SEARCHING FOR THEORETICAL AGENCY: TOWARDS A BLACK AFRICAN IMMIGRANT STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY

En busca de la agencia teórica: Hacia una epistemología desde la perspectiva del inmigrante Negro-Africano

BERTRAND TCHOUMI
Morgan State University
Bertrand.Tchoumi@morgan.edu.

Abstract

 This article describes the theoretical construction of a Black African Immigrant Standpoint Epistemology (BAISE). BAISE is an emerging system of thought that seeks and locates the souls of Black African immigrants, re-centers their conceptions of knowledge, and describes their theory of action. Such an epistemology is critical as a tool for Black African immigrants to more effectively express their theoretical agency and construct an alternative form of knowledge that accounts for the totality of their experiences and their social realities. The article first describes the key tenets of several conceptual frameworks that have been appropriated and reconfigured to provide the conceptual foundations of BAISE. These core components are interwoven together to capture the complexity of the experiences and the realities of Black African immigrants and create a tapestry of concepts and knowledges providing the epistemological context for BAISE. Among the many coeval and complementary theories of knowledge available, theories that focus on agency and the construction of realities, on the valorization of previously discredited and discounted epistemological alternatives, as well as on the deconstruction of the positionality of Black African immigrants on the racialized checkerboard and on the re-centering of the marginalized and oppressed lives have seeded the emergence of BAISE. The second major section of this article presents the initial theoretical development of BAISE. The conceptualization process describes how the marginalized status of Black African immigrants shapes their identities and perspectives on the world.

Bertrand Tchoumi
DOI: 10.15366/reauam2020.1.001

Resumen

Este artículo describe la construcción teórica de una Epistemología basada en la Perspectiva del Inmigrante Negroafricano (EPINA). EPINA es un sistema de pensamiento emergente que busca y localiza las almas de los inmigrantes negroafricanos, y luego re-centra sus maneras de concebir el conocimiento y describe su teoría de la acción. Tal epistemología es fundamental como herramienta para que los inmigrantes negroafricanos puedan expresar su agencia teórica con mayor efectividad, y construir una forma alternativa de conocimiento que tenga en cuenta la totalidad de sus experiencias y realidades sociales. Este artículo describe primero los principios clave de varios marcos conceptuales que se han apropiado y reconfigurado para proporcionar los fundamentos conceptuales de EPINA. Estos componentes centrales se entrelazan para capturar la complejidad de las experiencias y las realidades de los inmigrantes negroafricanos y crear un tejido de conceptos y conocimientos que proporcionan el contexto epistemológico para EPINA. Entre las muchas teorías coetáneas y complementarias del conocimiento disponibles, aquellas que se centran en la agencia y la construcción de la realidad, en la valorización de alternativas epistemológicas previamente desacreditadas y descontadas, así como en la deconstrucción de la posicionalidad de los inmigrantes negroafricanos en el tablero de ajedrez racial y en el re-centrado de las vidas marginadas y oprimidas han sembrado el surgimiento de EPINA. La segunda sección principal de este artículo presenta el desarrollo teórico inicial de EPINA. El proceso de conceptualización describe cómo el estatus de marginacion de los inmigrantes negroafricanos define y da forma a sus identidades y perspectivas sobre el mundo.

Alternatives are not lacking in the world. What is indeed missing is an alternative thinking of alternatives (Santos 2016: 20).

Indigenous knowledges not only represent alternatives and challenges to dominant discourses, but also restore historical agency (McIsaac 2000: 99).

INTRODUCTION

Can we really conclude that the conditions of Black African immigrants can be fully understood through the lens of the Eurocentric system of thought and logic? This article argues no, and provides support for those who assert the urgency to construct alternative epistemologies that account for the experiences and the realities of Black African immigrants. Critical

social researchers (Santos 2012) are unanimous that we are living in a divided world, the Global North and the Global South. The ways of knowing developed from the dominant Global North side of the binary divide are suspicious and contested (Ani 1994). They do not represent the totality of the knowledge possible. They have proven themselves incomplete and sometimes culturally inadequate to objectively represent knowledges emerging from the invisible and discounted Global South side of the divide. In addition, the persistence of injustice, discrimination, and opportunity gaps have widened the "abyssal line" (Santos 2012) between the marginalized[1] and the hegemonic groups and prompted the emergence of alternative epistemologies in the Global South. The construction of a Black African Immigrant Standpoint Epistemology (BAISE), as described below, offers an appropriate and objective alternative to the Epistemocentrism and the Euro-American Colonial-Global-Capitalist Order (Tchoumi 2020).[2]

1. CONCEPTUAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONTEXT
This section reviews the tenets of various theoretical framewoks that have seeded the construction of a BAISE. Several tenets drawn from the constructivist/interpretivist framework ground BAISE in people's constructed realities. Other tenets are drawn from the epistemologies of the South, defined as a "crucial epistemological transformation [..] required [. .] to reinvent social emancipation on a global scale" (Santos 2016: 18). The "global South" (Santos 2012) represents the conceptual space of exclusion, silence and marginalization around the world. It is from such a global epistemological location that the critical race theory emerges to deconstruct the problematic of race and racialization in the United States (U.S.) and the standpoint epistemologies to re-center and theorize the life and experience of the marginalized populations. Tenets from both critical race theory and several standpoint epistemologies have also been incorporated into the theoretical framework of BAISE. The recombination

---

[1] The concepts of the marginalized, the oppressed and minority populations are used interchangeably in this article to refer to subaltern groups, mostly non-White individuals. They include all people of color, among whom are Black African immigrants.

[2] The BAISE was first conceptualized in a study (Tchoumi 2020) focused on the narratives of Black African Immigrants school leaders. "School leaders" refers to educators in positions of formal authority such as principals and assistant principals. Hence the reference to Black African immigrant school leaders in this article.

of these tenets in the BAISE framework, in turn, creates a new knowledge lens and shed a new light on the conceptual frameworks from which those core components were drawn (See Figure 1 below).

1.1. Theorizing Agency and the Construction of Realities

The constructivist/interpretivist approach provides a framework for understanding the production of the social world and seeking the meaning of experience (Creswell 2017) from the emic point of view. It centers the perspective of people involved in the experience. Therefore, the understanding of the complex world of lived and told experiences starts from the constructed narrative of those who lived them (Schwandt, 1994). Participants are social agents acting autonomously, intentionally, actively, and purposefully to "construe, construct, and interpret their own behavior and that of their fellow agents" (Schwandt 1994: 225).
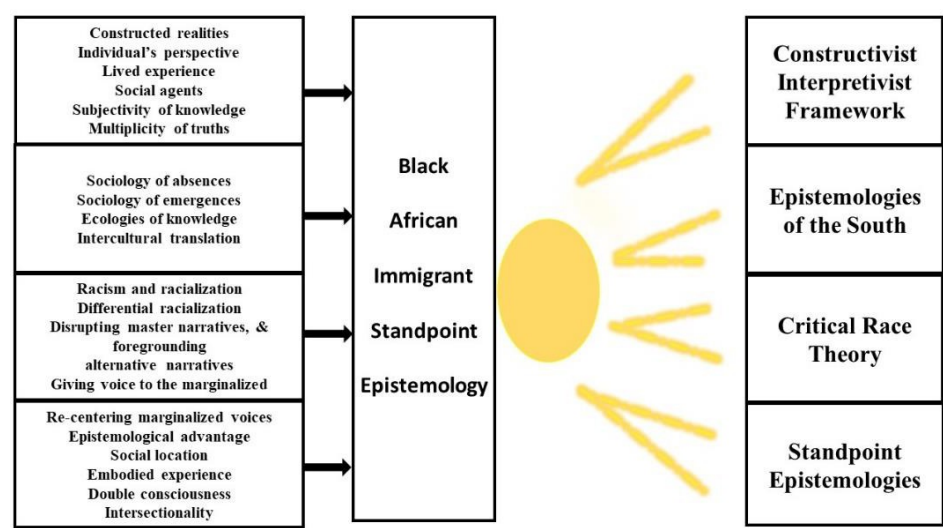
Figure 1. The Black African Immigrant Epistemology (BAISE) was born out of the appropriation and combination of tenets drawn from other theoretical frameworks. The newly constructed BAISE theoretical structure in turn sheds a new light on the meaning of the theories from which those concepts were extracted.

Knowledge is thus subjective. It is the result of perspectives constructed in human's mind (Glesne 2011, Guba & Lincoln 1989, Schwandt 1994). Constructed realities also derive from the interaction

between individual and social institutions and practices. The sum of perspectives born from those interactions can unveil how certain groups of people think and act (Glesne 2011). It also indicates the various ways a community of people sharing the same cultural experiences tend to construct social reality (Willig 2001). It is possible to determine and understand the leading viewpoints of each nation, region, or ethnic group based on the different experiences and perspectives of individuals (Willis 2007). The constructivist/interpretivist approach provides a ground for constructing a Black African immigrants' agency and the possibility to develop forms of knowledge that highlight their worldviews.

The constructivist thinking does not essentialize reality to fit a pre-conceived frame of thoughts; instead it embraces the notion of differences (Fuss 1989) through the subjective production of knowledge. It recognizes the plurality and the plasticity of reality. Reality is malleable and flexible to "fit purposeful acts of intentional human agents" (Schwandt 1994: 236). The constructed knowledge is an act of agency and consciousness. For instance, Black African immigrant school leaders develop their own consciousness and construct their reality based on their personal and professional experiences irrespective of the fact that they share the same continental origin and are subject to the same kind of racist and discriminatory practices other minority groups undergo.

There is no single reality (Schwandt 1994, Willig 2001). There are multiple interpretations of reality, multiple perspectives, and multiple versions of truth; in short, "there are 'knowledges' rather than 'knowledge'" (Willig 2001: 7). Sensitivity to diverse perspectives and viewpoints produces a more comprehensive understanding of reality. The idea of the multiplicity of truths and knowledges supports and validates the construction of BAISE as an act of agency based on the interpretation of reality and the construction of meaning and knowledges from the Black African immigrants' perspective.

1.2. Harvesting "Not Yet" Epistemological Alternatives
Epistemologies of the South derive from the concept of the plurality of knowledges (See Figure 2). Santos (2012) coined the concept of the epistemologies of the South to advance "new processes of production and valorization of valid knowledges and new relations among different types of knowledge" (p. 51) developed from a location of socioeconomic and political disadvantage. That borderless and conceptual location is

inhabited by the oppressed and the marginalized populations around the world. It is also a movement of resistance and a call for action intended to overcome human sufferings (oppression, discrimination) caused by capitalism and colonialism. Black African immigrants by their origin and their status in the U.S. count among the victims of the various form of colonialism and imperialism perpetrated by the global North.[3]
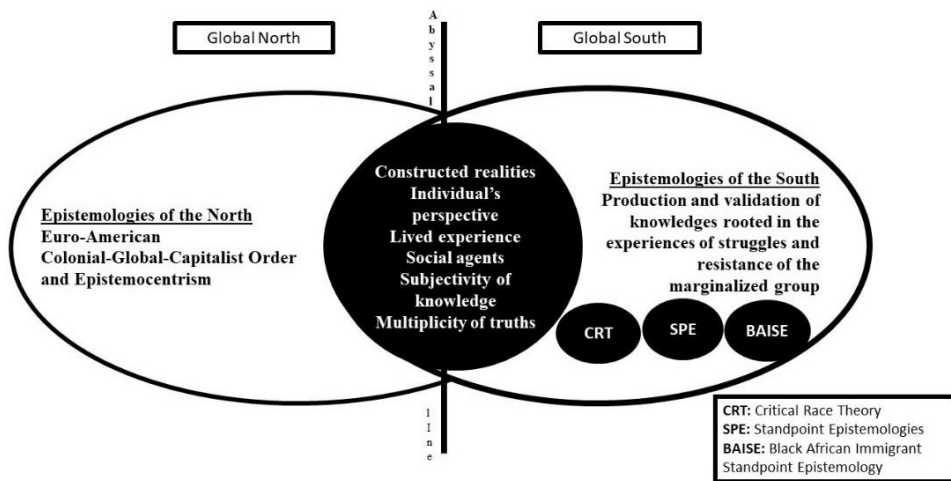
Figure 2. View from the South: The epistemologies of the South validate the emergence and the coexistence of coeval, complementary and parallel social forms and local knowledges.

The epistemologies of the South are grounded in two premises: the incompleteness of the Western understanding of the world and the endless availability of knowledges based on the infinite diversity of the world. These two complementary pillars of the epistemologies of the South acknowledge the limits of the Western monocultural worldviews and provide a space for new and discounted epistemologies to emerge. In

---

[3]The global North is the dominant side of binary divide. It is a trope for the capitalist, colonialist, imperial, and patriarchal societies represented by Europe and North America. It is also important to recognize that the global North exists in the global South through dictatorial leaders who serve at the pleasure of their Western masters and at the expense of the suffering populations.

addition to criticizing the global North hegemonic constructs, Santos (2012) has advanced four tenets around which the epistemologies of the South are built: sociology of absences, sociology of emergences, the ecology of knowledges, and intercultural translation.

The sociology of absences deconstructs the Euro-American imperial order of discourse and the rhetoric of (in)validation and (de)legitimation of alternative knowledges. It is less about the absence of knowledge than the production of its non-existence. Santos (2012) describes five mechanisms -referred to as logics- that Western cultures employ to discredit, exclude, and silence knowledges produced in the global South: the supremacy of Western conventions and scientific dogmatism; the linearity of time and history; the naturalization of differences; the dominance of globalization and universalism; and the preeminence of the capitalist form of productivity. These five logics have created five forms of non-existence referred to as: "the ignorant, the residual, the inferior, the local, and the non-productive" (Santos 2012: 54).

The BAISE challenges this kind of deficit thinking and stereotypical representation of non-existence via its carefully constructed counterhegemonic epistemology that highlights the theoretical assets and agency of Black African immigrants. BAISE becomes an additive proposal intended to amplify the present and fill the emptiness created by the subtractive rhetoric of non-existence.

The sociology of emergences follows logically as "a symbolic enlargement of knowledges, practices and agents" (p. 56). It calls for a new order of knowledge that is emotional and non-conventional. It argues the horizontality of paradigms of knowledge that look into the future of plurality and possibilities. The BAISE positions itself at the forefront of those possibilities to expand the horizon of knowledge focused on the conditions of Black African immigrants.

The third tenet of the epistemologies of the South is the ecology of knowledges. This tenet is grounded in the dialectic of knowledge and ignorance according to which "every kind of ignorance ignores a certain kind of knowledge and every kind of knowledge triumphs over a particular kind of ignorance" (Santos 2012: 57). This implies the incompleteness of all kinds of knowledge and the existence of multiple form of knowledges. The epistemologies of the South promote the form of knowledges histotically and currently discounted and excluded by the capitalist society and advocate for a cognitive justice. Such invisible

knowledges include ethnic minority ways of knowing, among which BAISE is positioned as described and documented in this article.

The final tenet of the epistemology of the South is intercultural translation. It is the space of "mutual intelligibility among the experiences of the world, both available and possible" (Santos 2012: 58). The intercultural translation is a hybrid form of understanding or an epistemological interaction that recognizes the validity and the legitimacy of various perspectives and knowledges. It doesn't give preeminence to any form of knowledge. Instead it puts them on the same horizontal plane and acknowledges their complementarity. As such, the idea of intercultural translation is crucial in mitigating conflict and dealing with diversity in absence "of a general theory and commando politics" (Santos 2016: 22).

1.3. Deconstructing the Location of Black African Immigrants on the Racial Checkerboard

The critical race theory deconstructs the concepts of race and racism and provides a theoretical space for examining how racial considerations permeate the construction of identities. In addition, it frames the deconstruction of the master narrative and advances an alternative discourse for raced and racialized groups, including Black African immigrants. Race and racism "explicitly and implicitly impact social structures, practices and discourse" (Yosso 2005: 70). Racist attitudes and actions mostly affect the daily experience of African Americans and people of color (Delgado and Stefancic 2001: 7). They are consistently seen through the glass darkly.

Therefore, to understand the experiences of racialized minorities and their understanding of their own experiences, it is important to understand their location on the racial checkerboard. For Black African immigrants in the U.S., it means understanding the box they check on the racial checkerboard. For convenience and oversimplification, the American society prefers to "place its citizens into boxes based on physical attributes and culture" (Delgado & Stefancic 2001: 70). This social taxonomy constitutes a hegemonic attempt to label, control, and divide.

Race is thus a social construction (Delgado & Stefancic 2001, Ladson-Billings & Tate IV 1995). The dominant group invents, manipulates, mutates, and destroys races and racial categories at will (Delgado and Stefancic 2001, Omi and Winant 1994). Race has become a proteiform concept that changes constantly to take the shape of the mind

and intentionality of the group that controls the discourse. "Raced" or "racialized" people stay in that category as long as the complex of superiority of the members of the dominant group remains unchecked and unchanged (Omi and Winant 1994).

The dominant society also categorizes minority groups through differential racialization based on space and time (Delgado & Stefancic 2001). The racialization process is of particular interest for Black African immigrants in school leadership. As Black immigrants, they cannot escape racialization. They are racially stamped from the beginning. Critical race theory provides a critical space for examining how the racialization works for them and how master narratives are developed to attempt to codify their social identity (Cook 2013). Their racial inferiorization justify their epistemological non-existence in the monocultural mind of the dominant group.

One of the tenets of the critical race theory provides critical tools for interrupting and countering the hegemonic discourse and for advancing an alternative narrative. In the racialization process of Black African immigrants, the dominant group "endows them with pseudo-permanent characteristics" (Delgado & Stefancic 2001: 8) and develops a mechanism of control to ensure their permanent subjugation. The dominant group achieves this goal by codifying and constructing a social identity for the members of each racialized group in order to frame who they are in the Eurocentric terms and to define how they ought to behave in the society. Often, this hegemonic discourse is racist, pejorative, distorted, and mythic. It is the site of stereotypical discourse and derogative iconography.

In their battle for liberation, marginalized and oppressed people use narratives as a tool for emancipation and as a cure for their muted and their mooted voices. Narratives have the strategic advantage of eliciting "the perspective of those at the bottom and thus potentially challenge normative assumptions about power relations" (Matsuda 1995: 185). In this space, Black African immigrant school leaders share their stories and their experiences in their own accented voices and regain their agency by legitimizing their experiential knowledge and lived experiences (Bell 1987; Delgado 1989). In addition, they acknowledge the plurality of worldviews and voices and propose new and alternative ways for understanding phenomena (Lopez 2001). Master narratives tend to advance a monolithic perception of the identities of subjugated people and,

consequently, homogenize the group to which they belong. This essentialist and deterministic perception assumes that

> [A]ll people perceived to be in a single group think, act, and believe the same things in the same ways. Such thinking leads to considerable misunderstanding and stereotyping (Ladson-Billings 2013: 40)

The only thing oppressed people have in common is their social location and their oppression. Apart from that, they live at the intersection of two or multiple identities. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) wrote: "No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity [..]. Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties and allegiances" (p. 9). It is the space for messed up and mixed up bodies. An examination of people's identities must take into consideration a set of factors including race, sex, class, national origin, sexual orientation, and how the combination of those factors within a single body plays out (Ladson-Billings 2013). The ideas of intersectionality and anti-essentialism provide a space for theorizing multiple identities and multiple consciousnesses within Black African immigrants while recognizing that they are all immigrants carrying all the baggages and all the myths associated with them.

Critical race theory provides a clear understanding of the location from which BAISE is theorized. It is from a location of racial inferiotity where Black African immigrants are homegenized. More importantly it inscribes the emerging epistemology in the context of emancipatory knowledge, that is, knowledge that resists opression and advances an alternative viewpoint.

1.4. Advancing the Preeminence of Marginalized Lives

The standpoint epistemology is a conceptual framework grounded in the social locations ("standpoints") of marginalized and oppressed lives. The standpoints of marginalized populations give them clear epistemological advantages because they offer a better understanding of the world: a comprehensive and impartial representation of the reality reflecting their interests and values and drawing from the variety of their experiences (Jaggar 1983). Social location influences people's experiences, shapes and limits their knowledge (Intemann 2010, Wylie 2003). As a result, they

experience different material circumstances and develop different viewpoints. The standpoint perspective subverts the modernist conception of knowledge as universal and rational and argues that knowledge is embodied (Intemann 2010, Wylie 2003). Standpoint epistemology focuses on the embodied experience of the marginalized and the oppressed.

The experiences and lives of the marginalized are problematic. The problem is not internal or biological; rather, it is external and structural. It is not pathological; it is positional. It is the problem of social inequality and discrimination that shapes their experiences and their social conditions. The stratification of the society creates an uneven and unjust social order with differential power relations that establish different social locations for people (Harding 1993, Wood 2005). Marginalized groups are conscious of these problematic social locations and of the influence they have on their interpretations of events. The unequal social structure determines the relevance of the standpoint theory (Wood 2005).

Marginalized and oppressed people live in subordinate social locations. That positionality affords them a kind of knowledge that seems "more accurate and less false" (Wood 2005) in comparison to the kind of knowledge members of the dominant group would have produced. Harding (1993) has discussed the validity of the standpoint epistemology in terms of "strong objectivity." It takes into consideration the experiences of an intersection of people from diverse backgrounds, sexual orientations and immigration status (Hirsh, Olson and Harding 1995). Strong objectivity also implies "strong reflexivity" placing the subjects and the object of knowledge on "the same critical casual plane" (Harding 1993: 136). As a result, the standpoint epistemology produces a marginalized-centered knowledge, that is,

> Knowledge *for* marginalized people (and those who could know what marginalized can know) rather than *for* the only use of dominant groups in their projects of administering and managing the lives of marginalized people (Harding 1993: 56, emphasis in the original).

A tenet of standpoint epistemology is that knowledge should be produced by a marginalized researcher, that is, someone who belongs to the same social location as the participants. It must be noted that this theory of epistemological and heuristic exclusivity is not absolute,

as Hart (2010) makes clear in his argument that behaviors associated with a particular worldview are adaptable and transferable to people from different cultural groups.

Another tenet of standpoint theory is that marginalized populations operate from the position of double intelligibility: at the margin of the dominant group and, at the same time, within their circle. They have access to the ideology of the dominant group and the knowledge embedded in the social institutions they control (Narayan 1989). That is why their knowledge is deemed comprehensive, inclusive, and more representative of the reality, granting them an epistemic advantage. The epistemic advantage entails "double consciousness" (Narayan 1989, Wood 2005), that is, the ability of the marginalized to function intimately and efficiently within two contradictory epistemological locations (Wood 2005).

People living under oppression and marginalization are more likely to adopt a critical posture in response to their social conditions (Narayan 1989). Their "critical emotional response" (Narayan 1989: 219) leads them to develop an oppositional consciousness. It also shifts their function and their position on the narrative and heuristic paradigm. They become authors and masters of their agentive narratives. Authorship and agency allow Black African immigrants to take over control of the discourse and to define who they really are in their own terms.

The standpoint is thus an "intellectual achievement" (Wood 2005). It is achieved through political and scientific struggle to understand one's experience through critical stances on the social order within which knowledge is produced (Harding 2004, Jaggar 1983, Pohlhaus 2002). It is also a manifestation of the awareness of how power structures, shapes, or limits knowledge in specific context (Intemann 2010). A standpoint theory is, therefore, an empowering act (Harding 2004) and an expression of human agency.

The standpoint epistemology acknowledges diversity and intersectionality. Individual can claim multiple social locations: "Any individual can have multiple standpoints that are shaped by membership in groups defined by sex, race-ethnicity, sexual orientation, economic class, etc." (Wood 2005: 22). Finally, the standpoint epistemology can contribute new or alternative perspectives to the body of research on the marginalized and the oppressed. Cornell (1994) provides a closing argument on the topic:

> The "standpoint of the least advantaged" means, concretely, that we think through economic issues from the standpoint of the poor, not the rich. We think through gender arrangements from the standpoint of women. We think through race relations and land questions from the standpoint of indigenous people. We think through questions of sexuality from the standpoint of gay people. And so on (p. 42).

In the interest of epistemic equity and agency, the BAISE draws from the standpoint epistemology the idea that Black African immigrants speak from the periphery. Knowledge developed from that location of marginalization is critical and local because it is born from struggle against an unjust and unequal social order. Although it is objective from the perspective of Black African immigrants, it does claim global representation of all marginalized groups.

2. CONSTRUCTING A BLACK AFRICAN IMMIGRANT STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY

The Black African Immigrant Standpoint Epistemology (BAISE) is a conceptual paradigm in construction, analogous to the several minority communities and marginalized constituencies that have developed exclusive standpoint theories, including the feminist standpoint, the queer standpoint, indigenous standpoint, and the indigenous women standpoint epistemologies that describe their positionality in the larger social landscape.

The Black African immigrant standpoint paradigm is an interpretative tapestry of concepts rooted in the dialogue of existing standpoint epistemologies as well as other epistemologies anchored in both global South and global North discourses. It is also grounded in the work of social scientists and Black editorialists (Omara 2017, Pierre 2004) who have investigated and discussed international migration issues and immigrant identity formations. Like any other localized and ethnic standpoint epistemology, a Black African immigrant standpoint is constitutive of the interconnection of Black African immigrant ways of being, knowing, and acting (Wilson 2001)..

2.1. Locating the Souls of Black African Immigrant Folks

The ontology of Black African immigrants swings within a triple cultural interface (Nakata 2007) based on their immigration status, the color of their skin, and the racialist culture within which they live. Additionally, their positionality is conditioned by their relationship with the members of the Black diaspora at large. Finally, the fingerprints of their African background cannot be discounted.

### 2.1.1. Multiple consciousness at work

W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) is one of the first African American researchers to have explored the souls of Black folks. In a seminal essay published more than a century ago, he described the state of mental bivalence between which Negro Americans balance. He coined the terms "double consciousness". According to Omara (2017), double consciousness

> Describes the experiences of being Black in America and being keenly aware of how you are viewed in a society that daily inflicts the indignity of racism upon you and forces you to create a palatable version of blackness that makes others feel safe.

Double consciousness then crystalizes the coexistence of two contradictory identities within one dark or brown body: the "two-ness" of being American and Negro, "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (Du Bois 1903: 5) in a deeply racist and divided landscape. For Black African immigrants living in such an environment, there is a third layer of consciousness, grounded in their immigrant experience and identity, and complicated by an increasingly pernicious anti-immigrant sentiment and rhetoric. Based on the unique experience of Black African immigrants in the U.S., Omara (2017) coined the concept of "triple consciousness" to describe the experience of being Black and immigrants. For Black African immigrant women and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) African immigrant folks, there are additional layers of consciousness that further complicate their ontology (See Figure 3).

Therefore, the experience of Black African immigrants may be "systematically and structurally different" (Wood 2005: 61) from the experiences of native Blacks or other non-Black immigrant minority groups. Ukpokodu (2013) has studied the unsettling and painful

experiences of Black African immigrants within U.S. educational institutions. He found that Black African immigrants undergo a "hegemonic symbolic violence" due to the color of their skin and the accent they speak. More importantly, the disparaging of one's accent is not a universal practice. Lippi-Green (1994) observed that "only accent linked to the skin that isn't white or signals a third-world homeland" (p. 29) is prejudiced and problematic. The dominant ethnocentric group has designed these discriminatory practices based on racial indicators and linguistic proficiency to naturalize and normalize the inferiority of non-White people, (pro)claim their incompetency, and de-legitimize their professional achievement (Harushimana, Ikpeze, & Mthethwa-Sommers 2013, Ukpokodu 2013).
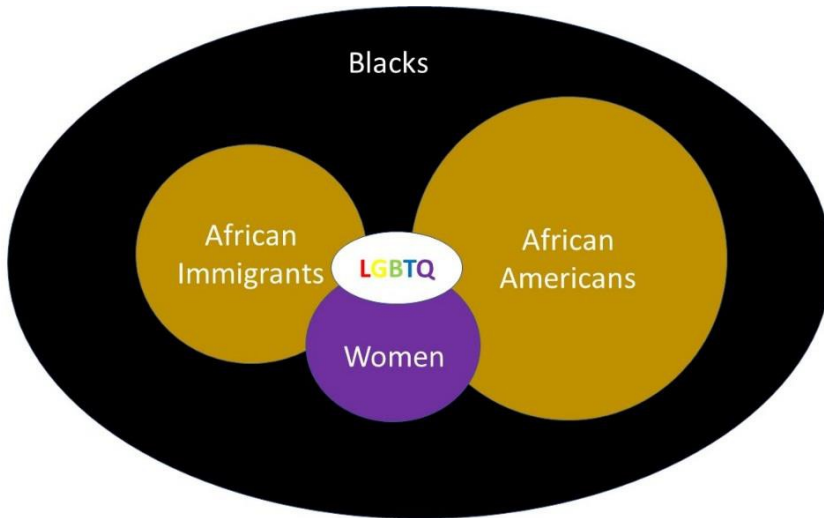
Figure 3: Sample of a multilayered intersectionality of Black African immigrants. LGBTQ and Women create another layer of intersectionality within the Black African immigrant community.

The plot to de-legitimatize Black African immigrants is part of the constant ridiculing and denigration of immigrants in the U.S. Many rightwing politicians, including president Trump and his far-right allies, openly expressed their hatred and disdain for immigrants from poor and so-called "shitholes countries". Richwine (2009) reached a ludicrous and unthinkable conclusion about the mental abilities of immigrants in his Harvard sanctioned dissertation. He claimed that the IQ of immigrants is

lower than that of the White majority and that their intellectual deficiency is likely to persist over several generations. However, many reports indicate that Black African immigrants have the highest educational attainment of any group in the United States. Some editorialists even referred to them as the "invisible model minority" (Page 2007).

This experience with racism and discrimination is similar to the experience of native African Americans. A problem for most Black African immigrants is that they learn their race for the first time when they cross the borders of a majority White country (Warner 2012). Black African immigrants must pass as African Americans to be counted (Okonofia 2013). The displacement Black African immigraants experience may lead to changes in identities, perspectives, and understandings. The experience with dislocation comes with disrupted identities and reconstructed self. It is both a liberating and an oppressive process (Sonn and Lewis (2009). Unfortunately, the racialization of Black African immigrants, resulting from race relations in the United States, complicates the relationships between Black African immigrants and African Americans.

2.1.2. Clash of blackness

The positionality of Black African immigrants in the U.S. cannot be fully understood without situating them in relation to African Americans. Having a better understanding of the dynamics between the two subgroups aids one to understand how the dominant group uses "manipulative deflection" (Okonofua 2013) to reaffirm the overarching hegemonic social order. It also helps one to understand the unique worldview of Black African immigrants and validates the imperative for a Black African immigrant standpoint theory that affirms the heterogeneity of the Black population in the United States.

There are existing tensions and conflicts between Black African immigrants and African Americans (Arthur 2000, Omara 2017, Pierre 2004). The hostility and misunderstanding between them are due, in part, to the cultural differences and the socio-economic and political barriers between the two groups (Arthur, 2000). These perceived differences have sometimes led to violence between Black African immigrants and African Americans (Cunningham 2005). However, this collision did not happen by chance. It stems from a well-executed hegemonic manipulation initiated by the dominant group. Their members constantly disseminate and perpetuate "myths and stereotypes to demean Black people and keep them deliberately

separated and isolated so that they can be dominated" (Moikobu 1981: 192). They subvert and manipulate the "ethnicity paradigm" to reinforce the racialist myth of African Americans' cultural inferiority. They credit Black African immigrants with superior cultural capital and positive behavioral dispositions that may be lacking to African Americans. This view repackages the "culture of poverty" and the cultural deficiency discourses to perpetuate a "cultural racism" that adversely affects all Blacks in the United States. Research and scholarship also contribute to this social manipulation:

> [T]he mainstreams scholarship on Black immigrant 'incorporation' in the United States society, moreover, works in ways that use immigrants' purported 'ethnic' identification to further a subtle, yet insidious, racialist discourse about [United States-born] black cultural inferiority" (Pierre 2004: 150)

It is a racist plot to set Blacks against Blacks and maintain the status quo. What it brings to the BAISE is the recognition of the diversity within the Black community as well as the Black African immigrant distinctiveness. It also inscribes the "ethnic distinctiveness" in the context of power relation and ongoing practices of racial subjugation. This idea is consistent with Collins' (1997) thought which asserts that "standpoint theory concerns the commonality of experiences and perspectives that emerge for groups differentially arrayed within hierarchical power relations" (p. 377). It is from that shared location of inequality and marginality that the Black African immigrant group is constituted. The narratives that emerge from that social location of disempowerment, dehumanization, and marginalization are used to understand the relationships located within the social power relations (Ardill 2013: 334).

2.1.3. Fingerprints from the homeland

Most Black African immigrants come from the so called "Third world countries." Coming from Third world countries can be problematic in America because those countries are associated with disparaging stereotypes and their people are perceived as less civilized. In the mind of African American students, Black African immigrants are associated with the images of "Tarzan, wild animals, and the 'Dark Continent', which have made the 'African' in African American something to be avoided and

Bertrand Tchoumi

reviled" (Traore 2003: 2). In an open letter to Black African immigrants, Seppou (2017) editorializes on their plight in these terms:

> People will hold stereotypes about you [Black African immigrant]. Some might ask if you've lived on trees or jungles and others won't even ask, they'll assume you did. Others will think your entire existence has been defined by hunger and poverty.

As an example, one day, as I dismissed my 6ᵗʰ grade French class at a U.S. public school, an African American female student gave me a bi-folded piece of paper where she drew a picture of a hungry and scrawny man and a child, representing me and my little baby girl, surrounded by flying bugs. It was not just the grotesque drawing that was problematic; she also added the following inscription: "AFriCA. We Hungry. Mr. ChuBie aNd his BaBie." This picture reflected the student's mistaken stereotypical thinking that Black Africans are all poor and must rely on assistance to survive.

These disparaging stereotypes are deeply ingrained in the fabric of the American society. They precede the arrival of the new Black African immigrants in the U.S., condition their social interactions with both members of the Black diaspora and White Americans, and inform and influence how Black African immigrants position themselves in the society.

The massive exodus of Africans out of Africa towards Western countries could be indicative of trouble living in Africa. Although there is no single explanation as to why Africans leave in massive numbers, Takougang (2006) argues that

> Africa's rather desperate economic and political future have been important factors for recent large-scale migration to the United States; it could be argued that the apparent relaxation of the United States' immigration policy has also been very helpful (p. 3).

In this regard, Black African immigrants are seeking new opportunities and better conditions of life. Their national identity is the product of a double influence. The first influence is their strong cultural and traditional background. Many African countries have within their national and regional traditions kept alive traditions and ancestral values that they impart to their people. The other influence is the result of history: the

history of imperialism and colonialism that have left a lasting impact on the contemporary political systems and social structures of many Black African countries. For instance, an education system that is more Eurocentric than African-centered; students learn more about European culture and civilization than their own geography, history, and people (Omara 2017). In many African countries, the languages of colonizers have become official languages.

By the time Black African immigrants come to the United States, most of them are already carrying a complex and hybrid identity constituted of their traditional culture and their western-centered formal education. With the triple consciousness factors and the collision with other Blacks from the diaspora, the personality and the identity of Black African immigrants become even more complicated and multidimensional.

2.2. Repositioning the Black African Immigrant Knowledge

BAISE is an autonomous and autotelic construct intended to "develop a form of expression and intelligibility" (Mupotsa 2007) exclusive to Black African immigrants. It encompasses the totality and the complexity of their lived experiences as Black and immigrant at the same time. It uses their lives and their material conditions as the starting point and the way of knowing. Their daily life and professional experiences profoundly shape what they know, how they see themselves, and what they believe (Wood 2005). For example, the leadership experiences of Black African immigrant school leaders shape who they are as well as their understanding of the reality. The BAISE proclaims the primacy of and gives preeminence to the experiences and realities of Black African émigrés around the world.

The production of knowledge is socially situated and structured by the power relations and politics. In line with the work of Collins (1991) on Black feminist epistemology, the BAISE assumes that (i) the content of the thought cannot be dissociated from the historical and material circumstances that shape the lives it produces. Only Black African immigrants can produce a Black African immigrant standpoint, (ii) Black African immigrants as a community share certain commonalities, (iii) there is a real diversity and varieties among Black African immigrants, and (iv) the Black African immigrant standpoint reveals how Black African immigrant school leaders make sense of their work at U.S. public schools.

This means that a BAISE is not the product of a historical pre-determination nor an essentialist concept; instead, it is achieved through

political actions and struggles. The problematic of Black African immigrant standpoint is rooted in the history of colonization, racism and marginalization (Moreton-Robinson 2013). This condition generates knowledges and experiences situating them in different power relations and affecting the experiences of individuals sharing similar material conditions. The cultural and social positioning complicates these circumstances as well as the sets of complex relations that shape the daily life of Black African immigrants (Moreton-Robinson 2013).

2.3. Black African Immigrant Standpoint Theory of Action
Black African immigrants live within a triple cultural interface: ethnic, immigrant, and (Black) American (Pierre 2004). It includes how they look at the world, how they understand it, and how and what knowledge they operationalize (Nakata 2007). The theory of action of a BAISE is located at the third prong of the cultural interface. The BAISE provides knowledge and strategies to negotiate and navigate the cultural interface (Ardill 2013) as well as strategies that challenge and interrupt the existing unequal social order. Sprague (2001) puts the imperative in these terms:

> A fully social standpoint theory offers us a strategy for constructing knowledge that explicitly takes into account the distortions prompted by social relations of domination and works to ground and reconcile divergences. Ultimately, it presents us with a political challenge and holds accountable as scholars for our role in meeting it. The surest way to increase the commensurability of standpoints is to use them strategically to construct knowledge that exposes and undermines the social relations that now divide us (p. 535)

Based on this conceptualization of the transformative and cathartic function of a standpoint theory, the BAISE attempts to interrupt and redress the stereotypical images of Black African immigrants in the American society and destabilizes the underlying cultural racism that supports it. From this perspective, Black African immigrants position themselves as "epistemologically significant" subjects producing knowledge that is rooted and delimited by their marginalized social position (Pohlhaus 2002: 285).

In fulfilling this function, the BAISE also gives them voice and includes them within the intellectual knowledge production system.

They are no more absent or non-existent, as the BAISE thus affirms their epistemological presence and agency. Therefore, BAISE promotes "the representation of historically underrepresented social groups whose experiences might be relevant to the particular research context" (Intermann 2010: 792). Today, intellectuals and communities are searching for new ways to grapple with difference (Collins 1992). A BAISE provides a platform for developing alternative views that can help understand the differences within and among groups and help identify possible commonalities.

CONCLUSION

This article has described the conceptualization of a Black African Immigrant Standpoint Epistemology (BAISE). BAISE is an emerging system of thought that seeks and locates the souls of Black African immigrants, repositions their conception of knowledge, and describes their theory of action. Such an epistemology is warranted as a way for Black African immigrants to express their theoretical agency and construct an alternative form of knowledge that accounts for the totality of their experience and their social realities. The article first described the key tenets of several conceptual frameworks that have been appropriated and reconfigured to provide the conceptual foundations of BAISE. These core components were interwoven together to capture the complexity of the experiences and the realities of Black African immigrants and create a tapestry of concepts and knowledges providing the epistemological context for BAISE. The second major section of this article presented the initial theoretical development of BAISE. The conceptualization process described how the marginalized status of Black African immigrants shapes their identities and perspectives on the world.

This introduction of BAISE to the global forum of knowledges will surely attract strong Eurocentric criticism. This is to be expected, as the construction of the non-existence of alternatives has always been a modus vivendi for hegemonic theorists. Consistent with the promises and the premices of the epistemologies of the South, the BAISE emerges as "a proposal-in-progress" (Santos and Meneses 2020: xxxii), a "not yet" (Santos 2012: 54) epistemology in the active process of becoming an epistemological reality. A reality that coexists with and complements other localized and ethnic epistemologies and serves as catalyst for the emergence

of other epistemological constructions such as a Black African women standpoint epistemology or other invisible minority epistemologies.

REFERENCES

Ani, M. (1994) *Yurugu: An African-centered critique of European cultural thought and behavior*, Trenton, NJ, Africa World Press.

Ardill, A. (2013) "Australian sovereignty, indigenous standpoint theory, feminist standpoint theory: First people's sovereignties matter", *Griffith Law Review*, *22,* 2, pp. 316-343.

Arthur, J. (2000) *Invisible sojourners: African immigrant diaspora in the United States*. Westpoint, CN, Praeger.

Bell, D. (1987) *And we will not be saved: The elusive quest for racial justice*, New York, Basic Books.

Cook, D. A. (2013) "Blurring the boundaries: The mechanics of creating composite characters", in M. Lynn & A. D. Dixson (eds.), *Handbook of critical race theory in education*, New York, Routledge, pp.181-194.

Collins, P. H. (1991) *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, New York, Routledge.

Collins, P. H. (1992) "Reply on Black feminist thought", *Gender & Society* 6, 3, pp. 517-519.

Collins, P. H. (1997) "Comment on Hekman's "truth and method: Feminist standpoint theory revisited": Where's the power?", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, *22,* pp. 375-381.

Cornell, P. (1994) "The impact of changes in teaching and learning on furniture and the learning environment", *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 92*, pp. 33-42.

Creswell, J. W. (2003) *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.), Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W. (2007) *Qualitative inquiry & research design*, Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE Publications.

Cunningham, J. (2005) "Tension between Africans and African Americans surface again", *New York Amsterdam News*, *96*(6).

Delgado, R. (1989) "Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative", *Michigan Law Review,* 87, 8, pp. 2411-2441.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001) *Critical race theory: An Introduction*, New York, New York University Press.

Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903) The souls of Black folks. http://sites.middlebury.edu/soan105tiger/files/2014/08/Du-Bois-The-Souls-of-Black-Folks.pdf (Accessed: April 2019).

Fuss, D. (1989) *Essentially speaking: Feminism, nature, and difference*, London, Routledge.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989) *Fourth generation evaluation*, Newbury Park, CA, SAGE Publications.

Harding, S. (1993) Rethinking standpoint epistemology: What Is "strong objectivity?", in L. Alcoff. & E. Potter (eds.), *Feminist epistemologies*, New York, Routledge, pp. 49-82.

Harding, S. (2004) "Introduction: standpoint theory as a site of political, philosophic, and scientific debate", in S. Harding (ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 1-15.

Hart, M. A. (2010) "Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and research: The development of an Indigenous research paradigm", *Journal of Indigenous Voices in Social Work,* 1, 1 https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/bitstream/handle/10125/15117/v1i1_04hart.pdf (Accessed: January 2019).

Harushimana, I., Ikpeze, C., & Mthethwa-Sommers, S. (2013) "Telling it like it is: Legitimizing the brains under the colonial masks", in I. Harushimana, C. Ikpeze, & S. Mthethwa-Sommers (eds.), *Reprocessing race, language, and ability: African-born educators and students in transnational America*, New York, Peter Lang, pp. 1-9.

Hirsh, E., Olson, G., & Harding, S. (1995) "Starting from marginalized lives: A conversation with Sandra Harding", *JAC, 15,* 2, pp.193-225. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866024 (Accessed: March 2019).

Intemann, K. (2010) "25 Years of feminist empiricism and standpoint theory: Where are we now?", *Hypatia*, 25, 4, pp. 778-796.

Jaggar, A. M. (1983) "Feminist politics and epistemology: The standpoint of women", in S. Harding (ed.), *The feminist standpoint theory*

reader: Intellectual & political controversies, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 55-66.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2013) *Critical Race Theory -What it is not! Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, London, Routledge.

Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate IV, W. F. (1995) "Toward a critical race theory of education", *Teachers College Records*, 97, 1, page 47-68.

Lopez, G. R. (2001) "Re-visiting white racism in educational research: Critical race theory and the problem of method", *Educational Researcher*, pp. 29-33.

Lippi-Green, R. (1994) "Accent, standard language ideology, and discriminatory pretext in the courts", *Language in Society*, 23, 2, pp. 163-198.

McIsaac, E. (2000) "Oral narratives as a site of resistance: Indigenous knowledge, colonialism, and western discourse", in G. J. Dei, B. L. Hall & D. G. Rosenberg (eds*.)*, *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts*, Toronto, Canada, University of Toronto Press, pp. 89-101.

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2013) "Towards an Australian indigenous women's standpoint theory", *Australian Feminist Studies*, *28,* 78, pp. 331- 347 (Accessed: September 2019).

Moikobu, J. M. (1981) *Blood and flesh: Black American and African identification*, Wesport, CN, Greenwood Press.

Mupotsa, D. S. (2007) "African feminist standpoint", *Postamble*, 3,1, pp. xi-xxiii.

Nakata, M. (2007) The cultural interface. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, *36*, pages 7-14.

Narayan, Uma (1989) "The project of a feminist epistemology: Perspective from a nonwestern feminist", in S. Harding (ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual & Political Controversies*, New York and London, Routledge, pp. 213-224.

Okonofua, B. A. (2013) "I am Blacker than you": Theorizing conflict between African immigrants and African Americans in the United States" http://sgo.sagepub.com/content/3/3/2158244013499162.full-text.pdf+html (Accessed: May 2019).

Omara, A. (2017) "Triple consciousness: To be black and an immigrant in America", *Salon* (September 17) https://www.salon.com/2017/09/17/triple-consciousness-to-be-black-and-an-immigrant-in-america (Accessed on March 2019).

Omi, M., & Winant, H. (1994) *Racial formations in the United States*, London, Routledge.

Page, C. (2007) "Black immigrants: An invisible 'model minority", *Real Clear Politics,* https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2007/03/black_immigrants_an_invisible.html (Accessed: May 2019).

Pierre, J. (2004) "Black immigrants in the United States and the "cultural narratives" of ethnicity", *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 11, pp. 141-170.

Pohlhaus, G. (2002) "Knowing communities. An investigation of Harding's standpoint epistemology", *Social epistemology*, 16, 3, pp. 283-293.

Richwine, J. (2009) *IQ and immigration policy*, Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, http://delong.typepad.com/pdf-1.pdf (Accessed: August 2018).

Lippi-Green, R. (1994) "Accent, standard language ideology, and discriminatory pretext in the courts", *Language in Society*, 23, 2, pp. 163-198.

Santos, B. D. S. (2012) "Public sphere and epistemologies of the South", *Africa Development*, 37, 1, pp. 43-67.

Santos, B. D. S. (2016) "Epistemologies of the South and the future", *From the European South: A Transdisciplinary Journal of Postcolonial Humanities*, 1, pp. 17-29.

Santos, B. D. S., & Meneses, M. P. (eds., 2020), *Knowledges Born in the Struggle: Constructing the Epistemologies of the Global South*, New York, Routledge.

Schwandt, T. A. (1994) Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N.K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (eds.), *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues*, Thousand Oaks, CA, SAGE Publications, pp. 221-259.

Seppou, N. (2017) "An open letter to Black African immigrants", *Huffington Post*, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/nadege-seppou/open-letter-to-african-immigrants_b_8925614.html (Accessed: January 2018).

Sonn, C. C., & Lewis, R. C. (2009) "Immigration and identity: The Ongoing struggles for liberation", in M. Montero & C. C. Sonn (eds.), *Psychology of liberation: Theory and applications*, New York, Springer, pp. 115-133.

Sprague, J. (2001) "Comment on Walby's "Against Epistemological Chasms: The Science Question in Feminism Revisited": Structured knowledge and strategic methodology", *Signs*, 26, 2, pp. 527-536. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175452 (Accessed: June 2018).

Takougang, J. (2006) *Diaspora: African immigrants in USA. Contemporary African immigrants to the United States*. www.aframglobal.org/articles/article/3077802/48646.htm (Accessed: December 2018).

Tchoumi, B. (2020) *Why do you "talk" like that? The accented voices of Black African immigrants in school leadership*, Doctoral Dissertation, Morgan State University.

Traore, R. L. (2003) "African American students in America: Reconstructing new meanings of "African American" in urban education", *Intercultural Education*, 14, 3, pp. 243-254.

Ukpokodu, O. N. (2013) "The African-born in America break the silence on racism and linguicism", in I. Harushimana, C. Ikpeze, & S. Mthethwa-Sommers (eds.), *Reprocessing race, language, and ability: African-born educators and students in transnational America*, New York, Peter Lang, pp. xiii-xxii.

Warner, O. (2012) "Black in America too: Afro-Caribbean immigrants", *Social and Economic Studies,* 61, 4, pp. 69-103.

Willig, C. (2001) *Introducing qualitative research in psychology: Adventures in theory and method*, Philadelphia, Open University Press.

Willis, J. W. (2007) *Foundations of qualitative research: Interpretive and critical approaches*, London, SAGE Publications.

Wilson, S. (2001) "What is Indigenous research methodology?", *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 25, 1, pp. 175-179.

Wood, J. T. (2005) "Feminist standpoint theory and muted group theory: Commonalities and divergences", *Women Language*, 28, 2, pages 61-72.

Wylie, A. (2003) "Why standpoint matters", in R. Figueroa & S. Harding (eds.), *Science and Other Cultures: Issues in Philosophies of Science and Technology*, New York, Routledge, pp. 26-48.

Yosso, T. J. (2005) "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth", *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8, 1, pp. 69-91.