



# PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND IDENTITY:

## Finding your voice in the professional world

BY JANE OREMOSU AND DR MAGGIE SEMPLE, OBE

*'Language plays a key role in one's sense of belonging and feelings of safety. It is the way by which people communicate with one another, build relationships and create a sense of community.'*

Everyone loves a story because it tells us something about ourselves and others. Stories tell us things about the society in which we live, the life experiences and opinions of people like us, or those who are different, presenting other truths. Stories shape our thoughts and actions, we remember and retell them in our own ways.

Everyone is a storyteller, our personal narratives can start from life as lived, or as we say in our book, lived experience/lived reality.

We construct our own narratives through stories of experience. We select events, organise, connect and evaluate them. We occasionally create moral tales, how the world should be, based on personal narratives.

At times, the stories we find ourselves repeating are outdated, they need to be

reset or perhaps deleted. Our lived experiences shape personal narratives and identity.

Finding your voice in the workplace is both exciting and challenging. You will develop confidence, as you understand the value you bring to a role and nurture the ability to adapt your style of communication. Language has a vital role as you find your voice.

There is a need to help people in organisations and companies across the world, as they discuss difference, race and inclusion. *My Little Black Book - A Blacktionary* was written to do that, an A-Z pocket guide through the intricacies of the language of race. It is for people entering the workplace, exploring their identity, who feel overwhelmed by changing phrases and definitions, for Black people who want to focus the language of lived realities. Our book explains the impact of Black fatigue, describes a culturally competent individual and defines the Halo Code.

As Black women, we have faced challenges working in organisations. Colleagues might say "I don't see colour I just see people", thinking that being 'Colour Blind' is a positive attribute. *A denial of thought when seeing someone's skin colour*

*especially when it's Black, and being unaware of the challenges that come with it', is our definition. The truth is that everyone sees skin colour. Not acknowledging skin colour implies that only chosen parts of a person are 'seen', not the whole person. Heritage, experiences, cultural differences are ignored. If this occurs in your workplace have a conversation about why it is important that your skin colour is 'seen' and what it means when it is not.*

And, if you are a young Black professional, try to express your narrative with confidence. Identify your core values through self-discovery and reflection. What matters to me and why? Where are my boundaries? Who am I? Does this person come to work with me? What are my strengths? Write these down and place them where you can see them every day. Build confidence in your ability. Shape your narrative.

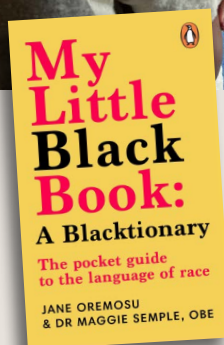
Contribute to discussions and observe how your ideas are received. Positive reinforcement from these experiences helps build self-assurance. A mentor can provide support as you navigate the workplace, offer advice, share their own experiences, help you develop communication skills.

To establish your authentic self in the

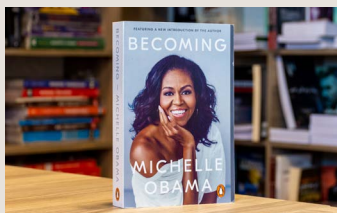
workplace, be equipped with appropriate language of expression, know what you want to convey and why. Our Blacktionary Show was created for this reason, a monthly event where people come for 90 minutes with *My Little Black Book - A Blacktionary* and an openness to extend their knowledge, share experiences and gain understanding around the language of race. We assert provocations to engage our culturally diverse audiences in discussion: “Who we are today, may not be who we were yesterday or will be tomorrow.” We talk about life as lived and life as told by ourselves and others.

Everyone can contribute to a diverse and inclusive workplace environment. Here are our tips:

1. Has your organisation signed up to the Halo Code? Initiate a discussion about the benefits.
2. Identify someone you like professionally because they demonstrate inclusive behaviours. Replicate this behaviour.
3. Be curious about terms that are used to stereotype individuals or behaviour, challenge the thinking behind them.
4. Learn about different cultures by reading or attending events.



Jane Oremosu and Dr Maggie Semple, OBE, are the co-authors of *My Little Black Book: A Blacktionary*, a pocket guide to the language of race. They are dedicated to reshaping narratives around race and fostering inclusive workplace cultures.



*“Your story is what you have, what you will always have. It is something to own.”*

**(MICHELLE OBAMA, BECOMING)**

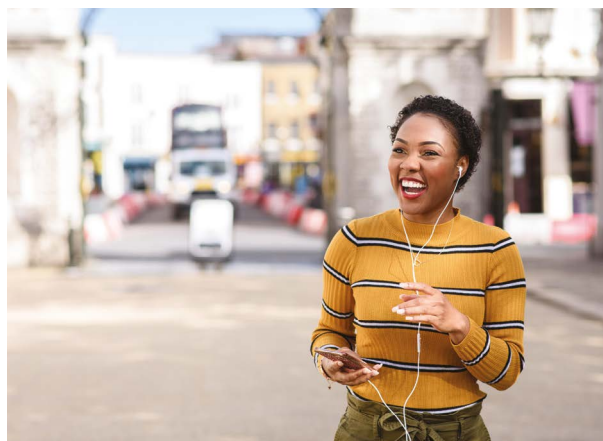
## Education without boundaries

There are no limits on where you come from and what you can do next at the University of Greenwich. We take pride in the diversity of our subject expertise, our students, staff and alumni.

When it comes to equality, we believe in action not words. Our Race Action Plan 2021–26 sets out how we are increasing the representation, progression and success of our Black, Asian and minority ethnic students and staff.

Our vision? To be the best modern university in the UK by 2030.

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**28<sup>th</sup>**  
**in the world**  
 in the category  
 of reducing  
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