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The Storytellers: Identity narratives
by NZ African youth – a participatory
visual methodological approach to
situating identity, migration and
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Reviewed by
Adele Norris



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The Storytellers: Identity narratives by NZ African youth – a participatory visual methodological approach to situating identity, migration and representation, by Makanaka Tuwe

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This fascinating and original work explores the experiences of third-culture children of African descent in New Zealand. The term 'third-culture kid' refers to an individual who grows up in a culture different from the culture of their parents. Experiences of youth of African descent is under-researched in New Zealand. The central research focus explores racialised emotions internalised by African youth that are largely attributed to a lack of positive media representation of African and/or black youth, coupled with daily experiences of micro-aggressions and structural racism. In this respect, the case-study analysis is reflective of careful, methodological and deliberative analysis, which offers powerful insights into the grass-roots strategies employed by African youth to resist negative stereotypes that problematise and marginalise them politically and economically.

Study participants (third-culture youth) are situated as 'storytellers'. The arts are used as a medium to not only explore media representation and culture, but to also co-create counter-narratives to the mass-media messages that often stigmatise African youth. This work is situated as an important

platform to promote positive and empowering multi-media expressions of identity via photography, memes, narrative essay, music and poetry produced by the storytellers.

In many ways, this work is one of the few examinations of blackness in New Zealand that explores contemporary experiences of anti-black racism. The storytellers recall and work through series of events (e.g., elementary school, job interviews, walking downtown) wherein they felt othered and/or dehumanised, yet lacked the language to articulate and locate such events within the broader structure of racism.

By elevating the voices of the youth, this work does not frame African youth from the position of deficit (lacking/deviant/problematic), but rather from a position of power wherein they assume the role of epistemic agents, as possessors of knowledge. This is a difficult task requiring trust to be established via meticulous use of insider knowledge.

The methodology combines an ethnographic approach guided by an indigenous framework. Involving the youth as collaborators as opposed to subjects is consistent with Indigenous and community-based approaches. As a result, this approach facilitates a series of powerful discussions through workshops and focus groups that extend beyond data collection to exercises of healing, reflection and affirmation. This process is reflective of an empowerment and emancipatory component central to Indigenous methodologies.

Thus, this work simultaneously uncovers nuanced experiences of blackness experienced by the storytellers, while emphasising the agency of the youth. The latter was accomplished through highlighting the various ways African youth resist racism and colonising narratives through artistic expression.

It is from this perspective that this work presents the findings as an exercise of gift sharing as opposed to mere data collection. The researcher is positioned as a receiver and steward of these gifts. Establishing an environment to implement the methodology required an the cultivation of sustained trust, which resulted in fruitful engagements. The storytellers, in turn, identified contemporary forms of micro-aggressions and racist tactics in New Zealand across multiple social and institutional levels that overlap with other forms of oppressions (e.g., stigma attached to non-white immigrants). In other ways, the storytellers' experiences of subjugation were distinct from other marginalised groups because of the specific ways anti-black sentiments are mobilised globally. The knowledge produced in this work is of extreme importance and sheds light on the gap between claims of multi-culturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand, and experiences in this country of racism and marginalisation. In an age when extreme-right movements are increasing globally, this work tackles daily realities of racism in New Zealand and its traumatising effects. While there is existing research on racism in New Zealand, very little examines the experiences of black bodies. Thus, this evaluation explores an important and neglected group and points to a critical need for continued research into the experiences of African peoples in New Zealand.

AUTHOR

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