial of her English ability in two ways. First, she points out that a non-native speaker of her mother tongue, a British woman, never learned to speak the language without an extra-local accent, but that did not make her any less fluent in the language. Second, Mabunda critiques government policy and, by implication, she critiques multiculturalism as ineffective. Since the Canadian government selects immigrants it should ensure that different English accents “shouldn’t be a barrier for people because it is dehumanizing.” The failure of government policy to ensure recognition of diversity at a meaningful level, to facilitate equal access to jobs, housing, health care, etc., can also be seen as “another aspect of colonization.”

Mabunda concludes that the language barrier is systemic, a tool used “to put us down.” It is not, after all, about communication. It is about power and exclusion, marginalization and ‘othering,’ racism and discrimination. Mabunda came to Canada with her husband, first as graduate students and then as independent immigrants, awarded points for higher education and knowledge of English. She has been in Canada 13 years and earned a Master’s degree at a Canadian university. That she ‘knows English’ is beyond dispute. That she speaks English with an ‘African accent,’ and experiences the world in an African woman’s body, is also beyond dispute. The systemic barrier, she suggests, is not mastery of the English language; it is being an African woman in Canada’s third largest city.

Conclusions

African women in Vancouver experience language as a problem in their daily lives, but not because they have difficulty with expression or comprehension. An ‘African English’ accent signifies more than the content of verbal communication, it marks the speaker as immigrant, as African/Black, as female, in a landscape in which these are not privileged statuses. Constituting a border within the Canadian imaginary, extra-local accents easily distinguish between Canadians and ‘others.’ But language is not just a border between local and extra-local, its performance is located in specific racialized landscapes embedded in colonial histories and processes of globalization. In the Canadian context, an ‘African English’ accent suggests that the speaker lacks a sophisticated grasp of the English language, is probably poorly educated, and not competent, capable or desirable in a host of situations. Such perceptions, however erroneous, have material and other consequences in African women’s lives.²⁵

Language is also entwined with identity. Our personal histories are embodied in the way we speak, evoking ethnic, national and regional origins, class and educational backgrounds, and gender and sexuality. African women express their identities through their language, developing a transnational pan-African identity rooted in a specific Canadian landscape. For a small, geographically dispersed, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual community, ‘African English’ is central to community formation. Indeed, ‘African English’ is an important means of identifying community members, with the community largely defining itself through culture rather than colour. Thus language remains a powerful site of inclusion as well as exclusion. Language is also a form of

²⁵ We do not mean to suggest that African men do not experience similar barriers due to their ‘African English’ accents. In fact, we assume that they do. But we have not as yet extended this research to study men’s experiences, so we do not know how these issues might vary among men and women in the African community.

resistance, as African women refuse the demand to bury their own identities by trying to perform as someone else.

The expectation that everyone will, or can, conform to a limited vernacular style is both unrealistic and unnecessary, and clearly contrary to discourses of multiculturalism and realities of diversity. Thirty-five percent of the population of greater Vancouver were born abroad, over 80% of whom were born outside Britain or her former ‘white settler dominions’ (Hiebert 1999).²⁶ Vancouverites are a diverse lot, and significant proportions have extra-local accents of one kind or another.²⁷ But our focus groups suggest that perceptions of language fluency reflect much more than difficulties with communication or sensitizing oneself to the local dialect. Instead, the accent barrier should be understood as a form of boundary maintenance, a site through which power relations are negotiated.

Language is a site of negotiation over inclusion in the imaginary civil society, on the one hand, and access to specific material sites, on the other hand. For African women, their embodied accents form a boundary that excludes them from full citizenship, and is the frequently named cause of dis-entitlement from jobs, housing, or respectful treatment in public institutions or public spaces. At the same time, language is a site of African women’s identity, resistance, and empowerment as the community negotiates its own space in the local landscape. Part of that resistance, as these focus groups show, is to problematize the racialized construction of language fluency, and to try to put ‘accent discrimination’ onto the public agenda.

²⁶ Only 17% of the foreign born were born in the United Kingdom or her former ‘white settler dominions’: 1.3% in the U.S.A., 0.2% in Australia, 0.1% in Ireland, and 4.2% in the United Kingdom, for a combined total of 5.8% (out of 34.9% foreign born) (Hiebert, 1999:54-56). Of course people migrating from these countries also have extra-local accents, but ones that do not seem to invoke the same boundaries.

²⁷ We do not know to what degree other extra-local accents, for example various European or Asian accents, receive a similar response as ‘African English.’ We are not aware of research that looks at this issue. However, the extensive research on racial/ethnic inequality in Canada suggests that some extra-local accents will be considered more acceptable than others. This is an area that clearly warrants more research.

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