

‘My Story’ for the *Senior Leadership Programme for Women of Colour: Sharing Event*
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Beyond Tolerance members at the University of Arizona, January 1999

I became an anti-racist activist at university. My friends and I volunteered our free time to hold events on campus to dialogue about race and racism. It was distressing and exhausting work. I therefore tried to keep my academic pursuits separate, to avoid emotional burnout. My story is about how that is proving impossible.

I found linguistics in my second year and I was drawn to its connections to cognitive science. How was language, in its infinite complexity, represented in the mind, *and* in the brain? I ended up in *socio*-linguistics, the study of language and society, by accident: there was only one linguist looking for a Research Assistant, and she was a sociolinguist.

When I went to graduate school, I started out by studying a community without much racial diversity — my hometown — and so I could still silo away my anti-racist activism from my work. During my PhD I did work on race, but I still considered my work relatively apolitical. Then, Okim Kang and Daniel Rubin published a paper in 2009 replicating a study that white American university students hear speech differently based on the race of the person talking.

We know that visual cues like lip posture influence speech perception. They showed that students heard the exact same speech as having “no” accent when they saw a white face, but having a non-native accent when they saw an East Asian face. Now, hallucinating an accent is maybe *not* so surprising because they were actually told that the speaker was, “a Chinese international teaching assistant.” The finding that floored me was that their comprehension rates, *and* teacher evaluation ratings, also declined when seeing the East Asian face.

This research obviously impacts all of us, as academics. It also reminded me of something that happened to my mother when I was young. Our family name is Hall, which comes from my grandfather’s intentional anglicising of our Cantonese name, Haw. My mother is a 4th generation Chinese American and, like me, doesn’t have any ethnic markers in her speech. One day she went in for a job interview, after having talked to the person on the phone. She described going into the interview and seeing the interviewer look surprised and confused, even a little hostile. (She didn’t get the job.)



Mabel & Clifford Hall, late 1940s

In 2017, John Rickford and Sharese King published a paper about one of the key witnesses in the Trayvon Martin trial, Rachel Jeantel. Jeantel speaks African American English. The jurors stated that they couldn't understand her speech. Rather than trying to understand this key witness, her testimony was completely dismissed. It was deemed not credible. The reason given was just that they couldn't understand her.

Psychological research has argued that the reason we find unfamiliar accents to be less believable is just because it's cognitively taxing to listen to them. In other words, it's draining to have to work at understanding someone, and so that effort makes us view that person less favourably. In other words, it's not racism, *per se*.

In response to this argument, in 2019 my co-authors and I published a paper with a counter argument. In a survey of Edinburgh tourists, we found that more than half would rather have a tour guide they *didn't understand*, rather than one they did understand, if the tour guide was Scottish. For them, the inability to understanding a tour guide's Scottish accent is actually an attractive part of an "authentic" Edinburgh tourist experience. It makes the guide *more* credible, not less. Even some of the professional tour guides we interviewed held this view, as well. Social context matters.

In short, it's proven impossible to separate my professional life from my personal life and my political life. When we know that our sensory input is not even objective experience, but is necessarily shaped by our personal subjectivities, then the data we collect and the topics we teach are even more so, and we have no choice but to work to decolonise our research and teaching.

You can visit this link for the references I've mentioned and some other resources:

<http://www.laurenhall-lew.com/recommended-resources.html>

Thank you.