

**A JAMAICAN BRIT NAVIGATING AMERICAN EDUCATION:  
A PERSONAL NARRATIVE**

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**Abstract:** *The Intersection between the Past and Present: The past is the past, that's the saying. But the past intersects with the present every day. My past or my history begins with my grandparents. My journey to my current place began with my grandparents. My parents then contributed and my mom solidified my destination, in my opinion. Using narrative inquiry as the basis for an investigation into my own history. From Jamaica to the United Kingdom landing where I am today in West Texas, United States of America. How my Jamaican roots have guided me, educated me, and aided me on my educational journey as an immigrant.*

**Keywords:** *first generation, immigrant, racism, higher education, United Kingdom, United States*

**INTRODUCTION**

“Ma’am can I see some identification please”?

I’m looking at the police officer perplexed, I hadn’t even heard him come into the room. Identification? What does he need identification for? I’m in my graduate lab on campus, working on my dissertation defense presentation. My eyes aren’t on his face, my eyes are on the gun resting comfortably at his hip. He follows my eyes down to his gun, gently adjusting his belt letting me know, he read my mind, a subtle, yet aggressive move.

I left the United Kingdom to pursue a career in track and field, whilst at the same time studying for my baccalaureate degree. I have now been in the United States for thirteen years so I am not ignorant of the ethnic tensions that openly exist here. The scenario above made me realize in a very profound way that my experiences in the United States

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in 2019 have not been that dissimilar to that of my parents who were first generation Jamaicans in the north of England in the 1960s.

When I moved from the United Kingdom to the United States to be an athlete, my paternal grandmother told me, "Racism in England is nothing compared to racism in the United States". A Jamaican-born immigrant herself, my grandmother is always on edge when it comes to racism. She had seen and been called things I shudder to repeat. I was prepared, or so I thought. This paper presents a narrative investigation into my own journey being an English-born, Jamaican-loved and American-educated black woman. It begins with my grandparents, as in my mind my journey to where I am today begins with their decision to emigrate from Jamaica to the United Kingdom. It then focuses on the efforts of my mother and concludes with my own story of struggles, racism and triumphs.

"A life story does not consist of an atomistic chain of experiences, whose meaning is created at the moment of their articulation, but is rather a process taking place simultaneously against the backdrop of a biographical structure of meaning, which determines the selection of the individual episodes presented, and within the context of the interaction with a listener or imaginary audience" (Rosenthal, 1993, p. 3).

## **NARRATIVE INQUIRY**

Narrative inquiry is a unique qualitative research tool embedded in interpretive hermeneutics and phenomenology. Narrative inquiry necessitates the gathering of stories and perspectives to ascertain the meaning that is given to certain phenomena (Trahar, 2009). It relies on a phenomenological framework, as it takes a particular phenomenon and develops it into a story that can become accessible to a wider audience. Chase (2005) notes the conceptual shift away from the idea that the "interviewees have answers to researchers' questions" to the idea that "interviewees are the narrators with stories to tell and voices of their own" (p. 660). Furthermore, understanding a story, listening to the story, and creating meaning in the story are three meaningful and essential stages of narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry is based upon the premise that, as human beings, we come to understand and give meaning to our lives through stories (Andrews et al., 2011). It requires diligence and openness, flexibility and honesty. Narayan and George (2012) suggest that the researcher "follow the unexpected paths that emerge" (p. 23). Bringing life to others' lived experiences is the essential of being a narrative inquirer. However, the intimate relationship governed by such inquiry requires the researcher to be

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pragmatic in order to eradicate any assumptions or false thought that could reduce their openness to the process (Biesta, 2007).

To add to the novelty of the methodology, no single definition of the practice exists. Smith and Sparkes (2009) stated, "It's hard to give a single clear cut definition of narrative, or draw a precise boundary around its meaning" (p. 2). First, while narrative and story are used synonymously within certain fields, the distinction needs to be made clear. Story is "a detailed organization of events, arranged in a plot with a beginning, middle, and end. It has the connotation of a 'full' description of lived experience, unlike narrative" (Kim, 2016, p. 305). But narrative is defined as "a way of telling and knowing about human life experiences" (Kim, 2016, p. 303). Story is developed from narratives. While narrative is the process, the forming of thoughts and ideas, often fragmented, story is the final product, the former needing the later and vice versa, but two different steps within narrative inquiry.

Kim (2016) defines narrative inquiry as "a storytelling methodology that inquires into narratives and stories of people's life experiences" (p. 304). Clandinin and Connelly further describe narrative inquiry as an active research process that can find its roots in epistemological and ontological assumptions. Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through "collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

Life story/biographical interviews are a combination of the biographers' personal life history and the narrators' collection and formation of their stories. The process of narrative interviews, like life story, is dissimilar from the standard in-depth interviews, as the main aim of narrative is to collect the full story of someone's life. The power of collecting one's personal life history allows the resulting product to be "social, often producing, reproducing or even changing cultural narratives" (Wood, 2001, p. 241). One of the most crucial aspects of the life story interview is that the researcher facilitates the storytelling by figuratively removing themselves from the conversation and allowing the participant to direct the nature of the conversation (Pederson, 2013). The aim of life story is to gather the most meaningful and relevant pieces of information as opposed to recording every moment in the participant's life. Rosenthal (1993) described the life story as not being a consistent chain of experiences, in which the meaning is made when spoken. Meaning is made with the choice of particular situations and episodes alongside a listener.

### **Jamaica to the United Kingdom**

In the early 1950s my paternal and maternal grandparents made plans to leave the sun-drenched shores of Jamaica and migrate to the grey and rainy islands of the United Kingdom. They had small children that they chose to leave behind in Jamaica with relatives in order to take the 22 day “Windrush Boat trip” that marked the beginning of post-war mass migration to the United Kingdom. The choice was a pragmatic one; the quality of living and the lives they could develop for their children were much higher in England. It was a country that they believed would reward hard work, where their children could get a good education and where the possibilities were limitless.

Upon her arrival, my maternal grandmother refused to have any more children until she was living in her own home, a motivational tactic that worked well for my grandfather as he purchased their first home within a year of them arriving. In the 1950s, the United Kingdom was a country in transition, “in 1950 the legacy of the Second World War was still everywhere to be seen. In the major cities, and particularly in London, there were vacant bomb-sites” (Quinalt, 2001). With this in mind, my grandparents both settled their new homes in northern England. “The 1951 census showed that only 3 per cent of the population had been born overseas and the great majority of the immigrants were white and European”, (Quinalt, 2001). My grandparents, all in their twenties, made not simply a geographical change but also a cultural one, going from being in the majority to being members of a very small minority who were not wanted and, more importantly, not welcomed in the United Kingdom.

Both of my grandmothers placed a great focus in their homes on the power and usefulness of education. Each of them qualified as nurses under Enoch Powell, the Tory (Conservative) Health Minister, who invited women from the Caribbean to Britain to train as nurses. In hindsight, they were both feminists before their time. They believed that a woman’s place was not in the home, as was commonly thought in the 1950s, but that a woman should always attempt to improve herself through education – a tool that no man could take credit for, nor take away. My grandparents, and most notably my grandmothers, have left me a legacy that is evident at this stage of my life. In fact, I have followed without intention in their footsteps.

My maternal grandfather came to the United Kingdom during the Second World War, risking his own life to proudly serve the British Empire. He would often tell stories of arriving in the United Kingdom long before black people were “common”. When he first arrived, he was not met with the same levels of racism that my paternal grandparents remember facing. He was a novelty; people would buy him drinks in bars and ask him questions, fascinated at the brown man with the funny accent. At this point in the United

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Kingdom's development difference was not seen as being a threat. Each nation that was a part of the British Empire carried the same passport; whether they were born in Montego Bay or Liverpool, each was considered a British subject.

The United Kingdom was the land of opportunity for what is now referred to as the "Windrush generation" (those who arrived by boat from the Caribbean Islands), an opportunity for many to move to the United Kingdom, make some money and return to their home country. When the boats docked in Essex, they were often met with large crowds of welcoming Brits. This welcoming attitude quickly changed, as the British natives realized that the Windrush arrivals were not all planning on returning home, most clearly when they enrolled their children in school. These children were the targets of racism in schools. Windrush children were often bullied and teased. The racism that the children of new immigrants faced was common, pervasive, and often unspoken. Their parents had moved them from another country to flourish. How dare they complain about a few bruises or a handful of hurtful words?

### **First Generation British**

My mom is my idol; she is my source of strength and my educational inspiration. I vividly remember standing at our gate as she walked to the train station on her way to a job interview at a London-based university. What I remember the most is that even at seven I knew that this job was big, it was important and that I wanted her to get it. So much so that I ran inside to give her "a good luck charm" – a Christmas ornament that I had made from a piece of tinsel and a cone when I was three years old. In my mind it was the magic she needed. I ran to her at the top of the street and told her that she needed this ornament for good luck.

My mom made family history a few weeks later, as she was hired as an academic and professional tutor at a prestigious London university. Being the amazing mom that she was, she told me it was because of my good luck charm, and to this day I am still happy to believe it. During the half-term holidays, she would take me to the office with her. The whole experience left me mesmerized – the train journey into central London, the old building that my mom's department was housed in. However, that was not what I loved the most about going to work with my mom. It was the way that she carried herself – her unapologetic presence in what was then a predominately white institution. She is not arrogant, nor aggressive but as the only black person in her department it would have been very easy, I think, for her to be meek. She never was; and nearly twenty-five years later, she is still the same. It was also not lost on me that she was the only black person in the building that was not wearing a uniform. To me she was royalty. She had set the tone for my educational journey.

My mom was the very first in her family to go to university; she is actually the only sibling who has pursued higher education. She was born in the north of England in the 1960s and her mother had made sure that she always attended the best schools that she could. Attending Catholic schools throughout her primary and secondary education, my mom excelled in predominately white institutions. As white students would hurl racist comments at her on the way home, she returned to school, day after day, holding her head high. When she told a teacher that she wanted to be a school teacher, they laughed, and in retrospect had every right to laugh. This was England, Yorkshire in the 1970s. There were no black teachers, there were no role models, and my mom's dream was comical to the white teacher whom she had told. She was not even thinking above her station in life; she was creating a whole new role.

Her parents could have very easily told her to dream small, to get a respectable job at a shop, or in the hospital. The Windrush was in full effect in the United Kingdom. Being a nurse was a well-respected, well-paying job. However, they allowed her to follow her dreams, as she enrolled in teachers' training college. She often told me about the unbelievers, the doubters, the racist classmates and the equally racist teachers she faced. She was overstepping her position, but she had done so with grace and pride. She moved to London and became a teacher, the only black teacher in her school at that time. Even after training, she still did not know any other black teachers.

My mom did not stop there. While working full time as a teacher she went back to university part-time to get a BSc (Psychology). I asked her why, and, in her typically humble manner, said she "didn't know" but had to do it. She just wanted more from her life and she saw education as the route to achieve that. At this point in her life she was in uncharted territory. Her parents were not guiding her; she did not understand the education system; nevertheless she kept going. She graduated with Master's degree, a first-generation student, the first one of her siblings to be born in the United Kingdom. In my mind, she embodies why my grandparents took the risk moving to the United Kingdom in the first place. She tells a story of her Master's graduation. Her two proud parents make the trip to London.

'Your grandmother was visibly excited. Your grandfather was bubbling on the inside, but you know he's a man of few words. He had on his best suit. What I hadn't told them was who would be attending the ceremony, Princess Anne'.

My grandmother was an ardent royalist; she loved the royal family. She loved what they represented and what they stood for. "Well, you know for your grandmother that was it! A Master's degree and a member of the royal family".

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My experiences in education have more or less followed the same broad theme. During my time in education I can count on my fingers how many teachers of colour I have had. From preschool to PhD there have been seven and I should confess that five of them came from my time completing a degree in African-American studies. I often wonder what impact my mom made on her students as she walked into her classroom for the very first time. Or how many little black girls she has inspired to change the narrative of their own lives. What I do know is that she changed the narrative of my life, not only because she was my mom, but also because of the way she continued to strive to change the rules of a game – higher education – that she had never been taught.

What stands out most to me is my mum's humbleness. It is a paradox, because in her lifetime she has always carved out her own path and truth, like her parents. In the face of racism, in the face of hostility, and with no outside guidance, she has reached incredible heights. The children of the Windrush generation had to navigate a world that they had not been asked to be born into. In many important ways, their parents, although well intentioned, could not assist them as they moved forward. They were in a very real sense pioneers and they set the tone and standard for the grandchildren of the Windrush generation. Were we going to stand in the shadow of our parents or would we step out?

### **English-Born, Jamaican-Loved, American-Educated**

The very first primary school I attended was a small private school in greater London. Of the 120 students in the school, 17 were black. Now, why would my parents send their only child to a largely all-white, private school after having faced the levels of racism and hostility that they had faced? My mom believed, as her parents had, in the “power of education”. The educational system in the United Kingdom is great, for white students. The infamous Newsom Report (Newsom, 1969) suggested that Afro-Caribbean children enter school with higher reading and mathematics skills than their Caucasian counterparts. But by the time they finish the second year of school, those same Afro-Caribbean children are found to be behind, with the males achieving lowest (Newsom, 1969). Gambling with my education was not something my parents were willing to do. My entire education in fact has been spent at predominately white schools and universities.

Being able to migrate to a new country and to be outsiders is the story of my grandparents, determined to work hard in the face of adversity, when homesick for Jamaica, when lonely, and without support. Their past is part of my present. We search for a country where we feel the space to flourish and be ourselves.

I was born to be an athlete. I felt that I emerged from the womb with the determination to be the best track and field athlete possible. I raced the boys around the playground

from as young as three years because “the girls just aren’t as good as me”. My parents introduced me to the sport of track and field at the same age, and I was in love. Everything about the sport fueled my addiction to it. The speed, the glory and the fact that I had a God-given talent for it made the love run deeper. I would sit and watch competitions on TV, pretending that one day that would be me, hearing my name. The entire Olympics was, in my mind, only about track and field. The Olympic motto “Citius, Altius, Fortius” is Latin for “Faster, Higher, Braver”, (Legacy, 2003), but was changed in my house to “win, win, win”. As an only child, I was my own competition. My mother, always the cheerleader and coach, encouraged me to follow my dreams and give it my all, no matter what that was. The older I became the more I fell in love with the sport. At the age of 13 years I told my parents that my plan was to move to the United States and go to university. If I was going to be the best, I had to train with them. The competition did not scare me; it excited me. I did not understand the system and neither did they; but they did their best to support me learning it. By the time I was eighteen, it was time to decide, and from knowing nothing five years before, I was now in contact with over a dozen coaches in the United States. The great Jesse Owens is quoted saying, “We all have dreams. But in order to make dreams become reality, it takes an awful lot of determination, dedication, self-discipline, and effort”. The United States was not only a dream; it was bigger. It was my goal and I didn’t set goals that I didn’t intend to achieve. I needed a full track and field scholarship to a Division I institution in the most competitive collegiate system in the world.

I knew America had ethnic difficulties but in my naiveté I didn’t think it could be worse than the United Kingdom. I had sat in class during my GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) English class as we read *Of Mice and Men* and had girls spit out the word “nigger” with so much joy and venom as they looked at me, the only black girl in the class, square in the eye. I had been left out of birthday parties because “my dad just doesn’t like black people, he isn’t racist, and he just said you can’t come”. I developed a thick skin; I was ready for their comments.

My determination paid off and lead me to a quiet Jamaican, an assured and highly qualified coach at the University of Iowa in January of 2007. Coach Jimmy Grant was fighting cancer for the second time in his life. Over the course of that semester we saw him less and less as the cancer metastasized to his brain and lungs and eventually took his life that summer. The loss of Coach Grant left me and the other ‘Island’ girls on the team alone, facing the reality for the first time that we were not welcome on campus. Coach Grant had repeatedly told us, “They don’t want you here. Look out for one another always”. But he had shielded us, much like a parent, from the harsh realities. When he died, I realized how much he had protected us.



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I recall sitting in my assistant coach's office as one of the cross-country girls walked in. She casually called him by his first name as if she was his friend. I winced; the man had earned the right to be called Coach by his own athletes. He smiled, as if he hadn't heard it and asked her how he could help. She wanted to know if he was going to continue to recruit foreigners (her polite way of saying Caribbean, because the only international girls on the team were either Caribbean-born, or like me, Caribbean-loved). At this point, I am sitting in shock. Not only did she have the nerve to ask him this, a Caribbean man, but to be so bold as to ask him in front of me. In the back of my mind, I was reminded that, to her, I was English. She did not group me in the same bag as the other girls, whom she couldn't always understand. But Coach's face was unchanged; he relaxed back into his chair and asked her what it was that she was concerned about. This bold and out-of-order athlete proceeded to tell him that the foreigners were bringing down the team's GPA and he needed to take this into consideration the next time he brought one on a visit. In my head I can hear my Grandad's famous saying when he was shocked beyond words, "But stop"! Had I heard her right? Was she really that bold? Did she really have such little respect for Coach, for me, for her teammates? Coach told her he would consider her input. Pleased with herself and Coach's response, she bounced out of the room.

Coach and I sat in his office in silence, both staring off into space, wrapped up in our individual disgust and shock. Coach turned to his computer and pulled up the team GPA, I couldn't see any of the details but I know what it looks like from a distance. I was already ahead of him. These were my teammates, my friends, my sisters. I already knew that the only person without a 3.0 GPA was ME! I'm waiting for coach to teach me something profound; I need him to. After what feels like an eternity, he finally broke the silence as he laughed, "You guys have some of the highest GPA's on the team". I needed more; I needed him to teach me how to respond with the same grace as he just had, and asked "Why would she feel that it's okay to come in here and say that? Does she always call you by her first name? How are you not furious"? He told me that as immigrants, as Caribbean people, we are made from stronger stock; that if we crumble at every negative word spoken to us we would never be able to get up in the morning. The best way to overcome racism is to rise above it. If you want to make them mad, succeed. Reach places where they told you that you couldn't go and do it better.

Fast forward to my Statistics class. I was dreading the class from the moment I enrolled in the programme. However, as the class began, I dedicated myself to learning it. I may need it for my dissertation, and I wanted to have an advanced understanding of it. Two examinations into the course and I am not doing well. I hadn't done anything but statistics for the past 6 weeks. I am once again the sole black face in my class of fifteen. I ask the professor to direct me to places where I can get more questions to work on, or another book that she could recommend. "Don't worry about it; when you fail you will take it again next semester". Was I embarrassed? Yes, but I was fuming more than I was embarrassed.

But I find myself channeling my grandparents, my parents and my previous coach. I think “We come from a group of people who are used to not being welcomed, and that’s okay, as long as you don’t let it stop you from achieving your goals”.

My life in the United States some 60 years later is not that dissimilar from my grandparents’ or even my parents’. My move to West Texas has been akin to stepping back in time. The city in which I currently reside has a black population of 8%, with only 12% of that eight percent having a bachelor’s degree or higher, half the national average. Not only by virtue of my race, but also by pursuing an advanced degree I remain on the outside of “normal” society. Ironically, I take my strength from my grandparents; they died when I was child; yet as an adult in another country I feel closer to them than I ever have. I understand why they stayed in the United Kingdom; I understand why they encouraged education and I respect them so much for it.

### **Back to Where It All Started**

“Ma’am, I need to see some identification. We had a report that a black male wearing a black hoodie was walking in and out of rooms in this building. My guess is that they saw you and assumed you were a male because of your height. I’m sorry to have to do this. But, please some identification”.

This was two days before I defended my PhD dissertation. I was sitting at my computer in the graduate assistant lab; gospel music was blasting from my headphones. I was in that moment when I was excited about my defense. I had recently told my mom that I could feel her mother’s pride as I completed my dissertation journey. I had felt her so strongly that I was dedicating my dissertation to her memory. At 6 pm, casually walking around my building in my usual attire, sweats, (may I add some very nice Nike sweats that I had recently bought). Working hard to be the first in my family to get a PhD. I didn’t have much left to do on the PowerPoint presentation, but I wanted to put in a few hours to make sure it was finished with enough time to spend the next day or two practising. As I sat at my desk I was excited, thinking about the moment my committee called me back into the conference room as Dr. Graham.

Yet here I sat, with a police officer towering over me. Strategically placed between myself and the door, and I realized that the words of one of my mentors had never been so real. He had said to me, “Remember, that no matter how many degrees you get, you will always still be a ‘nigger’ to someone; but you don’t let them stop you from moving forward with your goals”. When my mentor had originally said that to me as I sat in his office, I had listened, but in this moment, I realized what he had been preaching. It was almost poetic. I was mere hours away from finishing, from being part of the 2%. I won’t lie, I was feeling good! I had put in the work, I had sacrificed, and I had pushed myself. I was navigating a

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different country, a unique educational system, I was on my own, and the finish line was so close. My mentor's words came flooding back. My grandmother always used to tell me not to be "boasie" (boastful or high- chested), but to remain humble in everything that I did, knowing that my success had come from God and not from anything I had done.

This police officer didn't see me as the soon to be Dr. Author. He didn't know how many articles I had read, or the celebrations I had missed out on to get here. He didn't see the Jamaican roots or hear the Queen's English coming from my mouth. No. He saw a 5ft 11in, dark-skinned black woman. He saw a predator, an intruder, a possible criminal. My education had not elevated me in his eyes; it wasn't going to protect me, if, God forbid, he should reach for his gun.

I wasn't Jamaican and I wasn't English in that moment. I was simply a "nigger".

### CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, there is someone who feels that I have missed the scope of the *Caribbean Educational Research Journal* special edition – "Voices from afar". I wasn't born in the Caribbean; my father was born in Jamaica, and my mother was not; so technically I was only raised by one Jamaican. However, the call for submissions was titled "Voices from afar". My voice, my story and my experiences migrating and being educated in America are importantly connected to my Jamaican roots. The voices of my grandparents and my parents echo in my experience. Their reach and influence on me as a woman, as a student and now a PhD graduate have not been watered down, but rather their essence has been distilled.

As I enter the world of higher education, I am a Caribbean woman. My values, expectations and beliefs are not American; they are Jamaican. I just happen to be English-born. The experiences and the reach of the Caribbean voice are not limited to just those born in the Islands, or to those who teach in classrooms. Our pride and rich heritage are now passing through generations, filtering into sport, but still strong as ever. When we cross the border into the United Kingdom or the United States we are no longer separated by different country colours. However, we are, as Booker T. Washington said, "In all things purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress". Let a cricket match or a track meet come on, or a conversation about which island has the best carnival, then of course we represent our own. Yet in these foreign lands we come together, as fingers on a hand; we unite, we support and we uplift one another. We create our own stories of empowerment and fortitude.

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