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Other, please state; an insider/outsider account of taking up space

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Writing about culture and identity is a painful process for me because of the complexity of my associated feelings and experiences, which are difficult to articulate, and mostly intangible. When I encounter terms and concepts that capture some aspects of my experience, they often fall short of a holistic or encompassing acknowledgement, thereby requiring that I choose between remaining untethered or setting down some parts of myself to enable other parts to be seen and affirmed in restrictive spaces. For example, the UK tendency to gather demographic data about race often lists common racial categories and concludes with 'other, please state'. It is not a simple exercise for me to complete these forms and evokes discomfort, awakening the dis-ease that I experience as I am always the "other".

This paper reflects on my experiences of taking up space as a multiracial woman of colour undertaking a doctoral degree in the UK where my research centres a community which I do not belong to, and individuals who are racialised differently to myself. Through the process of writing it, my sensemaking changed as outlined herein. The decision that my thesis would centre the experiences of Black, Caribbean people when I do not claim membership of either group is not the focus of this work, as that is interrogated within my doctoral thesis, but here I will share an experience of negotiating how and when to take up space – an ongoing process which has been a site of intense personal reflection throughout my doctoral journey and which became crystalised for me in a revelatory moment whilst presenting my work at The University of the West Indies and University of Leicester International Summer School. The summer school took place in Trinidad in June of 2024, and it was during a presentation of my research for the delegate conference where I publicly laid claim to my relationship to my work and therefore my decision to take up space with my research.

Culture

In order to contextualise my summer school moment, it is necessary for me to provide *some* background about my own identity and culture, though I will avoid superfluous self-disclosure and categorisation. Beginning with notions of *culture*, people like me who have spent most of their childhoods living in a place that is '*outside their passport culture*' (Sheard, 2008, p. 31) are often referred to as *third culture kids.* This recognised phenomenon whereby some individuals experience a *third* culture, or a '*culture between cultures*' (Sheard, 2008, p. 31), suggests that such individuals integrate the new culture they are exposed to into their emerging, home culture (Sheard, 2008). The notion of a third culture kid is another example of a category wherein the shoe does not quite fit for me. My *father* was a third culture kid – growing up in a number of countries within which his family had no connection or heritage due

to his father's work, and my mother was a third culture kid herself as her parents migrated from their homeland out of necessity for their safety. My *parents* therefore could be defined as third culture kids, but their *differing* cultures, racialisations, and cultural experiences shaped my childhood, which was characterised by exposure to a range of cultures which *I* experienced as normal, but which distanced me from many of my peers. By the time I was twelve years old, I had lived in four countries across three continents, and the time spent in my father's home country or the land where my mother was born was disproportionately outweighed by time spent in countries where we had no familial or ancestral connections.

Sheard (2008) explains how children absorb foreign cultures alongside the development of their own cultures. Applying this to my life, this suggests that by my preschooler years, I was already experiencing and integrating multiple cultural influences in the contexts within which I had been socialised by that point. I was living in my fourth country when I first started school. Chen et al. (2019, p. 333) highlight the significance of what they term the '*temporal order of exposure*' to different cultures in recognition that the cultures within which early cultural immersion and socialisation occur can impact our cultural preferences – an area which they insist requires further exploration.

Enculturation, socialisation and acculturation

Because of the circumstances of my childhood, the process of enculturation or first culture learning (Ferguson et al., 2016) relating to my heritage cultures has been intermittent, disrupted, and in some respects absent due to geographical location and lack of contact with others with shared cultural backgrounds. Ferguson et al. (2016, p. 166) has defined enculturation as referring to '*implicit and covert aspects of cultural transmission*' and distinguishes this from socialisation where '*explicit and overt aspects involv[e] direct instruction*'. Ferguson et al. (2016) outlines different modes of traditional enculturation including vertical (where parents transmit culture to their children), oblique (where institutions or other adults transmit cultural knowledge), and horizontal (where children transmit to one another). In my case, then, I have experienced multifaceted vertical enculturation, from my third culture parents who transmitted their individual hybrid cultures intermittently throughout my childhood, in contexts where oblique and horizontal cultural transmissions were also multilayered due to the locations and communities within which I lived in my early years. The vertical enculturation my parents transmitted may also have been in tension with my overt socialisation to non-heritage cultures. In turn, this resulted in my experiencing marginalisation – a form of acculturation which Thomson and Hoffman-Goetz (2009) explain originates from the work of John Berry, and which they define as occurring when someone does not identify with their new culture or their culture of origin, since they can only do so with each in part.

Dis-ease; accountability and taking up space

Writing this piece has pushed me to interrogate and name experiences from my childhood and features of my upbringing that I have taken for granted, and which I can now see contribute to the difficulties I have as a multiracial woman of colour in naming and claiming my *own* culture at a stage in my life where I feel it should by now

be clearer to me. The term third culture kid understates the complexity of my lived experience and cultural hybridity. It seems to me that the development of a strong personal cultural identity requires the successful amalgamation of influences, which then enables us to make a claim on and take up space in the cultures within which we have experienced the successful transmission of a sufficient depth of cultural knowledge. A moving example of this can be seen in Emily Zobel Marshall's (2025) poem 'I live here'. In the poem, Zobel Marshall recounts an experience that her late mother, who resided in Wales, had when asked by a local woman when she would be returning to Africa? In 'polished' Welsh her mother replies, 'I live here' (Zobel Marshall, 2025, p. 67). In one swift stroke, Zobel Marshall's mother claims her connection to the land and the community within which she is rooted. Her fluency with the Welsh dialect solidifies and legitimates her right to belong and embodies her cultural literacy in ways *I* have never been able to do.

I have long laboured under the weight of disconnection, and it comes from within as well as from experiences of being othered. My dis-ease with articulating my culture, and ultimately my identity, is rooted in a lifetime of having my presence in different spaces questioned, challenged, and disrupted. My accent, my colour, the absence of some cultural knowledge (usually accumulated in life stages that I experienced elsewhere) have all conspired to give me away.

In the context of a decolonial lens, the interrogation and reflexivity that is necessary to pursue an ethical relationship with our research contributes to a lifelong tug-of-war. The process of identifying the ways in which we are complicit in upholding systems that cause harm persists in muddying my clarity about the spaces where I belong and can take up space.

In her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2021) explains how she grounds her decolonial work in her *own* context and invites researchers to consider this an ethical responsibility. Whilst I wholeheartedly agree with much of Professor Tuhiwai Smith's writing, I *cannot* situate myself within a delineated framework amongst my cultural peers in an encompassing context because the identification of such peers is so difficult for me.

My inability to articulate my own culture is not surprising since it is not easily summarised, but this does not alleviate the pressure I feel to be *able* to do so. Wolff (2010) acknowledges the societal pressure around race and ethnicity as well as the societal boundaries that are constructed by this pressure, and explores the impact this had on *her*. Wolff recognised that her self-identity had been constructed in adherence to how society expected her to self-identify. In her paper about her experience of attending a LatCrit conference, Wolff (2010, p. 748) goes on to address a contextual example of her reluctance to be appraised as someone who did not belong. As a Black '*Jamerican*' woman attending a conference about critical Latina/o theory, she may have experienced a similar self-reckoning to the one I experienced when I applied for summer school in Trinidad. Though the experience was not ring fenced for individuals with Caribbean ancestry, I wondered if I might be taking up a space that someone else was more worthy of occupying.

My relationship with African, and later Caribbean, culture

Though I could not confirm the specifics of my multiracial heritage until recent years, I have always been cognizant that a significant proportion of my heritage connects me to ancestors in the African continent. This knowledge, as well as the alienation from my peer group that I experienced throughout my childhood, influenced the friendships that I established from my early teens through into adulthood – formative years for identity formation. Ferguson et al. (2016) considers the possibility that enculturation can occur and be motivated by experiences of discrimination that can drive individuals towards a search for belonging, which was likely the case for the period of my adolescence when identity formation and belonging were most important to me. I was able to connect more easily with third culture peers in general, but particularly with those who also experienced racialisation in the UK context. They were frequently peers of African heritage, and in some cases included extended family members of my peers who often '*adopted*' me and included me in cultural and familial social events.

The diverse relationships within which I could share *more* of myself and make connections were often bolstered by a shared love of world music, and an instinct for dance and movement which such music awakened, but I have always been cognizant that social acculturation aside, I always feel like some or all of me does not belong. The groups and individuals that claimed me and invited me to take up space saw something of themselves in me. They were othered too, but where we differed is my othering occurred in the absence of recourse to a broader peer group within which I could confidently claim membership.

Where my teens were characterised by rich relationships with a diverse peer group that frequently included African third culture kids and British kids of African heritage, from early adulthood my close and primary relationships (whilst still diverse given the places I was living) brought me closer to Caribbean heritage people who had often benefited from the opportunity to develop a strong cultural identity in their home countries before coming to the UK and becoming third culture *adults*. Through my marriage, the loss of both parents, and beginning my *own* family, my Caribbean community became the one within which many of the relationships that grounded me were contained. I don't think I could ever claim a Caribbean culture or identity, but the people who *do* are my family, and with them, parts of me that do not get to show up very often have access to affirming spaces within which I am once again claimed.

In recognising that I am outside of the cultures that my peers feel rooted within, I feel that I am honouring the complexity and depth of cultures as each is rich and nuanced and situated within the place, and history, and circumstances impacting the people that built and maintained it. I try to practice a reflexive awareness and remain vigilant to cultural appropriation, and to forms of oppression and violence that my privilege insulates me but not some of my peers or family from.

Identity and ancestral legacy

Many multiracial people who are raised in third culture spaces experience othering through multifaceted microaggressions. I have been complimented for my good English, asked where I am *really* from, and stared at in spaces where people who look

like me are rarely present. These particular triggers have made me more cognizant of my racial heritage which is where *identity* comes into the mix for me.

My status as a (complicated) third kid results in tensions between notions of identity rooted in my *values* and identity rooted in *phenotypical identification* whereby a huge margin of error applies. Race is a social construct. It is the core of racial ideation (Chen et al., 2019) and notions of race differ according to location. When I first moved to the UK as a child, I was often racialised by those around me as Asian or mixed Black heritage, but over time and as my social contexts changed, I came to be viewed as *mixed* heritage and *asked* rather than told what my heritage was.

This experience and the process of writing about it has highlighted key tensions for me. The decolonial desire to disrupt the troublesome practice of '*studying*' groups to which we do not belong is in tension with the problems which arise for people like me who may recognise the encouragement to *own* our own positionality in the contexts within which our knowledge and identity is situated, but feel paralysed as I have by the implications of this. On the basis of disconnection from our own heritage, we may experience barriers to proclaiming 'I live here' (Zobel Marshall, 2025, p. 67).

I am intuitively drawn towards notions of reclaiming ancestral knowledge and of Sankofa. Gray et al. (2022) describes the Adinkra symbol of Sankofa – which they translate to mean '*return go see/fetch*' – in their utilisation of this principle as a methodological approach. Where this applies to the mining of cultural knowledge, Sankofa becomes another example of a concept with which I deeply resonate but experience disconnection from and dis-ease about claiming. My parents have both passed on, and the complexity of my heritage and acculturation has been compounded by that fact. How can I retrieve cultural knowledge from which I have been severed by socialisation and circumstances which I did not choose?

Unlike theoretical conceptualisations of third culture kids, I do not have a land to which I can belong where I can be claimed. Whilst I work to avoid perpetuating cultural appropriation, misrepresenting myself, or getting too close to identifying with cultures that I feel disqualified from claiming, the decolonial injunction against making such egregious errors *could* stand to encompass the recognition and acknowledgment that the work of claiming culture is messy, and that some of us do not have the privilege of a continuous or recoverable connection to our language or the source of our heritage. This is of course a common wound for descendants of oppressed people who have experienced colonial violence over generations and in their own lifetimes, but for me, the disconnection from others who have experienced the severing of cultural ties in their lifetimes is where the bulk of my dis-ease originates.

Some of the barriers I experience in claiming my identity are informed by my racialisation as a woman of colour, but not as a Black woman. Outside the UK there are places where I would be racialised as white and I am acutely aware of this. Our phenotypes are used to *other* us and put us into categories, but according to context can afford us privileges that in turn perpetuate other modes of disconnection from one another.

Taking up space and the violence of policing spaces

Familiar (experiential) challenges that arise in decolonial dialogues about who can/should engage with decolonial work, who is well placed to authentically draw from ancestral knowledge, or represent a particular culture or community that they claim connection to are themselves an extension of colonial violence. Kolopenuk (2023) writes powerfully about one iteration of these discourses in the context of identity validation practices which have arisen in response to a 'pretendian problem' within academia. This issue, Kolopenuk writes, is associated with resources that are allocated to Indigenous students and researchers being misappropriated. The irony is not lost on her that the processes being developed in order to strengthen identity validation have the impact of intensifying Indigenous regulation and replicating systems of colonial governance.

Categorisation and delineation of individuals on the basis of their connection with cultures or communities ultimately perpetuates our disconnection because we engage with assessments of authenticity that reproduce colonial judgements about who can belong where, and who can claim which identity or engage with deeply reflexive work. I do not argue here for a lack of accountability; rather, I am arguing that accountability can be managed within communities and through connection, and that we need to take caution lest we reproduce violence where we seek to disrupt it. Rules and practices that monitor who can belong and who cannot have the potential to become as muddled and as problematic as the oppressive systems we seek to deconstruct.

In my thesis I have interrogated the merits of working *with* or alongside underserved communities with the ethical duty to refrain from perpetuating the emotional labour that disproportionately impacts racialised communities. I have weighed the increased authenticity that a project like mine would stand to gain if it was led by a Caribbean heritage researcher. I have also considered the emotional labour and cost to such a researcher of sitting with powerful stories that illustrate the oppression and shortcomings of culturally sensitive provision for communities like theirs. Ultimately, I do not believe that underserved people should have to fight on their *own* behalf for their needs or their experiences to be recognised. I do of course recognise that some may choose to, but the fight for equity is a shared one.

In her 1975 keynote address for Portland State University, Toni Morrison famously argued that racism is a distraction that keeps us explaining. I can see the application of her argument across multiple contexts and argue that in the same way that decolonisation is everyone's work, so is working to highlight ways in which research and health services can evolve to better serve communities that are not benefitting from them.

I have experienced a wide range of responses to my doctoral work. I have had the necessity of my research affirmed and celebrated by people from a range of backgrounds because it brings attention to needs that dominant discourses often fall short of including. I also experience challenges to my research, from a white woman at an academic conference asking me if I planned to interview some white people about *their* experiences too to make my findings more generalisable, to the understandable challenge that a Black, Caribbean undergraduate student made to my positionality and identity when she asked me why I was focusing my work on her community.

The challenges that arise with taking up space occur outside of academic contexts too. In 2021 the comedian Harry Gregory (known as White Yardie), who had lived in Jamaica from his early infancy to his 20s, was asked by a guest on a news series on which he was also appearing as a guest when he had *decided* to be Jamaican (Adejobi, 2021). As a white man, Gregory's presence in a space which centred a discussion about who can define Black *culture* was questioned when race was conflated with culture. In the fallout that followed, Gregory's community commended his handling of the incident and claimed him. After all, his cultural and national roots were clear and irrefutable.

In 2022, Ngozi Fulani, the founder of the charity Sistah Space, was challenged by Lady Sarah Hussey about where she *really* came from when she attended an event at Buckingham Palace (Rhoden-Paul, 2022). Fulani described Hussey's comments as a constituting a form of abuse (Rhoden-Paul, 2022), and she temporarily stepped down as Chief Executive of Sistah Space (Davies, 2023) due to the widespread abuse that she received on via social media (Mackintosh, 2022). The incident has also impacted the charity directly, such as in a recent incident when it was robbed and had most of its technology stolen (Davies, 2025). Much of the racist public backlash that Fulani experienced directly was centred on her clothing and how she identified with her African heritage (White, 2022). Fulani, a Black woman of Barbadian heritage, was vilified for identifying with her African ancestry, which she of course could not easily define.

The potential to co-produce third spaces

I have talked about third culture kids and the ways in which minoritised people often build community in spaces where we are unrepresented, claiming one another to make spaces for those on the margins. I have claimed many people, inviting them into *my* third space communities, and been claimed many times in turn. Where the unique conditions of a summer school study abroad experience make space for such claims to be made is in its ability to create a physical and intellectual space in which delegates can coproduce their own third culture *together*.

Hopson, Hart, and Bell (2012) define third culture building as a *process* where a new, separate culture is collaboratively formed as a cognitive space. They describe the fusion of two cultures, but I argue that the process is capable of incorporating *elements* of multiple cultures which can be harmoniously assembled in service of building common ground upon which rich connections and relationships can be formed. During my summer school experience, the element of sharing student work amongst peers created individual and additional spaces where delegates identified additional connections with peers who they had not yet spoken to earlier in the programme. This was so powerful as to arguably warrant the sharing element of the summer school programme to be brought forward to maximise the time and opportunities available to delegates to create these additional collaborative third spaces.

In centring my research on Black, Caribbean people living in the UK, my focus as usual is outside the frame of reference of many of my dominant peer group, but it sits more authentically within *my* world despite the valid persistence of questions (many self-generated) about why I chose this focus for my work. People who do not know me

sometimes wonder about why someone who is not Black or of Caribbean heritage is centring a community which is not their own. Explaining that I don't have such a community is necessary and maintains an important practice of accountability, but further perpetuates scrutiny about my culture and identity – creating more spaces within which I have to try to define myself. As something of an insider/outsider where my relationship to the Caribbean diaspora is concerned, the opportunity to attend summer school offered me a space within which to make connections with other third culture peers, people whose research also centres the Caribbean region and/or its people, and people with Caribbean heritage living and studying around the world. The spaces it created enabled me to bring parts of myself into learning spaces that had never been welcome there before and this transformed me.

In the summer school context, I found I was able to bypass the need to claim an identity and instead, claim my *family* who had tuned in to watch me present my work live, in *their* time zone for the first time. Their support and presence moved me into an emotional space and facilitated a vulnerability within which my presentation became more spontaneous than I had intended, and culminated in something of a breakthrough for me. The passion with which I speak about my work has been commented on before, but in that space, my new friends and peers provided meaningful feedback and engagement with my work which helped me to recognise that my complicated cultural socialisation did not preclude me from making meaningful contributions within which there were times and contexts where it was ok to take up space.

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