“West Indianness” as an Ethnographic Presentation of Self in the Field: Black Canadians Across The Border

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Abstract: Researchers have shown ethnography to be a communicating tool of a social world under study, thereby educating the reading audience. However, being in the “field” as a researcher who is marked by a race, ethnicity, and nationality presents challenges to the way our participants see the researcher and therefore to the type of data collected about a given social group. Despite this, researchers tend to push this information into the background of their analyses. This paper considers how a Canadian researcher of West Indian background used “West Indianness” in sociological field research as a methodological tool for participant recruitment and the maintenance of insider status while clearly marked as “other” because of national birthplace. This research stems from an ethnography in gentrified Brooklyn, New York from 2004-2007 with West Indian childcare providers. Results show how the insider/outsider presentation of self as a Canadian West Indian accommodated and at times hindered the research process while in the field. This paper explores how ethnographers can incorporate a more nuanced reflexivity of this insider and outsider status and relate it back to the analysis of their work as they re(present) their research.

Reflexivity

Subjectivity runs rampant in all forms of social research, even the ones that claim some purely objective code of ethic. However, in ethnographic research, we unveil that subjectivity even more than our positivistic counterparts, given the forum in which we are studying social worlds. As a qualitative research method, ethnography, in many ways, physically places the researcher next to their participant in the research site. Ethnographers are faced with the challenge of comparing what people say they do in interview settings to what they actually do while in their natural setting. Because of this placement, ethnographers should be required by academic publishers to include a certain amount of reflexivity in their social analysis. Their presence alone as beings marked by gender, race, and class often influence data outcomes.

In a co-authored article written with sociologist Erynn Masi de Casanova (2009), we have given voice to ethnographic reflexivity through writings about place as women and mothers studying childcare providers in
Brooklyn, New York and direct sellers of cosmetics in Guayaquil, Ecuador. We conclude, as do others, that motherhood should be part of the reflexive analysis when discussing researcher-subject relations between and among mothers (Stack 1974; Grasmuck 2005; Warren 2001). In the same vein, feminist researchers discuss the importance of deepening the understanding of social issues through reflexivity as a step toward theorizing the multiple positions that influence how data is collected and how this leads to full disclosure, something that is touted among all social scientists. This paper uses an intersectionality analysis to discuss how race, ethnicity, and national identity inform the research analysis when studying West Indian women (Collins 1990, King 1988, Crenshaw 1991, Davis 1981). In addition, this paper uses a “presentation of self” framework to demonstrate the inherent gap in subjectivities between the researcher and participant as it relates to the author having grown up black in Canada while creating a transnational identity in the U.S. where her research takes place. Goffman’s ideas of self-presentation through distancing and embracing of social roles as a means for protecting the socially constructed collective self serves as the theoretical basis for this paper (Goffman 1959).

Reflexivity that considers the presentation of self allows researchers the opportunity to communicate to readers how they have placed themselves as people marked within social structures of privilege or subordination among their participants. It allows for the insider-outsider position to be clearly defined by the researcher in order to discuss issues of authority and power in the research process. I begin this paper by first discussing one research project that warranted reflexive analysis using the presentation of self framework along with the means by which I gained entrée into a specific social world.

This paper outlines two ways that race, ethnicity, and nationality formed and informed the research project under analysis. The first point shows how the insider/outsider presentation of self as a Canadian West Indian and black woman benefited and at times hindered the research process while in the field. The second point explores how ethnographers can incorporate a more nuanced reflexivity in relation to this insider and outsider status and relate it back to the analysis of their work as they (re)present their research.

**Research Project**

The ethnographic project took place from 2004-2007 in some of the gentrified neighborhoods of Brooklyn, New York. I was interested in learning about how black West Indian childcare providers used public spaces, resulting in community formation that helped to lessen the isolation inherent in this form of domestic work. The study touched on issues of surveillance while in the public settings, uses of technology by employers and providers, as well as food sharing and informal economic savings systems (Mose Brown 2011). Twenty-
five Caribbean immigrant women were regularly shadowed throughout their workdays, in the public spaces they occupied and the private households of their employers. In terms of immigration status, there was a mix of undocumented and documented providers, some of whom had gained citizenship during their tenure in the U.S. They were all first-generation immigrant women from the Caribbean islands of Jamaica, Trinidad, Barbados, St. Lucia, Grenada, St. Vincent as well as the South American country Guyana, which those in the study referred to as a “West Indian” nation. All women, ages twenty-five to sixty-one, were made aware that the data would be collected as part of my dissertation and then result in a book (Mose Brown 2011) that would chronicle what I observed during the years. Along with detailing the daily interactions between these women and neighboring residents, commercial store owners, and park employees, I also spent a year volunteering with the non-profit advocacy organization Domestic Workers United in order to understand how some childcare providers organized for better working conditions, a push that resulted in the statewide enactment of the current Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights.

Being Black Canadian
Being black Canadian was never taught to me as something having to do with a history fraught with stereotypes or deep-rooted anxieties of identity; I was never warned about what institutional racism would have in store for me as I became more involved in social institutions such as universities as an adult. It simply meant that I was one of several hundred thousand second-generation Caribbeans in Canada and therefore shared a common cultural history with my peers that was only ever distilled down to what islands our parents came from and how much we enjoyed Caribbean fêtes. While racism was prevalent in many of my peers’ lives, I never explicitly experienced it until becoming an academic here in the United States. I heard my first “black joke” from a non-black person as a 34-year-old professor in New York City, something I had never explicitly experienced growing up black in Canada. Not having been exposed to such an explicit act of discrimination or sheer racism shaped my future encounters with research participants and therefore consequently influenced how I saw or didn’t see the struggles I later researched. What does this mean? I came across my participants (mostly black women childcare providers) in Brooklyn parks that were also frequented by residents of Italian background or other self-identified white ethnic community members and did not approach them as a group working in a racially and financially subordinated position to white employers. I did not initially recognize their potential stigmatization, nor did I feel stigmatized in the way that I am being socialized to feel now that I have read more and have an understanding of black American history and black Canadian history. After all, these women could have been my aunts or cousins. Perhaps this is due to my naïve upbringing or my buying into the notion that Canadians of African

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descent are not as racially marked as African Americans, a fact that my participants would frequently let me know as I interacted with them as they discussed their own stereotypes of and express their distancing from African American childcare providers. I was raised in a predominantly Italian immigrant suburb of Toronto, where my father’s occupation as a professor and my mother’s work in the university library placed me in a higher class status than my Italian friends, whose fathers worked in factories and mothers stayed at home or worked in small shops. Identity and self-worth was never measured by my parents’ immigrant (turned citizen) status or the color of my skin. My empowerment came from the fact that I felt close to my West Indian culture, as did my friends with their Italian or Caribbean cultures, and that my class status was considered middleclass. In addition, my parents did not identify as black, but rather mixed race. However, by the end of high school, I understood my category as black/other as I immersed myself in media outlets and used them as a source of cultural and social reference. As were many of my black Canadian peers whom I would speak to later about issues dealing with race in Canada, I was always taught to see two sides to every argument and assume first that any insult or xenophobic statement was unintentional. In other words, we learned to give our oppressors the benefit of the doubt and look for the non-racial story behind individuals’ actions as taught by our parents. Perhaps subconsciously we accepted the multicultural lens that the Canadian government presented as tolerance, to look for that individual’s story. As stated in Lily Cho’s discussion of Cecil Foster’s work on the multiple dimensions of blackness and modern society, Canadian rhetoric “makes blackness a reason for inclusion rather than exclusion” meaning that behaviors and achievement in Canada are discussed in terms of the individual instead of institutional constraints that stem from a racist hierarchy (Cho 2008:211; Pabst 2005).

As a researcher, I found the distancing of racial identity and embracing of cultural/national identity as a Canadian West Indian that had developed over my life course to be one of the ways I gained entrée into the social world of the West Indian childcare providers. With the long history of Caribbeans migrating to Canada from as early as 1900, many of the women I shadowed and interviewed had several family members living in Canada and/or had visited Canada themselves. It wasn’t uncommon for participants to recite to me some of the areas that surrounded Toronto such as Ajax or Mississauga and discuss Caribana the main highlight of their visit. The stories they shared became their way of letting me know that they understood where I came from in the same way that I chose to emphasize my Canadian identity as a means of subconsciously separating myself from being identified as a black American because of the tension felt between the two groups (Caribbeans and African Americans). This tension has been discussed by sociologist Mary Waters in her studies of...
West Indian immigrants as well in my own published work (Mose Brown 2011; Waters 1999). My sociological lens as an academic has me to believe that I created a presentation of self that made it acceptable for me to continuously inject my West Indianness along with my Canadianness into social interactions in ways that directly influenced how I was perceived. Because of this I was able to create social ties with my participants that would allow me access to their social world. This front stage I was engaged with promoted impressions of a middle ground—a Swiss of the North perception—which I believe was accepted by participants because they responded back to me with seemingly little tension. This performance of being Canadian supports what other scholars have found to be an inaccurate perception of complete national racial tolerance (Reitz and Breton 1994). Yet, almost immediately after learning where I was from during this performance, participants’ body language and speech seemed less distrusting. After all, no one bad could possibly come from Canada (or so many like to believe). This “clean image” stereotype is furthered by documentaries such as Fahrenheit 9/11 by Michael Moore that show border town Canadians in Windsor leaving their doors open at all times because of the perceived safety, a feature that I have experienced in my own hometown although not in my own household. However, this image of safety and “goodness” is mostly transferred through smaller interactions among Canadians. For example, most Canadians are warned to make sure they present the Canadian flag in clear view on their backpacks when touring Europe during the college or high school years because they wouldn’t want to be mistaken for an American who may be perceived as arrogant. That mistake could cost you the accessibility needed to navigate countries that view you as a hostile first world nation. Presenting one’s Canadianness in this case trumps the need to express West Indianness. As a skilled researcher, knowing when to engage in the presentation of Canadianness or West Indianness, or both simultaneously helped me to earn the trust of participants. More than this though is the fact that West Indians have had a long migration history to Canada and my participants almost all had some Canadian connection to family members, which lent to their perceptions of me in the field.

Being a Black Woman
While my Canadianness was established, I needed to also take note that I was engaging with an exploited group of workers who happened to be of the same racial category as me according to U.S. standards. Although our experiences of race relations differed depending on duration in the U.S. and national background, our racial similarity as perceived by outsiders perhaps gave us similar outlooks on how we may be viewed in the gentrified communities in which we found ourselves. So while I was of a different class status than these women in New York, I shared the racial distinction that residents could judge on sight. Whether or not residents did judge this is beyond the scope of the project I was taking on, but having lived
in the U.S. now for a decade, I am aware of how I may be perceived prior to opening my mouth to say my Canadian national “eh.” Being aware of this racial similarity and armed with knowledge of the history of racial hierarchies allowed me to move across public and private spaces with my participants in ways that I imagine would be different, but not necessarily better for a researcher of a different race. Participants clearly understood Canadian blackness to be different from blackness in America. In fact, I’m not clear whether they viewed it as Canadian blackness or some other hybrid of Canadian West Indianness. As Naomi Pabst notes, while there has been a substantial history of racial intolerance in Canada, there is “no dominant narrative of blackness in Canada” which renders black Canadians in a multitude of social locations (2005:35). This notion of having a Canadian black identity is fraught with black American identity, one that many black Canadians I know, and perhaps mistakenly, reject outright and replace with a West Indian/Canadian identity, one that is more palatable to the dominant group (Pabst 2005, Walcott 2001). However, among my participants, I was expected to understand the American plight of the black woman although I grew up hearing from my Caribbean Canadian family members that I was mostly Indian (another byproduct of rejecting blackness). Knowing one’s “place” and “identity” is something my participants understood all too well.

Two participants in particular made frank comments about “white people” and being black that I’m not sure would have come out had I been a white researcher. Jennie, a married participant in her mid-30s from Grenada, discussed her position as a childcare provider and how she felt about her “place” as an employee within a white neighborhood and household. She said to me, “After you know that we were once enslaved, and knowing how we were treated by white people and how our forefathers were treated by white people, how could you not treat us better after you know what it’s like, I mean what it still is . . . I think we have slavery now, it just happens differently.” In this comment, Jennie explains her shared racial and political understanding of exploitation and subordination as a domestic worker. While her collective “we” did not necessarily include me as a participant in this form of work, further discussions indicated that I should understand this exploitation and subordination as a black woman. Later in our conversations about West Indianness and working for someone of the same background, Jennie said to me, “Working for you would be different than working for a white person . . . because you could relate in so many ways. In terms of culture, even if you’re not from the islands, because you’re black I kind of expect that you would treat me better.” Being a black woman meant that I should understand what these women go through as black working women because of our shared constraints under a gendered racial hierarchy. The multiple oppressions and therefore multiple consciousnesses expressed by these narratives are not articulated by participants from the standpoint of intersectionality, rather,
they have been internalized as a way of understanding their place in the matrix of domination, a way for them to contextualize their subordination to the oppressor (Collins 1990, King 1988).

In another conversation with Molly, a Guyanese woman in her 60s who raised seven children of her own prior to working as a childcare provider, race was discussed as a physical characteristic that is monitored in public spaces by white residents of the gentrified neighborhood. Molly recounted an incident that occurred at a public park in Brooklyn where childcare providers organized an event involving food, running races, and other social activities for other providers. An argument that took place after one childcare provider didn’t receive a roti skin, a traditional West Indian flat bread that is typically eaten with curry. Molly continued as she spoke about Irene, a provider from Trinidad, “I heard that she gone cuss out Carol because she [Irene] didn’t get any roti and was using foul language around all the white people.” She continued, “I don’t like when people get on like that because it makes it look like black people can’t be organized.” Molly’s use of racial markers here indicates that black people in gentrified “white” neighborhoods are constantly under surveillance for wrongdoings. Her sensitivity to how others may perceive her racial group based on an argument between two other childcare providers deepens the sense that as black women living in the U.S, these women understand the racial hierarchy and potential consequences of their actions, no matter how benign they may be.

**West Indianness as a Research Tool**

As an ethnographer, presentation of self becomes a research tool. Readers have seen pictures in books that show researchers dressed in a similar manner as their participants or text that shows them using the speech patterns they believe will somehow bring them closer to their participants (Duneier 1999:335, Wacquant 2004:84). Yet, this is not something that most qualitative, or quantitative researchers ever expose. As a researcher, I know that engagement with participants while collecting survey data is managed in much the same way as our qualitative encounters. Project directors will explicitly tell you not to wear too much makeup, not to use academic speech, not to dress up too much... and to “look relaxed.” All of these presentations of self influence the relations between researcher and participant thus creating a subjective reality.

As woman and a mother, I was able to gain access in ways that perhaps a man without children would not (Mose Brown 2009). While I did not intend to do so, I often found myself using colloquial idioms to demonstrate my West Indianness. Many of my participants would tell me that they could hear my West Indian accent, which was not something I had ever utilized through my years growing up in an immigrant household. It was from these comments that I came to the realization that indeed I was engaging a repressed
speech pattern or accent that I had acquired from my family while growing up. Upon further reflection, I realized that I did this in order to 1) put myself at ease among the women I was studying to avoid any discussion of authenticity and 2) to somehow put my participants at ease so that they may open up to me in ways that I initially thought might be useful. The presentation of my West Indianness became an important tool to me in the beginning of my research and over the three years I began to see how this presentation changed participants’ body language (how close they would lean in to me to talk about someone else or to discuss an employer) and in their interactions with others around me. As an actor in this fieldwork, impression management was continually being employed in order to maintain and make a particular presentation of self more credible to participants. Whether through my appearance as an element of the front stage performance I was giving in the field to the manner in which I played my role, my observers (participants) were delivered a performance that altered their interactions with me.

My husband, who was seen by participants in these gentrified neighborhoods going to and coming from work further legitimated my Canadian West Indianness. All of the married women in this study were married to black West Indian men and Molly’s husband lived and worked in Canada at the time of the study. My husband was known among the women as a Canadian man of Jamaican parentage and they relished the fact that they had seen him in the neighborhood prior to my arrival at the parks, although he also went with me on occasion. They reaffirmed that he was a good man, despite being of Jamaican descent, a view which embodies gross stereotypes of Jamaicans being aggressive and noncommittal. Molly’s remark confirms this when she stated that my husband was “one of the good ones.” The fact that my husband was seen as a good Jamaican man from Canada legitimized my Canadian West Indianness among the women and allowed for more comfort between me and my participants (Mose Brown 2011).

This research tool of West Indianness, while symbolically meaningful to me as a researcher, was not necessarily consistent, which ultimately could confuse my intended audience, the West Indian childcare providers. I often went back and forth between my academic, mother, and “backstage” presentation of self, which potentially exposed me as a fraud. Whether or not I was perceived as such I will never know, but indeed it had to be part of the full picture. Also, since I was second-generation West Indian from Canada, I may have been perceived differently had I grown up in the United States under the structural rubric that the women I was studying worked under. In terms of language, I noticed without doubt that as I engaged in patois or colloquial banter, I was able to gain a more fluid conversation that appeared to put participants at ease in my presence. At the same time, when engaging my “mother” presentation of self, I fell into the student role of learning West
Indianness. My participants would “school” me on how West Indians should raise their children through either a story of their own childhood or how they would handle the situation at hand, and since I came from West Indian parentage they would suggest either implicitly or explicitly that I should engage in particular forms of parenting (such as corporal punishment). Just as meaning was delivered to participants through my presentation of self, participants engaged in similar presentations of self as the teachers of West Indianness and New York West Indian struggle specifically. While performing this role, their goal seemed to be targeted to make me a better West Indian mother and cultural teacher to my book or academic audience, but they also gave me insight into the West Indian climate in the United States as compared to Canada. This was typically presented to me through comments about the health care system and how much more difficult it was for them to gain access to education or financial stability in the U.S. than in a perceivably more tolerant Canada.

Writing about the Insider-Outsider Phenomenon

Why should we care about these performances if both researcher and participant are engaged in the performance? Simply put, our performances are continuously shaping how research processes occur and are transmitted across borders through a variety of identity formations. Being black “from” Canada in the U.S. Because of this difference, we ought to be explicit in our writings to avoid presenting ourselves as impersonal, detached researchers with no transnational identity. If as researchers we are to produce research that is accurate and with full disclosure, why, then, would we leave such an important part of the meaning making out of our writings? All of the performances shape the context under which our research takes place and gives further meaning and texture to the social worlds we are attempting to understand. The argument over insider or outsider positioning becomes moot at this point because of the inherent overlap in performances that occur when conducting research. The status and power dynamics between actors create complex interactions that do not determine concrete benefits or advantages of the insider/outsider position (Sharan B. Merriam et al. 2001). However, the impact is nonetheless part of the research outcomes or at least how you get to those outcomes during data collection, so the performance ought to be discussed (even if only peripherally) to give deeper context to the research methods used.

The presentation of such insider-outsider reflexivity discussions should occur in the beginning of a manuscript along with an overview of research methods. This allows readers to digest the complexity of the investigation so that they have a clear understanding of how to “read” the data and findings. By including such information early on in the manuscript, authors will be able to connect their readers to the material and
lend transparency to the subsequent representations. In addition, recognizing one’s presumed historical and national privilege (or lack thereof) would illustrate the researcher’s attentiveness of the stratification and inequality that exists both between and within cultures and social groups. Including this type of reflexivity about researchers’ positions within the field may show a more complex set of analyses of how race, ethnicity and nationality are purposely used to create opportunities for researcher and participant interaction.

Conclusion
Reflecting back on the simultaneous presentations of self from participants and me as the researcher allowed for an analysis of how meanings were shaped through interaction while in the field. Understanding the position of the participants was filtered through my own transnational identity and geopolitics as a mixed race/black immigrant Canadian who was a woman of West Indian parentage (Pabst 2005). These presentations may be seen as shortcomings in fieldwork; however, it is this precise display of subjectivity and reflexivity that allows research to challenge old forms of doing research where the researcher is a taken for granted presence who does not affect the research site. Is there an objective truth through human interaction or is there only a social structure that is constructed as truth? Critical realist ethnographers have been debating this “truth” in social science research for just over two decades (Bhaskar 1989; Hammersley 1992). Bhaskar contends that social theories are intertwined with the social realities presented by ethnographic research and therefore should be presented in such context while Hammersley suggests that the researcher ought to present the participant’s perspective or assertions about a given topic aside from the researcher’s construction of reality. Atkinson (1990) argues that our understanding of the processes by which we identify meanings gives potency to our reflections of those meanings and that this allows the researcher to present a more contextualized social reality as experienced by the participant and the researcher. These constructions of reality can be further complicated by the literature on blackness in Canada whereby blackness is either seen as a byproduct of American identity, something that one becomes socialized into, or some “other” thing that is constructed through a Caribbean historical lens (Walcott 2001, Clarke 1996, Etoroma 2010, Foster 2007, Pabst 2005). By reflecting back on how researchers have potentially influenced the field, we are able to illustrate the mechanics of the research process and the construction of the intersections inherent in our findings. Whether or not a social truth or reality is actually presented by the researcher, the fact remains that in the social sciences, researchers are expected to lay bare the process by which they are collecting data and potentially influencing the field.
References


**Endnotes**

1 I use the term West Indian throughout this paper since the participants in this study referred to themselves as such and since the author also grew up in Canada where this term was the norm for identifying those born in the Caribbean, specifically English-speaking countries as opposed to the French or Spanish speaking Caribbean countries. It should also be noted that participants often used multiple markers such as West Indian, Caribbean, and national labels i.e. “I am Trinidadian.”

2 First-generation here is used to define women who were born in the Caribbean and were first-generation immigrants to the U.S. Second-generation would refer to their offspring who were born in North America.

3 Paul Attewell, Philip Kasinitz, and Kathleen Dunn (2009) show how the racial income and wage gap is as prevalent in Canada for Caribbeans as it is in the U.S. once they controlled for generation size suggesting that there have been institutional constraints for black Canadians as there have been for black Americans.

4 The Caribana parade occurs the first Saturday in August.

5 Referring to the mythical perception that Canada is neutral to world events and impermeable to hostile overt racial hierarchies in social institutions.

6 Geopolitics refers to Pabst’s definition whereby individuals and collective social groups occupy multiple categories of identity as it relates to power relations within various geographic locations.