Beyond the Sole Category of Race
Using a CRT Intersectional Framework to Map Identity Projects

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My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.

(Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1995, p. 358)

Our task must be to try and think our way out of the paradox of identity and the other, the paradox of oppressor and oppressed.

(Cameron McCarthy et al., 1998, p. 221)

General Background

THE POWER OF THE IDENTITY MOVEMENTS of the Civil Rights era continues to affect curriculum design, instructional practices, and student learning. In a previous era, the thrust of public interest was convened around bringing access and equity in education to oppressed and marginalized groups that were characterized by race and gender, particularly. Today, the effects of these identity movements on educational practices can easily be seen through the inclusion of content by and about people of color in public school curricula. Multicultural education, however, requires that classrooms and schools evolve beyond content alterations and slight changes in pedagogy to include reflection and critique of the intersectionalities and complex relationships that are inherent within identity categories (Banks, 1995; Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 2000). To be clear: These days, multicultural education often means race education and sometimes elides issues of sexual orientation, gender construction, religion, and class norms. This elision further obscures fluid identities, media relationships and community alliances, revealing a deep tension between the framing of emancipatory pedagogies and the fluid contexts in which we live.

Still, Sleeter and Delgado Bernal indicate, "Multicultural research conducted within a Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework might offer a way to understand and analyze the multiple

identities and knowledges of people of color without essentializing their various experiences" (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004, p. 241). If multicultural education is, by definition, an education that serves the public interest of a participatory democracy, how can issues of heteronormativity, the centrality of Christianity in U.S. life, and the prominence of middle class values be critically interrupted when they are concomitantly embedded in current, essentialized notions of race and gender? Here, we draw on critical multiculturalism in synthesis with critical race theory to offer a heuristic tool—a tool to enable new interpretations of personal writing, to inform critical pedagogies, and, most importantly for our purpose here, to elucidate the interdependent schemata of discourses in particular cultural and historical moments. Turning the voice of the self into a lens to interrogate structure, we seek to problematize essentialized notions of identity as well as interrogate facile interpretations of Truth in counterstory. We argue for identity as process and category, and we argue for the signs of alliance across unlikely borders—our goal is to "think our way out of the paradox of identity and the other" (McCarthy et al., p. 221).

Conceptions of Identity

In ongoing scholarly discussions of the negotiations, meanings, and processes between structures and people, conceptions of identity and its role in culture and society play a significant, if shifting role. Daniel A. Yon (2000), in plotting some of the major debates concerning identity formation from a postmodern perspective, explains,

> Much of the growing field of literature on the question of identity is structured by tension between conceptualizations of identity as a category or as a process. As a category, identity announces who we are and calls upon notions of nation, class, gender, and ethnicity for definition. But a second way of talking about identities recognizes that identity is a process of making identifications, a process that is continuous and incomplete. (pp. 12–13)

Identity-as-category, then, calls forth the voices of critical race theorists who have posed the category of racial identity as central to their analyses; however, these same theorists have investigated the *process of categorization* through law and personal voice. It is CRT feminists who especially elucidate that the processes of categorization can underscore essentialism by offering a critique of original CRT approaches to identity:

> In addition to rejecting essentialism in feminism, Critical Race feminists reject CRT's essentialization of all minorities. As the experiences of males may differ significantly from those of females, we are thus a feminist intervention within CRT. Our anti-essentialist premise is that identity is *not* additive. In other words, Black women are not white women plus color, or Black men plus gender. (Wing, 2000, p. 7)

Rejecting a binary of identity-as-category versus identity-as-process, CRT scholars have insisted on both the personal and contextual implications of identity formation. As John O. Calmore (1995) puts it, "Critical Race Theory tends…toward very personal expression that allows our experiences and lessons, learned as people of color, to convey the knowledge we possess in a way that is empowering to us…" (p. 321). In this sense, an attention to structural and historical

processes that contribute to one's identity is also an attention to an understanding of oneself as a member of a racialized group; however, group membership must be understood as contingent, contextual, and irreducible if the political project of anti-essentialism is to hold. Our purpose then, in this work, is to understand the complexities of discourse around identity as they are mediated in racialized contexts.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995) argues that an intersectional framework is needed to critique systems of oppression as well as discuss differences *within* groups of people, not just between different groups. She outlines an intersectional framework in three interrelated dimensions: (1) structural intersectionality, (2) political intersectionality, and (3) representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality deals with the subordination of women due to their gender roles, responsibilities, and job opportunities. An examination of structural intersectionality highlights the institutional dynamics concerning socio-economic status, race, and gender. Political intersectionality is the way in which issues of difference are often dealt with in a disjointed fashion, the core problem of identity politics. These discourses force women to choose race over gender and gender over socio-economic status, preventing the characterization of women of color as multifaceted beings. The failure to acknowledge the complexities of women's identities and allegiances is further exacerbated through representational identities. Through these identities, women of color are often fed media images of themselves that present stereotyped, narrow constructions of who they are or who they can become. Thus women, seeking to identify themselves in world cultures, adopt, modify, and reject these images in their efforts to define themselves (Crenshaw, 1995). While Crenshaw's work focuses on women's intersectionality, these same categories also apply to men (Carbado, 1995).

Crenshaw (1995) argues that intersectionality expands CRT's power

> because women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women, antiracism and feminism are limited, even on their own terms. (p. 360)

This, of course, is also a way in which intersectionality relates to critical multiculturalism. No single aspect of the expression of identity can fully accoun for cultural and historical context, even given the fact that race has consistently assumed a central role in America's history and imagination.

Counterstory

Because critical race scholars view experiential knowledge as a strength, they draw explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color by including such methods as "storytelling, family history, biographies, parables, *testimonios, cuentos, consejos*, chronicles, and narratives" (Sleeter & Delgado Bernal, 2004, p. 247). For example, education scholars such as Delgado Bernal (1998), Fernandez (2002), Villenas and Dehyle (1999) used the counterstories of families and students of color to defy common stereotypes that make people of color seem uninterested in academic success and intellectualism. Counterstories play an important role:

> These counterstories can serve at least four theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical functions: (1) they can build community among those at the margins of society by putting

a human and familiar face to educational theory and practice; (2) they can challenge the perceived wisdom of those at society's center by providing a context to understand and transform established beliefs; (3) they can open new windows into the reality of those at the margins of society by showing the possibilities beyond the ones they live and demonstrating that they are not alone in their position; and (4) they can teach others that by combining elements from both the story and the current reality, one can construct another world that is richer than either the story or the reality alone. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 475)

Using counterstory, scholars illustrate the complexities inherent in negotiating schools and programs that remain rigid and uninviting to students of color and their families.

The method of counterstory does not function as an isolated tool for exploring how power and privilege create opportunities and reinforce barriers for people of color. Diverse methodological tools must be utilized in order to describe the experiences of people of color in settings impacted by multiple dynamics (Coates, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Counterstory is

both a method of telling the story of those experiences that are not often told (i.e. those on the margins of society) and a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse—the majoritarian story. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, p. 475)

Identity Projects

In this paper we offer a textual analysis of high school students' writing from a summer college bridge program in an effort to highlight the complex contexts that students experience and how students draw on conceptions of race, class, and gender. These representations of student work serve as intersectional accounts of race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 1995). We use the term "identity project" to illustrate the shifting cultural meanings and constructions at play in students' writings. An identity project is one that seeks to illuminate the self in society and is impacted not only by individual agency but also by endemic features of American cultural life—the context which frames and limits possibilities of expressive selfhood. We argue that identity projects reflect accommodations, resistances and internalizations of the accretion of discourses that comprise public life.

Making use of the public aspect of persona, we project our identity projects onto the scrim of knowledge production in schools. As composition theorists tell us, writing in class settings makes sense of audience, purpose, and voice for reasons of persuasion, exegesis, and hermeneutic invention (see Ball and Lardner, 2005 for an understanding of composition as racialized practice). Often, multicultural education calls on the voice of the self—the autobiographical incident, the *testimonio*, the autoethnography as genre—in order to begin critical discussions of difference and justice.

CRT counterstories are identity projects that act to transform, re-envision, and rewrite the self and particular groups. They depend, in part, on an understanding of racism as endemic to U.S. society, but, equally important to this study, they extend this understanding to one that also intersects with other systems of oppression (Delgado, 2000a). Identity projects differ from

counterstories in that they may often act not to counter but to reinscribe racism, sexism, and classism. As such, they are artifacts of cultural calculus, artifacts that allow for affirmation, solidarity, and critique in multicultural praxis (Nieto, 2000).

A Note on Data Collection

The young men and women writing are African American, Latino/a, White, Hmong, and Native American and hail from a wide range of economic backgrounds, family structures, and religions. These racial and cultural dynamics held great potential for fecund discussions and written works that explored how students fit into and resisted their multiple community affiliations.

These conversations did not occur in a vacuum; rather, they were facilitated by a critical multicultural curriculum that focused on issues of identity and society with regard to race, class, and gender. The material documents were collected from over three hundred students from a period of six years (1999–2004). Each year, the students were asked to submit their polished pieces of writing to their teachers to be published in a program anthology. The published pieces, as well as newer unpublished works from more recent students, comprise the bulk of the data. Curriculum planning materials and available resources also were collected.

Using Crenshaw's CRT intersectional framework to code for structural, political, and representational intersectionalities, we arrived at several themes, four of which will be presented in this paper. Our themes are racialized heteronormativity, which encompasses hyperfeminization and hypermasculinization; Judeo-Christian-centricity, which highlights morality, discipline and punishment, and community memberships; essentialized racial projects which work to tightly contain community and group memberships; and middle-class values of exceptionalism and meritocracy. Needless to say, these themes overlapped and fed each other in ways that, we claim, limit possibilities for transformational public discourses if they are not open for examination and reflection. Further, these themes arose from our own critical self-reflection as teachers and researchers. We seek not merely to point at identity projects to understand cultural contexts; rather, we seek to understand our own existential positions in the milieu.

Findings

What we found in the students' autobiographical pieces was a complex of discourses surrounding issues of race, class, gender, and religion. These were heavily impacted by media images of men and women, political discourses that centered on poverty and teenage sexuality, religious rhetoric to guide and suppress behavior, capitalist agendas surrounding wealth and material consumption, and societal discourses that reinforced the myths of meritocracy and democracy in the United States. Within these often competing and contradictory discourses (Gee, 1989), we attempted, for example, to untangle how some students coupled poverty and teenage mothering with an overwhelming pro-life, anti-abortion religious orientation.

Female students in particular wrote about being a teen mother as a necessary form of punishment for the sin of pre-marital sex, with little regard to the impact this punishment has on the child, for example. This religiosity, in play with a heteronormative view of womanhood (and manhood), again in play with material acquisitiveness, is just one example of the need we have,

as multiculturalists, to pay close attention to the performative power and production of identity projects in education.

Identity projects have rich potential for engaging multiculturalism—indeed, they provide an apt starting point for Nieto's (2000) conception that critical multicultural practices encompass affirmation, solidarity, and critique. In affirmation, we seek to understand and accept difference. Solidarity validates difference, but rather than merely celebrating its existence, a practice of solidarity demands the instantiation of common goals centered on equity and justice for all. Lastly, critique is necessary as internalized and externalized oppression are identified in order to transform social relations. In the spirit of affirmation, solidarity and critique, we also analyze these identity projects in order to objectify our own practices and orientations as researchers and teachers.

Racialized Heteronormativity, Meritocracy and Exceptionalism

In the following piece, the writer describes her subject position—not simply or easily, but with a keen eye to her public audience. Drawing deftly on the history of the Black Power movement, she melds a message of racial pride with the genre of African American rhetorical tradition (Ball & Lardner, 2005), instantiating orality and narrative interspersion as design features of her project. Further, the writer shows identity as a project of both category and process:[1]

> Surely you know what is to be a strong African American woman. It is to carry that long line of love and deceit. It is being an intelligent woman, going through the best college there is and then some to get where and what she wants to be in life: a SUCCESS. It is to make sacrifices to keep what you have or to get what you want. It is to be emotional and to be able to flip feelings to as hot as a bag of hot fries but yet be as cool as winter-fresh gum. It is to be independent like a single mom holding it down for the sake of herself and her child. To be able to pay her car note and house bills and also have the COACH and TIFFANY'S on the side. She is a single woman; for her that's a definite A-plus. It is for her to buy herself nice things without her man saying, "You want me to pay for that, right?" No thank you, sweetie, she got this! It is to know when to stop being MS. INDEPENDENT so much that when men say, "WHAT AM I HERE FOR? YOU DON'T NEED ME. YOU DO EVERYTHING YOURSELF THAT NEEDS TO BE," the truth is she really doesn't want to let her guard down and get hurt. But you see that's what happens when you try doing all work and no play. It is to be a sensible woman that uses her resources for her own benefit and work only to support herself! Yeah, that's right boo-boo, no free rides here! It is to be the backbone of the family that holds everyone together. It is to carry the lifeline of her children. She plans to be a cool yet an influential woman over her life. She will also become a dominant woman in the workforce, not allowing any man to tell her otherwise. Like women before her time, she will become an educated woman. Not just any woman an EDUCATED PREVAILING BLACK WOMAN. (Emphases in the original)

Here, it is possible to see a counterstory regarding black womanhood, one that speaks of fierce independence, flexibility, capability, and feminism—a counterstory that refutes white American tropes of Black womanhood: the welfare mother, the drop-out, the drug addict. Middle class values of brand-consciousness and acquisitiveness, exceptionality and meritocracy are seamless-

ly entwined, as well as a sometimes-contradictory heteronormativity. As we move into the separate analyses of structural, political and representational intersectionality, it is worthwhile to heed Romany's (2000) assertion that

> The intersectional lens exposes the arbitrariness of the demarcation of social spheres and shows not only how the dichotomy hides the ways the self becomes gendered, but also how it becomes simultaneously racialized and engendered—that is, how the psychological and politeness barriers imposed on Black women by the social divisions of labor affect them as women and as Blacks. (pp. 60–61)

It is only through intersectionality that the tensions between Black single womanhood and committed heterosexual relationships that this author puts forth can make sense from a narrative perspective.

Structural intersectionality. In terms of structural intersectionality, we can see in this example a consideration of African American women's identities existing and growing in concert with institutional dynamics such as unstable financial and employment opportunities, as well as the breakdown of the nuclear family. Educational and employment opportunities exist as structures emerging directly from the economic politics of racism—but also those of sexism. The writer underscores her resistance to structurally imposed limitations even while acknowledging them: "Going to the best college there is and then some" and "To be able to pay her car note and house bills and also have the COACH and TIFFANY'S on the side."

Limited job opportunities for Black people are the direct result of an economic history of racism; however, it is a history that has had categorically different effects for African American women and men. As African American men of the working class have experienced, for example, a diminishment of skilled manufacturing jobs under globalization and a concurrent intensification of prosecutorial racism in the courts for nonviolent crimes (such as drug offenses, which in turn resulted from the U.S. government's dumping of crack in urban black communities), African American women not in the middle class have experienced economic intensification: "The backbone of the family that holds everyone together." Mapping here, we can see that the projection of one's persona is intimately linked with history and culture. An attention to structural intersectionality offers a reading of identity construction as both category and process. Multiple dimensions of categorization are clearly in play as the subjectivities of womanhood are contrasted against those of manhood and again as the subjectivities of modern Blackness are embedded against the invisible centricity of Whiteness.

Political intersectionality. From the point of view of political intersectionality, this narrative illustrates a certain disjointedness that asks the woman to choose gender over race and socio-economic status over gender. Crenshaw (1995) indicates, "The concept of political intersectionality highlights the fact that women of color are situated within at least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas" (p. 360). In this identity project, the persona of Black womanhood stands at an uneasy impasse with the project of Black manhood. Discursively, the racial solidarity the writer addresses is at risk as Black manhood no longer fits the bill of regulated, white patriarchal norms—"WHAT AM I HERE FOR? YOU DON'T NEED ME." Additionally, the fulfillment of Black womanhood in this project is delicately balanced between the sphere of home/family and career/public influence. In fact, it seems that socioeco-

nomic status, addressed through material acquisitiveness and dominance in the workforce, subsumes the place of manhood, which proves a paradox in this heteronormative framework. The disappointment evident here as the promise of heterocentric and patriarchal constructions of public life fade in importance in the face of economic imperatives is a moment open to complexity and reflection.

Representational intersectionality. Lastly, representational intersectionality outlines how this young woman orients herself to dominant discourses of single Black motherhood, which is in turn related to the "disappearance" of the black man from the middle class generally as well as black social life specifically. This narrative directly counters dominant cultural tropes of the welfare mother, the uneducated/illiterate and poor black woman; however, it does so in a somewhat narrow construction that, as Crenshaw (1995) would remind us, both adopts certain narratives while it counteracts them. It is in this representation that both counterstory and story are in play, making an identity project emerge.

Judeo-Christian Centrality

Trying to Find Love: The Cause and Effect of Teen Pregnancy

My mom is a very good mother, I think personally that she raised me the best she could. One reason why my mom got pregnant is because her parents didn't tell her not to have sex. They really didn't talk to her or any of her sisters about the physical part of life, and that she could have a baby if she had sex. One big reason why there might be a lot more African American women getting pregnant than any other race is because most of the parents don't know how to talk to their children about sex. Or just plain and simple they don't take the time out of their lives to tell their kids. My mom always told me what could happen if I had sex, and she's always been there. My mother lets me know about everything that happened to her, it's almost like we're sisters because we are so close. I think the main reason that she always warns me about stuff is because she's already been through it and doesn't want me to make the same mistakes.

Most women who get pregnant, are young, and are on their own are most likely to be on welfare. The pregnant teens are on welfare because they don't have jobs or their jobs don't pay them enough money. I don't think it's all the pregnant teens' fault that they got pregnant. I mostly blame the parents for not always being there, and telling their daughters and sons about sex and about having babies and how you can get pregnant. I think the reason why most girls have sex is because they need to release some tension or it's just a cry for help; maybe their parents aren't showing them enough love at home. Girls who try to find love somewhere else may end up in all the wrong places, which would mean they want to belong to someone, be attached to somebody. So if some girl is attached to her boyfriend and she trusts him, and her boyfriend asked her not to use a condom because he "loves" her, she probably would do it because she thinks she's in love. When some girls come up pregnant, some of their boyfriends don't even claim that the baby is theirs, let alone take care of the baby. Most guys get scared when their girlfriends get pregnant because it's an unusual situation for them, and they don't know how to respond to the situation. In most cases the guys are emotionally scared by the girl and the baby, so they don't have to take care of the baby and its mother. No matter how immature

the guy may be at the time, he becomes a man the day his girlfriend or ex-girlfriend has that baby.

I think teen pregnancy is very bad because the people that usually produced the baby are really young. This means that they can barely take care of themselves because they're still young. Most teens that get pregnant aren't even ready for kids or the big commitment. Usually the male leaves his girlfriend, leaving her and her family to support the baby. In the Bible it says that God doesn't give anyone anything that they can't handle in life. It's just a matter if they're willing to try harder to support the baby, but it also depends on if they care about the baby. If they really care about their baby, they will take care of the baby no matter how hard it is. I know all of this because my mom was a single pregnant teen. Life was very hard for her, but no matter how hard it was, she kept working and doing the best she could with what she had, on her own.

Structural intersectionality. In this essay, teen-aged women are subordinated by the fact of their gender, socioeconomic status, and age. The problem of teen motherhood emerges in this narrative seamlessly as particularly a black problem, a woman's problem, and a socioeconomic problem—ignoring the differences between biological age and social age. Drawing on autobiography first, the narrator generalizes teen motherhood as endemic to African American culture; exemplified, in part, by African American parents' refusal to engage in a conversation with their children about sex. The conspicuous narrative breakdown occurs in the essay's Judeo-Christian centricity, which is fundamentally patriarchal. In this central trope, abstinence and adoption are the only available concepts in the discussion of teen pregnancy. Obviously absent are concerns of general reproductive health, elucidated by Nancy Lesko's (2001) discussion of Zillah Eisenstein's work:

> Feminist politics can aid us in reconsidering school-aged mothers and sexuality from the perspective of age domination. Zillah Eisenstein's argument that reproductive rights must include health care, sex education, AIDS prevention, and so on will shift the present immoral status of teenage mothers. (p.145)

The problem of the school-aged mother is also a problem of history, embedded in trajectories of mandatory secondary schooling, the instigation of child labor laws during the Industrial Era, and the patriarchal control of women's bodies. (Paternity is uncertainty, as this author indicates, "When some girls come up pregnant, some of their boyfriends don't even claim that the baby is theirs, let alone take care of the baby.") Institutional dynamics dictate that the pregnant teen is in violation of religious and economic norms, regardless of her biological readiness to bear children.

Political Intersectionality. Clearly, this narrative poses that African American women, regardless of the inaccuracy of the assertion that "One big reason why there might be a lot more African American women getting pregnant than any other race is because most of the parents don't know how to talk to their children about sex," must choose a certain moral stance in order to remain welcome members of their communities. Related to the political disequilibrium here is a discourse of sinfulness and how it is focused tightly on women's bodies. Specific to this example, (as there are plenty of examples of misogyny in Judeo-Christian discourses), is the differentiation of certain kinds of sin: premarital sex is a lesser sin here than abortion (within or

without marriage). Christianity is at odds with socio-economic spheres, and both here work to constrain possibilities of African American womanhood.

Endemic to African American cultural history, too, is Christianity. The source of community strength in terms of literacy and civil action, the church can also serve to underscore differential outcomes based on gender. Identity politics require a strict adherence to conservative Christian values regarding women and their bodies, men and their bodies, splintering solidarity by raising the shadows of hyper-fecundity and promiscuity.

Representational Intersectionality. Fundamentally, the motif of the Black teen welfare mother is a narrow construction of what young black women are and who they can become. Even here, the author writes a counterstory in her revelation of her mother's honesty and success as a mother. As the writer reflects on her mother's successes as a woman and mother, she must always pose this intimate image next to that of the parent who "doesn't show enough love" and the child who is "crying out for help." In this project, the balance between counterstory and story is precarious—the narrative self loses some of its integrity as it contrasts starkly with public representations.

The author cannot reconcile her original argument that candid discussions regarding sexual practices as a means to alleviate the perceived social problem of teen welfare mothers with her own identity as a Christian. Representations of young women from within and without the African American community resonate and clash in the same moment, and so the tension between story and counterstory remains unresolved.

Essentializing Racial Projects: Communities and Group Memberships

Dang, You Talk Clear!

Being Vietnamese in Madison, I believe, is very hard. I can't particularly fit in with other Asian people here because most of them aren't Vietnamese. They speak different languages and have different cultures. The other Vietnamese that live up here are generally related to me, and that makes it hard to know how and where I fit in.

Personally, I live in a predominantly black neighborhood. Because of this, I hang out with a majority black crowd. I'm not the typical Asian girl that a lot of people have in their mind. I'm always being stereotyped as being a Chinese girl that can't speak English well with "chinky" eyes. When I do speak "clear," and often "wit slang," people are often caught off guard, asking me why I "act" or talk so clear, and so "black!" It's hard to reply, because to me, I don't act: this is what I've grown up around, this is what I know. I don't have that "Asian accent" that most perceive me to have.

I always wonder what others think of me—of "the Asian girl that tries to act black." I didn't even realize one could act like a color, let alone be categorized as one. It's funny that people like to prejudge how you <u>should</u> act, and how you <u>should</u> talk by the way you look, and when you prove them wrong, they get the idea that you're not true to yourself, like you're trying to be something you aren't. I personally don't want to be black, not that it's a bad thing, it's just that I love my nationality and my culture, and I wouldn't do a thing to try and change that. I can't change who I am, neither can I change who I hang out with or how I act or talk, because I can't change what I was brought up around, or the people I grew up with.

This subject should matter to the world because everyone needs to realize the differences in races and understand that stereotypes are destroying the strengths of those who combat those stereotypes. Everyone is different in their own way, and nobody should be the victim of being categorized as to how they should act, dress, or talk because of the color of their skin.

Structural intersectionality. Community allegiances that emerge from socioeconomic conditions indicate more diversity and hybridity than dominant, essentialized notions of racial identity allow. The subordination of people of color ideologically "blackens" some immigrants (Lee, 2005 illustrates this in the case of the Hmong, for example) as they experience racism in employment, housing, and schooling opportunities. Structures support particular housing patterns, often placing new immigrants and their families in neighborhoods that emerge from a range of government and corporate practices: housing loans and subsidies, school segregation and desegregation, white flight, and the like.

Political intersectionality. This author aptly indicates the multiple layers of hypocrisy that essentialization forces her to face. Hers is a counterstory that refuses to accept binarism—whether in the blank category "Asian" that often imposes, through the centrifugal power of whiteness, a Chinese identity on all Asians, or in the instantiation of skin color as the primary feature of belonging to Blackness. The writer insists on her own hybridity and its richness—both in her ethnic heritage and her cultural competencies. The solidarity implied by identity politics shatters in this narrative as the author makes plain her multiple allegiances based on race and ethnicity—she does not address gender explicitly and socio-economic status only implicitly. For this young woman, the questions raised by race and ethnicity together offer enough complexity.

Representational Intersectionality. Representing Vietnamese/not-Chinese/ Asian/ Black, the writer runs full speed at the bricks of identity-as-category. The clever title of the piece shows this most distinctly: The imagined African American audience remarks to the author's native use of Ebonics, "Dang, you talk clear!" with surprise, perhaps because of an expectation of the Asian-as-always-immigrant. Other writers have indicated that an Asian face is often marked as continually foreign, un-American, in ways other races are not (Lee, 2005). Unaccented English, and, in this case, Ebonics, comes as a shock to the rigid boundaries of what identity categories demand for cohesion: "…people are often caught off guard, asking me why I 'act' or talk so clear, and so 'black!'"

Implicit in this re-representation, too, is the author's recasting of the passive, silent Asian female: "I'm always being stereotyped as being a Chinese girl that can't speak English well with 'chinky' eyes." In her outspoken resistance, she engages the strength of the discourse of Black womanhood—turning essentialism on itself: "When you prove them wrong, they get the idea that you're not true to yourself, like you're trying to be something you aren't." This excerpt outlines the consequences of resisting identity politics, a consequence that the author cannot (at least in this narrative) adequately reconcile. Instead, she ends glibly, "Everyone is different in their own way, and nobody should be the victim of being categorized as to how they should act, dress, or talk because of the color of their skin."

Implications and Significance

Clambering over the uneven terrains that shape identity projects allows us to critically reflect on our own identities and existential experiences in particular historical moments and cultural milieus. The discourses of racialized heteronormativity, meritocracy, exceptionalism, inclusion, and exclusion in communities and groups work themselves out in our individual experience in a gamut of ways; therefore, interrogating them becomes a complicated task. Nonetheless, critical disruption of these discourses cannot occur without a nuanced understanding.

Building affirmation, solidarity, and critique from identity projects asks us to appreciate the complex intersections of race, class, and gender as they are processed through historical, legal, and economic structures. An identity project is not a map of false consciousness; rather, it is part counterstory, part context story—an artifact of culture that acts as a heuristic tool. Using identity projects as a tool for research, teaching, and reflection, we can begin to outline the confluence of material effects, historical trajectories, discourse, and identity as both category and process. Highlighting only category results in essentialization. Highlighting process alone can lead to an emphasis on constructionism that can reject the material effects of power:

> Vulgar constructionism thus distorts the possibilities for meaningful identity politics by conflating at least two separate but closely linked manifestations of power. One is the power exercised simply through the process of categorization; the other, the power to cause that categorization to have social and material consequences. (Crenshaw, 1995, pp. 375–376)

We have here attempted to walk the razor's edge, understanding the limits of language in fully accounting for the messiness of context and structure. Research in the public interest pushes us to think about ways in which these conversations can carry into an ongoing public dialogue in our schools and our public culture as well. The implications of this approach reach into the spheres of curriculum and pedagogy. When multicultural education comes to mean merely discussions of gender and race (which are difficult enough to engage in, to be sure), complex meanings embedded in the untidy reality of public identities are blurred and smoothed over, to the detriment, we argue, of both democratic possibility and critical self-awareness (Ladson-Billings, 2004). How do we unpack and critically examine issues of oppression and resistance with students in a meaningful way that encourages them to continue to apply the same critique to their communities, personal lives, and global existence?

Another significant implication for the current research milieu is that the primacy of race, while of paramount importance to understanding issues of educational equity and social justice, cannot be understood fully without close attention to intersectionality (Delgado, 2000b). What Crenshaw's (1995) intersectional framework offers us as researchers, then, is a reminder that social science is necessarily complex but that we should not shy away from attempting to describe and understand this complexity. Indeed, the current political scene shows us that racial representation, so long a rallying cry of earlier identity movements, does not fully accomplish the goals of social justice in a democracy (Lee, 1995). Until we become more proficient at analyzing intersectionalities, we cannot do the kind of research or teaching that will truly serve the public interest of strengthening our democracy.

NOTES

1. All student writings are quoted in their entirety in order to maintain fidelity to the authors' work.

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