

2020

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### Recommended Citation

Russell, Darlene (2020) "Using Positionality to Dismantle the Missy Anne Syndrome in English Methods Classrooms," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 9 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol9/iss1/15>

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## Using Positionality to Dismantle the *Missy Anne Syndrome* in English Methods Classrooms

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My big brown eyes took it all in. I read the excitement in my parents' faces as they counted down the days until the landmark airing of the TV mini-series, *Roots*. In the 1970s this was both historical and revolutionary media. *Roots* was the multi-generational chronicle of Alex Haley's family from the rich shores of West Africa to the savage dystopia of African Slavery and the Civil War in America. This was not just Haley's story; it was everyone's story from the African Diaspora. *Roots* provided a sweeping panoramic glimpse, albeit with the trademarks of Hollywood, into the African American Slavery experience in the United States. This riveting epic mini-series was a visceral cultural cry of African American people. It bellowed a narrative that African Americans carried in their ancestral DNA, and some passed down through the generations but most learned about on a dirty platter of history served in school. My mother, father, brother, and I huddled around the television to watch *Roots*. My brother was a toddler, and I was a second grader. I did not quite understand this monumental moment, but I knew it was important.

Several years later I viewed *Roots* with older and more thoughtful eyes and engaged in rounds of critical discourse about the movie with family and friends. To this day, many scenes and characters have stayed with me. To my chagrin, the mini-series made such an impression upon me that I avoided watching movies with any of the actors who play the astonishingly nefarious

roles. One of the most internecine and emotionally-cacophonous "relationships" was between Missy Anne Reynolds and Kizzy Reynolds.

Missy Anne was the niece of a White slave owner, and Kizzy was Missy Anne's uncle's slave. Kizzy was gifted to Missy Anne as her handmaiden. Kizzy was Missy Anne's possession; she was property. Missy Anne, a beneficiary of an institutionalized oppressive system built on race, interacted with Kizzy in what appeared to be benevolence but simply masked superciliousness born out of the loins of White supremacy. Missy Anne's words were oiled in deficit and condescendence, and she knew that it was unfathomable for Kizzy to be her equal but merely her life-size human toy.

"You remember when we would play school? I'd be the teacher and you'd be the pupil." Missy Anne sang in a high pitch voice to Kizzy. "What fun we had! You were such a good student, Kizzy" [Roots].

I have seen my share of "Missy Annes" in schools serving largely Black and Latino/a student populations. I use Missy Anne for a few reasons: she is White and she is Kizzy's "teacher." Moreover, Missy Anne's persona represents some of the iconic sentiments and exchanges between White people and people of color particularly Black people. In spite of the equality strides in education, many teachers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century suffer with, what I call the *Missy Anne Syndrome*. The Missy Anne Syndrome is characterized by intentionally

or sub-consciously perpetuating White supremacist ideologies, reproducing racist oppressive structural systems, and subscribing to racialized deficit thinking while even proclaiming colorblindness. The confluence of these symptoms is detected in teachers through quiet contemptuous gazes of students, polished patronizing exchanges with students, and race-coded language between other teachers and school staff. White cultural and instructional poly-hegemonic ideologies, from the teachers to the curriculum, are endemic in public schools across the nation.

According to scholars like Banks, Sleeter & Thao, and Picower, a White, middle-class, monolingual, female teaching force dominate schools in the United States. Moreover, Howard adduces that this demographic is particularly accentuated in racially segregated schools that serve Black and Latino/a students. In 2019 the NJ 101.5 FM station aired a segment on “How New Jersey hopes to achieve a more diverse teacher pool,” it was reported that “on a typical school day, more than 163,000 students in New Jersey never encounter a teacher of color in any classes or while walking through the halls.”

Lamont Repollet, New Jersey Education Commissioner, interviewed in the segment added that “about one in five schools in New Jersey have a 100 percent white professional staff.” This data certainly underscores the need for diversifying the teaching pool and prompts questions about how teacher education programs will address race in the new decade to silence the Missy Anne Syndrome.

From my observations and years of experience working with schools that serve Black and Latino/a student populations, the Syndrome is characterized in preservice and in-service teachers in some of the following ways:

- **Being verbally condescending to students**

Using language, word choice, tone as “weapons” to diminish students intellectually, psychologically, emotionally or physically (e.g., physical appearance, hair, clothing style, etc.).

- **Having encounters with students and not relationships**

Interacting with students monolithically or on a surface level instead of creating intersections of cultural connections with them on an authentic and deep level.

- **Engaging in “play” marked by masked ridicule**

Actively seeking opportunities to “relate” to students and showcase diversity consciousness by using students’ culturally-based colloquialisms and gestures in exchanges with them as disguised racial mocking.

- **Using extrinsic motivation tactics to make students “happy”**

Converting the classroom into a modern barter system by using tangibles like candy, food, and rewards to seduce students into being “well-behaved” and content without having to ever really get to know them.

- **Using insipid and meaningless instructional activities**

Having low expectations of students and intentionally selecting curricular materials that lack academic luster and vigor, which reproduce systemic racial oppression and White supremacy.

- **Asserting authority in a Draconian manner when students assert their “voice”**

Penalizing students (e.g., discipline referrals, suspensions, etc.) when they use their voice to express, question or assert themselves by deeming such “disrespectful” and rejecting the role that culture plays in expression. Failing to see that cultural interpretations can be biased, limiting, and inaccurate.

- **Funneling the message of superiority of self and lifestyle into the classroom**

Creating a cultural lacuna between students by deliberately transmitting messages of superiority and privilege through attitude, attire, and language. This social hierarchy flaunting relies on the myth of racial inferiority.

A first step in avoiding the Missy Anne Syndrome is recognizing the mammoth role that culture plays in how one perceives self, others and the world. Also, understanding that cultural identities like race and class directly “position” how one perceives and experiences life. H. Richard Milner, IV (388) posits how “racial and cultural consciousness” shapes our positionality. Positionality involves the sociocultural positions or cultural identities one holds as it pertains to race, gender, class, culture, ethnicity, education, family history, citizenship status, language, geography, schooling, religion, and other identities.

In my work with English teacher candidates, I teach them about the importance of their positionality—how it leverages them, how it privileges them, how it historicizes them, how it even categorizes them, how it shapes their approach to curriculum, and how it situates them in their beliefs about and interactions with students. My work as an English teacher educator is framed and contoured by critical race theory sprouting from the works of Bell, Delgado & Stefancic and Ladson-Billings & Tate, and culturally responsive pedagogy aligned with scholars like Baker-Bell, Delpit, Gay, Gutiérrez & Rogoff, Johnson & Eubanks, Sealey-Ruiz and Morrell. I stress to teacher candidates the unassailable necessity to connect with students. As we move into a new decade, the future of successful classroom interactions and engagement will rest on the teacher’s ability to veritably recognize and value students’ cultural

capital and authentically connect with them. An integral cog in this connection is the teacher acknowledging and understanding his/her own positionality.

It is through positionality that teachers can critically consider a cadre of print and non-print texts—poems, novels, music, essays, art, and films—and instructional designs in the ELA classroom. According to Christensen in *Reading, Writing, and Rising Up*, ELA teachers need “to respond to the world, pose questions, be multicultural, anti-racist, and pro-justice, participatory, joyful, activists, academically rigorous, and culturally sensitive” (138). In my introduction of positionality, I provide teacher candidates with an example of my positionality in Figure 1 as identity disclosure and to serve as a mentor piece for students. We then read Ana María Villegas’ and Tamara Lucas’ *Preparing Culturally Responsive Teachers: Rethinking the Curriculum* discussing the six strands of the article while focusing on the nexus between sociocultural consciousness and positionality. Following this, teacher candidates create a single PowerPoint or Prezi slide outlining their positionality. They are given license to be as creative as they wish in the aesthetics of their slide. Teacher candidates present their slide to the class as represented in Figure 2. As a collective, we carefully discuss the implicit and explicit implications of positionality composites. I encourage candidates to critically question each other’s positionality if something is nebulous, contentious, glossed over or absent. The goal is for positionality statements to reflect candor and transparency, and welcome healthy intellectual scrutiny.

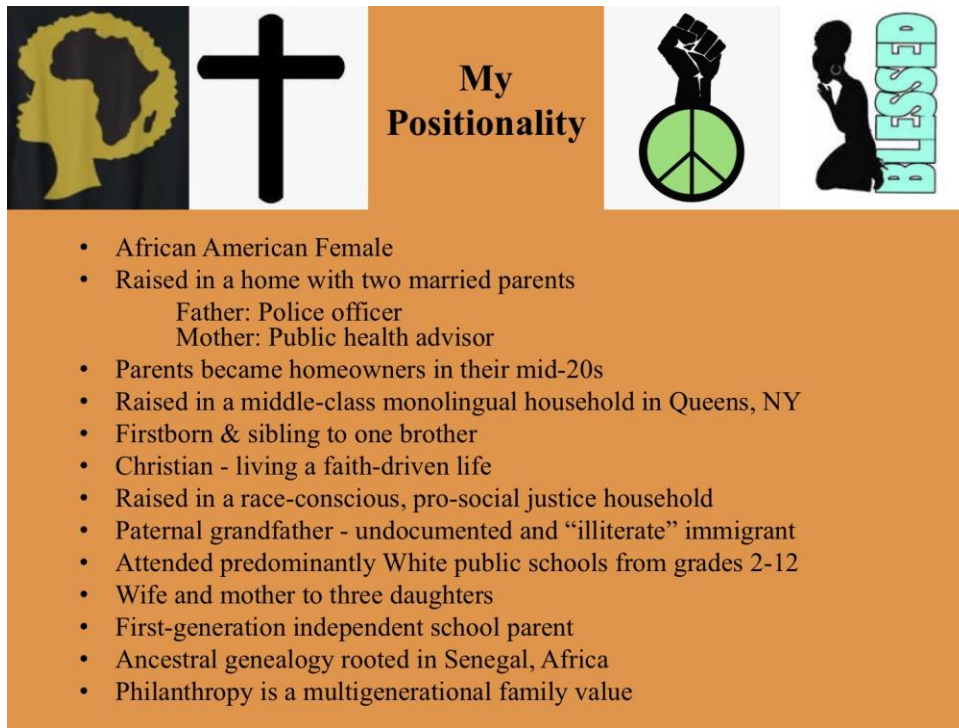


Fig. 1. My Positionality

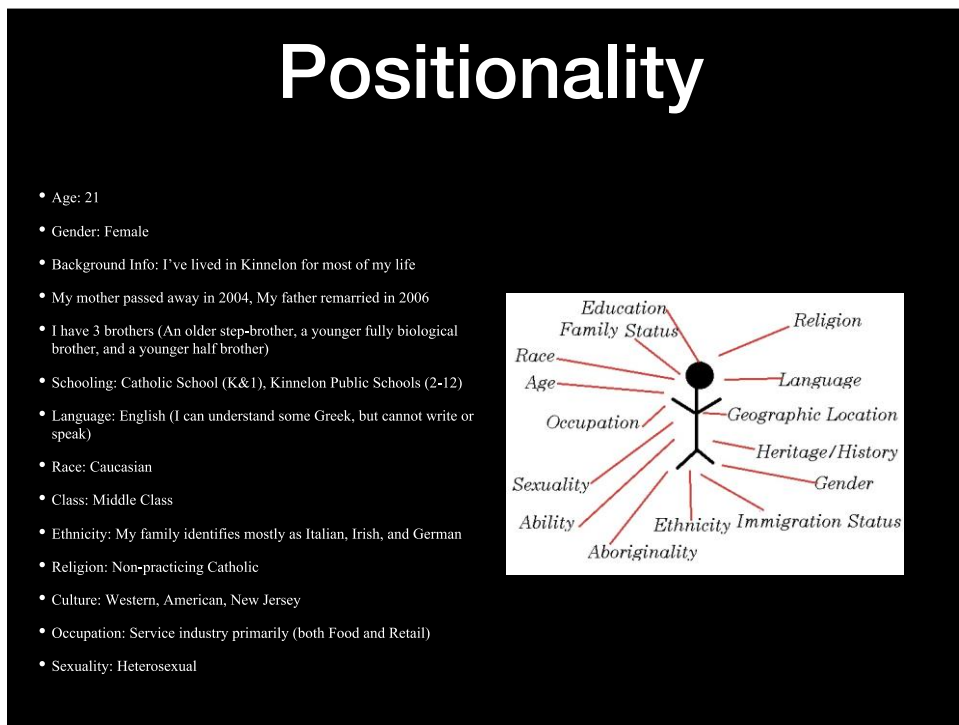


Fig. 2. Pre-service Teacher Positionality Sample

We segue into the medley of ways their positionality can be introduced to their prospective students in clinical field experiences, and how to shepherd middle and high school students to understand positionality and to create their own slides. I emphasize how highlighting and discussing positionality help to create an atmosphere for discussions about race, culture, gender, class, geographic location, education, and other identities that are ubiquitous elements in all period literature. Additionally, I stress how positionality is steeped in enduring ELA themes like the search for identity, the dynamics of social hierarchal systems, the dimensions of gender roles, friendships and foes, and individual and societal norms, to name a few. When teacher educators and pre-service teachers actively acknowledge their positionality, they are recognizing their sociocultural composition, unmuting social constructs and confessing familial backgrounds and epistemologies, which unequivocally impact how others perceive them, how they see themselves and others.

Positionality makes room for deep literacy engagement and transformative reading. This kind of engagement occurs through literary theories by unsilencing and uncamouflaging issues of race, class, gender and other critical lenses in culturally relevant texts. In particular, elucidating “how the critical lenses of race, class, and gender cradle and nourish our beliefs” (Russell 81). Instructing and training teacher candidates to transform and traverse the curriculum to teach social justice, agency, and equity is about giving them critical lenses, and for most, this is brand new. There is a plethora of literary works like *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *Enrique’s Journey*, *A Lesson Before Dying*, *Bronx Masquerade*, *Shout*, *Lord of the Flies*, *All American Boys*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Behold the Dreamers*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, *I Am Malala*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Paper Things*, *Everything I*

*Never Told You*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *I Am Alfonso Jones*, to teach about what factors determine who is silenced and heard, how “marginalized” communities have been historically treated compared to present day and how they have responded, and how oppression and stigmas manifest and survive, which are all the spoils of systemic racism, classism, xenophobia and linguisticism in the United States.

This kind of teaching has frequently been met with more than a modicum of resistance from students especially White students who are challenged to see the implications of their positionality as it pertains to race. White people having to confront race oftentimes leads to white fragility. White fragility is defined as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (DiAngelo 54). Some of the “defensive moves” I witnessed teacher candidates make include boycotting race discussions through silence, bodies physically becoming stiff along with flaring nostrils, voicing feelings of being singled out, seeing no connection with race and ELA, giving low ratings on course evaluations and articulating that this kind of teaching is “too political.”

The esteemed educator, philosopher and critical pedagogy activist, Paulo Freire, reminds us that teaching is a political act and the impossibility of any teacher being neutral. Mounting racial inequities, immigration laws, socioeconomic disparities, drug and health issues, and education inequalities like a marching band with choreographed precision follow us into a new decade and ultimately into the classroom. Hence, pre-service teachers need to be culturally cognizant of the multiple identities they possess, and the inherent or perceived power or deficit attached to these identities, and how their identities affirm or oppress students. These multiple identities

will determine how teacher candidates galvanize the curriculum, construct learning experiences, and connect with students, families and communities.

If pre-service teachers fail to acknowledge the dynamics of their positionality, they can make themselves susceptible to the Missy Anne Syndrome. When this occurs, the cultural immune system of pre-service teachers is compromised and they give rationed pieces of themselves in the classroom. This results in spurious encounters with students: having a fixed mindset of students' range of potential, designing instructional activities that are culturally and educationally tawdry, and propagating the myth of superiority (teacher) and inferiority (students) in attitudes, behaviors, and language. Each one of these outcomes is manufactured by a structural oppressive society where Missy Anne was able to soar while Kizzy was anathematized to crawl.

Recognizing positionality places teacher candidates on the path to becoming culturally responsive, critical self-reflective practitioners, which has the unbending power to serve and honor all students in ways that can yield cascading dividends in the new decade in ELA classrooms.

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