

# THE CONTRADICTIONS OF MULTICULTURAL RHETORIC AND ACADEMIC PRIVILEGE: THE TEACHER IS ALWAYS RIGHT

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*International students from post-colonial countries who further their education in the United States come with disadvantages from their cultural backgrounds. Their contribution to learning is marred by their experience of colonization and their collectivist views of the world. "Imbyino Nyir'urugo ateye niyo wikiriza." (Translation: The tune that the owner of the home starts is what you answer.) The host culture shapes scholarship based on Western traditions—precision, objectiveness, economy of style, etc.—that refute other cultural expressions and conceptualizations. A conversational model is used to disclose the privileges and oppressions that unfold in a professor/student relationship. The conversation reflects a desire for inclusiveness of multicultural scholarship at odds with long held practices of language hegemony and Western scholarship traditions.*

## **Introduction**

In Kinyarwanda, the language of Rwanda, we say, "*Ikinyoni kigurutse kitavuze bacyita icyana*," which means, "A bird that flies away with no say is labeled as a baby bird." As a former international Ph.D. student from Rwanda who now teaches undergraduate students (Hadidja), and her former faculty advisor who teaches in a doctoral program (Susan), we decided to write on issues of privilege because of some insights that came forward in our relationship together. It was obvious in the course of our work that there was an unconscious, and sometimes conscious, drive to shape discourse in certain ways deemed acceptable to earn the qualification of scholar in Western academia. And yet as social workers, we also value the discourse of multiculturalism; this was particularly relevant to the sub-Saharan African traditions brought forward through Hadidja's background. We experienced a contradiction between what we say we do and how we do it.

This conversation is a small contribution to the gap between our ideals and our practice, which we believe is impacted by the privilege that exists in academia and one type of oppression experienced by some international graduate students. This discussion cannot cover the complexity of international students'

experiences so we limit our conversation to the oppressive effects of colonization, using language as an instrument for rhetorical hegemony. Further, we discuss the impact of rhetorical hegemony on the learning process of international students and the multicultural pedagogy of social work. We argue that some academic practices and traditions actually contribute to a process of cultural homogenization, at the same time that the social work profession is seeking cultural pluralism.

We have discovered through our conversations together that issues of power and privilege exist in many different contexts in the teaching/learning relationship in academia. Privilege starts within the relationship between students and professors, is institutionalized within the hegemony of scientific traditions, and is promoted through the use of English as the dominant language. These themes are presented through the following conversation. The insights that have evolved for us through speaking together provide opportunities to re-distribute the power of privilege in academia toward a more inclusive model of scholarship and knowledge development.



### **The Privilege of Academic Literacy and the International Student**

**Hadidja:** There are multiple layers of privileges and many more layers of oppression for international students. Some of us come from wealthy countries and wealthy families; others come from emerging economies with their own set of challenges. Others yet are non-traditional students coming from post-colonial systems with a variety of languages and cultures, which can be considered enriching or irrelevant to the American academic setting, depending on the evaluator of the content students bring with them. International students entering higher education in the United States come in with different support systems and their starting point is very different depending on the existence or lack of the support system in place for them. Those with a pre-existing niche of friends and other compatriots who have been through the system before them will fare better than those who do not have that niche. Students with prior travel experience to the United States will have an understanding that is different from those without prior travel experience. These prior experiences will set the scene for a conscious decision to adhere to the norms of the place or to bring in one's worldview and maintain it.

**Susan:** For me, the realization of my privilege as one of your "evaluators" became clearer to me in the past few years. I think some insight evolved through our work together, but also before, when I've worked with other international students, and advised other students with diverse cultural experiences. I've been aware that you bring a different lens of scholarship from that expected here in our school. I've also been aware of my actions in shaping your scholarship - your thinking, the way you write, your approach - so that it fits in with institutional standards of scholarship. I have had the authority to accept or reject your ideas and how you represent those ideas. I worked with students who I knew were bringing unique cultural narratives and perspectives, and then found myself reshaping or refocusing those narratives. I began to recognize what was being lost - the meaningful knowledge you bring from a different cultural lens. It wasn't

like a light bulb as much as a growing sense of unease. Yet, I felt ambivalent because it seemed I had to help shape your scholarship in order for you to succeed and do what was necessary to complete the Ph.D.

Then, in preparation for work in our doctoral program, I read some of the findings from the Carnegie Foundation about the formation of scholars. A quotation really stood out, "...scholarship segregated is scholarship impoverished" (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008, p.10). They argue that the cultures of Ph.D. programs must be participatory and fair, and that there is a "hidden curriculum" that becomes embedded in the culture that conveys powerful messages about what students can create, what risks to take, and what scholarly activity is possible. The authors also argue that there is a "shadow side" to our graduate education - the "deeply ingrained traditions" that are not visible and rarely challenged - that restrict education from the development of diversity and varied strategies that would strengthen our intellectual communities in this rapidly changing, multicultural world (p. 20). I think these traditions related to scholarship are a form of privilege - a power over you that has impacted your experience of making your own unique cultural contributions.

**Hadidja:** Yes, in the process of you helping the student to fit into what the academic process expects from them, a side of them is lost. They lose their voice. I remember one time I was talking to a fellow student from China who commented, "Sometimes I feel like I do not know who I am anymore. I have lost a piece of me while trying to be what they want me to be." It would be like having a basket full of beans that are multiple colors but you've decided that you only need the black colored beans. So the other colors, even though they are beans also, don't fit with the ones that you already have. I think from the perspective of an international student there is an uneasiness of realizing you want to be an academically accepted, educated student the way that fits with what has been modeled to you, and yet leaving behind the other aspect of you that does not fit in, that doesn't have any room. It feels like a little death of self in



someway. Rwandans say, “*Ingendo y’undi iravuna*” – “Try to imitate someone else’s walk style and you will hurt yourself in the process.”

When you and I were working on my refugee study, you kept telling me to “narrow it down, focus, and narrow it down.” And I was thinking, “If I keep narrowing it down, I’m going to completely lose the context of what I’m telling you.” It was not going to make sense outside of the whole experience. As Ann Weick (1999) pointed out: “For social work, context is all-important” (p.330). I remember you telling me, “Keep coming back to your research question.” I, on the other hand, was thinking that if I kept thinking about how I was answering my research question there was a whole aspect of what I think was important in the understanding of the refugee experience that went beyond the research question.

**Susan:** Yes, I remember distinctly those conversations, after you had done quite a bit of data analysis. You really argued strongly that you couldn’t possibly capture the phenomenon without bringing in the participants’ histories and experiences as refugees prior to receiving services here in this country; it was the contextual aspects of what they had experienced before coming here that had everything to do with their experience here. The traditions informing my work with you negated your cultural traditions that were essential to your scholarship. So I was participating in a form of cultural hegemony (Askeland & Payne, 2006).

I can see now a form of academic hegemony based on a long history of traditions and norms that are no longer explicit or transparent. Turner (2003, p.187) provides a helpful historical perspective when she tracks academic literacy through a construction all the way back to the “supremely rational Cartesian ‘cogito’ - that of an ideal observer, whose observations must be precise and ‘objective’; and a relationship of mastery between ‘men’ and knowledge, particularly European ‘men’ and its others.” She presents the history of the “classical episteme,” as having a focus on “clarity” and a “scientist’s discipline of language reduction.” She also points out Einstein’s and Newton’s “minute precision,” and the emphasis on “a visibilising

economy of style” (pp. 187 – 190). She argues that through these norms, “...the reader is led along a route of clearly identified argumentation, without detour and distraction” (p.190). These rhetorical strategies become a ‘disciplining technology for language use and language users....academic writers are subjected into this visibilising economy’ (190).

So when you think about our work together on your dissertation, with me as your advisor, were there times that you felt like you knew what needed to be brought forward and I didn’t? And would you, could you have said, “You’re wrong about this,” or “I think this is the only way to present this”? You did do some of that.

**Hadidja:** Yeah, I did some of that. Because I think one of the reasons I argued strongly about some of the things is because this wasn’t only an academic topic, this was my life. I either was going to be saying it the way I felt about it or I was not going to say it at all. I cared strongly about it because it wasn’t just another topic: globalization or money woes and Wall Street. No, it was my life. So that touched a part of me that was beyond academia; that made a huge difference and the fact that you were receptive. On the other hand, if you remember I kept saying, “Do you think this will ever look like a dissertation?” I was worried about it because it was my life, it was my emotions, it was about the people who worked through the same thing that I did, things that I dreamt about, nightmares that I went through. I was worried because the other pieces of writing you find in academia are dry; it’s statistics—there were 10 women who did this and 20 men who did this—and mine did not sound like that at all. My worry was more about, “It doesn’t sound academic.” Coming from a collectivist society background, I still have a tendency to change my primary behavior and way of doing things in an attempt to adjust to social situations (Cross, 1995; Weisz et al., 1984; Yang, 1986, as cited by Yeh, Arora, Wu, 2007). In this case it was important that I emulate the writing approach that is predominant in academia.

**Susan:** Yes. Okay. But that element of your emotions did make a difference in breaking through your reluctance to disagree.



When you say "sound academic," what do you mean? What were you thinking it should look like?

**Hadidja:** It needed to look like other dissertations. When an American student wrote about Japanese resiliency, I thought, "She's not Japanese." So I should be able to work on a topic that I am not so involved with. I felt like I was going native. Going native sounds very negative in terms of academic work, and I was so native it didn't sound very academic.

**Susan:** Well, I don't think you were going native. That would imply you were stepping out of the researcher role and into the role of your participants. You were an insider, but you really were invested in bringing forward these findings in a systematic, scientific way which is academic. But there is a prejudice in academia about qualitative research; many in academia would argue that qualitative methods are not really scientific. A majority of students and faculty only consider positivist, quantitative approaches to be real research because this paradigm meets the criteria Turner (2003) described in the history of academia literacy. It's another element of the academic culture about what is valued and expected. I think you are describing the experience of cultural hegemony, where power is imposed by the majority through ideas and structures that are viewed as perfectly natural and are supposedly for our own good academically (Brookfield, 1995, as cited by Askeland & Payne, 2006). However, this culture is constructed and brought forward in order to protect the status quo that serves traditional academic interests.

I never felt that you lost your perspective about it, but I understand that you were immersed in it, as any qualitative researcher must be. You were the only one who could make the interpretations that you did, because of your profound understanding of your participants' experience, based on your cultural participation (Douglas, 1976). So that was a painful process for you because you had to reflect on your own experience and then step out of it in the process of making your interpretations. And I think you did that beautifully but with a tremendous amount of pain. I mean, it was very hard.

**Hadidja:** It was very hard. It was very hard. I needed to know from you that it was okay to think that way and that the research would meet academic standards.

**Susan:** I can see embedded in your experience the impact of the norms and traditions of academic privilege related to who decides what is scientific language. The presentation of qualitative findings, for example, is scientific, and yet clearly cannot be represented through an economy of language and reduction in style. Qualitative research emphasizes rich description: bringing forward the meanings and essence of the refugee experience of your participants and making the connections to all the complex variations of their experience, as well as the context where it was experienced. And, as this approach becomes more valued and integrated into social work, it opens the door to more meaningful cultural interpretations of human experience. But, based on our work together, I imagine that you learned about academic literacy differently from most American students.

#### **Colonization and the International Student: The Dual Heritage**

**Hadidja:** Yes. Where I come from, Rwanda specifically, before these formal Western forms of education, the way we learned is by doing. You sat with your mother or you sat with an older cousin or you sat with your grandmother and you would be told stories. And it was through those stories that there might be some application at some particular point, but it wasn't about "So what did you learn from that story?" It wasn't about picking and choosing from that story one element, it was the whole story; it was the beauty of knowing and contextualizing whatever you are going to be learning in that story.

For example, on a trip you take with a cousin, the time you've spent together and the unfolding experiences during the trip all have the same value for the experience to be complete. African women tend to be involved in agriculture tasks. Even if they are involved in trading, their lives evolve around their communal work; they work together; they have



fun together, they go to the field together . Rwandans say, "*Haganira ababagaranye*," which means "Those who can converse are those who are weeding together." For two or three women to be able to talk, to have a meaningful conversation, they need that space. The idea of "*kubagara*," which is weeding, takes time; it's tedious, and you have to be very careful because you do not want to remove the good seed, you want only to remove the weeds. You have a broad context where you're disclosing to your friends or to people working with you; you do not even see it coming. It flows into the work. Without realizing this, whether it is the "*kubagara*," the weeding, or the "*kuboha*," the weaving, women are doing physical work with their hands, but there is a mental aspect to it, an emotional aspect to it, that allows you to disclose and that eases the hardship of the work you are doing. And by the time you are at the end of your work, you have "killed multiple birds with one stone."

**Susan:** So you're saying that learning happens through relationships, in the course of everyday life, and it is reciprocal. And relationship, by its nature, involves knowing. I'm also thinking that this kind of learning happens over time, and takes time.

**Hadidja:** Yes. My informal education is the domain of the family and friends and the neighbors. The formal education is a domain that belongs to that "White man" school. This is going to be interrelated with the idea of colonization. It's the colonizer who brought formal education. The Germans in Rwanda, and later on the Belgians, did occupy the land, but also took on our minds and ways of thinking, setting the stage for rhetorical hegemony and privilege in scholarship. Colonization is a process of taking over a land and arbitrarily imposing outside language and practices to the native population. It also involves gradual dismissal and eradication of our native socio-political structures. There is no colonization of land anymore, but the impact of imported languages and the globalization that came with market economies has continued. It has taken on a higher level of rhetorical hegemony in which certain cultures like the United States, unwittingly or consciously, have taken over the

rest of the world. Colonization is usually done through the imposition of a language, which becomes a non-negotiable vehicle and ticket to progress of any kind. One of my friends used to say, "*Ukwigishije ururimi abaguhatse*," meaning "He who teaches you his or her language controls what you do and how you think." It is through language that people share their ideas and their mental process co-creating the world around them (Gergen, 2001).

Our parents were not involved with that formal education because they have been told that they do not know what they are doing, that what they were doing was backwards, savage, and unacceptable. Also, they did not speak the language of the colonizers so they could not even decide on the content of the curricula of their children's education, because that was the prerogative of the colonizers. This is important, both from the point of view that the parents could not be involved in the education of their children because it was not something that they knew how to do, and also that they were not a part of the discussion of the western conceptual view of the world. For those of us who were trained in French philosophical view of the world we heard statements like "*Ce que l'on conçoit bien s'énonce clairement et les mots pour le dire viennent aisément*," (Boileau, French poet of 17<sup>th</sup> century), meaning, "What is conceived well is enunciated clearly and the words to express it come easily."

One has to remember that Rwandan children, like other colonized children, had two conceptual worlds that competed in relation to the learning experience: the traditional informal world from the parents and the imported world from the colonizer. To be able to use the imported language to express a concept, you needed to be able to have a mental process that matched the western way of conceptualizing the world. If the mental process is in your native language, then it is a challenge to be able to translate that concept in a language that is imported, and does not take into consideration the nuances of your native language (Takahashi as cited by Tsuda, 2007). It has been a long held belief that the inability to make that transition was because



“French was the language of universal human reason and had the power to civilize people who spoke it” (Kasuya, 2001, p. 168). This certainly leads to self-deleting or self-erasing of one’s identity by espousing the colonizing language and mannerisms, as one wants to appear civilized and capable of mastering the conceptual world of the colonizer (Turner, 2003)

**Susan:** And so what did that mean for you then?

**Hadidja:** What that means is the formal education belongs to your teacher. It is the teacher who knows what he or she wants you to learn and you better listen without question and absorb as much as you can.

**Susan:** So...your voice is non-existent? It’s only what the teacher wants to hear; that is the only voice you can really have. And so when you think about your experience in the doctoral program, was it immediately obvious to you that your voice didn’t matter?

**Hadidja:** When you are colonized and you are in your home country there are things that you internalize. You are told or shown the way things are done and that’s the way to go. Now when you come to America, you go from complete disorientation and confusion to the realization that you need to shift gears and learn a completely different set of how to do things. You are not introduced to how those things work, because there is an assumption that everybody entering the program went through the same American educational system. Pointing out to your professor that you were trained differently would be admitting that you are not qualified to attend the program. You cannot question the assumption; you cannot even figure out if you have a say because for a long time you were not allowed to say anything. And it becomes a puzzle. You are coming here with a complete set of values, another way of doing things, and there is no bridge. In my case, that situation was twice as challenging because I was coming from a Muslim family where it is frowned upon for a woman to challenge the rules of the house. In my collectivist society, self-effacing is preferred to self-affirming (Yeh, Arora, & Wu, 2007).

**Susan:** I think you’re identifying an important point about privilege. Educators in the United States have little insight about the importance of our past roles as “rulers,” whereas you have a heightened awareness of your past oppression through colonization (Askeland & Payne, 2006, p.733). I can only relate in terms of my own non-traditional experience moving into academia. I dropped out of school when I was just a kid. I traveled around the country doing migrant work, and had three children in the process. I ended up getting a GED, which is like an equivalent of a high school degree, but it’s not really. It’s just that you have to be smart enough to answer the questions; but you miss a lot of content that you would have in formal high school classes. I went to a state college and earned an associates degree. I was admitted to the masters program in social work without a bachelor’s degree because of my professional work experience. So I didn’t have a high school degree or a bachelor’s degree; I had equivalencies. I did fine; I actually received the outstanding student award when I graduated. And, interestingly, I feel a need to say that. But I remember feeling a stigma that I was the only one listed in the graduation program without a bachelor’s degree by my name. Clearly, educational credentials, not equivalencies, were highly valued. I, also, wanted to be what was expected in academia, as you have said about colonization. And, I assumed that what was expected was right. So in some ways I have experienced a parallel process, but from a position related to social class within Western academia. Ann Weick (1999) talks about “guilty knowledge” as a process where we learn to keep private things about ourselves that are really “a grounding of our knowledge in our own experience...” (p. 328). We learn to develop filters about what can be shared. The knowledge that we develop from our childhood experiences and from your experiences in a different cultural group end up “...on the bottom rung” (p. 329).

I think I always perceived students and their work somewhat differently, perhaps because of that different educational experience. In my role as a professor, I have developed a different view. It’s not by accident



that my research has been qualitative, and focused on empowerment and professional ethics. Both have to do with the distribution of power and how it impacts others. I have responded to existing academic standards with a responsibility to “do it right” for myself and for students. So I’ve had both the privilege of the vested authority but also my own oppression as a woman and a non-traditional student. It’s interesting how hard this is for me to reveal overtly in the academic culture. It’s been easier for me to come out as a lesbian to students and faculty than to say that I didn’t graduate from high school. And so this really feels like guilty knowledge, and also fits with our discussion about privilege and oppression. There are all these layers. However, throughout my own life and educational process, I had the opportunities to change it. I made many wrong decisions; I’ve thought I could have known better, so maybe my oppression was not the same as your experience of colonization. But, as a colleague has noted, structures can limit our choices that we make and as we internalize the structure, it limits our choices even further (E.W. Walls, Personal communication, October 4, 2009).

**Hadidja:** See, coming from a colonized system has a particular flavor of being underprivileged in itself. When you came as a “less-than” type of student, you think you could have made other choices and if you wanted you could work hard, make up for the time you lost, and regain the status that was expected of a white woman who is capable, but did not use her full potential. I came from a system that was a three year bachelor degree system but with a lot of years of experience in the field, working the ground, working with village people, those kinds of things. So when I came, the first reaction from the people evaluating my academic transcript was that I needed a fourth year I was thinking, “A fourth year? Why would I need a fourth year after 19 years of teaching and working in the field?” And so you get into that mode of thinking that what *they* said actually carries more weight than what I think and cannot express. Someone has said I needed it, so someone else’s voice is always stronger than mine. And as it has been my experience that everybody

is always right except me. If someone had pushed too much, I do not think I could have made a case for myself.

I was lacking, not because I made a poor choice, but I actually belong to that category of “half devil, half child” (Kipling, 19<sup>th</sup> century) who cannot do anything to catch up. When I was growing up, parents who thought it was a waste of time and money for their children to go to school used to say, “*Uriga se ngo uzatware umusozi?*” “Why bother with school if you will never rule on the land?” It was believed that there was a category of people born to rule and others who are born to serve the ruling class. There was a class of the “capable” and a class of the “incapable.” So you invested in education only because you were called by your class to be a ruler later on. But if by birth you will never be a ruler, then getting an education was a waste of time and money.

**Susan:** So, colonizing...that’s a new word for me. It’s a new way of thinking about things because I guess I am one of the colonizers and didn’t realize it. Educational colonialism does claim that the “colonizers’ universal knowledge” is superior to the knowledge of cultures that have been colonized, which is marginalizing and devalues what you know (Askeland & Payne, 2006, p. 734). It seems like what results is internalized oppression; you focus on what you think you don’t know in response to what is valued by the academic community, rather than what you have to contribute differently: your unique voice. I did not understand your post-colonial experience when we worked together, but I think I understand it now. How did language impact your experience?

### The Privilege of Language

**Hadidja:** People look at me twice and wonder where I came from, what that accent is. People already decide that they do not understand what I am saying because I speak with an accent.

**Susan:** And what was that experience like for you in terms of course work and classes and relationships within higher education?

**Hadidja:** So I come in with an accent. I already know I did not speak like everybody



else because there were jokes I could not participate in. I cannot remember what it was, someone said something about Judge Judy. I didn't have a clue who Judge Judy was. And everybody was laughing in the classroom, and I could not laugh, and I could not ask because I did not want to embarrass myself even more by asking who Judge Judy was. Another time it was something about *Roe vs. Wade*, and again I did not know what that was about and did not ask.

**Susan:** Right, because you don't want to be seen as not knowing. . . .

**Hadidja:** It was supposed to be joke for everybody. But it was not to me. And so I found myself acting in a way that now feels like self-discrimination, because the minute I realized that there was something that everybody else knew and understood, and I was the only person who did not, did I want to acknowledge that I'm stupid? Or did I want to keep quiet and let it pass?

**Susan:** Which reduces the learning and discovery for everyone. So, coming from a different culture and lacking fluency in our language and culture makes it so much more difficult to participate fully. And I think there is something in the academic culture that reinforces that sense of, "You should know what you're talking about" or, "You should know what other people are talking about" even if you are from somewhere else. I'm just guessing about this, but I'm guessing that you don't feel like what you bring, that what you do know, which I can guarantee you they don't know, is not something. . . .

**Hadidja:** . . . That has room. No, it doesn't. There's no space for me to know what they don't because that is not relevant. Social work is a very policy and culture driven profession. For me to understand and contribute to the discussion, it has to be based on something I can relate to - background information either from my life or from previous classes. Every American student has heard about homelessness, social services, juvenile delinquency, drug use and abuse, eviction notices, school social work, mental health facilities, rehab, recreation centers, and all the jargon that is in the news everyday. You do not jump into a discussion about this topic if

you need to be told what they are in the first place. You may have information on how things work in other places of the world, but that is not part of the discussion. Or if it is, things are not regulated in the same way they are here. What I know that the professors themselves do not even know doesn't count.

**Susan:** Why doesn't it count?

**Hadidja:** Because you've been brought up to believe that what they know is what counts. What you know - actually, you don't even think about what you know. You always think about what you don't know. Part of living the legacy of colonization of the mind is that constant need for outside validation. Anything that you may know that is valid, when they ask you to speak, you actually set yourself up, because you decide that you don't have anything to say. What you say doesn't count. People wonder why those African women, and in some of countries of the Middle East, women still choose to stay behind the veil. Even when you ask them to speak, they have been so used to not saying anything that they actually believe they don't have anything to say. What would I say?

Colonization of the mind is a horrible thing because it puts you in that position of never, never trusting yourself. You wouldn't even think about trusting yourself; it doesn't exist in your vocabulary. There is a book, *Infidel*, in which the author talks about Muslim women being behind the veil for so long that in the end, they are hiding, not only their physical self, but also get to that point where even when they removed that veil, they have ceased to exist even in their mind. They have disappeared even in their mind.

**Susan:** On the other hand, your experience really enriched the findings of your dissertation as you integrated Rwandan language, sayings, and cultural meanings into your dissertation. I learned so much from the way you framed the conceptual ideas through the women's voices within the context of African culture and their previous experiences as refugees fleeing from the genocide. Only you could do that; it had to flow from your cultural understanding and perspective.

**Hadidja:** Yes, and I do that a lot with my students. Some of them like it, some of them



don't. They think I'm taking them all over the place, and I can understand their anxiety because I primarily think in Kinyarwanda. When I get into the heart of explaining some concepts in class, I go from Kinyarwanda and that's how the word will come out. Usually what I am saying will be a concept of how we view the world. When I translate it in English, it really loses its full meaning; it loses it because I am bringing my view of the world to the students who cannot relate to that way of looking at the world. Therefore, it can be confusing; it can also be enriching for those who are accepting of it.

There is an assumption that the international students are taught for their market at home. I was trained in my own culture and then in this culture, so find myself going back and forth between the two. I am afraid of losing that side of me, and yet I struggle in fitting into the new role that I have here, because now I have to cater to an American public, American students, and I have to speak the language they speak - shifting my thinking to fit their thinking.

**Susan:** Yes, and it sounds like another form of oppression: the teacher waiting for her wisdom to be accepted by the dominant white student culture. You bring that Rwandan point of view, which enriches the learning of your American students in ways not possible with an American instructor.

**Hadidja:** I was wondering if I consider myself as privileged, able to understand a little bit of both worlds. It's enriching if you want to look at it that way but is that a privilege? Are some of the students receiving it that way? Students resist it if they think, "I don't think that way. You should be teaching us the way everybody else teaches us." It has been enriching for a student who says, "I like it when you use those metaphors, those Rwandan metaphors." It can be perceived either way.

**Susan:** I'm just trying to relate to it from my own experience as an educator; that decision about how much to disclose that is different from what the student expects. For me to disclose something like, "I was a teenage migrant worker," might chip away at that privilege I carry, based on academic traditions. So I can understand that it's a risk to bring

your Rwandan culture into the classroom and expect students to connect with you about it and apply it to their own learning.

**Hadidja:** It comes down to credibility. You want to be credible as an academician, right? They say, "Thank you for sharing your story" I perceive the term "story" as taking away the credibility of being a strong academician. I feel like telling them, "Conceptualize in my way of thinking - what I understand," and, "This is what I would like for you to get out of it." When they call it a story, for me it takes away that credibility of being a strong academician.

**Susan:** It lets you know that they do not really understand what you are bringing forward; they are thinking of it as a story, rather than your life, your world view, your culture. You are exposing them to as a different way of conceptualizing what takes place in the world. A "story" can be a way of dismissing it as an interesting anecdote, rather than something that has a conceptual significance to their own life and their own learning. I think there is a dismissing of the importance of the multicultural information that is unconscious and unintentional.

**Hadidja:** Very unintentional, and probably unconscious. And of course, when you are an outsider like I am, trying to fit in, and actually completely buying into these colonized minds, of course you want to be that thing that they are expecting. But you can't totally give up who you are.

**Susan:** You feel like an outsider: first as an international student, then as an educator, coming from another country. Hickling-Hudson (2006) captures the injustice of the experience you are describing as, "...the only way the marginalized will receive education justice is to fight for it, but...their fight is hindered by the exclusions they have suffered" (p. 214). You are identifying a complicated form of oppression that is difficult to address.

The other thing that I started thinking about was the term ESL (English as a Second Language) students when referencing international students. I started thinking about you and the number of languages in which you are fluent. How many languages do you speak?



**Hadidja:** Four. English is not my second... (laughing), it's my fourth language; that's the one I learned last (laughing).

**Susan:** So, talking about cultural hegemony, this seems like a perfect example: the underlying assumption that if anybody speaks a language other than their country of origin, it's going to be English. You come to this country with fluency in all of these different languages, and the way that it is received here is in relation to your ability to speak and write English in a scholarly way, rather than the contribution to multicultural understanding you bring with you. Unfortunately, in academia there is an underlying assumption that language expression should be clear and "...not draw attention to itself" (Turner, 2003, p. 190). When attention is drawn to language through the use of a second language (or fourth in your case) or for those who are new to the "cultural practice of academic literacy," then you are placed in "deficit" (2003, p. 190). The overlapping of language use and rationality results in your being perceived as having a deficit in academic literacy; you are viewed as having a deficiency in your thinking ability as well as a deficiency in English (Turner, 2003). I think that is what you are identifying.

**Hadidja:** Yes, if you can't write fluently in English, you are not academically acceptable. I have a student who is from North Africa and he most likely speaks Arabic in his home and I think it is one of the French speaking countries, and so the student is struggling. When he came here, they evaluated him for English fluency through the TOEFL, a test of English as a foreign language. He passed, but the passing of the TOEFL is very mechanical and technical. It doesn't take into consideration all of the other aspects of learning he needs to be able to go into a classroom and follow all the complex concepts that are explained in English. So the way he is writing and responding, or even trying to participate in class, is completely disjointed. I'm finding myself very, very torn. Do I consider this student someone who needs extra help? Do I give him more time, because at least I'm lucky that I speak the other language he speaks? Can I allow him to write in the language he

feels more comfortable? Does he need to go through the whole mechanism of what a student who is disabled will do? But, he's not disabled.

**Susan:** Yes. To present his ideas in his own language...because involvement in an educational experience in a foreign language makes students feel inferior, and less competent. So the lack of fluency in the language used in the educational process ends up excluding that student from full participation, which leads to an inability to learn and know in his own context (Askeland & Payne, 2006). This is just what you have described about your own experience as a student. Limbu (2009), at a conference on privilege I attended, said that treating ESL writing differences as an error, not as a rhetorical choice, treats students as in colonization.

**Hadidja:** English is the language of learning here. When a student has difficulty writing, even in English, we send him to the writing center. This student, who is struggling with the language, was trained in writing in a completely different language. The way he formulates his sentences, he is translating, and losing some pieces of the sentence to make it complete.

**Susan:** International students don't have that opportunity to use their own language and meanings here; we take that opportunity away. We say you must present your ideas in English. And of course, the paradox of this expectation is that you have to find a way to present your contribution to knowledge in a way that will be accepted and valued by the rest of the scholarly community without losing your cultural voice.

For students who are working on a Ph.D. and want to be educators who will want to contribute to the professional literature in English, this becomes a puzzle, as you noted earlier. How much do I take away from their presentation of ideas based on their own language and their own cultural experience? At the same time, I want to help them present those ideas in a way that they will be accepted and integrated into the fabric of the professional community. And I don't have an answer about it. The idea of "mastering the master's



language” has long been important for people to become empowered in post-colonial societies (Turner, 2003). But, developing your proficiency does not negate the opportunity to use it in a way that integrates your cultural language and understandings into your work, as you did in your dissertation. That becomes a form of transculturalism (Turner, 2003).

One aspect that felt better to me as you and I were talking about your dissertation was that the more we talked about these issues (and I think we talked about them indirectly I don't think we really hit it head-on), it seemed to me that you began to feel – and I'll use the word “permission” to bring in your language and sayings from your life in Rwanda. I think it is here that we get into issues of privilege. I was in a position of power over you as your advisor. I mean, as a faculty I had tremendous power. How do you think this impacted the issues of multiculturalism?

#### **Cultural Homogenization and Critical Pedagogy**

**Hadidja:** I think cultural hegemony is the tendency of either consciously or unconsciously preferring the norms and behaviors that are common in one culture over the norms and behaviors that are foreign to the dominant culture's traits. So my cultural traits and characteristics are either ignored or not given a chance to be manifested. There is a recognition of your culture and an unconscious dismissal of mine. We're not conscious about what's going on. We've lived with it for so long that we do not even think about it anymore; that is the way it builds up. The system claims to want diversity and create diversity, but doesn't go beyond the idea of diversity. It doesn't go beyond the statistics that show diversity. For example, we have three Black women, we have one disabled woman, we have one who's older than 55, you know. The system does not ask the questions about what are the needs. Are we ready to accept what these diverse people bring with them? What does that mean? How does that translate in terms of making these students' academic experience successful and meaningful?

**Susan:** Yes, the multicultural rhetoric supports our social work values; we believe in it, and we want to promote it, but changing the way we do things in regard to scholarship so that those cultural differences have a place is difficult. There is a risk of blending cultural contributions into scholarship that subverts the uniqueness, homogenizes rather than highlights the differences. Ann Weick (1999) has argued that there is a value in exploring subjugated knowledge because of the opportunity to identify and understand the “...power dimensions of knowledge development” (p. 329). What people from marginalized groups such as yourself know is knowledge that is not valued in the “monolithic paradigm” of scientific knowledge, so there is a silencing effect to your voice. Weick states that, “...the oppression of knowledge is double-layered: its inherent value is denied and those who might wish to claim it are intimidated into silence (p.329). So your question about whether we are prepared to hear different cultural contributions is important. Multiculturalism can only exist if we, as academic faculty, help to create a space and a value for the diverse contributions and ways of knowing from students such as you. The universalizing of language is also contributing to cultural homogenization along with the cultural oppression that occurs when multicultural rhetoric is not viewed as substantive and important in the development of social work knowledge.

It's helpful to read about some of the new approaches to pedagogy that may make a difference with this issue. Critical pedagogy brings in the role of power in the production of knowledge, and argues that the purpose of social work education is the “emancipation of oppressed groups” (Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005, p. 2). This approach seeks to distribute the power more evenly between teachers and students. In order to truly integrate multicultural content, some of it must come from international students such as you, with the language and meanings intact. Saleebey and Scanlon (2005, p. 8) argue that we must examine the “status-based hierarchies and roles” in the classroom in order to make



change. How did you experience the power between us?

**Hadidja:** Well, I think a critical pedagogy is a teaching method that allows the students to be critical of what and how they are being taught. It leaves room for students' input and encourages criticism during the learning process. The way that I experienced power between us though, would be power in the sense of empowerment. You, as an insider, have that power embedded in your position to help me, as an outsider, get in. I like the idea of opening the door from the inside for the outsiders to come in, as opposed to trying to push the door open from the outside because nobody is going to open it for you.

**Susan:** Yes. Okay. So connect that then to what you were feeling about how you and I worked together?

**Hadidja:** You knew more than I do. You knew some of the politics that I didn't; I'm behind the door and you were inside that door. When you're inside the door, you know the feasibility of things. You know which strategies can be acceptable and which ones will not be acceptable. You knew what type of material I could bring that would get me in, and you knew which kind of material would not get me in. That's the ally side of the person helping the underprivileged, and using your position as a privileged person to lift up those who are in a less privileged position.

I'm thinking of a man I worked with some years ago. He thought I was very open-minded, that I was very smart, that I spoke English, so he didn't need to have a translator. He was working in post-genocide Rwanda and emotions were really raw, and there were killings still going on. Of course, he was worried but he was this young, bright, idealistic American and wanted to save us all. When I quit my job at Care International and went back into teaching, I was going to be making less than \$100 a month. He suggested I go work for him because I could make much more money. He said, "The money I pay my chauffeur could pay your salary as a teacher for a year." I knew he was right but I was not a good addition to his staff. I came from the wrong group. People were saying that my "stupid American friend was a CIA agent."

This type of suspicion could have been enough for the government to ask him to leave Rwanda, and yet he was doing wonderful work. He worked with these families that had taken on children that they had found on the street; they were building homes for them; they were distributing crops for them to farm. He needed to be working with someone from the Tutsi group, someone who came from the tribe that the government trusts, in order for them to trust him. This is what I mean by "the insider." The Tutsis were back in power. So that was the same thing you were doing with me.

**Susan:** OK. So you're saying I was on the "right side" in terms of someone who was trusted in the academic setting. Is that right?

**Hadidja:** Yes, that's very right. If you're in an oppressed group or you are underprivileged, it may take a longer time for your voice to come through, longer than if you had an ally from the privileged group. And I think that happens in many other spheres too.

**Susan:** I think that I and many other faculty in their own private quiet ways work with international students and with other students who come from different cultural perspectives in these individual relationships as allies, you know, really trying to support your voice - your cultural knowledge. It happens in these individual relationships, but it doesn't get institutionalized; it doesn't happen in an overt way, it happens in a covert way through all of these individual relationships. Subsequently, valuing of diversity in language and cultural knowledge doesn't happen easily or openly at the institutional level, at the level of the department or the level of the university. There is a lot of rhetoric intellectually but "the way we do things around here," the institutional culture, is to continue the traditional academic practices and standards that can exclude different voices. The result is a reinforcement of cultural homogeneity - in research, knowledge development, and curriculum, which we have been discussing.

Daniel (2008) argues that our liberal pluralist approach to multiculturalism in education does understand and celebrate diversity, but doesn't really explain or critique how our everyday practices promote or foster



domination of others and also within the academy. I think this is what the feminist bell hooks (1994) was arguing when she said, "When education is a practice of freedom, students are not the only ones who are asked to share, to confess" (p. 21). As faculty, we have to develop a critical pedagogy that examines our own practices.

**Hadidja:** It's very true. You've got to build from those individual relationships into a network.

**Susan:** Kind of a collaborative approach – a partnership.

**Hadidja:** Yes, one little thing gets attached to the other one and every piece is added to the other one because it is something that can be more useful and more powerful than individual actions.

**Susan:** And, it implies a sense of unity about valuing some of the same things. I think that's not there yet.

### Conclusion

Those of us who are colonized and those of us who are colonizers, first of all, have to have some insight about it, some realization that this is a process within which we are actors, and develop a consciousness about it. Motivation is important in order to try to understand the causes and consequences and work toward justice, an equalizing in the distribution of power between teachers and students. Friere argues that liberatory education requires that there has to be a process of *conscientization* for learners and teachers: that we have to help learners with awareness of inequalities so that the situation can be changed. This process can only occur through teachers and learners talking and resolving the issues together, rather than through what Friere calls the "banking method" of education where teachers only transfer knowledge to students (Freire, Freire, & Macedo, 1998, cited in Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005). Faculty who teach in graduate education must act as allies to "open the door from the inside" to international students so that their voices and contribution become part of social work knowledge.

We cannot ignore that we live in a global world that requires acknowledgement and integration of the contributions of every culture.

As Weick (1999, p. 328) noted in referencing Thomas Kuhn: "The net is never expansive enough. There are always facts and experiences that the current paradigm does not adequately capture or simply misses." We educate international students who should be able to take their education back to their home, without making their homes extensions of America. Also, international students who choose to remain in this country will contribute to the multicultural understanding of people here. Providing a window for those long oppressed voices to be heard is the true democracy we have advocated in social work all along.

Faculty can move to institute transparency shedding light on the "shadow side" of graduate education and examining openly the hegemony embedded in the academic propensity toward clarity and the "norms" that go with it (Turner, 2003; Walker et al., 2008). These covert values have to be recognized and made visible, and critiqued through open dialogue among and between faculty and students. It is a good time to optimize openly that "what is valued academically, epistemologically, and ontologically varies between countries and cultures" and make use of this variation to strengthen the academic traditions in the United States (Askeland & Payne, 2006, p. 739). Students can be encouraged to use a transcultural lens, integrating their experiences, language, and cultural particularities into their research, writing, and personal practice paradigms (Mullen, 1983; 1988).

Graduate students of the future need to be diverse in all kinds of ways "...to ensure a wide range of viewpoints that enrich intellectual exchange." In that way new and different approaches and models can be developed that support the intellectual community of academia and its future representatives (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008, p. 126). The dangers of cultural homogenization can only be addressed through these multicultural voices that bring new perspectives, languages, meanings, and understandings to the international community. As Weick argues, "...guilty knowledge is dangerous knowledge. It is knowledge that sits at the edge of the



dominant knowledge paradigm, insistently challenging the assumptions about the value of what we know" (p. 329). Doctoral education can use the knowledge and experiences of international students to address and critique the academic episteme that produces a re-enactment of the past rather than new models that create innovative, multicultural scholarship for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Social work education should not be the place where post-colonial international students experience education as one more experience of losing their voice. Teachers are not always right.

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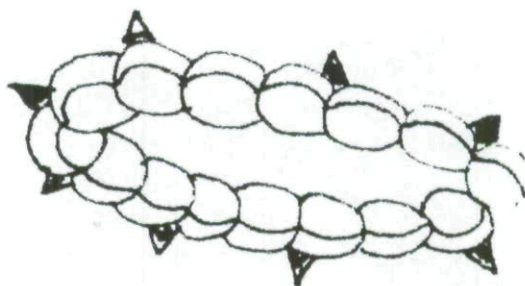
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