

## **Nothing About Us Without Us –Nigerian and Irish Women Working Together.**

Veronica Akinborewa, Camilla Fitzsimons and Philomena Obasi.

This chapter is probably quite different to what comes before and after it. It is a conversation between three adult educators; Veronica who is a Nigerian woman of colour, Camilla who is a white Irish woman and Philomena who is a woman of colour, also from Nigeria. We have known each other for around 5 years, firstly through a student-lecturer relationship and more recently through work we have undertaken that involves the design and delivery of workshops on ‘culture’, ‘interculturalism’ and ‘racism’. Our approach contrasts with how many of you might more typically read ‘about’ these topics. We lean on an autoethnographic approach where our writing seeks to describe our experiences and draw out analyses from these. This method is thus both a process and a product (Ellis, 2011). Our first-hand account explores relationships that exist amidst the intersections of race, gender and institutional positions. Our capacity to overcome these barriers and successfully work together is determined by the quality of our relationship. Nothing is taboo and we have often discussed the joys and challenges of working together.

Here we share a flavour of just one of these discussions with you. It was recorded during the Covid19 lockdown of 2020 when each of us were confined to our homes and connecting via zoom.

*On identity....*

**Camilla:** I might start, or anybody else can, I don’t mind.

**Veronica:** No, you go ahead, take the lead Camilla please.

**Camilla:** That’s part of the story, isn’t it, me taking the lead? Sometimes I worry about that, but we can talk about that later. So, I’m Camilla, I’m Irish. I grew up in an environment where I never questioned what it meant to be Irish, there were very strong

cultural markers; being Irish in the 1970s meant being white, eating potatoes, going to mass, that sort of thing. I also grew up during ‘the troubles’ in Northern Ireland. There was a lot of bombings as I remember it, lots of people getting killed. That kind of fed into my Irish identity.

Who’s next, Philomena do you want to go next?

**Philomena:** Yes okay, I can go next. My name is Philomena Ilobekeme Obasi, I’m from Edo State, Nigeria. I had my son in Ireland in July 2001 and my daughter in America. My children had their primary education in Nigeria. We relocated back to Ireland in 2014 so they could continue their secondary education. I had heard about Ireland growing up. I had always loved Trinity College because all the Missionaries (Priests and Nuns) that came to Nigeria from Ireland always talked about it.

**Veronica:** Okay me. Veronica Adeyinka Akinborewa, originally from Osun State, in Western Nigeria. I came to Ireland in 2002 with my first son. I had my second son and my daughter here. When I arrived in Ireland, we were not allowed to work until we got our residence permits. We just stayed at home and were not sure of what the future held for us. So, I volunteered with a charity organisation and got involved in some integration projects in my local community.

When I got my residence permit, I felt it was time to try and get a job and I assumed that I was going to get a ‘good job,’ if there is anything like that. I already had a first degree in Africa before coming to Ireland. It was not long before I realized that I was building castles in the air! As a matter of fact, it seemed as though the ‘proper’ jobs were meant for our Irish counterparts while the menial jobs were meant for us, ‘the others.’

So, what did I do? I reverted to my baptismal name ‘Veronica’ so the recruiters might at least give my C.V attention and, low and behold, the interviews started coming in. I did this because I read an article about a young Nigerian-British lady who had changed her name to a more English name so she could get a job. I’m not proud of saying this, because I really do love my traditional name, my native name. But I thought at that

time, because I was desperate to move on, I was desperate to...get into a better position. I just did not have an option at that time.

**Camilla:** And you were not imagining it. There was an experiment by McGinnity et al (2008). They made up fictitious CVs with different names; either African, Asian or European but with similar qualifications then sent out. The candidates with 'Irish names' were twice as likely to get called for interviews.

*The politicising nature of our lived experiences.*

**Philomena:** I had my degrees from Nigeria, a Bachelor in Education, Masters in Public Administration and a Masters in Business Administration. Although teaching was my principal profession, I ended up working in the finance sector and Oil and Gas.

When we relocated to Ireland in 2014, my children were initially going to school and I was mostly at home. I said to myself 'okay, I need to integrate, I need to meet Irish people, especially women.' So, I volunteered with the Parent-Teacher Association and when my children were at school, I attended some adult education classes, some of these were at level 3 and I got to know other women doing these basic education classes. From my interactions with these Irish women, I got a sense of the reasons they were availing of the programme. Most were dropping their children into the centre's creche, then coming into these classes. Many had stopped working when they had kids or had left school very early. I saw a lot of similarities between these Irish women and many Nigerian women. I thought these inequalities were part of Nigeria's culture and didn't expect to see the same sort of thing in Ireland.

**Camilla:** You said you worked in Oil and Gas, tell us a bit more about that? I'm just conscious because there is a cross-over to the work of Ken Saro-Wiwa. I've heard you give a talk about his life in the past. Were you working for, or against, the big corporations?

**Philomena:** I was working as a Buyer for a French Oil and Gas Company involved in offshore drilling. I didn't know much about what was going on before then, but I discovered they were making huge profits. There were various indigenous companies

and factories in Nigeria that were producing most of the goods and services that were being imported from France, Germany, the United States, etc. This made me question the need for what seemed as much as an 80% importation when we could easily source most of the products in Nigeria.

**Camilla:** Sounds like it's quite a politicising experience?

**Philomena:** Yes, it was. The indigenous people of the oil producing areas were/are living with a lot of poverty – no good pliable roads, clean drinkable water, schools, electricity, and local amenities. Before the emergence of oil companies, the people were predominately fishermen and farmers as they live in riverine areas. The oil spillage, due to the negligence of these companies caused massive environmental damages, this is what Ken Saro-Wiwa and his group were often protesting against.

**Camilla:** We must talk more about this again. I guess my interests are mostly about 'racialisation' and racism. I used to do workshops about 'culture' and 'interculturalism', but I began to feel quite uncomfortable about this. I got tired of being in rooms with mostly white people from the dominant culture, 'othering' people. I couldn't stop thinking of the expression 'nothing about us without us.' I started reading contributions by bell hooks, she's African American. She talks a lot about the intersections of sexism and racism and says 'white people' have been socialised to see black women as 'less than', people who should be cleaners or carers; what she calls 'symbolic mummies' (hooks, 2004, p. 99).

**Philomena:** When I told people I might go back into teaching, there was some resistance from both my Nigerian and Irish counterparts. Some people said things like 'Oh you want to teach, a black person teaching in Ireland?' or 'Why don't you go to healthcare? you want to take our jobs from us?'

**Camilla:** Sounds like hooks is onto something.

**Philomena:** There's also a website by *The Migrant Project* that talks about ways in which racism affects Nigerian people's ability to get work<sup>1</sup>.

**Camilla:** Interesting. I started to think about my own whiteness in a much more deliberate way. I like the ideas of Francis Kendall (2013). She's also white. She talks about the invisibility of the privilege I grew up with and says white people have to think more about this. So, I began to write about what it means to be white and from the dominant culture (Fitzsimons, 2019). For me, this is the most authentic contribution I can make.

And I know that's not necessarily your interests, that's another thing I worry about, that the black people in education are mostly asked to talk about their culture and ethnicity and not about anything else. I would love to see much more integration and we don't seem to have quite gotten there yet.

**Philomena:** We desperately need black and migrant teachers as educators!

**Veronica:** Growing up in Africa, I always had a passion for working with communities who have been marginalized. Here in Ireland, I found myself working at different levels, firstly with people living in what are sometimes described as 'poorer areas' and later with men recovering from addiction. So, I decided to do a degree in Addiction studies, to better understand their issues. Many of them were early school leavers, some of whom had great potential. I returned to college again and did a post-grad in teaching.

I'm also interested in culture and interculturalism. We were one of the first black families in my community. I did some voluntary work with a community group to put an integration programme together. Along the way they discovered I am a choir member in my local church and my husband is the keyboardist. They invited us to sing to older people every Tuesday evening. We would go there, we would sing, we would dance, they would sing their Irish songs and we sing our Nigerian music. And as time went on, we brought other Nigerian families that lived nearby. I also did some voluntary work with Rotimi Adebari, the first black mayor in Ireland who was also interested in

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.themigrantproject.org/nigeria/life-in-europe/>. 24<sup>th</sup> July 2020.

integration and was lecturing in UCD. More recently, it has been a great pleasure delivering collaborative workshops alongside Camilla and Philomena.

*On working together...*

**Philomena:** I have always wondered what informed your decision to ask Veronica and I to collaborate with you to create the degree module: *Exploring Ethnic Ireland*, back in 2018? I know you have told us before.

**Camilla:** I got an email from a colleague asking me to deliver this module to an evening adult learning group. I had a strong, almost allergic reaction to the request. Immediately I thought that it would be totally wrong for me to deliver this module alone. I couldn't deliver a module called 'Exploring Ethnic Ireland' as a white person from the dominant culture! I could do bits of it, the bits about being white, but I know nothing about being a person of a minority ethnicity in Ireland.

Sometimes I wonder if a few years ago, I might have given it a shot, but I have matured enough in my ideas to know I needed help. You were both past students on an Initial Teacher Education programme I coordinated, and I knew you were skilled adult educators. I wasn't just choosing a 'random black person' [am I allowed to say that?]. But I was conscious of what Kehinde Andrews (2018) says – that white people must use our privilege to create opportunities for people who are racialised, the people who so often get overlooked. Its back to that earlier conversation, about what happened when CVs with different names were sent out. I wanted to be part of expanding the staff of the university beyond white-middle-class people. This module needed 'white' and 'black' people working together, migrants and non-migrants. I mean its problematic language. I know that, but I am using it anyway. It's shifting all the time and it can be hard to keep up. So, that's what informed the decision, I just kind of felt 'why on earth am I being asked to do this?'

What was it like to be asked?

**Veronica:** I panicked initially. Back home you refer to your lecturers as a superior. When Dr Camilla invited us to come and teach, this was very much going through my

mind. I wasn't feeling confident calling her by her first name, but I was also thinking 'who would listen to a black teacher?' I have always had that at the back of my mind.

**Philomena:** I felt so honoured. I felt so privileged amongst a few. And I felt really happy, that this is a sign that there is change. That they will be hearing from us directly, speaking about the things we know naturally.

**Camilla:** I am also working with you guys on other projects, Philomena on some research and Veronica you are now part of the staff team on that same Initial Teacher Education programme you came through as a student. How do the students react when they meet you? Is there ever like 'oh my god she's Nigerian?'

**Veronica:** Seriously, I have not had any negative reaction from staff or students in any of the centres. I remember visiting a centre where I was once a student. The manager gave me a warm welcome and she introduced me to the other staff members. It was a wonderful feeling and it felt like a sign that we are taking some small steps in the right direction.

*On racism.....*

**Camilla:** But my sense from working with you both is that it's not always like that? This is so topical now because of the death of George Floyd and the explosion of the Black Lives Matter movement. We did a class on the Irish Black Lives Matter movement in 2018. I remember talking to the all-white degree students about how our experiences are so different. We don't have to worry about racial slurs when we walk down the street.

**Philomena:** This issue about race is so strong in this part of the globe. Most people in Nigeria are not aware of it. It was only when my children came to Ireland they found out about racism. They couldn't understand why their classmates asked questions like, 'Do you eat a lot of bananas in Nigeria?' They would reply, 'We don't eat banana only; we eat varieties of food.' 'Do you have traffic electricity/roads in Nigeria?.' My children did not know it was racist. I would just say, 'maybe they don't really know; they have not been there.' Most people I have met are good people, but some are racist.

It really doesn't bother me. I guess it must be difficult to all of a sudden cope with an influx of migrants to once enclosed communities.

**Veronica:** It's sometimes subtle but yes, there is racism in Ireland. Just the other day, I was filling out a form and one of the questions on the list was about my nationality. I was glad to write that I am Irish, but I was asked for my 'country of birth', which of course is Nigeria and then I thought to myself, why do they need that information?

**Camilla:** Good question Veronica, or should I call you Adeyinka?

Sometimes I feel that I am more powerful in our conversations. I worry about that. Maybe it's because I am the 'doctor' rather than the white person, maybe it's not real, maybe it's in my head. I do wonder if I need to be doing more to make sure I don't have to be the boss.

**Veronica:** I think it is a good thing that you are always so aware. That explains why it has been easy for us to work together, even though we come from different cultural backgrounds.

**Camilla:** And... Philomena, do you know who makes me think of you and your interest in diversity in sport? There's this young footballer who plays for Ireland and Southampton [in the English league]. Michael Obafemi, is that a Nigerian name? Apparently, he could have played for England, Ireland or Nigeria but he picked Ireland. He has a senior cap.

**Philomena:** Yes. He is Irish with Nigerian parents. With time, there will be a beautiful blended culture in Ireland. We look forward to that.

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