

Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad

Volume 32, Issue 2, pp. 191-194

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DOI 10.36366/frontiers.v32i2.475

THE
FORUM
ON EDUCATION
ABROAD

Language Learning as a Process of Transformative Socialization

Anya, U. (2016). *Racialized identities in second language learning: Speaking blackness in Brazil*. Routledge. 262 pp. ISBN 13 9781138927780.

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Abstract

Review of Uju Anya, *Racialized identities in second language learning: Speaking blackness in Brazil*. Routledge, 2016.

Keywords:

Study abroad, race, identity, second language learning, Portuguese as a second language

The social¹ and multilingual² turn in second language acquisition has brought increasing scholarly attention, especially to how students employ

¹ Firth and Wagner (1997) put forward the needs to understanding identity in SLA research. The term “social turn” was explicitly advocated by David Block in 2003 in his book *The Social Turn in Second Language Acquisition*. In his book, he suggests a more interdisciplinary and socially informed approach to SLA research.

² Scholars have addressed the importance of the bi/multilingual nature of the second language learning and study abroad context (e.g. Kramsch, 2006, Ortega, 2013). For instance,

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languages and other semiotic resources to construct and perform different identities related to social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality and co-construct meaning and negotiate differences in various communities. In her book *Racialized Identities in Second Language Learning*, Dr. Uju Anya adopts a critical perspective and uses a sociolinguistic approach to understand the experience of African American sojourns studying abroad in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, where blacks form 80% of the population. She foregrounds race in language learning practices and introduces the idea of language learning as a “transformative socialization” in this case, presenting through how students are “transformed into new ways of understanding, doing, and speaking Blackness” (p. 3) via their participation within and outside different classrooms, as well as various types of “multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural communities” (p. 23) in Brazil.

Situated in the socio-historical and political context of racial inequality in the U.S., Anya first reviews the urgency of researching the language learning experience of the underrepresented population, African Americans, in the field of applied linguistics. Although previous studies show that African Americans have favorable opinions and strong desires to learn new languages, the population is still missing from advanced-level language classrooms. Instead of investigating the reasons behind the nonexistence of African Americans in language classrooms, Anya takes a new perspective by looking at experiences of blacks who, to different degrees, succeeded in language learning. Anya recruited four focal participants (i.e., *Leti*, *Rose*, *Didier*, and *Nina*) and provides us a detailed picture of their interaction and participation in different communities.

In Chapter 2, Anya introduces the key theoretical concepts that guide the study, including languaging, translanguaging, intersectionality of multiple selves, the dynamics of positioning, and investment. Anya conceptualizes study abroad and language learning as a process of “transformative socialization,” a journey that not only socializes students into the target language communities, but more importantly, also transforms students’ identities “by changing how we think, what we can do, and our future possibilities in becoming” (p.32).

In Chapter 3, “*Telling Black Stories in Language Learning Research*”, Anya asserts the need for critical inquiry in applied linguistics. She describes in detail the methodology used to gather and analyze the information. Data presented in this book include video-recorded interactions of two courses, activities, and excursions, semi-structured interviews, student journals and writings, as well as field notes. Such data afford the possibility to embrace students’ learning

Ortega (2013) discusses the current flow in SLA and emphasizes embracing the bi/multilingual turn.

trajectories as “whole people and whole lives” (Coleman, 2013, p.30). Thematic, critical, and conversation analyses were used to describe various ways of how African Americans learned to speak their multiple subjectivities and (dis)engaged in social practices. The next four chapters (Chapter 4-7) provide detailed examinations of the four focal cases. Anya presents a series of vivid life stories of the four participants and looks at “how diasporic affinity fueled by historical, social, cultural similarities between African Americans and Afro-Brazilians incentivized and contributed to all four study participants’ investments in learning Portuguese” (p.8). By documenting how they dealt with difficulties and challenges in learning a new language and comparing their linguistic actions in different communities within and outside classrooms, Anya discusses how their emergence and transformation of new identities and the nature of (non)participation contribute to their investment and outcomes.

The highlight of the book is that it is well situated in the sociopolitical context, and it calls for more attention to the anti-racist agenda in the field of language education. Whereas racial inequality is a salient social problem in the U.S. and research that closely examines identities certainly could not bypass such issues, as Anya points out, there is strong resistance in the field to “openly addressing polemics such as racism, sexism, xenophobia, colonialism, homophobia, and elitism” (p.13). Critical examinations of the intersectionality of identities are needed. Even though study abroad researchers are urged to investigate the social aspects of language learners and go beyond measuring the time of using languages and linguistic outcomes, little research has studied the layer of race and ethnicity.

Another strength of the book is that Anya describes herself as the fifth participant of the study and incorporates her own life trajectories as an African American. Incorporating the researcher’s subjectivities and non-neutrality within the sociopolitical world they study is “risky” but crucial in qualitative research. In Chapter 3, she presents her own stories and positions herself as both a researcher and a participant. In the following chapters, we could see that she agentively led or participated in students’ activities such as traveling and going to night clubs.

In the last chapter of her book, Anya revisits the focal participants’ investment and communities they participated in and proposes an alternative perspective to evaluate students’ language outcomes. She redefines the meaning of learning a new language as not only linguistic improvement but also how students use the new language in transformative socialization within different communities and how these experiences shape their old and new knowledge of the target language and culture. Unfortunately, Anya does not offer further suggestions to this concern. In addition, the study abroad program examined in

this book was a ten-week program. It would be interesting to see how students participate in communities longitudinally.

This book is an excellent resource for scholars who are interested in second language learning and study abroad context, since it is a timely addition to the research on race and ethnicity in this field. It would be also very beneficial to graduate students, study abroad program curriculum developers, and educators, given that it successfully provides valuable insights on how to position a researcher in the field site, how to understand students' needs across different classrooms, and how to help students engage in target language communities.

Author Biography

Yi Wang is a Ph.D. Candidate in Chinese Linguistics at the University of Arizona, where she also holds two Ph.D. minors, one in Second Language Acquisition and Teaching and another one in Anthropology & Linguistics. Her research focuses on study abroad, language ideology, language policy, and second language use in multilingual contexts.

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