Chapter 1

Lifting the Shroud: Reflections of a Cultural Chameleon

By Ansell Chiu

Ansell Chiu is a Chinese Singaporean who moved to Bangkok, Thailand at age nine. For the next nine years, Ansell schooled primarily in American-curriculum international schools, in a community consisting of third-culture kids. His experience as part of a people-group brought together by transience assisted his assimilation into United States society, including Chinese-American minority circles. Ansell analyzes how his childhood enables him to alter his projected persona, donning various stereotypes including the Asian model minority and the hapless international student. He further inspects how the third-culture kid experience both allows him to leverage passing and covering in his interactions with others as a student in Texas, while concurrently generating confusion about his Southeast Asian self-identity.

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Early life in Singapore gave no indication that I would one day be almost ten thousand miles away, studying in a predominantly White-American university, attempting to trace my life journey across oceans, cultures, and racial influences. The son of an Anglican priest father and homemaker mother, I enrolled in a Singapore government school like any unassuming middle-class Singaporean would. As a member of the Chinese-Singaporean majority, I never really paused to ponder the effects race had upon my life. The Singapore government overtly (and sometimes overly) emphasizes racial harmony and understanding between those of Chinese, Malay, and Indian descent; as a young and impressionable primary school student, I had no reason to believe otherwise (Clammer 1982:130). Race was a non-issue. We were all Singaporean. Or so I thought.

After turning nine, my parents were invited to establish an English language center in Northeast Thailand and to build relationships with local
churches. We moved. Our move, though strange, was not excessively disconcerting. My father is originally from Hong Kong, and our family was already accustomed to traveling overseas often. My father’s particularities worked in my favor, too. He disliked older apartments, always looking to sell in favor of moving to a slightly newer one. Whilst living in Singapore, our family must have moved five or six times by the time we departed for Thailand. I had been primed for transience without knowing it. Upon arrival, we settled into an apartment and my parents enrolled in intensive Thai language classes in Bangkok, the Thai capital.

The American international school microcosm

My sister and I enrolled in school too. Unceremoniously thrust into a small private international school predominantly staffed by White-American teachers, I instantly needed to act, think, process, and operate in dual environments. On one hand, I now lived in a city of nine million Thai nationals, many of whom spoke very little or no English. My membership in an ethnically Chinese majority in Singapore was irrelevant. Furthermore, within the four walls and seven hours of formal North American education, I was now the strange kid speaking oddly-accented English, lacking basic understanding of United States geography, and spelling English words the English way. Should I learn to be Thai, or strive to develop myself as an “American”? Was either even possible?

The odd “in-between-ness” with respect to two or more cultures points exactly to the concept of a Third Culture Kid, or TCK. A TCK is defined as “someone who, as a child, has spent a significant period of time in one or more culture(s) other than his or her own, thus integrating elements of those cultures and their own birth culture, into a third culture” (Eakin 1998:18). TCKs therefore identify best with others sharing this third culture, but before I came to recognize such an identity, I would first have my early identity rudely challenged.

The English language represented my first tussle with white majority culture and the beginnings of my unconscious instruction on the arts of covering and passing – that is, minimizing the “obtrusiveness” of my personal cultural identity, or even perhaps eliminating it from others’ notice completely. Yoshino writes how virtually everyone is expected to cover in some form or another, to unjustly suppress elements of her identity, to squelch the quest for self-definition (2006). He goes on to quote John T. Malloy’s “New Dress for Success” self-help manual, where Malloy identifies the “model of success” as “white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant.” Indeed,
this model formed the very baseline white habitus for the “American international school” system I would continue to school in for the remainder of my secondary education. I would quickly encounter dissonance with an exported white habitus within the “international” school environment.

Exportation of white habitus

Habitus hearkens back to Bourdieu’s synthesis of a structure that “shapes an actor’s perception, appreciation and action”; white habitus specifically defines “a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions” (Bonilla-Silva 2010:104). By exporting American curriculum and American schoolteachers, and failing to integrate more international elements into course syllabi, the American international school I spent fifty hours a week in also exported white habitus and the American model of success.

I vividly remember the first few weeks of fourth grade. My parents took great care during my primary school years to encourage study of the English language. I prided myself on spelling and vocabulary, and felt crushed when I received a less-than-perfect grade on a spelling quiz. I missed points not because I spelled a word incorrectly – at least, not incorrectly in any British-based system. According to my fourth grade teacher, I was in an American school system now, and “neighbour” was spelled “neighbor” in America. Therefore, I was wrong. I did not deserve the points for the misspelling, and I needed to learn that in this school, America was the last word.

Like any good nine year-old nurtured on Chinese Confucian educational values, I was more concerned with succeeding and excelling in a meritocratic system than I was with maintaining my rugged individualism and British-English vocabulary. I did not really know any of my classmates yet; I knew I was different; and, according to my fourth grade teacher, who had infinitely more wisdom than me, I now knew I was wrong. My mission? I needed to assimilate to my White-American teacher’s expectations. After all, “assimilation is implicitly characterized as the way in which groups can evade discrimination by fading into the mainstream” (Yoshino 2006). My

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1 Throughout this essay, I will refer to United States school systems and United States majority social norms as “American”, as this was the term most often applied in my daily interactions growing up. However, I fully recognize the colloquial term “American” problematically ties the word solely with the United States and fails to include the full extent of the Americas.
solution? Spell “neighbor” the right way – or, as Yoshino would say, minimize my otherness. Cover.2

I did not believe, and still do not believe, that my teacher (in addition to very many other individuals to follow) intended to explicitly force racialized norms upon me. She simply sought to promote order and uniformity in her class. Nevertheless, here lies the very heart of unconscious and systemic racial and cognitive bias. As any group defines what is right, correct, and important for itself and from its point of view, it simultaneously constructs other groups—“out” groups—that are distinguished by behaviors and characteristics that deviate from that group’s view of “normal” (Dovidio 1992). This cognitive bias is the brain’s normal way of sorting through the overload of information we receive each day; yet negative biases are formed as antitheses to what the in-group regards as acceptable. Such an event makes an impression upon a child. I now knew what was acceptable. I needed to be more “American”. I would thus operate for the next five years, learning to cover and adjust from school, to home, to the city, and everywhere in between. This journey I made daily. Whenever I functioned within WASP culture, Thai culture, Singaporean culture, or TCK culture, I adjusted myself accordingly.

The identity of a TCK served me well as I honed and perfected my ability to recognize in-groups in diverse situations, pinpoint any negative variances I exhibited, and cover them. A TCK quickly realizes she never fully belongs to a traditional culture. She remains transient, impermanent, and uncertain. For me, this meant attempting to alter myself to at least have some fit with those around me. I attuned myself to unconscious biases, and adjusted accordingly. My integration would continue as my family and I returned to Singapore, where I continued my education in another American curriculum-based international school. Here, too, the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant model of success persisted, as I witnessed an even lower degree of integration between the school and wider society. My school was a white-American cultural enclave, unable to resolve the dissonance its teachers generated between themselves and their students (some of whom may have been white, but who certainly belonged to TCK culture).

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2 Editor’s note: Introduced into the sociological literature originally by Erving Goffman (1963), it refers to the process in which individuals downplay mutable traits, such as ways of speaking, forms of attire, and the like, in such a way that permits them to fade into the mainstream and thus escape stigmatization and discrimination. Goffman contrasts covering with the process of passing, in which the stigmatizing characteristic of the individual is not externally visible, so that, for example, the gay man may “pass” as straight.
Klemens and Bikos note how missionary kids (MKs) returning home after years spent overseas with their Christian missionary parents have greater difficulty than their peers in adjusting to college life; as TCKs, they return “home” to a country they do not see as home (2009:730). In my case, my survival instincts became “home”, in the very actions of conforming to exported white habitus. Later, when I moved to the United States to attend college, I would feel more at “home” covering and passing in the United States than some of my American-born TCK friends, though that itself would bring a fresh set of obstacles and challenges. Before that, though, I would have to refactor my covering and passing to tackle a new habitus: the Singaporean Army.

The army: Covering to survive and succeed

All male citizens and permanent residents age 18 and over are required to serve in the Singaporean military. I enlisted as part of my civic duty – and immediately encountered the same dissonance United States MKs face when re-entering the United States. I had no idea how to operate in mainstream Singapore culture anymore. After nine years in American international schools, I was lost. I related best with TCKs, not with Singaporeans – though I could look and sound much like a typical Singaporean. However, I discovered the key to my survival during Basic Training.

One young gentleman undergoing Basic with me hailed from the United States; one of his parents was a White-American, and the other was a Chinese-Singaporean. Naturally, everyone in Basic, including the instructors, all saw him as White. Surprisingly, though, their reaction was almost always positive. Andrew, as I will refer to him here, drew comment after comment as the “American”, yet even our officers would mention it with a hint of admiration. Andrew could do no wrong; his “American-ness” seemed to elevate him above his peers and reinforce his performance as a recruit. In a predominantly Chinese-Singaporean culture, Andrew was a model minority. “The term ‘model minority’ romanticizes Asian Americans as a hardworking, successful, and law-abiding ethnic minority that overcome hardship, oppression, and discrimination to achieve great success” (Melody, Chiu, and Lee 2010:44). Interestingly enough, Americans proved to be a model minority in Singaporean military circles. The United States military operates as one of the world’s premier fighting forces; thus, Singapore military personnel hold US military personnel in high regard. Even though United States citizens may have a crass, obnoxious, or ignorant reputation overseas, the officers who praised Andrew seemed to ignore those things completely.
I observed, and then strove to connect myself as closely as possible to the “American model minority”. For the next two years of service, I carefully chose which situations to cover my Singaporean persona and highlight myself as an Americanized Singaporean – often appealing to a superior’s perception that I had some transcendent intelligence or knowledge. Other times, when being perceived as “American” would have isolated me, I distanced myself from that image and donned my mainstream Singaporean persona, seeking to pass on my American-influenced identity.

The move overseas: From majority to a minority among minorities

After two years of service, I found myself applying to colleges in the United States. Schooled in white habitus, it never struck me as sensible to enroll anywhere else but a university in the United States. After all, why waste the opportunity when the US seemed to project and offer so many promises of social mobility, making one’s own way, and succeeding through working hard? The idea stuck with me. Moving to the US seemed like a grand idea; after all, I hung out with plenty of Americans throughout my school years, and some of my best friends were White-American TCKs.

I was in no way prepared for the shift from living in Singapore, where the ethnic majority is Chinese, to dwelling in a city dominated by a 60 percent Latino population and schooling in a principally White-American liberal arts institution. San Antonio was a huge departure from anything I had ever known. Even Thailand had a Chinese-Thai minority, enabling me to blend in somewhat easily. Additionally, the Thais were still a Southeast Asian community. In SATX, there was no way for me to easily cover – or so I thought.

Within the first week of school, I was panicking. The demographic distribution on Trinity University’s campus has changed significantly since my freshman year; back then, students of any Asian nationality were few and far between. The campus’s East Asian community hall further concentrated many Asian internationals and Asian-Americans together in a single residence hall. Consequently, the only person I met for seven days who phenotypically or culturally resembled me was a Korean exchange student. I also experienced no contact with the international student community, as I had enrolled in the spring semester, and I did not undergo the international orientation the university traditionally provided. I felt I was destined for four years of loneliness.

The relief I felt when I chanced upon the East Asian hall was palpable. I had no idea how significantly it would affect me to shift from being the
member of a majority group to a lonesome individual. Thus, when I encountered members of the Asian American community on campus, I did everything I could to connect. Without knowing it, I decided to simply hide my strange, unique international identity and pass as an Asian American (Yoshino 2006). There was no need for people to understand that I was a TCK or a Singaporean international. It was simply easier (and much less lonely) to function as an Asian-American male and to be part of an already-established people-group. It was much too complicated to teach the majority of individuals around me how to understand me as a Singaporean TCK.

Of course, without knowing it, I was opting into the stereotypes and racial myths connected to Asian Americans in the United States – including the model minority myth. In the United States, “the mainstream tends to attribute Asian Americans’ success stories to Asian traditional culture – Confucianism. In other words, the notion of model minority is based on the cultural difference, indicating a racial minority’s successful assimilation” (Chou 2008:220). Naturally, any racial stereotype has significant and far-reaching implications. For a TCK like me, however, struggling to find some kind of daily baseline from which to operate, the answer was easy: I adopted an Asian-American identity. With all my years of experience operating between cultures, I chose to maximize the benefits of my newly adopted persona. I wanted to conform to “traditional Confucian” education ideals, to adapt unobtrusively and work hard (Chou 2008:221).

As time passed, however, I quickly learned that when I encountered issues where Asian-American minority clashed with white habitus, it was beneficial to distance myself from the stereotype. So, much like I switched between cultures on a daily basis in my youth and in the military, I applied the same tactics to situations in and around campus life. Oftentimes, individuals were more willing to listen to my point of view if they realized I was not just an Asian American, but I had spent the majority of my life outside the American bubble (though I had a lot of time in an exported bubble). I could be the “good immigrant”, the smart, hardworking, unobtrusive, cultured “other”, rather than the typical Asian American. If I instead needed others to feel like I understood them, I would minimize my international characteristics, striving to conform as tightly as possible to American speech patterns, cultural reference points, and the like.

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3 See Gladwell 1996 for a more general discussion of this point.
Next steps

By now I have come to realize the benefits, the uniqueness, and the shortcomings of my *modus operandi*. In my quest to be accepted, to succeed, and to walk the paths of least resistance, I run the risk of deep self-centeredness. Instead of contributing to anti-racial discourse, I ignore the consequences of operating within stereotypes and using racialized personas for my personal advancement. Increasingly, I recognize the ways in which I benefit from all my personas, slip around the untruthful and unprofitable aspects, and move on without looking back. I have become increasingly dissatisfied with advancement and success purely to attain personal social, economic, or political power.

As I approach the end of my university years, I have to acknowledge that there are many more important things in this world than figuring out how I can get fellow students to like me. Racial myths and stereotypes have much more far-reaching and deeply hurtful consequences than a friend making an ignorant remark about my SAT scores. The truth is that I can use my life experience with transience and learning to operate in different cultures to be selfish. Or I can understand that, just as Robert Jensen declares, the next step “is to not be afraid to admit that we have benefited from [privilege]. It doesn't mean we are frauds who have no claim to our success. It means we face a choice about what we do with our success” (Jensen 1998).

I cannot deny my responsibilities. I have the ability to build trust with others and shape myself to identify with them. I must now choose to engage, though not randomly in unwinnable battles against systemic racism, ignorance, and privilege. I face the choice to fight good fights, in the slim hope that my transience and fluidity might enable me to influence important people and relationships, to stand against injustices one step at a time. Perhaps I will also unwrap another bit of myself along the way.

References


Chapter 2

Deconstructing Queer Experiences at a Catholic High School

By John Dean Domingue

John Dean Domingue grew up as a white, upper-middle class male in a predominantly white town in Central Texas. During his time as a student at a very small Catholic high school in his hometown, he came out as gay with few negative repercussions. At the same time, he noticed the negative reactions of students to one other “out” student at the school: a mixed-race, bisexual girl who became pregnant during her sophomore year. In his essay, he describes the differences between their experiences and analyzes the power relations that could have produced these differences.

Growing up in my hometown of Kerrville, Texas consisted of navigating a whitewashed life in which whiteness was the norm and blackness was made nearly invisible. The idea of mixed-race people was imaginable but not talked about nor seen much in the population. Of those in the 2000 census who reported one race in Kerrville, 85.9 percent were white, 3 percent were black or African American, and 8.2 percent were of some other race. Only 1.7 percent of the population identified as being of two or more races, and 22.7 percent of the population identified as Hispanic. This differs from the numbers for the entire United States in the same year, especially in the black or African American category: while 3 percent in Kerrville reported this category, 12.3 percent of the U.S. population did so (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

Conclusively explaining the origin of the town’s racial mix is impossible, but the area’s history suggests some contributing factors. Shingle makers and ranchers settled the area about twenty years before the
U.S. Civil War. The early settlers were involved in campaigns against the Native Americans, and some were also fighters in the Civil War (Kerr County Historical Commission, n.d.). This background sets the stage for the experiences of non-white residents more than 100 years later. Most of the people in Kerrville were Protestant Christians with a pretty even distribution between the main denominations (e.g. Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran) and non-denominational groups. A smaller number were Catholic (including my family), and fewer numbers were part of other denominations (e.g. Episcopalian). Of those I encountered, few were agnostic or atheist, and almost none were Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim, or part of any other organized religion. This strong Christian influence predominated and provided a backdrop for all life in my town. Every action was judged according to a Christian morality. The small size of the town—20,425 people—seemed to intensify this effect (U.S. Census Bureau 2010).

My Catholic high school had an even more conservative environment. At the time of the experiences I describe in this essay, the school had only been in existence for a few years. The founders wanted a school that blended Christian values with education, so Catholic thought was interwoven into all interactions at the school. Although the school itself is Catholic, the student body at the time was about evenly split between Catholic and Protestant, and those who were Protestant subscribed to particularly strict views of Christian theology. Few were progressive regarding social justice issues related to race or socio-economic class, while many expressed racist attitudes. The extremely small size of the school made these views more apparent and extreme.

A few major “players” at school shaped my experience a great deal. Our principal at the time was the same one who helped found the school. He held progressive views toward most issues, except those involving sexual orientation/sexual identity. The faculty was mostly Catholic, mostly politically conservative, and highly educated. My father had just joined the faculty as the theology teacher when I enrolled in the school. His presence impacted my experience in several ways. I feared not meeting his expectations of conduct or academic performance because I knew he would learn about it immediately. This resulted in my attempting to follow the rules more carefully than I had in the past. I also had an insider’s view into the lives of the faculty, what they talked about, and their views of the students. This allowed me to pass between worlds that the administration normally tried to keep separated. It also gave me insight into the faculty’s process of dealing with racial and sexual others.

Casey [a pseudonym] was a girl at school who came from a mixed-race family consisting mainly of Hispanic and black ancestry. She is one year
younger than I am, and in her sophomore year of high school came out as bisexual. I come from a white family and came out as gay my sophomore year as well, which places our coming out experiences one year apart from one another. Because of the size of the school and the conservative climate, she and I were the only people at the school openly identifying with any sexual identity other than “heterosexual.” Before my arrival, there had been one openly gay male student in the first group of students admitted to the school.

I came out to the student body the February of my sophomore year, in 2007. How my classmates reacted to the announcement of my gayness varied according to their gender, popularity, age, and degree of athletic involvement. Most female students at the school accepted me, although they did participate in some tokenization and objectification of me after I came out (e.g. “I can’t wait for us to go shopping together!”). In general, the less popular students accepted me more, while those who were the most popular or most exclusive in their choices of friends accepted me less. The older the student at the school, the more I was accepted. And the more athletically involved the student, the less I was accepted. This left the non-athletic, moderately popular, senior female students as those most accepting and the highly athletic, popular, freshman, male students as the least accepting. There were, of course, exceptions to this pattern, but this does describe my general experience. After faculty found out about me, their receptions varied by academic discipline. The fewer strict guidelines involved in the discipline, the more accepting the teacher. The art and English teachers were the most accepting, while the math and theology teachers were the least accepting. My coming out, like that of many others, did not happen all at once. It was an on-going process that resulted in evolving experiences. As the years progressed, the younger students were less and less accepting, with many younger freshman males bordering on being openly hostile to me. I eventually stopped communicating with all but a small handful of male students at the school. After being “outed” to my father shortly after he began teaching at my school, my experience changed dramatically: Those who supported me, both students and faculty, intensified their support in the face of the hostility I faced from my father.

Casey had a less sudden coming out. Although I never learned the details of how she came out, news of her bisexuality spread slowly through the school during the 2007-2008 school year. She faced more opposition from female students than male students. Although I had little insight into the lives and conversations of male students at the time, it seemed that most, if not all, were ignorant or ambivalent about her sexual identity. Similar to my experience, she faced more opposition from the more athletic students. The difference lay in the fact that she played on the softball team,
so much of the opposition she faced much came from her teammates. Casey’s pregnancy in her sophomore year by an unknown father marked her at school more than her coming out did.

The faculty was the last to know and the most to gossip about her sexuality. Although she passed for straight among the teachers for a long time, once they found out about her sexuality, it seemed (at least through the window I had through my father) that all the teachers could talk about was their concern for Casey. I did not hear about many teachers expressing concern about my stability or well-being in the way they did about Casey. This was amplified when Casey became pregnant, especially among the more conservative faculty members.

Casey and I had a friendly relationship, but we were not close. I would like to think that we were drawn to each other by our shared experience as queer people, although at the time I had not started playing with my position in queer identity politics, so this might be a bit of revisionist history on my part. Our lives also intersected through my father. As the theology teacher, many in the school community looked to him for the appropriate reaction to Casey’s coming out and her unexpected pregnancy. Although he sometimes mentioned her sexual identity, he mostly focused his moral discussions on her pregnancy and his fear that she would abort the pregnancy. My father’s moral discussions about me focused mainly on my sexual identity and not on my practices, because he was unaware of any sexual practices of mine at the time.

Casey’s experience and mine differed greatly. Our membership in different identity categories shaped people’s reactions and the journeys we each took during and after our high school experiences. As a mixed-race person who could easily pass for black, Casey faced subtle racism and erasure of her mixed-race status. When she became pregnant, the highly religious school community reacted with moral disapproval. As a bisexual woman on a sports team, she faced distrust and loss of friendships. Because of all these experiences, she faced alienation on several levels. I only faced alienation on one front: my sexual identity. In all other ways, I conformed (more or less) to the norms of the student body.

Casey and I are now in very different positions in life. I am a junior in college, still relying on my parents, and uncertain about the future, especially in terms of what my family will look like in the future. I do not know whether I want to develop a lifetime commitment with anyone, nor do I know whether I want that to be a partnership, a marriage, or something else. I am unsure about whether or not I want children. Will I settle down soon or in a far-distant future? Meanwhile, sooner than she
might have planned, Casey had many of these questions answered for her by her pregnancy and decision to see it through. Casey had her baby and, the last I heard, was pregnant with her second child. She transferred out of my school and into the public school in her hometown near Kerrville. She is no longer pursuing education and presumably works a full or part-time job in the area.

My study of sociology has led me to interpret the interactions I had with Casey and the differing experiences we had at our Catholic high school in a very different way than I did at the time. Back then, I did not draw the connections between her race, gender, and sexuality the way I do now. Theories about intersectionality, intergroup contact, and the concept of liminality inform my interpretation of our respective experiences in high school. The literature concerning experiences similar in one way or another to ours suggests that that Casey’s experience differed from mine so much not only because of her status as a queer woman of color and the intersecting layers of oppression she experienced, but also because of her vulnerability at the boundaries of and transition points between social categories, as evidenced by reactions to her pregnancy and bisexuality.

My analysis of my own experiences is problematic. It is colored by my biases and the revisionary tendency of memory. My reporting on Casey’s experiences is also problematic since I never have had the chance to discuss them with her. I had negligible access to some of the women-only spaces she navigated, such as the women’s locker room, and any of her experiences I heard second- and third-hand. Even more, my standpoint as a white male makes it difficult for me to convey her experience accurately or fully. Despite these problems, analysis is possible and, hopefully, fruitful.

A study reviewing the impacts of peer networks on algebra students shows that clique affiliation is “a potential predictor for academic achievement” (Nichols and White 2001:267). It also found that members in a clique were likely to have similar scores in algebra (Nichols, et al. 2001:271). Where does this leave people who belong to no clique because they are marginal to every group? Casey, for instance, did belong to what I might have described as the “Girls’ Athletics Clique,” but even within this group, she was marginalized after her pregnancy. Unlike Casey, I was generally accepted into a clique and therefore had access to a high-achieving peer network. According to this study, that peer network could have been part of the reason I did so well in school. Although I do not know how she scored in her classes while attending my high school, I do know that she has not pursued any further education. And although no current literature will support this conclusion, future research might extend the conclusion of
the Nichols and White study to show that even continued educational development depends on peer networks in high school.

Because more aggressive peer groups might have more of a tendency toward homophobia (Poteat 2007:1831), Casey’s position on a sports team might have made her more vulnerable to discrimination by her peers. Fears of Casey’s sexuality seemed to center on her potential to be attracted to women, not so much on her potential to be attracted to members of either sex. By this I mean that these fears were more homophobic than bi-phobic: Girls who expressed concern about Casey’s sexuality seemed more concerned about sexual access to women than they were concerned about her sexual access to both sexes. The same study indicated that a small number of peers could instigate wider homophobic behavior, a finding that speaks to the reality of Casey’s situation in which athletic girls expressed the most homophobic attitudes (Poteat 2007:1839). Only a small number of students in the school were responsible for the homophobia and biphobia she experienced.

Poteat, Espelage, and Koenig (2009) researched heterosexual youth and their beliefs about gay and lesbian peers. They found that boys were less likely than girls to want to remain friends with gays or lesbians after they came out. The same held true for younger students rather than older (Poteat, et al. 2009:952). Although this study only asked about gay and lesbian students and not bisexual students, the findings should still indicate something about school climates for sexual minorities in general. The study only looked at beliefs, not practices, but if it did also indicate practices, it would resemble my own experience, but not Casey’s. In her experience, girls were less likely to maintain relationships with her after her coming out. In fact, many girls gossiped about her more than they did other people. The same study, however, also indicated that students in “more racially diverse schools reported greater willingness to remain friends and attend school with gay and lesbian peers” (Poteat, et al. 2009:952). My school had very little racial diversity. It more or less reflected the racial and ethnic makeup of my town, except with a greater proportion of whites. Because of its low diversity, the equalizing effect seen in the study did not occur at my high school, exposing Casey to a student body with a greater-than-average propensity to reject queer people. This suggests that race makes a difference in the reactions to sexual minorities, but it does not provide much insight into how our different racial identities may have contributed to the notable differences in how our peers reacted to us when Casey and I each came out in high school.

A non-scholarly article documenting the experience of a Georgia high school also sheds some light on the effect that the racial makeup of a
school has on in- and out-group formation (Gehring 2004). The headline “Georgia High School Students to Hold Three Separate Proms” implies that the school sanctioned three separate proms. The article reveals, however, that the students have opted for years to hold a black prom and a white prom. In 2004, though, Hispanic students voted for a prom of their own. The racial and ethnic makeup of the school is 67 percent white, 22 percent African-American, and 11 percent Hispanic, much different from the makeup of my school, which was probably more along the lines of 80 percent white, 19 percent Hispanic, and around 1 percent reserved just for someone like Casey who is of mixed-race background. This minimal amount of diversity allows little room for Casey to find peers of a similar race or ethnicity, which places her at a vulnerable position as one of the very few people of color at the school, and therefore deprived of peers of similar racial and ethnic backgrounds with whom to form connections and networks.

*Intergroup contact theory* contends that interactions between different groups have the potential to decrease prejudice (Pettigrew 1998:66). In this situation, it would mean that the more that straight students interacted with queer students, the more their homophobic attitudes would decrease. The theory does stipulate, however, that these positive effects can only occur when four conditions are met: “equal group status within the situation; common goals; intergroup cooperation; and the support of authorities, law, or custom” (Pettigrew 1998:66). In cases where all four conditions are broken, the opposite effect occurs. In the case of my high school and interactions with Casey, the authorities and customs of the school associated with its religious orientation discouraged intergroup contact between straight and queer students. This could have prevented more positive intergroup contact effects from occurring, thus providing one explanation for why the girls’ sports team excluded Casey.

Intersectionality theory addresses many of the differences between my experience and that of Casey. This theory posits that social stratification occurs through complex intersections of differences. It regards as necessary the process of analyzing difference markers outside of those immediately being studied (Darity 2008). This explains that even though Casey and I both experienced oppression as queer people, other vectors of oppression such as gender, race, and class shaped our experiences in different ways. She was a bisexual, lower-middle class, mixed-race female, and I was a gay, upper-middle class, white male. The vectors of gender, sexuality, race, and class intersected in my life in such a way that I was only vulnerable to oppression based on my sexuality. Casey, on the other hand, faced multiple layers of oppression. Her status as a person of color subjected her to a different experience than mine, which might explain why, for example, her
life was much more sexualized in discussions by faculty than was mine. She faced a sexual double standard: As a woman, she was expected to have less sex than men, and as a woman in a Catholic school, she was expected to maintain her virginity (or at least not allow anyone to know otherwise) until marriage. Her race also could have contributed to this invasion and hypersexualization of her life.

Liminality describes a state of being at the boundary of a group or in transition between groups. The word is used across many disciplines, but it helps add nuance to an intersectional analytical approach by noting that intersections of oppression could put someone in a particularly vulnerable position. Several aspects of Casey’s experience placed her at a position more vulnerable to attack than my own. Even though Casey comes from a mixed-race background, the students at school assumed she was black, thereby erasing her mixed-race status. She also occupies a precarious position legally, because “courts and society have imposed a false set of distinctions, categorizing people as ‘white’ or ‘colored.’” Her eligibility for affirmative action benefits in some instances, for example, is jeopardized because of her mixed-race background (Colker 1996:11). Because Casey comes from a mixed-race background, she faced erasure of her mixed-race identity both at the school level and at the national level. Her bisexuality also placed her in a vulnerable position because of the minimal degree to which the law or her peers understand bisexuality. Many legal definitions of sexual orientation end up labeling some bisexuals as homosexual and leave others out (Colker 1996:46). These definitions seem to focus on behavior and homosexuality, leaving a gray area for bisexuals. Similarly, her peers seemed to focus on her potential attraction to women and to ignore her potential attraction to men.

When Casey became pregnant, her sexual behavior with men was put in the spotlight, which brought to light the inconsistency with others’ focus on her homosexual attractions and her heterosexual behavior. This resulted in her bisexual identity being called into question—e.g., “How can she really be bisexual if she’s pregnant?”—thus emphasizing her liminal status in terms of sexuality. Her status as a pregnant woman also placed her in a liminal/transitional position. As she moved between childhood and motherhood in a short span of nine months, she occupied yet another layer of vulnerable positions (Hertz 2006:24). This contrasts sharply with my experience, which involved no liminality. I came out once with a very short transition time between straight and gay. I always had a very visible, unquestionable white racial status and I followed the same progression toward adulthood as everyone else, without jumping too far ahead or lagging too far behind. This left me with few opportunities to be attacked, which was much different from Casey’s situation.
Reviewing and reliving my experience in high school and seeing the ostracizing of Casey compared to my own acceptance serves as an occasion to explore theories of power relations, especially regarding race and gender differences. Comparisons between Casey’s and my experiences and those found in studies regarding homophobia, bullying, and academic success, when coupled with analysis drawing on intergroup contact theory, intersectionality theory, and liminality, provide useful insights into how power relations play out in high school settings and dramatically shape life stories of people with some shared characteristics. Although no definite conclusions can be made regarding what exactly caused this difference between Casey’s and my experience, this analysis nonetheless provides some insight into several different forces that could have caused it.

References


Chapter 3

Cultural Relativism and Cultural Racism: Intersections of Race and Gender in a Case of Sexual Assault

By Sarah Dropek

For Sarah Dropek, a white female from Texas, race is a topic that has come up many times in conversations. It wasn’t until she left the country though that she was forced to deal with some hidden forms of prejudice that she had been unconsciously holding herself. While in Jordan, Sarah was exposed to a culture very different from her own that led her to contemplate how to understand women’s rights and human rights in different cultural contexts. An instance of sexual assault near the end of her stay forced her to think in a very concrete way about the intersections of race, gender, and culture in the issue of violence against women. In this essay Dropek focuses on how she practiced a form of cultural racism that stemmed from both an incomplete understanding of cultural relativism as well as subscription to media-reinforced stereotypes of Arabs.

I remember the officer asking me again if I tried to make him stop. At this point in my statement that I was giving to him, I had already detailed the numerous ways that I had expressed my discontent with the situation that had occurred earlier that day, even going so far as to invoke the colloquial phrase “don’t you have a sister?” in Arabic. This statement (I was told upon my arrival to Jordan) is supposed to stop Arab men in their tracks if they are performing unwanted sexual advances towards you. The basic meaning behind it being that a man would not want another man to do the things he is doing to you to his sister so he should stop doing them to you. I had been told by Jordanian citizens that, “men’s honor is intimately connected to the sexual chastity of their female
relatives” and that this phrase would come in handy if we were receiving unwanted sexual advances (Warrick 2005:322).

I remember pausing, confused as to the officers repeated question and wondering if we had maybe lost something in translation. I came to understand later that he had been confused as to why I hadn’t screamed, hit, run, or done something that would make me look less complicit in what transpired. In the activist world of the U.S., fighting ‘victim blaming’ in sexual assault and rape cases is something that is still fairly new to the discussion. Victim blaming is, at its most basic, the act of believing that victims of sexual assault or rape were more deserving of or complicit in the sexual violence enacted against them due to what they were wearing, how they were acting, how much alcohol they had consumed, and the like. In my case, the officer was exhibiting a form of victim blaming in his miscomprehension of why I did not fight back as much as he would have found acceptable.

I’ve always thought of myself as a pretty spunky person who, if put in the situation I was in, would have fought back more. This led me to question my lack of action against my assailant. Friends have told me I should not feel guilty in any way for my lack of action. While I am grateful to them for recognizing my “freezing” as a legitimate response to situations of sexual assault or rape, I never would have expected that sort of inaction from myself.

Upon further reflection on why I acted (or rather, didn’t act) the way I did at the time of the assault, I realized that during and even after the assault cultural racism had influenced my comprehension of what had happened to me. Cultural racism is, “a frame that relies on culturally based arguments such as ‘Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education’ or ‘blacks have too many babies’ to explain the standing of minorities in society” (Bonilla-Silva 2006:28). Though it pains me to discuss this, as I never thought of myself as having racist feelings, the cultural racism I found in myself could be summarized as follows: “Arab men believe more strongly in the subjugation of women than Western men do and therefore they are also more likely than Western men to commit acts of sexual violence against women.

I have since identified at least two factors that contributed to my cultural racism. The first was my misguided attempt to practice cultural relativism while abroad. The second factor is the barrage of media stereotypes of Arabs I had absorbed prior to my visit to Jordan and my subsequent exposure to the heterogeneity of people who actually inhabited the country.
In order to understand more fully how my own cultural racism developed, it would be helpful to explain how the above two factors have come to simultaneously influence my understanding of what the “stereotypical Arab” should be like prior to my stay in Jordan.

As a product of a media-obsessed generation and growing up with electronic media playing an integral role in my life, I have (wrongly) allowed myself to believe that I am immune to media as an influence in how I conceptualize my world. This is, of course, a false and a dangerous belief to hold when I am constantly barraged by media in my everyday life. Media depictions of certain cultures or groups of people are in no way static. However, media depictions of Arabs and Arab culture, when compared with other groups, have been surprisingly consistent over time.

In a comprehensive study of Hollywood films, Shaheen finds that Arabs are typically depicted as “brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women” (Shaheen 2003:172). Women, meanwhile, are popularly depicted in Western media in, “a position that is deemed to be backward, subservient, and totally at odds with the kind of equality and rights Western women have managed to achieve” (Brasted 1997:9). Further confusing to Westerners like me who have no first-hand, comprehensive interaction with Arab people is the dichotomy set up even among Arab Americans in the U.S. of “‘good Arab girls’ vs. ‘bad American(ized) girls,’ or ‘Arab virgin’ vs. ‘American(ized) whore’” (Naber 2006:88). The overabundance of media images portraying “exceptional social problems in the region that are [then] reported on as if they are dominant features of all Arabs and Muslims” do a disservice to Arabs as well as to the consumers of those images (Eltantawy 2008:19).

While it may be easy to accept such portrayals of Arabs and Arab culture as true, individuals might not be as willing to admit to the way these biased images have come to shape their personal views. However, as media studies have pointed out, “a steady stream of bigoted images does, in fact, tarnish our judgment of a people and their culture” (Shaheen 2003:177). On top of that, the media can be understood as a loop that feeds back into itself. This means that while the media may initially inform the stereotype, the stereotype comes to inform the media in an endless cycle (Shaheen 2003:188).

If an individual also lacks direct contact with a culture or group of people, stereotypes learned second-hand from the media about a cultural group come to fill in the absence of personal experiences with that cultural group that would otherwise have been utilized to understand a cultural
With all of the above images floating around in my head before I left for Jordan and numerous exclamations from friends and family of “You’re going where?” reaffirming those images, it is hardly any wonder that I would not hold some sort of racist beliefs about Arabs and Arab culture.

Further complicating this was my original motivation for wanting to go to Jordan. I set out to visit the Hashemite Kingdom with the goal of coming back and being a sort of Arab advocate. I was sick and tired of hearing so many terrible things said about Arab people, Muslims, and the Middle East (especially since 9/11) and wanted to go to Jordan so I could come back and serve as a cultural bridge. I wanted to fight the good fight and dispel myths, stereotypes, and biases not realizing at the time that I was going to Jordan with myths, stereotypes, and biases.

Knowing that I didn’t know everything, and wanting to learn as much as possible to fulfill my cultural bridge aspirations upon my return to the U.S., I thought it would behoove me to bring as little expectations of Arab culture and as little of my own culture to Jordan with me. I thought it would suit me well to practice cultural relativism while in Jordan in order to refrain from judging Arab culture against my own. Cultural relativism derives from an anthropological understanding of culture that can be summed up as “it’s their culture and it’s not my business to judge or interfere, only to try to understand” (Abu-Lughod 2002:786). It was this combination of my steady intake of biased, sometimes overtly racist media and my embrace of cultural relativism that led to my downfall, as it were.

Authors have pointed to the interesting position everyone is put in when it comes to cultural contact in an increasingly globalized and connected world. Especially in cases of sexual assault and rape, culture intersects in a way that does not allow an easy definition of human rights. With regard to workplace sexual harassment and the role that culture plays, it has been observed that, “cultural relativism exerts considerable influence over definitions, tolerance levels, and legislative solutions to workplace harassment” (Zimbroff 2007:1317). This makes cross-cultural contact particularly problematic. What is acceptable and expected in one culture could be prohibited and condemned in another. Who is correct? Which culture’s definition prevails?
Research indicates that culture and nationality strongly influence how people understand sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape. In Canada, Welsh et al. (2006:101) found that “[w]hile white women with citizenship were able to fit much of their experience into an understanding of what sexual harassment is in Canada, the focus group of Filipinas struggled with defining harassment in Canada.” The intersections of nationality, gender, and culture have also impacted efforts in Arab countries to address human rights generally and women’s rights more specifically. As Warrick (2005:344) notes about the case of Jordan, the “has, with regard to gender and law, staked out a tenuous position based on its need to balance two not-always-compatible sources of legitimacy: claims about cultural authenticity and claims about democracy and human rights.”

Although I doubt the conflict between universal human rights and cultural traditions is one that will be resolved any time soon, the focus of this paper is how, in attempting to navigate the lines between cultural relativism, usage of my own cultural standards to judge another’s, and attempts to avoid racism, I ended up being racist, and arguably, complicit (at least in part) to the assault.

The morning after I gave my first police statement around two a.m. (which I would later repeat for a judge), I was sitting in bed trying to sleep but instead just rehashing everything that had happened that day. As I went back through memories that were surprisingly quick to fade, I remembered something slightly comical that didn’t feel suitable for the situation at hand that I was thinking at the time of the assault. The moment that I stopped actively attempting to make him stop what he was doing I recall a certain analytical calm where I said to myself in my head something along the lines of:

Now Sarah, this isn’t your culture, you knew getting into this study abroad mess that you were going to a place that was very at odds with your extremely feminist self. How can you judge him for what he’s doing to you? He’s grown up in Jordan. A culture filled with the subjugation of women is all he knows. You can’t judge him for this.

To admit to having thought this is painful. Not only is it demeaning to him on a cultural level (on an individual level, as the perpetrator, he of course still merits blame), but in utilizing cultural relativism, I conflated his actions with the entire Arab culture and implicated all Arabs in what he did. My line of thinking served to undercut and demean all of the wonderful Arab people I met while in Jordan who were not the stereotype and who were nothing but welcoming to me during my stay. In the perfect storm of intersections between race, culture, and gender, my use of cultural
relativism as a way to make sense of my stay in Jordan allowed room for racism to fester.

Along with utilizing learned stereotypes of Arabs and Arab culture to denounce a whole group of people during the assault, I was also subscribing to stereotypes held about American (white) women in Jordan. Upon my arrival in Jordan, several people told me that I should be aware that in Jordan, “Al Amerikan (Americans) were often referred to in derogatory sexualized terms” (Naber 2006:87). As many (white) American women are aware, for various reasons (some of them being media’s portrayal of us), a number of countries see white American women as loose and hypersexual.

During my assault, I excused my perpetrator not only by practicing cultural racism, but also by relying on what I had been taught about the racial stereotypes that Arab men had about white women. Yet again, in attempting to comprehend him and his actions, I found myself thinking that if his culture had socialized him in such a way that he sees white American women as more accepting of sexual advances, how could I judge him completely for doing what he was doing?

The racism ultimately present in the situation can best be defined as a version of the cultural racism previously defined. Though not referencing Mexicans or blacks, the line I was using was something eerily similar to the mass media’s representation of Arab men. In trying to rationalize away the assault, I was basically saying “Arab men are all oppressive of women and prone to assault and rape.” As was found in the media study, “convenient stereotypes make everyone’s job easier” (Shaheen 2003:190). My job of trying to explain, contextualize, understand, and come to terms with the assault was made easier by use of learned stereotypes.

In thinking I was above the influence of the media, I was more insidiously affected by the images with which I was presented. In thinking I would use cultural relativism to further my understanding of Arab culture, I allowed myself to espouse beliefs that relied on cultural racism. Ultimately, in my attempts to explain away what he was doing to me, I allowed him more leeway to sexually assault me.

It is slow work to come to terms with and banish one’s own racist thoughts. What is proving even slower work is how to deal with my compliance with what happened that day because of my racism. I have avoided using the word consent thus far because I do know that nothing that happened that day was consensual in any sense of the word. But in revealing the racism behind my actions (or lack of action, really), I do, at least in part, become complicit in the events that followed my inner
monologue. Research has found that “targets [of sexual violence] are more likely to use internal coping methods when the harasser is outside of their racial-ethnic group” (Rospenda et al. 1998:54). This was indeed true for my situation. But what can I do when my internal coping method (cultural relativistic rationalization upheld by racist overtones) impacted my desire and ability to fight back, like I always thought I would if I found myself in such a situation?

I should be clear that in discussing the assault in this manner, I am not attempting to excuse what he did to me or blame myself for what happened. In fact, the ultimate goal of these reflections is to find a way to not participate in “victim blaming”, even while I feel partially culpable for what occurred due to the intersectionality of the situation. In attempting to integrate logic into a situation that was anything but logical, I am trying to sort everything out, and will continue to do so. It is precisely because of the intersections of race, culture, and gender that make this my task as part of my healing.

Ultimately, the questions that arise from my practice of cultural racism do not have easy answers, if they have answers at all. More unfortunate still is my inability to act as the cultural bridge that I had dreamed of becoming upon my return to the United States. In fact, even writing down this story scares me insofar as it could be read in such a way as to encourage racist attitudes towards Arabs. To share my story runs the risk of allowing those who read it to be reaffirmed in their views of Arab culture as essentially consisting of “conformity, repression, subordination, [and] control” (Brasted 1997:9).

Weeks after I gave my initial report to the officer, I was told I needed to give my statement again to a judge for sentencing to take place. Once again I was questioned as to what I did during the assault. When it comes to victim blaming, it is often argued that “if a woman strays from the ‘acceptable bounds’ of womanly behavior, this behavior is held against her, particularly during a rape trial” (Patton and Snyder-Yuly 2007:876). But in Jordan, within whose “acceptable bounds” of female behavior should I operate? Navigating and contextualizing my story to help the judge understand what happened became infinitely more confusing with the intersections of race and gender.

As I explained my story to the judge, I fell once again into practicing cultural racism as I tailored what happened in a way that I thought would make my lack of action and fighting back more understandable to him. In so doing, I allowed myself to filter everything I said to him through a lens of racism where I attempted to frame everything spoken, keeping in mind
that he (a native Jordanian male) would of course view me (the white American female foreigner) as more sexually loose and willing to take part in the events that transpired.

It was in this judge’s small, square office that contained me, the judge, a stenographer, a translator, and two individuals who I only guessed were acting as witnesses that my racism slowly began to come to light. As I attempted to explain away my lack of fighting back, keeping my “American whore” status in the back of my mind, he stopped me (with a kind smile) and explained that he only needed to know the actual events that transpired and wasn’t worried about whether or not I attempted to stop the assault. As he calmly looked back down at the bright pink file that held my original statement and continued with questioning, the racial attitudes I had been holding prior to and since my assault slowly came into focus.

Whereas this man was willing to fight the stereotype of white American women in his patience in understanding me and my story, I had been operating under the spell of stereotypes about Arab men since I had gotten to Jordan.

Now that I am back in the United States, I still refrain from telling my story to many people to keep from potentially spreading and perpetuating racist ideas about Arabs and Arab culture. Instead, when people ask me what Jordan was like, I try to emphasize the gap between how Western mass media portray Arab people and the wonderfully welcoming Jordanians I met.

The most frustrating part of it all is that I don’t know how differently the situation would actually have played out knowing what I know now. I still find myself at a loss to understand how to enact my Western white feminism in the context of Jordan and the assault. Not only that, but in implicating myself in racism, I now face the task of understanding and coming to terms with the assault while avoiding blaming myself, something I have yet to accomplish. I only wish that some good can come from writing this story about someone who believed she was free from the stain of racism and unexpectedly discovered in a most traumatic way that she wasn’t.
REFERENCES


Many African American parents use racial socialization to prepare their children for life in a predominantly white society by sending messages of racial pride and racial positivity to their children. However, when these children are placed in predominantly white environments they may find it harder to accept such views. Through her own experiences and through various research studies, in this essay Morgan Latin highlights how conflicts between racial socialization in the home environment and a child’s personal experiences in school and other environments can lead them down a sometimes difficult path of racial identity formation. By using William E. Cross’ *nigrescence theory*, Morgan chronicles her own racial identity formation and how she has come to terms with her identity as a black female. She highlights how gendered racial identity among black females in predominantly white environments plays a role in how they see themselves.

I am black. I honestly don’t remember a time when I didn’t know that I was black. Born into a lower middle class black family we lived in a modest home in a predominantly black neighborhood and I was surrounded by blackness. All my life I had heard that “I was beautiful”, that “mediocrity is not acceptable in THIS family” and that “when I walked out in the world I was representing God, the Latin family, and myself.” My family socialization didn’t stop at messages of *self-worth*; they also conveyed messages of *racial barrier* and *racial pride*.4 For example, I knew at the age of

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4 Racial socialization is displayed by parents and other family members in messages about race that allow young black children to develop positive racial identities despite racial bias
three that my paternal grandfather's position as the Assistant Fire Chief in the City of Houston was hard-earned in the face of oppression and racism; and when he became the first black fire chief in our nation's capital he was defying barriers so that despite an unleveled playing field I could be proud of the color of my skin. Being surrounded by images of black entrepreneurs, educators, dentists, lawyers, public officials, and a host of other college-educated people, I knew that being black was something I could be proud of. I grew up in a black church, I attended black preschools and daycares, and never had any reason to question whether the words of affirmation my family spoke to me were true. It wasn't until second grade that I had my first experiences that made me question these things.

Being accepted into a prestigious K-12 college preparatory school in a very wealthy neighborhood in Houston was a privilege, I was told. On the first day of school, I entered this new school and soon realized that I was one of two black kids in my homeroom class. I had always been a social kid and never had issues making friends, so I started trying to talk to people in my class. Most of the girls seemed wary of talking to me and they already had their groups of friends. I thought maybe the two black guys I saw and I could be friends, but they were very unconcerned about my being there and seemed to be very well accepted by others in our grade. I eventually noticed that I was one of three black children and the only black female in the entire second grade. My feelings of wariness towards my new environment escalated and didn’t really change for years. Although my school experience was not the most pleasurable, I was forced to stay there because my family deemed it an opportunity I simply shouldn’t pass up. My journey through to graduation was by no means an easy one, but it has played a significant role in shaping my racial identity and who I am as a person.

The journey

Racial identity formation is a process best defined by the nigrescence theory developed by William E. Cross which follows the paths of pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization and internalization-commitment (Tatum 1997: 55). Nigrescence theories developed in response to the Black and adversity and in many cases is seen as a way to prepare these children to combat racism and protect them from the often deleterious effects of discrimination (Neblett et. al 2009: 189-190). These messages are categorized in a variety of ways. Self-worth, promotes the child's position of worth in a broad context. Racial barrier makes children aware of racial inequalities while teaching them how to cope and racial pride messages emphasize African-American heritage, customs, and traditions as unique and beneficial (Neblett et. al 2009: 190, 193).
Power movement and “depicted the stages of the Negro-to-Black identity transformation” (Cross 1991: 157). Cross draws upon these process models in order to develop his own updated theory of nigresence. Beverly Tatum uses Cross’ theory to further explain the development of blackness in a white context. She describes this path of racial identity formation as a cycle much like “a spiral staircase,” because as individuals go through life they may travel back and forth between certain phases, though because it is a learning experience they never return to exactly the same spot (Tatum 1997: 83).

Pre-encounter as explained by Tatum is the phase in which the individual “absorbs many of the beliefs and values of the dominant white culture, including the idea that it is “better” to be white” (Tatum 2004: 118). This is all a result of socialization in a Eurocentric culture, where the “personal and social significance of one’s racial group membership has not yet been realized” (Tatum 2004: 118). The individual then transitions into the encounter phase where she becomes very race sensitive and is forced “to question what it means to be a member of a group targeted by racism” (Tatum 1997: 55).

I can’t say I followed that exact path. My encounter with what it meant to be black started when I entered a predominantly white environment. I formed my initial, confident demeanor as a black female in Afro-centric environments. This was brought into question, however, when I no longer had any validation to affirm that. Even for a six year old it was easy to process that the only thing that separated me from my peers at school was that I was black and being that the black males seemed to have at least seemingly enjoyable experiences, that more specifically I was a black female. Unlike Tatum’s assertion that the pre-encounter phase comes from not yet realizing the “personal and social significance of one’s racial

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5 The role of the black female has evolved over 200 years of functioning as equal to black males due to slavery and a continued position of inequality lead to the need for black female labor in order to sustain the black family. As a result black women have not remained as closely socialized into rigid gender definitions of womanhood, but instead have expanded beyond traditional images of womanhood equating solely to femininity to a broader androgynous identity marked by “hard work, perseverance, self-reliance, tenacity, resistance, and sexual equality.” Androgynous gendered identities were found to be associated with higher self-esteem (Buckley & Carter 2005: 648-649).

6 In a study of seventeen black females ages 15-22 the researchers found that significant encounter experiences leading to gender and racial identity shifts, or experiences of gendered racism as early as preschool although this was thought to be a process identified as typical in adolescence, black female participants seemed to have to grapple with race and gender ideologies at a much earlier point in life (Thomas et. al 2011: 535). However, once black females reach a point of internalization and positive racial identity an androgynous gendered identity is more common and self-esteem subscales were reported higher (Buckley & Carter 2005: 658).
“group membership” (Tatum 2004: 118), I realized the personal significance of being black at an early age. While I was a race conscious individual, race was not the most salient issue in my life. Race was in some ways central to my identity, but it wasn’t salient because my view of race was all positive and had never been opposed. Essentially, my encounter experience led me to grapple with race in ways very similar to the way Tatum and Cross describe the pre-encounter phase.

**Maybe white is better**

By the end of the third grade I was simply trying to fit in. I went from feeling different to being called different. Even the slightest representation of blackness was to my detriment, but my frustration grew as I realized my skin color was not something I could hide. There are benefits to assimilating into dominant culture, and for me, it was the ability to have friends. Since my skin color was an automatic red flag I started to cover, or “assimilate to dominate norms” (Yoshino 2006). I tried talking more like white students, I filled my music collection with N'Sync, Backstreet Boys and the Spice Girls, and began asking my parents if I could wear my hair straight more often. It seemed to be working. At least I made acquaintances and could have conversations with people.

My parents were in no way okay with my attempts to cover my blackness. Taking a race conscious approach, the more I tried to assimilate and cover my blackness the more black organizations they threw me in. As my attempts to assimilate increased, I began to receive counterattacks from black kids in the organizations I was a part of for not being black enough. While my parents chose these settings as opportunities for me to be around people like me and to maintain positive black images, it only frustrated me more. While black girls talked about their boyfriends and the guys they liked, it was yet another reminder that I was completely unable to relate. There were no guys at my school that were interested in me. Instead they called me names like “Shaka Zulu” and “Big Momma.”

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7 Tatum describes race conscious parenting as searching for a variety of positive black images and messages to portray to their children. She identifies this as a way to buffer the effects of socialization in a white dominant society where positive images of one’s race might not be readily accessible (Tatum 1997: 55).

8 “Black girls, especially in predominantly white communities, may gradually become aware that something has changed. When their white friends start to date, they do not. The issue of emerging sexuality and the societal messages about who is sexually desirable leave black women in a very devalued position” (Tatum 1997: 57). In Tatum’s study of self-identified middle-class black college students who grew up attending predominantly white schools, the males identified various dating experiences including interracial dating while none of the black females dated in high school (Tatum 2004: 132). There is a certain detrimental effect for black females growing up in predominantly white environments. Another study relating
in my various organizations made me feel even more different because after several years of trying to fit in in a white world they made me realize that I couldn't be white and I no longer knew what blackness was like, either. As my parents forced me into more arenas with more black children I realized that there were black children that were perfectly happy with the color of their skin and it made me reconsider my attempts to be white. This was an additional encounter experience and I was forced again to grapple with what it meant to be black.

Can I have black friends, please?

By middle school I realized that this assimilating thing simply wasn’t going to work. “I’m black, and that’s the thing they’re going to see first, no matter how much I try to de-emphasize my blackness” (Tatum 2004:128). I realized that my best bet was to be who I was. The dilemma, however, was that by this point I didn’t know exactly what that meant or how to discover it. In the 6th grade I joined a new black organization. While it was still a little difficult getting used to being around black children, it was my first experience in a long time being around black people who were willing to accept me the way I was. Despite my educational background and my naiveté, this group of black students, mostly from working class backgrounds who grew up in predominantly black environments, was willing to laugh at the things I didn’t know and teach me how to survive in black environments.

By 7th grade I actually had a boy that was interested in me, I had friends, and a new appreciation for blackness. This is what Cross would label the beginning of my immersion/emersion phase ⁹. The immersion/emersion phase is not a subtle phase. Immersion is the transitory period where a black person first immerses herself in black culture, soaking up all the knowledge and new experiences she can acquire (Cross 1991: 202-203). As a result, it sometimes leads blacks to denounce aspects of white culture as inferior as an attempt to validate their blackness (Cross: 1991: 202-203). The stage then culminates into the emersion phase which levels off the more radical views of immersion as the person realizes her “first impressions of blackness were romantic and symbolic, not substantive, textured, and complex. I became more confident in black arenas and wanted to be more involved in them. I read more about

gender roles, racial identity and self-esteem, found that while black females are typically less likely than other adolescent girls to be negatively affected by the typical adolescent years of declining self-esteem due to a variety of factors, black females who grow up in white environments and are dependent on white standards of beauty and harbored negativity towards being black had low self-esteem (Buckley and Carter 2005: 657).
influential black Americans and I took advantage of every opportunity I had to learn about black culture.

My immersion in black environments, however, left me frustrated that I had to deal with race on a daily basis when so many of my black friends rarely did. In seventh grade I remember coming home at least once a week for months crying to my parents to let me look at other schools for eighth grade or at least high school. I begged them to let me transfer somewhere where I could have “normal” black experiences, where I could be around people who were like me and appreciated me for exactly who I was. Even though the black friends I gained through my youth organization didn’t understand some parts of me, like my love for musical theatre or why I always spent so much time on homework, I felt much more comfortable around them than some white girls in my classes that thought I was dirty because I only had to wash my hair weekly or bi-weekly, or that referred to everything from overcooked chicken tenders to an outfit they didn’t like as “ghetto”.

My group of friends at school was diverse and I can’t deny we had some great middle school memories. We were all females, one black, three white, a Japanese girl and an Indian girl. However, the other black girl and I were the only two of friends that did not grow up in the same social circles as our friends. As I further immersed myself in blackness, I began to see how often I was placed in a box and marginalized by my teachers, peers and their parents by comments like Why are you upset with an 89? That’s good for you! and I never would’ve thought you were so well spoken and You’ve never seen a home like this have you? I also realized, as I grew closer to my friends at school, that making comments about my frustrations to them often just made me more upset. Talking to them forced me to see that no matter how close we were, they simply didn’t understand why I saw these

10 To this day the common, slang use of the word “ghetto” annoys me. While the term originated as a term to describe destitute and deprived Jewish quarters in European cities during World War II it has taken on a variety of meanings (Seligman: 2003: 273). It is used by historians to describe “an area of a city that is racially or ethnically isolated, usually against the wishes of its inhabitants” (Seligman 2003: 273). Today, however, one of Webster’s dictionaries definitions of the word “ghetto” says it is “a situation that resembles a ghetto especially in conferring inferior status or limiting opportunity” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). It is this definition that has allowed the word “ghetto” to enter the slang discourse of a variety of people in the way in which my white friend was using it. To refer to the overcooked chicken tenders she didn't want to eat as ghetto was to say that anything ghetto was inappropriate, undesirable and as Webster's dictionary quotes, inferior. What made it worse is that the word was often used by white friends to actually describe things that they specifically related to black people. A white girl with a large butt was said to have a “ghetto booty” because it resembled the butts of black girls in rap videos. I don’t even believe they realized how problematic their use of the word was or how offensive it could be, but it definitely caused a lot of frustration on my part.
experiences as racial. In many instances it just made me even more annoyed. Many of my white friends told me I was overreacting and it couldn’t be about race because I was “not really black” (Tatum 2004: 123), as if being educated and in a predominantly white environment automatically lightened my skin, while many of my minority friends would nonchalantly identify my sentiments as “just the way it is.” The majority of my friends not only attended school in this type of environment, but they also lived in the neighborhoods surrounding our school and had parents who spent a significant portion of their time in similar work and social environments.

For my white, Japanese, and Indian friends it seemed that they were more comfortable accepting this society as their reality. I always wondered if their economic status allowed them to handle our school environment better than I did, but once I met other African American students that grew up in similar environments many of them shared the same disturbance and frustration with situations that took place in their school environments. It made me question even further the status of being black in the United States. Was my frustration with race self-imposed or is the black experience really that much different than that of other races in our country? At the end of the day, it was my view of race that caused the greatest divide between myself and my friends, not because they cared that I was black but instead that they didn’t understand what it meant that I was black.

It is common when people’s feelings are invalidated by others that they “disengage.” Disengaging is not just ending the conversation but being less likely to discuss it again with those who didn’t understand and look for people who do (Tatum 1997: 59-60). That’s exactly what I did. I stopped discussing race with everyone at school except my one black friend and I internalized a message, an assumption rather, that white people and many other minorities simply didn’t understand my racial identity and what it meant to be black.

**Freshman year**

My school took in new admits in large waves in the first, sixth and ninth grades. While we missed any incoming black students in the sixth grade, there were six new admits in the ninth grade. From day one of freshman year we found each other and for the first time since I entered my school in the second grade I felt a deep sense of belonging. I didn’t lose my original set of friends from middle school, but things did change some. Our white friends found different social groups and two of the new black girls joined our group of friends, along with a Chinese girl. Not only did I develop a solid group of friends freshman year, but there were two additional black
guys in my grade now, and I was ecstatic at the mere possibility of finally dating. Freshman year was a turning point. It allowed me to realize that it wasn’t my school itself that I hated but instead its inability to help me develop outside of the academic arena (Tatum 2004: 132).

So often people make comments that children shouldn’t have to see themselves as black, but in actuality, “The parts of our identity that do capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back on us. The aspect of identity that is the target of others’ attention, and subsequently of our own, often is what sets us apart as exceptional or “other” in their eyes” (Tatum 1997:21). I didn’t choose to separate myself as a black female. I didn’t choose to look for black friends solely because I thought there was something wrong with white people, I looked for black friends because I felt white people thought there was something wrong with me.

From the time I entered my first predominantly white second grade class I was made to feel different. In the fourth grade I remember talking to a girl who asked me, “Why don’t you ever wear your hair down?” As innocent as her question was, it was apparent that she saw it as weird and at the age of eight I was forced to try to explain the difference between white hair and black hair to a girl who really didn’t care to hear the details. She just wanted to know what my hair would look like if I wore it down. Then I looked around and saw that everyone else did get to wear their hair down except me. Instances like this served as constant reminders that I was different and that people noticed that I was different, I couldn’t change it but it often changed people’s perception of me. As if being the only female with dark skin wasn’t enough, I felt like every other difference between us drove a larger and larger wedge between me and my white peers. I believe Tatum says it best:

Why do black youths, in particular, think about themselves in terms of race? Because that is how the rest of the world thinks of them. Our self-perceptions are shaped by the messages we receive from those around us, and when young black men and women enter adolescence, the racial content of those messages intensifies” (Tatum 1997: 53-54).

**Tenth and eleventh grade: Public school**

As soon as I grew to enjoy my time at this school, I was forced to leave. My parents moved our family to the suburbs, and I now lived about 45 minutes from my school. My parents enrolled me in the public high school in our neighborhood and this is when I first came to understand how privileged I truly was to attend my private school. The public school I
attended was considered a good public school, yet it did not measure up against the academics I received at my private school. While not particularly academically satisfying, the two years I spent outside of my private school environment were critical in my ability to further explore my phase of immersion/emersion. My public high school was much more representative of the true demographics of America and I finally met white people that were accustomed to black people and were much more accepting. I was also able to meet a larger variety of black students from a variety of different backgrounds and it gave me a true scope of images both positive and negative that were crucial in developing my understanding of where I fit in among the many varieties of blacks. As I was able to forge relationships with a variety of people from various racial, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, my process of internalization began.¹¹

Senior year

After getting my own car junior year, I asked my parents if I could go back to my private school for my senior year. I attributed so much of my growth as a person to my time there and, although I hated it while I was there, being away helped me to appreciate the educational advantages I was afforded. My experiences forced me to grapple early on with many questions about race that some people wouldn’t be forced to face until college or beyond. Another part of me just wanted to attain the honor of graduating from a prestigious school after enduring so many frustrations for so long. Either way, this is when my internalization further developed. My senior year, I entered the school I had spent so much of my life in with a brand new confidence. I worked to put together a completely student-led Black History program, starred in musicals, participated in concert choir and show choir, and I developed some valuable friendships that I still have to this day.

Conclusion

As Tatum forewarned, when I continued on to college I went back along certain stops on the “spiral staircase” of my racial identity formation. For the first time I didn’t have the support system of my family or a stable support group of black friends that I was used to having help me pass through my development phase. In fact not having this support system provided the greatest interruption to my racial identity formation. I knew Trinity would not be a predominantly black environment, but I didn’t

¹¹ Internalization is the point in Cross’ nigrescence theory where “an individual has a positive attitude towards members of his or her own racial group as well as other racial groups” (Buckley 2005: 650).
realize the black population would be quite as small as it is. Academically I worked hard and enjoyed it and socially I flew home to Houston or traveled to my grandparents’ house in Austin every other weekend.

Having finally understood who I wanted to be as I came out of high school, I felt out of place. I had reached the internalization portion of my racial identity formation and I was comfortable in my blackness. I was not angry with white people nor did I feel a need to separate myself, but I knew who I was and who I wanted to be and after my past experiences with race I was no longer willing to change that. In the academic arena I don’t deny that sometimes I still choose to “cover” certain aspects of my personality or identity that aren’t appropriate in an academic setting, but in social arenas I was not willing to do so. More significantly, as is common through the internalization phase, I viewed race as a salient portion of my life and I had a desire to commit myself to black issues (Cross: 1991: 212-213). Trinity, however, was not a school that could allow me to express that the way that I wanted to.

Because Trinity didn’t have the support that I needed or wanted and throughout my college years I was forced to look for and build my own networks and support groups. I decided to join a city-wide historically black sorority instead of the local predominantly white sororities on campus. My sorority has had the most significant impact in my ability to be the person I am and has served as my platform to address issues within the black community that concern me. I also took an office in the Black Student Union on campus. Through Black Student Union I worked diligently to be supportive of others within the black community as well as educating the larger Trinity community about the positive aspects of black culture.

Although I have still associated with people of all walks of life, my time in college has brought me back to grappling questions of race. Before college my only view of racism was the basics: Slavery, segregation, the Civil Rights Movement, a few influential black Americans, as well as along with the occasional (and usually ignored) viewpoints of family members about how it’s hard to be black in America. However, coming to college and learning concepts like institutional racism, residential segregation, immigration laws and even the simple fact that race is social construct and not a biological one opened my eyes to see race and racism differently. I never doubted that racism was real, but through my academic studies in college it has forced me to realize how real it really is. Race is a subject that continuously interests me, that I constantly question, and I’m always interested to learn more about.
Regardless of whether or not I have it all figured out race is a huge part of who I am. It has shaped my experiences in a significant way. As I have journeyed through life, my attitude about my identity has gone from being sure, to being utterly confused, to being inquisitive, and now to being proud. Although the racial socialization of my family couldn’t completely protect me from the harsh realities of living in a racialized society where discrimination is still present, they provided me with a foundation of race consciousness and racial pride that I could turn back to (Tatum 2004: 129). I don’t believe I would have the same level of appreciation for who I am as a person and more specifically a person of color without having been forced to grapple with these issues. Although I do feel many aspects of my school environment could have better facilitated my development, I believe I am a stronger person because of my experiences.

References

Chapter 5

A Lack of Color: The Masked Effects of White Privilege and Segregation

By Rachel Matthews

Rachel Matthews grew up in a white-majority suburban area in Tulsa, Oklahoma. She attended a small private school, where the minorities in her grade could be counted on one hand. In her family and throughout her education, there has been a strong stress on equality. In the segregated environment in which Rachel was raised, however, people avoided discussing issues of race, ignoring their ongoing presence in their lives. In this essay, Matthews explores the lack of education she received about the Tulsa Race Riots of 1921 and the invisible effect they had on her city and her life. In doing so, she makes use of a number of concepts from the sociological literature on race relations, including abstract liberalism, colorblind racism, and white privilege.

. . .

To describe my experience with race entails an explanation of my lack of experience with race. I am white, middle class, and female. I grew up in a white, suburban section of Tulsa, Oklahoma and attended a white-majority college preparatory high school, where the minorities in my grade could be counted on one hand. Overall, I have led a sheltered, whitewashed life. Race was not an issue I had to confront growing up and it was not a topic of conversation that frequently came up. While surrounded by people with the same color skin as my own, my family upbringing and schooling stressed equality and tolerance of others. More than anything, I was taught to be politically correct. While worrying about not offending others, I did not wonder why I was not exposed to the people I was trying so hard not to offend. By living under the illusion that
everyone was, in fact, leading lives of equal opportunity, I was brought up in denial of the ongoing prevalence of racial disparities in the United States. Instead, I was a part of an effort to be colorblind. Hidden behind all of the political correctness was the truth of white privilege and white habitus that has characterized the segregated life I was raised in.

I was born in Madison, New Jersey and moved to Tulsa when I was seven. One would think that growing up in the location of the Tulsa Race Riots, which is thought by historians to be the single worst act of racial violence in American history, my education would have included some kind of special study of this event. When it was brought up in one of my Trinity classes this year as an example of a race-related event that has been kept from the public eye, I was embarrassed at my lack of knowledge of the event. I have a blurry memory of hearing about it in middle school, but not in depth. I didn’t have any clue as to the extremity of the event. My education didn’t include any field trips to a memorial or days of remembrance. I had to research the event after class to find out where the riots took place in downtown Tulsa and teach myself about the immensely racialized history of my city. I read in awe, learning about the horrific event that took place right where I had gone to watch a minor-league baseball game only months before.

I have realized, however, that the fact that I had never heard of this event does not mean it didn’t have a large influence on my life. It is a testament to how well the event has been covered up in history, even in the very city where the riots occurred. In reference to numerous Tulsa natives, historian John Hope Franklin notes “They haven't heard of it or don't know about it simply because there's been a conspiracy of forgetfulness. There's been no intention to remind them of it and no desire on the part of people to learn about what happened in the past” (Moses 2007: 1). In addition to proving the extent the gruesome event was excluded from mainstream history, my experience shows the racial influence the riots had on the placement of whites and blacks in Tulsa and how extreme residential segregation persists today.

Fearful of what the race riot would do to the young city's reputation, prominent Tulsa citizens made every effort to suppress the episode. An editorial in the Tulsa Tribune that allegedly helped to incite the white mob, entitled "To Lynch a Negro Tonight," has been cut out of all existing copies of the newspaper. Although black Tulsans have recounted the events of 1921 to younger generations, whites have generally preferred not to discuss them at all. In the words of Scott Ellsworth, a historian who has written on the riot, what has happened in Tulsa is a "segregation of memory (The Economist 1999: 29).
My upbringing is a testament to this “segregation of memory.” The area of Tulsa that I grew up in, South Tulsa, is on the other side of town from the location of the race riots and in the heart of suburbia. Tulsa is still a largely residentially segregated city. North Tulsa is more racially and socio-economically diverse, with a larger black population. It is also known as the “dangerous” part of town.

Greenwood, the location of the riots, has been underutilized and ignored by the majority of Tulsa residents until 2008, when the new Drillers Stadium was completed. In an article in *Tulsa World* discussing the selection of Greenwood for the stadium, Mayor Taylor acknowledged that psychologically-speaking, “Tulsa has needed this for decades…Greenwood is a very powerful place, and the story about John Hope Franklin needs to be told” (Lassek 2008: 1). John Hope Franklin was the historian whose efforts to publicize the Tulsa race riots came to fruition in the John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park, which lies adjacent to the Stadium. Greenwood Chamber of Commerce’s president and CEO Reuben Gant commented on how the stadium would affect the intermingling of the city’s residents: “When you have 400,000-plus people coming into the area, it’s going to really expose the district, not only to out-of-towners, but Tulsa residents that have never been north of the tracks” (Lassek 2008:1). I had always thought it odd that no one really ventured into the downtown area of Tulsa unless they worked in the office buildings there, but I never thought that the explanation could have been rooted in racial issues.

As an episode of the 2003 television series *Race, The Power of an Illusion* explains, much of the residential division between races, as well as the development of suburbia as a majority white concept, can be explained by how the urban geography of our country developed historically. In the 1930s, the Universal National Appraisal System started rating housing areas based on a color scale, with green being the best rating and red the worst. All white housing was green lined, while red was reserved for mixed black and white areas. Integrated neighborhoods were seen as unstable socially and economically, which led to whites leaving neighborhoods as blacks moved in to them, a phenomenon known as white flight. When black citizens moved into white neighborhoods, real estate agencies played on whites’ fears and offered them economic incentives to relocate. Racially-separate pockets of whites and blacks formed. Whites benefited from mortgages as white suburbia grew, while blacks were relegated to rental properties in city centers (Adelman 2003). This was the case already in the 1920’s in Tulsa. A 1999 article in *The Economist* noted that “Blacks were segregated on the north side of the city and not allowed to do business in
the white section. They were able to create a thriving business district around Greenwood Avenue. Booker T. Washington called the area ‘the negroes’ Wall Street’; to less sympathetic observers, it was ‘Little Africa.’ As previously mentioned, this is still the case in Tulsa, with South Tulsa being predominantly white and North Tulsa and the downtown area housing predominantly black residents.

Devonshire [a pseudonym], the elementary school I attended, is in South Tulsa. Devonshire is part of the Union Public School System, which is one of two major public school districts in Tulsa. Union is broken up into twelve elementary schools, in different parts of Tulsa. Because my district was located in the predominantly white suburban area of Tulsa I lived in, Devonshire’s student population was mostly middle class white kids. There was definitely a minority population at Devonshire, but all of my close friends were the same race and socio-economic status as me. In his article, “When Whites Flock Together: The Social Psychology of White Habitus,” Eduardo Bonilla-Silva explains that “social and spatial isolation of groups leads to the development of group cohesion and identity formation” (2006: 230). He calls the product of the group cohesion white habitus. White habitus is the way whites are supposed to act and react in different circumstances.

In certain atmospheres, whiteness becomes associated with normalcy and is tied to the “right” way to act. “By appearing objective, white habitus creates an atmosphere in which white hypersegregation seems proper, thereby justifying inequality and maintaining the existing racial hierarchy” (2006:234). White habitus limits interaction between whites and blacks. The ways blacks are presumed to act, as represented through stereotypes persistent in the media, does not fit into white habitus, restricting common ground between the two races. While my friends and I were experiencing the beginnings of our lives of white habitus, we were also being taught that all people, no matter what the color of their skin, were equal. I remember learning in elementary school that “everyone is treated equally” and “the color of your skin doesn’t matter.” I also remember my teacher claiming that she “didn’t see color” and I remember being very confused and thinking that this was something that I had to work toward. In other words, if I only believed the right things, and treated people equally, I wouldn’t see color either. The beginning of my racial socialization was underway and my white classmates and I were learning to be colorblind. What we didn’t realize was that we were also learning colorblind racism.

Colorblind racism is a subtle form of racism that is masked by a façade of egalitarianism. Bonilla-Silva (2010) presents much of modern society as being very concerned with appearing egalitarian, and, in turn, denying any
evidence of inequality. Both my formal education and family have put a large emphasis on treating everyone equally. In an effort to be politically correct, I learned to de-emphasize difference in my mind and in my speech. I shied away from racial comments and jokes, thinking that I was above that. The irony is that in my attempt to be politically correct, I was exhibiting a different kind of racism.

Bonilla-Silva’s argument is similar to the one made in Charles Gallagher’s *Color-Blind Privilege: The Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post Racial America*. By insisting that everyone is equal and one shouldn’t pay attention to the color of an individual’s skin, the distinguishing traits and personal experiences of others are discounted. Also, by believing that whites and blacks are on an equal playing field, “whites are able to imagine that the material success they enjoy relative to racial minorities is a function only of individual hard work, determination, thrift and investments in education” (Gallagher 2003: 22). By denying that racial differences set certain groups aside in any way, it became easier for me to justify as merit-based the success that I surrounded me as I grew up. This idea of material success and investment in education would come into play even more after I graduated from elementary school and enrolled in a private school.

In the sixth grade, students from all twelve elementary schools in the Union Public System come together to attend the sixth grade center. I remember hearing horror stories about the sixth grade center. In these stories and in my mind, it was a scary place full of crime and “bad kids”. Instead of having me stick around to experience a strong increase in diversity from my elementary school, my parents enrolled me in Garner Hill [a pseudonym].

The middle and high school I attended was a small, private, college preparatory school in South Tulsa. There were around ninety kids in each grade. Garner Hill costs a ridiculous amount of money. My mom is a teacher at Garner Hill and my parents made sacrifices to send my brother and me to school there, as they wanted to give us the best education they could. In hindsight, my parents and I agree that in terms of my teachers and classroom experiences, Garner Hill was a great education, but in terms of peer education and the valuable lessons in experiencing a diverse student body, it was not. In each grade there were no more than couple of African American students, Asian students, and hardly any Hispanic students. Everyone joked about the “token black kids” in each grade and how they were always the first to get their pictures on the Garner Hill website or in the magazine, in an effort to appear more racially diverse than we actually were.
One example of the dynamic of the interactions between races at my school, as well as the enforcement of egalitarian values at Garner Hill, lies in an incident that happened in Daily Gathering my sophomore year. A tradition Garner Hill prides itself on is ‘Daily Gathering’. This is a meeting that all the students and teachers attend every morning to make announcements, which include birthday announcements made by students’ friends, sometimes in funny or theatrical ways. One morning, a junior, Fred, called his African American friend, Don [both names are pseudonyms], into the middle of the ‘commons’, where Daily Gathering was held, to present him with a gift. He brought out a watermelon and a two-liter bottle of orange soda. A testament to my complete lack of experience with race, and my sheltered upbringing, I literally didn’t understand the connection until it was explained to me. Some kids laughed and some just sat there. After the announcement, a teacher from the science department immediately stood up. She said that there are times when announcements are funny and there are times when announcements cross a line. Fred was given detention and had to write up a letter of apology and read it to the school the next morning.

There were mixed reactions to this incident. Several teachers had clapped after the teacher’s statement, and I had multiple classes that included discussions of what had happened that day and how inappropriate it was. Fred and his friends thought that it was not a big deal because Fred was friends with Don, and Don had expressed to them that he thought it was funny, too. Fred did not think he should have been punished and wrote and read the letter to the school half-heartedly. Fred believed that because he was friends with one of the “token black kids”, it made it okay to make a racist joke in front of the school and reinforce stereotypes because he was “just joking”. Bonilla Silva discusses whites’ justification for racial jokes and comments, and uses several examples of phrases, such as “I’m not racist, but” and “some of my best friends are black” (2010: 57) that are commonly used. In general, racist jokes were pretty common among the student body at Garner Hill, which is why so many students were desensitized to the point that Fred’s actions did not seem to be a big deal.

Being on the lower end of the spectrum of wealth at Garner Hill, rather than being exposed to socioeconomic and racial diversity in high school I was exposed to the epitome of white upper middle class. While I was aware that my peers were privileged white kids, I was unaware of the fact that they were reaping the benefits of generations of white privilege. As I found it easier to see the privilege in their lives, through the name brand purses, shoes, and luxury vehicles, I found it even harder to see the white privilege in my own life.
As Robert Jensen states in a column published in the *Baltimore Sun*, “in a white supremacist culture, all white people have privilege, whether or not they are overtly racist themselves” (Jensen 1998). In our society, there are still numerous ways in which whites have advantages in the job market, housing market, and in education. In his column Jensen explained that he had spent much of his life not wanting to confront this fact, and since it is easier to ignore something that affects you positively rather than negatively, he went through life not having to confront it.

In her article “Emerging Themes on Aspects of Social Class and the Discourse of White Privilege,” Jennifer Heller defines this concept of white privilege as “the systematic over-empowerment of whites, which confers economic and psychological dominance simply because of one’s race” (2010:147). This plays out in society as “whiteness leads to the manifestations of materially based advantages as it interacts with other social features such as race, class and gender, which shape identity and life chances” (2010: 112). My family and the families I grew up around are all products of white privilege. The racial makeup of Garner Hill is witness to that. White privilege helped the white families present at my school succeed, while generations of blacks have been held back and do not have the chance for such educational success.

There is no denying that the education I received is not available to all, even with the help of financial aid. Having the chance to attend a college preparatory school such as Garner Hill prepares you for elite higher education, too: Practically all of its graduating seniors matriculate at four-year colleges and universities. Having the ability to afford to go to a private school sets kids up to succeed later in life, and the cycle of privilege continues.

The root of much of this advantage lies in the white population’s accumulation of wealth. As research conducted by sociologist Dalton Conley (2000:595) demonstrates “wealth ownership is the socioeconomic measure that displays the single greatest racial disparity in America today.” Rather than focusing on an individual’s success in the labor market and income, the root of the problem lies in asset inequality, which largely consists of inequalities in the value of homes. Blacks families in the United States have 1/8 the wealth of whites, on average. Differences in the success of blacks and whites nearly disappear when controlling for wealth differences. For example, “when class background is equalized, blacks are just as likely as whites to have completed college” (Conley 2000: 595).
As I am about to complete college and enter into the “real world”, I am finally coming to terms with the cycle of white privilege that I have received throughout my life, which has been largely responsible for the opportunities I’ve had to obtain such a great education. As Jensen (1998) stressed, it is important that whites acknowledge that they have white privilege, though feeling guilty about it is not productive. I must focus on how I can use this knowledge to try to combat the product of my socialization and racialization, which has made me overly sensitive to seeing differences in race, thereby disregarding that it is an issue at all. I am trying to see color again, and realize the disadvantage that blacks are still subject to today. Only by acknowledging color and the inequality our society produces can we hope to someday overcome racism.

References

Chapter 6

Yes, I am Hispanic: Rationalizing My Status

By Tiffany Rodriguez

To understand the role society has played in her racial socialization and the formation of her ethnic and racial identity, Tiffany Rodriguez looks objectively and systematically at several occurrences in her life through a sociological lens. Beginning with her parents’ inter-ethnic marriage, she consults research on the racial and ethnic identifications of children whose parents are from two ethnicities or races and finds that the child’s identity mirrors that of his or her father. Then, she uncovers the real reasons why her parents would not let her sleep over at the houses of her racially/ethnically different friends. Her essay also explores her father’s worries regarding her entry into romantic relationships with boys of certain ethnicities and racial minorities. To interpret how his prejudices have tainted her sister’s perceptions of race, she reviews studies on the psychosocial characteristics of blatant versus subtle racists. In describing a specific incident that called her identity into question, Rodriguez provides readers with the rationale for declaring herself to be a Hispanic woman.

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Throughout my life, I have chosen to identify myself as a Latina first and then as a white woman since I value my cultural heritage and ethnicity far more than I do my race. Many meeting me for the first time assume I’m 100 percent white and are often shocked to learn of my half-Hispanic\textsuperscript{12} origin. At first, this angered me. I felt people were failing to notice my behaviors attesting to my ethnicity, such as bringing Hispanic foods for lunch, attending the quinceañeras\textsuperscript{13} of family members, and serving

\textsuperscript{12} Throughout this essay I will use the terms Hispanic and Latina interchangeably to describe my ethnicity. As my father and his side of the family traces their origins to two different countries, Spain and Mexico. I feel that I can use both terms to categorize myself.

\textsuperscript{13} The celebration of a Latina girl’s fifteenth birthday, marking her transition from childhood into womanhood.
as a madrín¹⁴ to my cousin’s son). Now, I have come to understand this as the result of how our society uses people’s phenotype—their physical appearance—as a way of categorizing them socially and how, in turn, stereotypes become attached to these social categories. Throughout this essay, I look analytically at specific instances in my life where race and ethnic categorizations have directly affected my family or me. Focusing on my parents’ inter-ethnic marriage, my own issues with self-identification (i.e., am I white, Hispanic or both?), and exploring such concepts as social distance, white habitus, white privilege, blatant racism, and color-blind racism, I unpack and begin to understand my own racial socialization (Hightower 1997:369-370).

Family/ Familia

When a blond, green-eyed white woman walked across my grandparents’ threshold and into their house, shock and disbelief colored their faces. How could their son date a white girl, moreover a white girl he met at a club they forbade him to go to? Were there no more good, Christian, Latina girls in San Antonio for him to choose from? After dating for only six months my parents were engaged. As surprising as this was to my grandparents, my parents’ engagement represented what would be an emerging trend. In 2008 and 2009, the Pew Research Center found data suggesting that “one in seven new marriages is between spouses of different races or ethnicities” (Saulny 2011). Furthermore, “multiracial and multiethnic Americans … are one of the country’s fastest-growing demographic groups” (Saulny 2011). My grandparents eventually accepted my parents’ inter-ethnic marriage but, of course, there were cultural differences between the two families which led to misunderstandings and heated debates. One debate concerned how my parents should raise my sister and me. My grandma fought with my mother for the chance to be our caretaker, barber, and pre-school teacher. My mother thought a daycare was the better option, as she did not agree with aspects of how my grandma cared for us. I think my mom’s paranoia over us began then, when she realized she could not even trust family with her children.

I have helicopter parents. They are extremely involved in my life, paranoid, and smotheringly protective. In elementary school, I remember having to turn down a number of slumber party invites because my parents trusted no one with their baby girl. Among the few parties I attended, I now recognize a pattern. Those children and their parents were white. Studies consistently identify people’s “tendency to choose people of the same race” when choosing friends, though they also recognize that some

¹⁴ Spanish word for godmother.
contexts “limit the opportunity for interracial relations [including] region of
residence, neighborhood composition, school composition, classroom

Since my elementary school was located in a primarily white middle-
class suburb situated in northeast San Antonio, the opportunity to make
white friends was far greater than to make brown and black friends.
Nevertheless, I have always gravitated to things and people that were
different from me. Among some of my closest friends were Hispanics,
blacks, and Asians. My parents would never allow me to stay the night at
my Indian friend’s house and certainly not my black friend’s house – that
was just out of the question. I never really understood why until now. My
parents, who both check white as their race, exemplified the idea of white
habitus or “a racialized, un中断rupted socialization process that conditions
and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings and emotions and their
views on racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva 2009:104).

One of the main consequences of white habitus is the promotion of “a
sense of group belonging (a white culture of solidarity) and negative views
about nonwhites” (Bonilla-Silva 2009:104). Thus, they believed the parents
of my racially and ethnically different friends could not be trusted. My
parents made excuses such as “those people” would have harmed me if I
stayed at their house, they were involved in unstable relationships which
could taint my future perceptions of male/female relationships, they
practiced different cultural customs and religious beliefs that I need not be
exposed to – and so I was kept from their homes. Contrastingly, my white
friends’ parents could be trusted and, sure, I could definitely stay the night
at their houses. These qualifications baffled me as a child. Even my best
friend’s mother was in an unstable relationship as a white woman and yet I
stayed the night at her house numerous times.

Now, I see that my white friends and their parents were just benefiting
from white privilege or an “advantage, immunity, or right granted to or
enjoyed by white persons beyond the common advantage of all others; an
exemption in many particular cases from certain burdens or liabilities”
(Randall 2008). Considered less threatening and perceived to hold the same
values and moral standards as my own parents, they unknowingly benefitted
from racialized social privilege. And, because my parents actually believed in
this social construct, which assigned more trustworthiness to whites than it
did to ethnic and racial minorities, I disappointed many of my friends and
missed out on a bunch of pretty awesome slumber parties.

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Relationships/\textit{Vida romántica}

No one is socially privileged when it comes to dating either my sister or me. My father was born and raised in Texas by my grandma and his stepfather. Having little money, my father was raised to work hard for what he wanted. My grandparents, both of Hispanic origin, took religion seriously and stressed to my father and uncle the importance of marrying someone of the same religion and ethnicity. My dad always gets upset at the mention of boys. After all, he only wants the best for his little girls. His best, however, excludes certain races of “lower” standards. I remember telling him I had a crush on a black boy in my seventh grade history class. My dad asked, “How dark is he?” I replied that he was “very dark, dark-dark” and, at that, my father’s eyes narrowed and he told me I should not like “negritos.” Less than a year ago, I began to like a boy of Persian descent. My father asked to see what he looked like and when I showed him a picture he crinkled his nose and said something mockingly in an Indian accent. Upset by his reaction, I told my father that this boy attended college and was sweet and funny. Nevertheless, he told me I should try and find a nice white boy, with a college education, one who will treat me “right” and be able to provide well for me in the future.

From these conversational recollections, I’ve recognized my father’s social distance from other ethnic groups. As outlined in Weaver’s work “social distance is ‘feelings of unwillingness among members of a group to accept or approve a given degree of intimacy in interaction with a member of an out-group’ and ‘is ‘an indication of how acceptable or objectionable various ethnic groups are in society’” (2008:779-780). Even when I began dating a Venezuelan, a Hispanic like my father, he still found objectionable qualities in him. This may just be, however, a father’s concern for his daughter where no man is ever good enough.

Nevertheless, noting that “social distance is a general measure of ethnic prejudice,” I believe my father holds some prejudices against other ethnicities (Weaver 2008:791). Based on race and ethnicity alone, he places different values on people and separates himself from members of other groups. Weaver’s study also found that members of “many ethnic groups were significantly opposed to other ethnic groups making up half their neighbors” (2008:793). This mirrors my father’s dismay at the fact that our once predominantly “white” neighborhood is now more populated with the minorities that my father categorizes as “beneath” us, including mainly blacks and poorer Hispanics. I guess my dad has taken his social distance to a new level, no longer just categorizing ethnicities and races hierarchically, but taking their socioeconomic status into account as well.
My sister/Mi hermana

Unfortunately, my sister has inherited some of my father’s tendencies towards racial prejudice. She has become more of an outward racist than my parents or I care to admit. I see in her an air of white supremacy that scares me to the core. Driving in the car one day, I heard her yell “f&#@ing n-word” to another car whose driver was an older African American female. I was shocked. My mom, who was driving, said nothing in response to her expletive and blatant racism. I was appalled. How could my mother let her form such a racial ideology?

Ideologies are “racially based frameworks” that people use “to explain and justify (dominant) race or challenge (subordinate race or races) the status quo” (Bonilla-Silva 2009:9). I have tried multiple times to point out the error of my sister’s ways by deconstructing her racial ideology piecemeal for her, explaining that she is perpetuating “the prevailing social order” by using white prejudice to defend white privilege (Bonilla-Silva 2009:7-11). In response, she shrugs her shoulders and says, “Oh, well, that’s just how they are.” But why and how did she get like this?

Chou and Feagin found that children tend to mimic the racist views and behaviors exhibited by adults, perpetuating and re-creating racist structures through their social interactions, even though they may not understand the stereotypes and dominant racial frames or interpretations they embrace (2008:56). Therefore, I suspect that my father and grandmother, who grew up during the Civil Rights era and still subtly discriminate against blacks, are the main contributors to her overtly racist behavior, since my sister admires and emulates them.

Adding to and fueling her prejudiced beliefs are ideas garnered from her ex-boyfriend. Both his parents and extended family discriminate heavily against blacks and Hispanics, especially undocumented Mexicans. Picking up on it, he, too, upholds white supremacist ideals, sporting the Confederate flag on articles of clothing and dropping racist remarks as if he were conversing in a time period where that type of discourse would be acceptable. Once I heard both of them talking about the newest neighbors on our block who are black. Their conversation went as follows:

Sister: That’s why there have been so many thugs walking up and down our street. Don’t those fools know how to pick up their pants?

Boyfriend: Naw, they don’t know anything. Yeah, before you know it, they’ll break into your house or car. N@*%$/s are good for nothing. All they do is take from other people since they can’t provide for themselves.
I dislike when they express their prejudices around me. My sister is a reflection of my family and me and for her to act racist, well, what does that say about our family? That we are a bunch of racists?

Eugene Hightower distinguishes between two types of racism, *blatant* and *subtle*. This distinction helps me understand my sister’s racism. He says that “blatant racists are openly hostile and express beliefs that ethnic [and racial] minorities are inferior,” while “subtle racists deny having prejudice toward minorities, but lack sympathy to their plight and blame social inequities on what they view as maladaptive features of minority group culture and customs” (1997:369-370). I would categorize my sister as a blatant racist, though she possesses the qualities of a subtle one as well. Furthermore, Hightower contends that “racially tolerant individuals are psychologically healthier than prejudiced individuals” and found that “blatant racists showed poor internal control and integration as shown by significantly lower scores on well-being, responsibility, tolerance, and communality” (1997:370-372). Though this is more of a psychological rather than sociological approach to understanding prejudice and discrimination, it still provides insight into how an individual might think and function within society. In light of these findings, I believe my sister’s clinical diagnosis with ADHD\(^\text{15}\) and bipolar disorder – rendering her psychologically unhealthy – may contribute to her low tolerance for racial minorities and blatant racist behavior. Nevertheless, this research does not excuse her behavior. As a member of a society on a quest to end racial discrimination and prejudice, she needs to recognize her adding to the problem and then take actions to contribute to its solution.

**Me/Yo**

What really bothers me, though, is that sometimes I find myself laughing at or agreeing with my sister’s blatant racism. Does this mean I, too, am racist? I need to confess. Admittedly and guiltily, I am a *color-blind racist*. Throughout my participation in this course and other sociology courses, I have come to notice my use of various color-blind frameworks to justify and explain my viewpoints on discrimination and inequality with regards to racial minorities. More specifically, I use the *abstract liberalism*, *cultural racism*, *naturalization*, and *minimization of racism* frameworks (Bonilla-Silva 2009:28-29). A few times, I can remember justifying the admission of so many racial minorities to Trinity on the basis of “equal opportunity,” while whites mainly entered due to meritocracy and group-based advantages (Bonilla-Silva 2009:30-36). In another instance, using the naturalization framework, I rationalized my complete aversion to East Asians as possible dating

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\(^{15}\)Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.
partners on the basis some of immutable characteristics they had that displeased me.

As an uninformed high school student, I recall attributing the high dropout and pregnancy rate of Hispanic immigrant girls to their lack of parental supervision and involvement in their education since their parents had to work so many jobs just to survive. As a college student, I am automatically more likely to “make full use of the resources of color-blind racism” and “use diminutives to soften” my racial views (Bonilla-Silva 2009:71). Recognizing my color-blind racist tendencies in these brief stories is the first step toward understanding the whole ideology and how I contribute to its maintenance.

A trip with my mother/Un viaje con mi madre

During spring break 2008, my mother and I decided to go to Houston since my sister was taking a trip to Washington, D.C. and my father’s projects kept him chained to his desk at work. A mommy/daughter trip – this was going to be a blast! However, it rained all weekend and was actually quite cold. The Houston Museum of Fine Arts promised dry entertainment and so we went. I remember I wore my high school letter jacket that day, which bore my last name in large, fancy, white cursive letters. As we were walking through the galleries, one of the museum attendants stopped me and gave me a funny look before initiating a conversation with me.

“You’re last name is Rodríguez?” She rolled the “r” in my last name giving it the Latin flair I never could.

“Yes.” I replied, confused.

“But you don’t look Hispanic. I mean you’re pretty white and you have so many freckles. Is that your mother?” she asked, pointing to my obviously white mom who was staring intently at a work of art.

“Yes it is.” I began to get a little heated by the fact that she was questioning my ethnic identity. Did she not know that some people from Spain were as white, or even whiter, than me?

“Oh” she said as if everything she ever wondered about me had been explained within that one verification. “So you don’t speak Spanish, then?”

Actually, I had been taking Spanish classes for seven years by that time and could indeed speak Spanish. I answered her, “Sí, puedo hablar español.”
Turning and walking towards my mom, done speaking to this woman, I saw her smirk in surprise before returning to her job. At this, I became indignant. Who are you, madam, to point out that my skin color does not match up to your ideal of Hispanic? I felt as if she treated me as a lesser Hispanic, or not one at all, just because I was not caramel colored like her. I was infuriated. My mom, however, did not understand and proceeded to tell me I was white like her, not Hispanic.

Knowing what I do now, I understand the difference between white as a racial categorization and Hispanic as an ethnic one. Back then, however, I did not. Quickly, I rose to defend myself as a Latina and not a “bolilla”16 as my family calls white girls. I told her, “you are what your father is, not what your mother is.” Back then, I could have used Brunsma’s research findings, that a “father’s race appears to be important here in general – if the father is Hispanic, these Hispanic-White children are more likely to be identified as Hispanic” (2005:1145). Zhenchao Qian’s study had similar results regarding how most parents choose to racially and ethnically identify their children, noting “the importance of the patrilineal line of descent in our society, children’s race/ethnicity is most often identified with that of the father” (2004:763). Both Brunsma and Qian’s empirical findings offered the evidence I needed to prove my argument – that I am not alone in categorizing myself ethnically – to my mother.

According to Brown, Elder and Hitlin, ethnicity “is broadly thought of as groupings of people on the basis of people's countries or regions of origin. Race then becomes a subset of ethnicity, a characteristic in America used to organize the treatment of particular groups” (2007:591). Over and over, I identify myself ethnically rather than racially. I've always done that. This is common in the United States, especially since asking Hispanics about their race yields responses concerning traditions of their country of ancestry, such as food, music, language, and the like (Brown, Elder, and Hitlin 2007:592). My cultural heritage defines me more than any other aspect of my life, much to the disapproval of my mother who always reminds me that I am half white.

Identity / Identidad

Categorizing myself racially and ethnically on forms and when identifying myself to others is always an issue for me. As a child my parents, a Latino-white couple, could “choose both race and Hispanic origin, so few would identify only white but no Hispanic origin for their children” (Qian 2004:749). In other words, children of Latino-white couples can classify

16 Typically, Mexicans use the term to describe Mexicans who act “white.”
their children in two different categories: race and ethnicity. Also, children “may have the father’s racial/ethnic identity because the child usually carries the surname of the father” (Qian 2004:749). My last name, Rodríguez, connotes the Hispanic identity I cherish and maintain foremost. Though outwardly I look like any other white girl, I refuse to let people define me that way. Given the option, I say I am Hispanic.

My parents and grandparents raised my sister and me in the Hispanic tradition (e.g. eating many Hispanic foods, hearing and learning Spanish, respecting elders, and always treating guests with the utmost attention and hospitality). It is all I know and all that is important to me. A study by Herman (2004) found that adolescents were more likely to identify themselves as minorities, rather than white or multiracial, if they held positive ethnic/racial identities or were discriminated against due to their appearance (Brunsma 2005:1134). Furthermore, people’s social networks also shape their identification, such that those who surround themselves predominantly with white people identify as white while those in mostly minority networks identify as minorities (Brunsma 2005:1134).

Since I hold a positive ethnic identity, possessing more fond memories and associations with my Hispanic heritage than my white, non-Hispanic one, it naturally follows that I would identify as a minority. Furthermore, the significant number of culturally and racially different people that I grew up around led me to believe that I, too, needed to have some socially defining factor other than whiteness, which seemed too dull to me, to call my own. Like others from my generation, my self-identification depends upon the day, the form, and the options provided (Saulny 2011). A quote from a Ms. Lopez-Mullins in a recent article in The New York Times says it well: “[People] don’t want to label themselves based on other people’s interpretations of who they are” (2011). For me, it is important to acknowledge that I am white, but of more importance is that people know I am Hispanic, as it is an important aspect of my identity.

I have been socialized to value my ethnic identity over my racial one. I suppose this means that society places greater worth on culture, tradition, and language than it does on race, with the latter’s negative connotations of discrimination and prejudice. Ultimately, I would like to think that my unpacking and understanding of the mechanisms that have facilitated my racial socialization have made me a more cognizant member of society, at least with regard to racial and ethnic matters. These include my father’s distancing himself from racial minority groups, my sister’s blatant racism, my own color-blind racism, the white privilege experienced by my friends and their parents, and the white habitus my parents subscribed to. With greater accuracy, I am able to ascertain where, how, and why society makes
special accommodations for certain races and ethnicities – namely whites – while it stands by and lets others bear the brunt of discrimination, inequality and prejudice. I suppose my greatest realization is that I play a part in society, aiding in the formation and persistence of the unjust structure of race and ethnic relations in the United States.

References


In my essay, I address how whiteness and race have been socially constructed and how being white has granted me white privilege. I discuss how growing up in a Jewish household and attending synagogue instilled in me values of equality and the importance of giving back to the community. Those same teachings, however, have also made it difficult for me to grapple with some of my own experiences. I use the concept of “colorblind racism” to explain the types of racist encounters I have experienced and explain how residential segregation impacted my upbringing and perceptions of the world around me. White habitus has not only worked to shape my perception of others, but has severely reduced my chances of developing meaningful relationships with non-whites.

My story begins twenty-three years ago when I was born to a Jewish white upper-middle class family in West University Place, a suburb of Houston, TX. From the time I was born, we lived in a very racially segregated neighborhood, which I like to call a bubble. From the time I could walk, I attended Sunday school at Temple Emanu El once a week. Here, we not only learned about the Torah and religious holidays, but we also talked about Jewish values and the importance of treating people equally and giving back to the community. What they never taught us though, was how privileged we actually were. We had our fundraisers, our walks for charity, and our visits to the homeless shelters, but not once did I hear a sermon about the amount of inequality existing in our community or how we might have been in some way actually contributing to it. We saw ourselves as a “religious minority” within a much larger Christian community. It never occurred to me that race was part of the picture. I never thought about the fact that I could count the number of non-white people at my synagogue on one hand and how this lack of racial
diversity might affect the way I related to people who were physically different than me.

I grew up in a community where the non-whites were mainly the nannies and cleaning ladies that worked for the white families, the construction workers in the area, and the few African American teachers at my elementary school. Growing up, I was always told that I could grow up and do whatever I wanted to do and be whoever I wanted to be, as long as I worked hard in school and gave it my all. I didn’t realize the effects of “growing up white” on my chances in life until very recently. I was raised to believe that everyone was created equal and that a person’s skin color, physical appearance, culture, and religion did not matter. People should all be treated with dignity and respect. Despite these teachings, growing up in a virtually all white community created high levels of social and spatial isolation from other racial groups, which has ultimately given a sense of cohesion and identity among members of my “white” community, creating what some have referred to as “white habitus” (Bonilla-Silva et al 2006 and Bonilla-Silva 2010). White habitus is a “racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters…it promotes a sense of group belonging and cultural solidarity while fostering negative views towards non-whites” (Bonilla-Silva 2010: 104).

Historically, our society has regarded race as something that is rooted in people’s biological make up. It was on this basis that society maintained and justified its racial stratification system. Steven Jay Gould (1984) explains that the division of humans into modern “racial” groups is a product of recent history and does not predate the origin of our species. Scientific research has not been able to detect a “race gene” that is present in all members of one group and none of another. Nowadays, except for members of extremist organizations, few whites in the United States claim to be “racist” and most whites claim that they “don’t see any color, just people”(Bonilla-Silva 2010:1). What people in society today don’t realize is that by not acknowledging other people’s experiences, they subject them to new and less noticeable kinds of racism – namely aversive\textsuperscript{17} and colorblind racism. Although I personally have never been subjected to any kind of overt racism, I have experienced a lot of what Edward Bonilla-Silva describes as colorblind racism, “the dominant racial ideology of the post-civil rights era” (2002: 42). For him, colorblind racism involves: (1) cultural explanations (instead of biological) of minorities’ inferior standing and performance in labor and educational settings, (2) naturalization of racial

\textsuperscript{17}Aversive racism is a modern and subtle form of racial bias that is most likely to be expressed by whites as in-group favoritism rather than overt bias against members of other groups (Dovidio et al 1992).
phenomena (such as residential and school segregation), and (3) the claim that racial discrimination has disappeared (2002:42). Teresa Guess (2006) describes how “race” is a socially constructed category and uses structuration theory to help understand the process of racialization. The term racialization refers to the ways that racial meanings are assigned to different races and that, in turn, are socially ranked as inferior or superior to other races. Both the meanings and the rankings are communicated to all members of society through various processes of socialization. Racialization thus works not only to disadvantage members of racial groups associated with “inferior” traits (e.g., African Americans), it also enhances the life experiences of the members of race groups associated with “superior” traits (e.g., white non-Hispanics). In order to maintain the advantages of its constructed status, superordinate racial groups must uphold the ideology of the mass culture which “validates” their power (2006: 661).

My first experiences with grappling with issues of race were in college when it really hit me how different and privileged of a life I’d had compared with many of the other people going to school with me. Elementary school was the one time, other than in college, that I had experienced a somewhat racially mixed educational setting. Even then though, there were only four black kids, two Asians, and a small handful of Latino children in my graduating class of about two-hundred. A large part of this segregation had to do with the school district boundaries guiding which children attended the school. The school was located about two blocks down from my house in the middle of white suburbia. The majority of the non-white children attending the school had gotten in through the “gifted and talented” program which provided a way for children outside of the surrounding neighborhood to attend school there. Now that I think about it, district boundaries seem to function as a way of “keeping people where they belong.” Not allowing children from the financially deprived and minority dominated neighborhoods to attend the better performing schools, perpetuates the cycle of inequality in education without appearing to be racist (Massey 2007: 109).

The years following elementary school, my parents chose to enroll me in private schools where I continued to be overwhelmingly surrounded by other white kids and white teachers. I didn’t think much about it at the

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18Structuration refers to “the process of constructing, ordering, and routinizing of social relations across time and space…actors in this theory are as much producers as they are products of society’s structurations” (Guess 2006:659).

19 The process of racialization is dependent upon a prior process of “racial formation”, in which “social, economic and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meaning” (Guess 2006: 660).
time; I was colorblind to the racial realities at hand. My friendships had mostly been with other kids of the same racial and socioeconomic standing, the two exceptions being my friends Sarah and Jackie. Sarah was half-white half-Ecuadorian and Jackie was from Singapore. I did not see the hypersegregation 20 in my neighborhood, school, and friendships as a problem. I just figured that it was “normal” and “just the way things were.” I didn’t see it as having anything to do with race or racial matters. I took what it meant to be white for granted. It never occurred to me that being white meant that I had some kind of special privilege over others in society.

Research has shown that whiteness is often considered the “default” unexamined racial category which gives it higher status on the ladder of social hierarchy (Grossman and Charmaraman 2008). Even if whites are able to recognize the disadvantages of racism for non-whites, they are often taught to ignore the implications of White privilege. Whites rarely confront what it means to be “white”, whereas many people of non-white backgrounds, in particular African Americans, confront their race on a regular basis. Inter-racial contact alone is not sufficient to lead to greater levels of racial-ethnic engagement. As Crossman and Charmaraman (2008:150) note, there is a need for more targeted school socialization processes to raise white students’ awareness of their racial-ethnic identity. Students today need to learn the various ways in which social forces (e.g. language, knowledge, and ideology) shape white identity in today’s world (Applebaum 2003: 6). Without understanding this, members of the dominant white social group will not be able to appreciate their privilege in society nor will they be able to come to terms with their role in sustaining society’s racial hierarchy (Applebaum 2003:8).

While my parents, family members, and friends insisted that treating all people with equality and dignity were both important aspects of life, some of the things I have heard them say suggest otherwise. I remember specifically my mom telling me “Roll up your window and lock your door” as we passed by a black homeless man begging on the corner of the street. I also remember my “Bubbie” (which is the Yiddish term for grandma) saying things like “Why can’t they just get a job like everyone else? They probably aren’t even homeless. They’re just scamming people for their hard earned money.” I remember my bubbie accusing her help (all of whom were African American or Hispanic) of stealing everything from cash and jewelry to her groceries in the refrigerator. None of them ever actually took

20 Hypersegregation occurs when members of a race are segregated on at least four of the five dimensions of geographic segregation at once. These include an uneven distribution of races in an area, social isolation, residential clustering, centralization (measuring distance from the central business district), and the concentration of a single race in a particular area (Massey 1993: 74-75).
anything. Growing up, I accused her multiple times of being a racist, which created conflict in our relationship with each other. Although she grew up in a devout Jewish household and was taught that we were all equal and “made in the image of God”, she also had grown up in a time period where racism had been legally institutionalized through segregation and Jim Crow Laws. The environment that she grew up in instilled in her a very strong sense of “white habitus”, which greatly impacted how she viewed the world around her and led her to view “racial others” in a highly and negative light. My dad has shared many of the same frustrations that I have with his mother, but most of the time he prefers to stay out of the arguments. I see this avoidance as perpetuating the problem. He says that she is too old to change her ways since she is 89 years old. I have always held the belief that people can and do change, but I guess it is also a matter of how long they have been immersed in our society’s racialized ideologies.

I was always a rebellious child, never listening to what my parents advised me to do. Despite the fact that time and time again they had told me to lock my doors and keep my windows up when I saw “strange people” on the corners or in the street, I insisted on doing the opposite. I would drive around and give out food donations to people on the streets as well as any homeless pets I happened to come across. I did, however, keep my humanitarianism to areas of town that I was familiar with (mainly the “white” areas of town) and avoided going into minority neighborhoods. For some reason, it was in these areas that the little voice popped on in the back of my head telling me that I didn’t belong there and that I needed to leave. This was a very strange sensation for me since I didn’t get the same uneasy feeling when I was in more familiar and affluent parts of town.

I remember getting lost in the 3rd ward in Houston when I had just turned sixteen and was learning how to drive. The 3rd ward is one of the poorest and most rundown parts of town. It has one of the highest crime rates and is not somewhere that I, especially being a white female, would want to be alone at night. I pulled into a corner store parking lot and frantically called my dad to come find me. I told him what cross streets I was near and he plugged it into his GPS and came to the rescue. The fifteen minutes it took my dad to get there felt like an eternity. It was in this situation that my “white habitus” came into play. I had been mentally conditioned to be wary of people who dressed “thuggish” with their pants sagging below their bottom and t-shirts that were long enough to be dresses. This was a style of clothing that was primarily concentrated in African American and Hispanic communities. I don’t feel like I am a racist person for having these fears, but at the same time, I feel guilty about it. How can I hound my grandma for her racist attitudes when I have caught myself with similar feelings of uneasiness? Am I a racist, too, for not feeling
comfortable being the only white female in a majority black and Latino neighborhood? These are some of the questions that I still struggle with.

Post-civil rights era norms disallow the open expression of racially prejudiced views. Nevertheless, whites have developed concealed ways of voicing such views (Bonilla-Silva 2002 and 2010, Bonilla-Silva et al 2006, Dovidio et al 1992). Personally, I have caught myself saying some of the things that fit into what Bonilla-Silva calls “the linguistics of colorblind racism”, much of which occurred while working as a server in the restaurant industry. I can remember myself saying things like “I’m not racist or anything, but I don’t want to wait on that table, Hispanics never tip more than 10 percent” or “I don’t understand why they come out to eat with all their sixteen children and let them run around the restaurant like animals.” I can remember one of the other servers telling a joke about Mexicans and their supposed cheapness as well: “What’s the difference between a Mexican and a canoe?” one of my fellow co-workers asked. “The canoe sometimes tips.” I laughed when I heard it, not thinking about what a racist joke it actually was. Despite the fact that I knew that stereotypes were bad, I still managed to fall into the trap of internalizing and further reinforcing them though my actions. It bothers me that I gave in to these stereotypes, especially when I have gotten so hurt in the past when people make jokes about being Jewish. How was one’s race any different than one’s religion? They are both socially constructed categories.

According research conducted by John Dovidio and his collaborators (1992), when society is divided into social categories, people distinguish between the group containing the self and “out-groups”. People tend to view members of out-groups as relatively indistinguishable from one another but as quite different from members of their in-group. This increases the salience of the boundary between in-group and out-group and often results in the devaluation of people identified as out-group members (Dovidio et al 1992: 77). Social categorization by race systematically influences how information about particular people is processed, stored, interpreted, and recalled – leading to the perception of stereotypes. People tend to seek out and gather information about others that confirms their preconceptions and eventually results in behavior that supports the underlying social schemata – making stereotypes highly resistant to social change (1992:77).

A recent example of Bonilla-Silva’s concept of colorblind “race talk” came about when I was talking to my grandpa “poppie” about some things I had learned in my Sociology of Health and Illness class pertaining to racial disparities in morbidity and mortality rates. He, like many other Americans, believes that certain populations have higher risk of disease because of the
lifestyle they have chosen to live. On the contrary, many of the disparities have to do with heightened risk factors that are out of the individual patient’s control. Factors such as where one lives, exposure to chronic stress, and exposure to environmental pollutants all add to the risk factors associated with poor health outcomes. African Americans, for example, tend to be overly represented in highly polluted urban settings that can lead to higher instances of certain types of cancers and asthma. Poppie responded by saying “People choose to live in the location that they do. They segregate themselves. They could do something about it if they really wanted to.” After I pointed to the overwhelmingly white makeup of our respective neighborhoods, he stated that, “It is economics that decides the makeup of a neighborhood, not race.” But, as we have talked about in class, many of the housing markets that opened up after World War II were kept out of reach of African Americans. They were denied loans at higher rates and prevented from living in the newly established “white suburbia”. It wasn’t that they chose to segregate themselves from the whites. Whites chose to segregate themselves from blacks. Whites’ perception of a “safe neighborhood” was one with a minimal amount of minorities present.

This perceived “safeness” has also been reflected in my family’s concerns with my current living arrangements. I went from living in an almost all white neighborhood in Houston to being one of the only white people on the block in San Antonio. I have learned more about what it means to be white and privileged in the last two years than during my entire life prior to now. The house in which I lived at my junior year of college was smack in the middle of what I would call a “ghetto”. I didn’t think about the location when I decided to rent the house. All I cared about was the cheap rent and close proximity to school. It wasn’t long before I realized not only what it felt like to be the visible minority, but what it was like not to feel safe in my own home. While I have always endorsed the idea of living in a more racially mixed neighborhood, this was not what I had in mind. My “whiteness” became a much larger part of my identity while living here, through no choice of my own. Never before had I been referred to as a “white girl”. Was I somehow “more white” than I used to be? I don’t know. All I know is that I could no longer remain colorblind and ignorant of the world around me when it was now blatantly staring me in the face. For the first time, I noticed differences in how police patrolled the neighborhood and how people in the neighborhood viewed the police. I realized I had grown up under the protection of living inside a little social bubble, separated from the racial realities in the world around me.

Today I am much more aware of race and the privileges that come with being white in our society than I used to be. I also recognize that racism encompasses a much broader range of actions than I used to think.
most people think of racism they think of the overt racism that led to the civil rights movement. They don’t acknowledge that other less noticeable forms of racism have emerged and continue to affect the life chances of non-whites. I have learned that by not acknowledging others’ racial experiences and the realities of modern day racism, I have actually been contributing to its perpetuation. We live in a world where racial issues are overlooked and the implications of being white and privileged are ignored. While I am thankful that I was able to grow up living the life that I did, I realize now that the perfect little bubble that I grew up in wasn’t so perfect after all.

References


Chapter 8

Becoming Orgullosamente\textsuperscript{21}
Chicana

By Luisa Tamez

In the United States Luisa Tamez is Mexican, but in Mexico she is a \textit{gringa}. Although she was born and raised in the United States, Luisa is the child of Mexican immigrants and travels to Mexico frequently. Her essay explores how being \textit{ni de aquí, ni de allá} [from neither here nor there] has affected the formation of her cultural identity. She discusses the importance her parents placed on speaking Spanish and maintaining Mexican traditions, as well as the criticism received from family members in Mexico for being \textit{pocha} [an “Americanized” Mexican]. Tamez also discusses how her understanding of her own cultural identity changed upon arrival at Trinity, as this was the first time she experienced what it meant to be a minority.

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I grew up in two countries simultaneously. As the daughter of Mexican immigrants living in the border city of El Paso, Texas, I was able to constantly travel between Mexico and the United States, immersed in a beautiful and colorful fusion of both cultures. Birthday parties had piñatas and Thanksgiving meals came with a side of guacamole. We celebrated Halloween and \textit{Día de los Muertos} as well as \textit{el Dieciséis} and the Fourth of July.\textsuperscript{22} The cultural simultaneity in which I grew up allowed me to experience and be shaped by the best of two worlds. However, my binational and bicultural experience also made it so I never felt completely integrated into either culture or country. My cultural identity is a product of being \textit{ni de aquí ni de allá}.

\textsuperscript{21} Orgullosamente=proudly.

\textsuperscript{22} \textit{Día de los Muertos} [Day of the Dead] is a Mexican Catholic tradition practiced every year on November 2. \textit{El dieciséis} refers to the 16\textsuperscript{th} of September, Mexico’s independence day.
Not quite Mexican

"Nunca se olviden que son mexicanas" my mother would say as she would send my sisters and me to school on the Sixteenth of September dressed as *chinas poblanas*. The white flowery dresses and long, bow filled braids we were made to wear for the remainder of the day made it a little hard to forget. My dad similarly would insist that we spend afternoons completing basic Spanish grammar workbooks *para que aprendan su lengua natal bien* [to learn your native language well]. The emphasis my parents placed not only on being Mexican, but being Mexican *bien* [properly], instilled in me from a very young age the desire to do just that. The side of the border on which I was born and raised, however, made this problematic.

El Paso provides direct access to Mexico and is culturally and demographically like a little Mexico. As of the year 2010, 82.2 percent of the total population was Hispanic and 26.9 percent were foreign born. This composition of the population and the ease with which I could visit Mexico created the ideal conditions in which the Mexican identity my parents encouraged could flourish, despite not actually being in Mexico. If other children were not also wearing traditional Mexican garb on the Sixteenth of September, they were certainly wearing green and red soccer jerseys, two of the colors of the Mexican flag. Even the few non-Hispanic white or other minority groups in El Paso associated with Mexican culture. My senior year of high school for example, a black friend who was planning to attend a historically black college expressed his fear of experiencing culture shock from “not being around Mexicans anymore.” Similarly, a Korean friend who did not speak Spanish loved to appropriate Mexican slang and curse words. His wide familiarity with these terms made it so he was not just saying random phrases with no context; rather he knew which situation called for a particular profanity and which profanity could best express his emotion. Living in this little Mexico made it so I was rarely, if ever, exposed to negative stereotypes that would cause me to feel ashamed of being Mexican and cause a barrier to accepting this identity.

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23 “Never forget that you are Mexican.”
24 The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines *china poblana* as “a colorful Mexican costume consisting of an embroidered white blouse and a red and green skirt with sequins.” Images of this traditional costume can be seen online at http://www.soldemexicocbf.org/index.php?module=Pagesetter&func=viewpub&tid=10004&pid=2
Nonetheless, El Paso is still a part of the United States. Although my parents spoke to my sisters and me in Spanish and 74.9 percent of the population of El Paso speaks a language other than English at home, the classes and after school activities I attended were held in English. I would watch *El Chavo del ocho* ["The Boy from Apartment 8"] and *telenovelas* [soap operas] on TV with my mom, but my favorite programs were on PBS or Nickelodeon. English soon became my dominant language and the one in which I felt most comfortable expressing myself. My sisters and peers similarly felt most comfortable speaking in English, so it became the language in which we spoke to each other, reinforcing its dominance. Although I did not fully lose Spanish proficiency, my proficiency was reduced because the prolonged contact with English has consequences on the Spanish of bilingual speakers: Spanish becomes simplified and converges with English. (Mendoza-Denton 1999). I became living proof of Myers’ (2008) Peter Pan Fallacy that finds that most second generation Latinos lose much of their parents’ proficiency in Spanish.

Language proficiency, however, has been found to be a highly salient aspect of ethnic identity (Laroche, Pons, and Richard 2009). The dilution of my Spanish hence also diluted my Mexican identity, despite the fact that I was surrounded by Mexican culture at home and in the community. This would come as great news to those who claim that Latinos are a threat to U.S. society because they are unable to learn English and hence unable to assimilate to the idea of what “American” ethnic identity is (see Huntington 2004). For me, however, losing my Mexican-ness caused serious distress. Although race and ethnicity are not biological, I felt that because my parents were Mexican and because they always placed such great importance on being so, being Mexican was “in my blood.” The more I lost the ability to speak Spanish “well” and hence be Mexican “properly,” the more confused I felt about who I was. The constant teasing I received from family in Mexico for being *pocha*26 or *gringa* did not help alleviate this distress.

Ramirez finds that the way non-Spanish-speaking Mexican Americans feel about their cultural identity is affected by the Spanish-speaking Mexican Americans with whom they interact (2005). Although I do speak Spanish, I similarly was made to feel bad or illegitimate by fluent family members for my lack of proficiency in formal registers of the language. My feelings are mirrored in Ramirez’s study also in that the inability to speak Spanish affects not only individuals’ self-esteem but the ways in which they conceptualize their own identity (2005). In the case of my own identity

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26 *Pocha/o* is a pejorative label given to individuals who mix English and Spanish when speaking. It implies that the language proficiency of the individual is lacking.
formation, the desire to find a way to be Mexican bien [properly] followed me all the way to college. Once at Trinity I decided to take many steps to redefine myself and prove that I really was Mexican. The result of these steps turned out to be very different than what I expected.

**Not “American” either**

The first step I took towards fortifying my Mexican identity was joining the Latino Exchange group on campus. Since Trinity University is a majority non-Hispanic white campus, I hoped that by joining this group I would find a way to still maintain ties with Latino culture and meet other Latinos. I was however, quickly confronted once again with the realization that the experience of a Latino born in the United States is very different to that of those who are foreign born. It was not that the members of the group were not amiable; communication was just once again an issue. Since most of these Latino students were born abroad, they spoke standard or formal Spanish. I once again felt uncomfortable as I did with my cousins in Mexico because my manner of speaking was (I though then) deficient. I also felt as though I was not legitimately Latina because I was not born abroad and did not have the same amount of exposure to Latin America as they did. Moreover, many of the foreign-born Latino students come from affluent families and it was hard to share lived experiences when these experiences were so different. As part of this, there was also always the sense that Latino immigrants such as my parents were looked upon disparagingly by those who were born abroad and are affluent. This experience helped me begin to come to terms with the fact that my life experience was that of an immigrant and I did not have to wish to be something that I was not. I began to think that I should be more proud of being a U.S. citizen. This acceptance was complicated however by the fact that I did not fit in with my “American” peers either.

My first-year roommates made it their priority to point this out to me. “Why is it that when you are talking to your family and you have to hang up you say you will call them back ‘right now’ but don’t actually call them back until a few minutes or hours later?” one roommate bossily demanded. It was perhaps a month into our experience living together and I had no idea why she was listening to my phone conversations or what she meant. “Because I will call them back in a little bit, you know, right now,” I responded. She laughed and said, “But in English ‘right now’ means literally this instant, this very second.” By this point another roommate had joined in the conversation and was laughing as well stating how she noticed I did that as well and how weird it was.
My anger at being made fun of and having my English corrected was overshadowed by a light bulb that suddenly turned on. I zoned out their laughter and comments about other “weird” things I said, realizing that for me “right now” meant in a little bit because I was directly translating the word _ahorita_. This word, the diminutive of _ahora_ or now is used in Mexican Spanish to mean sometime in the near future, semi-now, so to speak. I suddenly understood the joke George Lopez made about having to say “right now, right now” among the Mexican-American community if you wanted something to be done immediately. Although this example may seem somewhat silly, it was mind blowing to me to realize that a term I used without even thinking was not “proper” English. Bonilla-Silva notes that “ideologies like grammar are learned socially and therefore the rules of how to speak properly come ‘naturally’ to people socialized in particular societies” (2008). It was very difficult for me then to accept that what was natural for me was considered wrong by the dominant white majority to whom I had never previously been exposed. My lack of complete proficiency in formal English made me realize I did not fit the “American” mold either.

Moreover, the manner in which my roommates corrected what for me was a product of being bilingual with a sort of sniggering pity caused me to see how individuals are punished when their behavior deviates from the standard white “American” norm. Not only did my roommates react to my English as if it were deficient, other individuals around campus would constantly reinforce stereotypes. I would be asked, for example, if I could make tamales or if I could convey a message to the dormitory cleaning ladies since we both spoke Spanish. When conversing with me, my roommates would also use ungrammatical phrases such as “no problemo” or “no bueno”. Although such words seem harmless and are commonly heard among non-Latino speakers, they nevertheless “serve as an important arena and device in the reproduction of covert racism” (Mendoza-Denton 1999). I do not believe most of the students with whom I had such interactions were willingly racist or mean. Bonilla-Silva in fact explains that “the analysis of people’s racial accounts is not akin to an analysis of people’s character or morality” (54). Nonetheless, it was hurtful for me to be subjected to this form of subtle racism practiced, however unintentionally, by many people in the white non-Hispanic population in the United States today.

**Chicana, pocha and proud**

Although my social experiences only contributed to my confusion about my cultural and ethnic identity, my academic studies came to the rescue. In this regard, my experience as a student at Trinity were contrary to the argument
made by Vásquez (2005:904) that school and university curricula in the United States tend to affirm the cultural norms of upper-class whites:

[Students from privileged classes find their attitudes, tastes, and behaviors validated by the teachers, curriculum, and educational system at large, leaving non-privileged students to be cast aside or forced to play cultural catch-up. High status students find legitimation of, and academic rewards for, their knowledge and lifestyles. To the extent that race and class are often inextricably bound up with each other, it is the echelon of upper-class students from the dominant racial group whose cultural knowledge is validated by the school system. Thus, students hailing from non-dominant classes (economically, culturally, and racially) find themselves excluded or marginalized on campus in much the same way as their communities are devalued in society.

In fact, Vásquez’s characterization here is completely contrary to my experience in my studies at Trinity, despite the fact that the university is, for the most part, composed of non-Hispanic white, affluent students. The positive manner in which the immigrant experience and the term Chicano were discussed in many of my major courses helped me come to terms with my lived experience. Vasquez finds that through Chicanos studies courses Chicano students are able to “not just uncover a literary community of characters and plotlines that [speak] to their experience and rendered visible their trials; they also locate a literature of which they [feel] a valid and valuable part, giving them confidence... It [means] that as their ethnic group [is] legitimized through classes at a major university, so too [are] they personally validated” (2005:910). My courses similarly allowed me to realize that I did not have feel as though I had to be either Mexican or from the United States but rather that I could be proud of being part of a legitimate Chicano culture.

What is more, I learned through the sociology class “Language, Culture and Society” how standard language ideology can cause stratification. Standard language ideology refers to the belief that there is only one correct way—the standard way—to speak or write a given language. Any deviations from that standard, regardless of their origin in regional or cultural differences in dialect, are regarded as wrong and in need of correction (Bonvillain, 2007). I saw my experience with Chicano English, Chicano Spanish, and bilingual code-switching very much reflected in this idea of deviance in need of correction and began to realize how wrong it was that “negative attitudes toward standard or nonstandard speech are extended to the speakers themselves” who are “thought to be stupid, lazy, or even morally deficient” (Bonvillain 2007: 387).
My struggles and confusion over my mixed identity were explained through my learning of how standard language ideology damages the self-esteem of individuals who deviate from the standard because they are made to accept that they are deviant and inferior (Bonvillain 2007). More importantly, I learned also that “the fact that nonstandard, nonprestige varieties continue with great vigor should be understood, not in negative terms but as a positive reflection of individual and group values” (Bonvillain 2007).

A gringa who has seen Sábado Gigante?

With this greater understanding and appreciation of my Chicano identity and pochismos I left Trinity for a semester to study abroad in Chile. The identity issues I thought I had resolved crept back up. When asked by Chileans where I was from I was hesitant to say that I was from the U.S. because I wanted to make it clear that I was also Latina. This was important to me because I felt that I connected more with the people when they knew my background was somewhat similar to theirs. My host sister, for example, was overjoyed and astonished to discover that I was the family’s first gringa to have watched Sábado Gigante [a popular Spanish-language TV show hosted by a Chilean emcee], or know who Maná [a Mexican rock band famous all over Latin America] was and could have (for the most part) fluid conversations in Spanish.

I also was hesitant to say I was from the United States because it quickly became tiresome to have to explain to incredulous Chileans, that I looked Latina and spoke Spanish despite the fact that I was from the United States because my parents were born in Mexico but I was born in the United States, and so on. Having to say soy de los Estados Unidos pero… [I’m from the United States but …] made me feel like I constantly had to explain myself and what I was or why I look the way I do. Saying soy mexicana [I’m Mexican], however, was not easy either because then I would be asked what part of Mexico I was from and I would have to once again launch into an explanation about my origins and ethnicity. On one particular occasion I found myself explaining my background once again to a group of people I met in a hostel when one of the members of their group exclaimed ¡eres chicana esa! [You’re Chicana, girl!]. This very accurate and direct exclamation made me realize that I didn’t need to be explaining that I was “Mexican but” or “from the United States except.” It was as simple as owning up to the fact that I was Chicana. I did not have to feel ashamed of not “properly” representing either culture, but could be proud of the fact that my culture, the Chicano culture, is a unique and legitimate combination of both.
Conclusions

My desire growing up to speak “proper” Spanish was caused in part because the high density of Spanish-speakers and continued immigration in the border region encourages the maintenance of Spanish across generations (Mendoza-Denton, 2005). I was constantly exposed to positive feelings about Spanish and Mexican culture and thus was socialized to want to maintain these aspects of my identity. Research suggests that my efforts to keep up my Spanish and hold onto my Mexican identity may have actually been beneficial to my overall healthy development insofar as identification with “traditional Mexican values and beliefs” is associated with psychosocial resilience and school success among Chicano/a adolescents (Holleran and Waller 2003 and Hurtado and Vega 2004). Moreover, fluent bilingualism has positive effects on second generation students because they maintain better relations with their families, have higher self-esteem, and greater educational ambitions than their English monolingual peers (Portes and Hao 2002).

The problem was, however, that my strong desire to be completely and “properly” Mexican was preventing me from seeing that my true ethnicity, which is a mixture of being from both the United States and Mexico is also a good thing. As Zentella (1997) and other researchers (see, for example, Mendoza-Denton 1999) have argued, my use of Spanglish and the mixing of Mexican and “American” cultures is not something negative, but is rather a creative expression of a new identity. It was necessary for me to realize that I did not have to be only Mexican or only American but that I could be proud to be a Chicana to fully appreciate and celebrate my cultural identity.

References


Chapter 9

Racial Identity and the Second-Generation Ethiopian

By Roha Teferra

In her essay, Roha Teferra focuses on racial identity as a second-generation immigrant from Ethiopia. She evaluates how race has played a significant role in her life throughout her educational experiences. Roha writes about this because her educational environments in elementary, middle and high school have been very distinct from one another and have contributed to the gradual transformation of how she identified herself racially. She also examines her upbringing and how it has influenced her views concerning her various racial identities. In addition, Teferra highlights her personal experiences with how she is labeled by people of other ethnicities as well as how her own ethnic group labels the children of first generation immigrants. Finally, she discusses how the process of labeling creates a new second-generation immigrant identity, one that is different from the identities that have already been established.

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When I looked at the initial title of my paper, “Racial Identity and the Second-Generation Ethiopian-American” I thought to myself, “If I were asked to choose today, I would identify myself as Ethiopian, rather than as an Ethiopian American.” This does not mean that I don’t acknowledge my American or black identity, but my consistent Ethiopian cultural experiences have played a large role in the way I see identity. In addition to the influences of culture on my identity, this essay focuses on how my various educational experiences and environments have contributed to the transformation of my self-identification over time. In doing so, I follow Portes and Rumbaut, who in their book *Legacies: The Story of The Immigrant Second Generation* note “[i]f ethnic identity does not emerge here as a fixed characteristic, then neither is it fluid as to fit what E.L. Doctorow’s character Billy Bathgate called his ‘license-plate theory of
identification’-the idea that ‘maybe all identification is temporary because you went through a life of changing situations’” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:156).

Portes and Rumbaut present the results of a survey given to eighth and ninth graders in 1992 and then in 1995-1996 to the same group. When respondents were asked to write out their self-identity, “four mutually exclusive types of ethnic self-identities became apparent, which accounted for over 95 percent of the answers given in both surveys.” These include: “1) a foreign national-origin identity (e.g. Jamaican, Nicaraguan, Cambodian); 2) a hyphenated American identity, explicitly recognizing a single foreign national origin (e.g. Cuban American, Filipino American, Vietnamese American); 3) a plain American national identity without a hyphen; and 4) a pan-ethnic minority-group identity (e.g. Hispanic, Latino, Chicano, black, Asian)” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:154). Figure 7.1 of this essay displays the results, which indicate that over the course of three to four years, a lot of change occurred in how youths identified themselves, “underscoring the malleable character of identity” (Portes et al. 2001:156).

Portes and Rumbaut also indicate that it is important to look at the “direction of the shift.” The survey reveals a “net loss of nearly 20 percentage points” for those that identified themselves as American or hyphenated American and “a net gain of almost 20 percentage points” for pan-ethnic and foreign national identities. As a result, the survey shows that there is a shift “toward a more militant reaffirmation of the immigrant identity for some groups and toward pan-ethnic minority-group identities for others.” Second generation youths “seemed to become increasingly aware of and adopt the ethnoracial markers in which they are persistently classified by the schools and other U.S. institutions” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:157).

My story starts with my parents. They were born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. My father was one of eleven children and my mother was one of three children. Since they grew up in upper middle class families, they were privileged to go to good schools, where they learned English. After graduating high school, both parents came to the United States for college in their mid-twenties. Although they knew each other in Ethiopia, they did not come to the United States together. My mother went to the University of New Mexico, where she received a bachelor’s degree in anthropology, while my father received a master’s degree in urban planning from the University of Oklahoma. Both graduated college and decided to stay in the U.S. to work, and they eventually settled in Houston where my sister and I were born.
Education has always been important to both of my parents. Since I was a young girl, they always stressed the importance of education and had very high expectations for the academic success of my sister and me. My first academic experience was in pre-school. I attended a private elementary school called Southwest Preparatory School for two years as a pre-kindergarten student. My parents chose this school because the parents of my best friend (also Ethiopian) recommended it, and the school even guaranteed that students would learn their ABC’s at the age of 2 or 3. The school was predominantly African American and kept to a very strict schedule. Being surrounded by mostly African American kids at school gave me a sense of belonging in the African American community at a young age.

After a couple of years at Southwest Preparatory School, I went to my sister’s elementary school, Lovett Elementary, from pre-kindergarten until fifth grade. This school was public and the environment was completely different because it was more diverse. It was predominantly white and black but there were students of various other ethnicities as well. Here, I made friends of all ethnic backgrounds. During my early childhood, the biggest challenge I faced was the acceptance of my Ethiopian identity. Elementary school is a time when you are making friends for the first time and all you want to do is fit in. At the time I believed that referring to my Ethiopian background would isolate me more from my American friends.
For that reason, I wasn’t appreciative of my Ethiopian heritage. For example, throughout elementary school, I remember feeling embarrassed when my parents spoke Amharic in front of my American friends or in public places. When my parents spoke to me in Amharic, the national language of Ethiopia, I would respond in English most of the time. I had not experienced discrimination or racism, but my urge to feel that I belonged in a group of people outside of the Ethiopian community with whom I shared things in common resulted in the abandonment of my Ethiopian identity and my self-identification as an American.

My older sister Axum had a similar experience. After Axum was born, my maternal grandmother came from Ethiopia and lived with our family to help take care of her since both of my parents worked. My grandmother only spoke Amharic, so the only way she could communicate with Axum was in Amharic. As a result, my sister’s first language was Amharic. Interestingly, by the time Axum starting going to school, although she spoke English, she had an Ethiopian accent, which I believe affected her experiences in school and caused her to block Amharic out of her mind. By the end of elementary school, she had forgotten most of the Amharic she had learned.

The middle school I attended was a performing arts school called Johnston Middle School, which was very diverse but had a greater proportion of blacks and Hispanics than my elementary school. Having said that, I was placed in the advanced placement courses, in which only a small number of blacks or other minorities participated. As a result, I felt somewhat separated from the majority of the blacks at my school even though my friends were still of various races and backgrounds. Some blacks were in the advanced placement courses while others were not, but because this classroom environment was the opposite of the environment I was in at Southwest Preparatory School, I felt confused about my sense of belonging. This different environment made me think a lot more about my Ethiopian identity. This does not mean that I considered myself better than blacks, but the reality of my situation was
that, culturally speaking, I was without question an Ethiopian because I had grown up immersed in Ethiopian culture. There was no reason for me to question my Ethiopian identity because I was born to two Ethiopian parents, I understood and spoke Amharic (almost fluently), and I was raised in a tight-knit Ethiopian community. There was, therefore, no question about my Ethiopian identity, regardless of whether I wanted to claim it or not. My black identity was beginning to get hazy by this point, which led to my eventual self-identification as Ethiopian-American.

High school was a very different environment. I attended Lamar High School, which is located in a very wealthy part of Houston. It is a public school, but is known for its International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which allows students to receive college credit for courses if they score high enough on the IB exams. As a result, there were students of various socioeconomic statuses at the school. A majority of the students from the immediately surrounding wealthy area were placed in the IB courses, while a majority of the blacks and Hispanics were in the regular classes. This resulted in a huge racially divided school. I maintained a diverse group of friends but my close group of high school friends was the few black students that were in the IB courses with me. We were of differing socioeconomic backgrounds, but we took similar classes and we could relate to one another. Although I developed a very close relationship to these black girls, I became more solidly rooted in my Ethiopian identity. My name, Roha, is obviously not an American name, so as soon as someone heard my name, they asked me where I was from. Otherwise, most people assumed I was black. Two anecdotes from high school help explain why I identify myself the way I do.

My sophomore year of high school, I had to do a presentation in one of my classes. I was the only black person in the class. At the end of my presentation there was a question and answer segment, and my teacher somehow mentioned that I was Ethiopian. One girl raised her hand and asked if my father was a marathon runner since I was Ethiopian. I immediately said no, and was extremely bothered by her question. There was a definite tension in the classroom when she said it so I knew I wasn’t overreacting. This brings me to the discussion of stereotypes related to certain races or ethnicities. Some common stereotypes of Ethiopians are that we are all skinny, we are all good at running, we all hate Eritreans and all Eritreans hate us. This particular experience brings me to a point made by Portes and Rumbaut, which states that “groups subjected to extreme discrimination and derogation of their national origins are likely to embrace them even more fiercely; those received more favorably shift to American identities with greater speed and less pain” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:187).
Starting my freshman year of high school, I became involved in ESAT, the Ethiopian Students Association of Texas. ESAT got involved with events going on in the local Ethiopian community as well as other community service activities. In addition to the consistent presence of the Ethiopian community in my life, this organization of students like me reaffirmed the importance of maintaining my Ethiopian identity. By senior year of high school, I identified as Ethiopian. Sociologist Mary Waters’ research on second generation black immigrant youths in New York City has found that “the social network or parents also influenced the type of identity the children…parents who were involved in ethnic voluntary organizations or heavily involved in their churches seemed to instill a strong sense of ethnic identity in their children” (Waters 1994:804). This was very true in my case because I attended an Ethiopian church and I had a group of Ethiopian friends like me that I grew up with outside of the school environment. This does not mean that I completely abandoned my black identity, but I could easily explain how I was Ethiopian.

This leads me to the second story from high school. I was having a conversation with one of my white friends. When I said something about being black, she told me that I was not black. I told her that I was black and Ethiopian as well but she didn’t really understand what that meant. This made me think a lot about labels and how according to society everyone has to fit in one specific category, when, in reality, especially in my case, there is extreme overlapping. My own experience is affirmed in research about identity-formation among African immigrants in the United States conducted by Msia Kibona Clark (2008:177), who found that most of the people she interviewed felt comfortable “in both African and American-American social circles.” As a result, I believe that I have what Huang, McIntyre, and Tong (2006:203) refer to as “a cross-cultural identity” that allows for my two cultures to be “complementary rather than competitive.”

In the short film, *Africans in America: Unfolding of Ethnic Identity* (Watson 2002), five African immigrant families were interviewed about their experiences in the United States. The film focuses on how the experiences of first and second-generation immigrants differ from one another and how the challenges they encounter influence their feelings about their identity. One of the immigrant children, who was in her twenties mentioned that identity was a struggle because she felt she had made more of a connection to her nation of origin but that she also shares similarities to African-Americans. This is exactly how I feel about my identity. For example, if one were to observe a typical day of my life at home, it is very obvious that the Ethiopian culture is a dominant component of my family lifestyle. For those who are unaware of what my life at home is like, I am treated and seen as an African American. The Ugandan woman in the short film has the
same experience and she expresses that this has made a difference in how she sees herself and her culture, to which I can undoubtedly attest.

My views on language have also been influenced by the way I have identified myself. For instance, when I was in elementary school, I was embarrassed when my parents spoke Amharic in public because I was attached to my American identity. By middle school, this began to fade away, and by high school, I felt a huge connection to my Ethiopian identity. As a child, I understood Amharic, but did not speak it well. By the time I reached middle and high school, I had a huge urge to learn to speak the language well. Even now, when my parents speak to me in English, I encourage them to speak to me in Amharic.

In the Ethiopian community, being able to speak Amharic is essential to maintaining your Ethiopian identity. If you don’t understand or speak Amharic, you are labeled as too American, or as being ashamed of your Ethiopian culture. These labels are not necessarily true because there are some children who have a lot of pride in their culture but because they live in areas where there is not a large Ethiopian community, it is hard for them to keep up with the language. Clark confirms this when she writes about how demonstrating one’s African cultural identity is critical to acceptance by the rest of the African immigrant community. For those that have American accents, this becomes an important task to accomplish (Clark 2008: 178). Within the Ethiopian community, I noticed this as a teenager when my second-generation Ethiopian friends used fashion as way to express their identity. For instance, many of us would wear bracelets or t-shirts with the colors of the Ethiopian flag. Not only was fashion a means of expressing our identity to everyone else, but we tended to be vocal about our background since it was difficult to notice by looking at us or hearing us speak with an American accent. This may have been our way of showing our parents and others within the Ethiopian community that we did value our culture. Proficiency in Amharic was not the only way of proving that.

Growing up, Ethiopian language and culture was always around me but as a second generation immigrant I could, for example, in a conversation with my parents, choose to respond to them either Amharic or English (Thomas 2010:146). Legacies: The Story of The Immigrant Second Generation discusses how “children were more prone to see themselves in the same terms as they perceived their parents’ own self-defin itions” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001:171). Before writing this essay, I asked my father if he marks “Other” or “Black” on the Census. He responded that sometimes he puts “Black” and other times he marks “Other.” It is evident, therefore, that even my father, a naturalized U.S. citizen, identifies himself as both Ethiopian and Black, which most likely influenced my identification with
both groups, even though I have always marked my race as “Black” on forms.

As a result of my educational experiences, I currently think of myself as Ethiopian, with definite ties to African Americans. Growing up, I didn’t feel a pressure to choose between being Ethiopian or black. I was part of a group that Waters (1994:809-810) in her study in New York referred to as the immigrant-identified teens who “tend to stress their nationality or their birthplace as defining their identity” (Waters 1994:809-810). Furthermore, this group’s identity is related to their interactions with black or white Americans. These youngsters identify with their homelands or their parents’ homelands, but not in opposition to black Americans or in opposition to white Americans...They do not distance themselves from American blacks, and they have neutral or positive attitudes and relations with them. At the same time, they see themselves as different from, but not opposed to, black Americans” (Waters 1994:815).

Although my experience is very different from that of many other second-generation children, it is evident that it exemplifies patterns observed in the transforming self-identification process among other second-generation immigrants. As Waters observes, “These identities are fluid and change over time and in different social contexts...There are cases we found of people who describe being very black-American identified when they were younger and who became more immigrant identified when they came to high school and found a large immigrant community” (Waters 1994:815).

There have been several instances in my life in which I have unintentionally benefited from the stereotype that I am a “good” black as a result of my immigrant background, as mentioned by Malcolm Gladwell in his article “Black Like Them,” published in The New Yorker magazine in 1996. Rather than separating me from my black identity, these instances only led to a stronger sense of attachment to my black identity, which is similar to what I experienced with my Ethiopian identity in high school. I had the urge to prove the stereotypes wrong.

This brings me to the argument expressed by Nedim Karakayali in “Duality and Diversity in the Lives of Immigrant Children: Rethinking the ‘Problem of the Second Generation’ in Light of Immigrant Autobiographies,” which argues that the presence of the immigrant culture and the host country culture creates a problem for second generation immigrants because of the implied notion that they must choose one identity. Karakayali highlights that rather than second-generation
immigrants trying to make themselves fit within one group, there is a “third option, which is not oriented towards fitting into one of the established identities but towards becoming ‘someone else’ … becoming part of a ‘people’ that does not yet exist. At the root of this option lies a questioning of the limits and legitimacy of established identities” (Karakayali 2005:336). In other words, my identity encompasses some aspects of African-American culture and Ethiopian culture, making it one that has not been acknowledged by society. It is important to emphasize that there are complexities involved with my identity that result in my belonging to a new people. As a second-generation immigrant, I should not have to choose one identity because my identity involves many identities.

References

Chapter 10

The Privilege of Race

By Karen Totino

In this essay Karen Totino focuses on the role that white privilege has played in shaping who she is, as well as the role that her lack of exposure to other races has played in forming her perspective on racial matters. She begins by talking about her childhood, growing up in a white neighborhood and attending a predominantly white elementary school. Karen then goes on to moving to The Woodlands, which has many stereotypes as being “all white and rich people” and how that played a role in shaping her life. Totino attended a private school for grades six through twelve and during her time there she knew only three African American students. She had little to no exposure to other races, especially to African Americans, until she began attending Trinity University. Karen has only realized how much of an impact white privilege and her limited exposure to other races have affected her life in the past couple of years.

When it comes to my experience and knowledge about race, I would describe myself as naïve. Since I was in elementary school I have been isolated in terms of race, due to being surrounded primarily by other white individuals. Much of how I view race and the issues surrounding race have been shaped by my lack of exposure to other races, especially African-Americans. The concept of “white habitus” refers to a “racialized, uninterrupted socialization processes that conditions and creates whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva 2010:104). White habitus is the idea that context plays a role in the way individuals view things such as race. The way an individual is implicitly trained to react to things in certain situations is based on socialization, experience, history and social psychological imprints (Bonilla-Silva 2010:124). My identity has been influenced by social factors and by “othering,” which is when I differentiate myself from individuals who are different than me, especially in race. As Proweller
(1999:776) explains, “[w]hite racial identity is co-constructed through othering which has the double-sided effect of securing race privilege while relegating people of color to the economic, political, and cultural margins of American society.”

The main way that I have experienced race in my life has been through *white privilege*, which refers “the systematic over-empowerment of whites, which confers economic and psychological dominance simply because of one’s race.” (Heller 2010:112). This concept draws attention the fact that whites have access to more desirable occupations because of discriminatory practices in employment. This concept also points out that most whites who experience this privilege deny benefitting from any special treatment because they want to believe they got where they are all on their own. Whites’ defense of their race privilege “grows out of the history of cultural advantage from which this group has benefited, an acute interest in maintaining these gains, and the desire to escape individual and collective responsibility for the history of white racism” (Wilhelm 2006). There are psychological benefits to white privilege as well in that whites have that false sense of accomplishment without acknowledging the role that their race has played in their success.

For my family, wealth has always been there and income has never been an issue. I do not think that anyone in my family has ever considered the role that their race may have played in their success. Wealth is the accumulation of assets passed down from one generation to the next as well as the stock of dollars and properties. Wealth is accumulated through owning homes and other major investments. Since whites have been economically enfranchised in the United States since before the founding of the republic, they have had more time to accumulate wealth than non-whites. Wealth shows a far greater inequality by race than income does because wealth is highly concentrated. Income is the flow of money that for most people is earned in return for performing a job. Additionally, income is the money used to pay for day to day needs such as food and clothes and is less indicative of disparities between races (Conley 1999). My family has a great deal of wealth, which has been passed down from earlier generations and this continuity of wealth and exposure to primarily white populations has played a part in shaping our opinions about race.

Race in the south is different than in other parts of the country, such as in New Jersey, where my family is from originally. In the south, whiteness goes unmarked because it is assumed to be normative; meanwhile, whites are able to “treat race and race relations as apolitical and still navigate society successfully” (Shirley 2006:1). The racial history in the south with its pronounced racial conflicts and issues with integration, “Southern whites
may have more race consciousness about being white than whites in other regions of the United States” (Shirley 2006:1). For some people in the south especially, being white is taken for granted while for others it is recognized as a status of privilege and prejudice. It is hard for most people to admit that their race has played a part in their success. In a recent study of white attitudes, Shirley (2006:1) found that “[t]he broader the context (being white in general vs. being white in the South vs. being white in their communities) the more likely the respondents were to acknowledge advantages of being white, while they were more likely to deny having white privilege the more specific the context” (Shirley 2006:1). My family in New Jersey is not as aware of the role that race plays in their successes and in their lives in general because there has not been the same history of racial tension in the north as there has been in the south.

During my childhood years, pre-school through fifth grade, my family and I lived in Spring, Texas in a predominantly white neighborhood. Our close family friends in the neighborhood lived on our street and were all white families. I attended an elementary school that was also predominantly white with the exception of a class for Latino students who did not speak English well. My friends were all white, primarily from middle to upper middle class families. We did not interact with the minority students even in elementary school because the classes were relatively segregated. The class of students who did not speak English typically stayed together on the playground and in the cafeteria, and similarly, the white students tended to group together as well. As far as I can remember, there were very few African-American and Asian students and I do not remember intermingling with them.

After elementary school, my family and I moved to a small area outside of Houston called The Woodlands. The Woodlands has a reputation for being wealthy white families with doctor parents and spoiled children. The Woodlands is very picturesque, with tall trees and green grass, with large homes and a beautiful lake in the middle of the city called Lake Woodlands. The neighborhood we moved into is composed of only white families, most of which are of middle or upper class based on wealth and income. There are a lot of well-known doctors, including neurosurgeons and plastic surgeons that live in The Woodlands and work either in The Woodlands or commute to the renowned medical center in Houston. The higher cost of living associated with The Woodlands can definitely be tied to the predominantly white population through the effects of white privilege. It is unlikely, however, that many of these wealthy white individuals would attribute their high quality life styles to their race. Due to the racial and financial segregation of The Woodlands, I have not had much exposure to other racial groups, which has limited my perspective on race. My
perceptions of race have also been influenced by the people I surround myself with and since most of them also have a limited experience and exposure to other races, their opinions on race are skewed as well.

I attended The Woodlands Private School, which is a private college preparatory school from grade six through grade twelve. The Woodlands Private School has much the same reputation as The Woodlands in that it is all rich, white students who came from wealthy families. In middle school, there were 60 kids in my grade with about 5 Asians, 2 Latinos and 1 African American student. This dynamic of races is typical for all other classes at this school from kindergarten through grade twelve. “The predominance of white students is not discontinuous with the racially white-washed enrollment of most private schools nationally. While there has been relative growth of minorities in private education, especially in private parochial and independent elementary and secondary schools, these populations continue to be disproportionately underrepresented in the private education sector” (Proweller 1999:799). My close group of friends remained all white individuals coming from wealthy middle class families. The fact that my family has money and has accumulated wealth over the years has allowed me to experience an exceptional education that not all other kids my age received. With my family being white, they have been more accepted by companies who favor the majority race, which has in turn affected me, a white female, to be able to receive more benefits based on my racial and financial status.

There were no minority race teachers in middle school, so race was never really discussed in the class room. I never thought about the issue of race and the role it played in my life because no one around me ever mentioned the idea. My experience in this regard is consistent with a study by Proweller (1999:802), who found that “[s]tudents are somewhat at a loss to articulate how whiteness has mattered in their lives [at private schools]. Not only have they not had to consider this issue before, but it is a discourse that has been naturalized and normalized. Hence, there does not appear to be any reason why it should be the focus of discussion” (Proweller 1999:802). Due to the fact that I did not see the importance of race in my life or in the lives of the individuals with whom I surrounded myself, I never brought up race when having conversations with others. From my experience, the lack of racial concern stems from the lack of racial diversity. When people are only associated with their own race, from the white grouping in my elementary school classes to the large scale racial isolation that is The Woodlands, individuals become blind to the influence race has on their lives.

27 This name is a pseudonym
Since I did not have a lot of experience with race or discussing race, it always seemed to be an intimidating topic because I did not know how to appropriately discuss racial issues. The roles that “class-based norms of civility and propriety” play in shaping “race consciousness among white students,” creates an environment “where speaking publicly about race in the private school is identified as bad practice” (Proweller 1999:805). As a result, white students often avoid discussing the topic of race publically for fear of not using the appropriate words for this type of conversation. “Good whites” avoid the topic while “bad whites overstep the bounds of what has been determined to be proper race talk” (Proweller 1999:805). This is a situation I dealt with growing up.

Since I did not have much experience engaging in conversation about race, I was hesitant to bring it up because I did not know how to speak correctly or how to refer to certain races without being offensive. “Racial identity productions that bind white talk about race to private fears of being racist provide strong evidence for the ideological pervasiveness and embodiment of the color-blind perspective in school” (Wilhelm 2006). If I was exposed to individuals of other races regularly growing up, I might have learned how to properly address race by talking with them, effectively achieving a better understanding of how they perceive their own racial identity.

During my four high school years at The Woodlands Private School, I still had little exposure to African-Americans. Private schools have been known to “serve a homogenous, affluent stratum of the population” but research has pointed towards indicators of change for the types of individuals who attend these private schools (Proweller 1999:802). During all four years there were a total of five black students, three of whom left Woodlands Private to attend the public school in the area. I was friends with the one African-American girl who was in my grade. I did not consciously think about her race but I did acknowledge that this was the first black friend I had ever had. Her family was not as well off as the other students so she and her two siblings who were also attending the school eventually had to leave and return to the public school system because it was cheaper.

Public schools are generally more accepting of all races because they are more affordable and accessible. Private schools, on the other hand, create a homogenous group of individuals who share a “common set of cultural codes that regulate student socialization inside and outside of school” (Proweller 1999:804). Private schools have the tendency to create an understanding among their white students that they are not just individuals but are part of a broader elite group. Without realizing this at the time, I can
look back now and see how being surrounded only by other white students, made me see myself as being a part of a white community in a place where I thought I belonged.

Private schools, whether purposefully or not, reinforce the sense of class privilege and keep the classes together, which reinforces the ruling class white culture that prevails in society today. I think that living in The Woodlands had this effect on me as well because living amongst wealthy white families was all I knew and it was where I felt most comfortable. Without the exposure to individuals with diverse racial backgrounds, I never had to seriously consider racial issues in my everyday life. Later, when I was exposed to situations involving minority individuals I felt a little out of my element. This could be attributed to the fact that I never had to face the discomfort associated with racial tension growing up. Therefore, I was less prepared to handle issues concerning race due to the uneasiness it provoked.

After my first African American friend left for public school, there were only two black students left in the entire high school. For the first time, I began recognizing the effects that race could have on education, wealth, income and opportunities. At the same time I began to think of all the times in my life that my race had benefited me without even realizing it at the time that I was benefiting from being white. Thinking about her leaving due to financial disparities in wealth amongst racial groups, I realized that private schools do not blatantly refuse to accept people based on race but they do have standards that separate races such as high tuitions that typically minority races cannot afford to pay but that white families can (Miller 1958). These epiphanies that I experienced would not have occurred had I not had even that rather limited exposure to an individual of another race. This further demonstrates how racial isolation can prevent the examination of how race impacts everyone’s lives.

Stratification is the way in which individuals are placed within society based on the characteristics that are valued by that society including class, race, and gender. The unequal distribution of people across social categories is characterized by differential access to scarce resources including material, symbolic and emotional resources (Massey 2008). This disparity was made evident to me when thinking about the race of the students at my high school and the reasons why there were so few minority students. Stratification is based on categorical inequalities in which resources are unequally distributed to groups that are divided based on social categorization and institutionalization. Two processes that favor the installation of categorical inequality are manipulation and opportunity hoarding, which is a socially defined process of exclusion. Whites
manipulate the job opportunities and positions available to people of
different races, allowing this inequality to continue in the workplace.
Individuals often categorize people unconsciously because it is a way of
making mental shortcuts to make identifying people easier. In high school I
became more aware of the ways in which I had created these mental short
cuts to group individuals based on race and race related characteristics. I
based my categorization on the little experience I had with different racial
groups at the time, which has changed greatly in the years following high
school mainly due to my increased exposure to other races.

Upon graduating from The Woodlands Private School in 2008, I
attended Trinity University which is a predominantly white private
university. Compared to public universities, the student body is relatively
small in number which means most students know a lot of other students
and are able to see the racial differences within the student body. Despite
the fact that most American white individuals do not consider the
important role that race plays in their lives, it is responsible for a plethora of
“psychological and economic benefits” (Heller 2010:112). Even though
there is definitely more diversity at Trinity than I have experienced
previously, my interactions with non-whites is still rather limited. I think
that my tendency has been to gravitate towards white individuals with
similar backgrounds and social standing as me because of the way in which
I grew up. This is consistent with the knowledge that people have a
tendency to stay within situations in which they are familiar and
comfortable with. My lack of racial exposure growing up still affects me
today in how I interact with others even on an unconscious level.

Advantage based on race is affected by gender and social class as well
because all three aspects have either oppressing effects or benefits. Race
and class are intertwined in many ways. Whiteness is seen as meaning
greater access to material resources much the same way that high social
classes have more access. Institutional policies in large cities are generally
“designed to funnel greater material opportunities to the white elite and that
it inevitably follows that material gain will trickle down to all whites” (Heller
2010:117). I think that my dad, being a white male in the business world,
has benefited from race and class. Most of the other people he works with
are white males as well, which shows the uneven distribution of access to
material resources and wealth between whites and other racial groups. I
believe that this relates to my family in that being white, we have benefited
financially. I had some awareness of the benefits that being white has had
on my life such as access to a private education for both primary education
and university education but I never realized how uneven the access to
those opportunities was until more recently.
In our society we are taught not to believe that “whiteness has a cash value . . . that white Americans are encouraged to invest in whiteness, to remain true to an identity that provides them with resources, power, and opportunity” (Heller 2010:114). It is made clear that to “invest in whiteness” is a choice influenced by the mindfulness that whiteness is a vehicle for achieving greater material resources. I have become aware in my years at Trinity and after taking many classes that deal with racial issues and inequalities that in our society, being white has many advantages for all aspects of life. “Whiteness becomes an end in itself because the ultimate outcome of racial inequality is presumed, in spite of a particular context in which an individual is not the recipient of unearned material advantages” (Heller 2010:115). Only recently have I been made aware of many situations in which being white has benefited me and family.

Despite not thinking that race played a major role in my life, I have realized that the concept of white privilege relates directly to my life and my situation in terms of social class and access to resources. White privilege is the idea that being white gives individuals more access to material resources and advancements towards success. My family has grown up experiencing white privilege and that has affected my life and the way I view race. I have been isolated from the issue of race for most of my life and it has not been until recently that I realized that race, being white, has made me who I am today and even shapes the interactions I seek. It has allowed me to experience more benefits including the economic success of my family and my access to a private education and a comfortable lifestyle. Additionally, the homogeneity of the group of people I grew up with played a significant role in my naïve outlook on the influence that social stratification by race has had on my life.

References


Chapter 11

A Divided Identity: Growing Up on the U.S.-Mexico Border, Pursuing the American Dream, and Retaining Mexican Cultural Values

By Aimee Vidaurri

Aimee Vidaurri has grown up in two different countries at the same time. She attended middle school and high school in Laredo, Texas and returned home to Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas every day. The high concentration of Mexicans and Mexican Americans along the border and the existence of an almost homogenous culture sheltered her from developing and understanding of racial differences in the United States. Now as a result of continuing her education, she has begun to realize the implications of race and how this alters people’s perceptions. Moreover, she has experienced a collision of what she considers herself to be and the stereotype of Hispanic women. Aimee’s essay conveys the perceptions of a first-generation, middle-class, educated female. She is interested in exposing the ways in which these characteristics conflict with Mexican expectations of feminine attitudes and the stereotypes of Mexican Americans held by white non-Hispanics.

I was born in Laredo, Texas on December 26, 1989 and a week later I was home in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas. My parents decided that my brothers and I should be born in the United States because this would ensure a brighter and better future.¹ Only recently I figured out that my name, Aimee, and my sister’s, Lauren, were also part of the plan. I know that my parents invested the little savings they had in order to give us this

¹ Crosnoe (2006) writes about the improvement of socioeconomic status and living standards of Latin American migrants, which is the most prominent cause for migration.
unique privilege. My parents weren’t the only ones taking advantage of this opportunity. Many parents hired U.S. doctors during pregnancy and made sure to be in the U.S. when it was time for the baby to be delivered (Rice 2011). It was the easiest way to become a U.S citizen. Citizenship didn’t play a noticeable role while I was a child. I attended kindergarten and elementary school in Mexico and like all the kids in my neighborhood I was enrolled at Colegio Mexico. Spanish was my first language and although my school offered English courses I was far from proficient. It didn’t seem like a problem not to speak English. My mother could not speak a word and my dad had a horrible accent. On the Nuevo Laredo- Laredo border, where most people spoke Spanish or could understand it, there wasn’t really a need to learn English.

I was unaware of the political boundaries that divided the two cities I was growing up in. I didn’t really notice that I didn’t have to carry any documentation when crossing the bridge or checkpoints and my parents did. I would just cross the border back and forth unnoticed and without any hassles. It was a natural event for me and for everyone around me.2 There were certain things that typically meant crossing the bridge such as shopping. I remember going shopping with my mother when I was younger. She would always create a separate list for the things she would purchase in Nuevo Laredo and those she would purchase in Laredo. We had access to the best of both worlds, she would say. We would purchase groceries for cheaper prices in Nuevo Laredo supermarkets and appliances, clothing and shoes in Laredo. As scholars have noted, this type of shopping was common for many Mexican residents (Martinez 1994 and Miller 1996). Growing up on the border allowed my family to engage in certain kinds of consumption practices that would have been impossible elsewhere. It also allowed us to enjoy a higher socioeconomic status than if we had lived elsewhere in the United States or Mexico. It was easy to economize by having access to very different markets.3 There was no doubt we were middle class in Nuevo Laredo. I later realized, however, that my socioeconomic status was tied to the city I was living in because the purchases I routinely made were much more expensive elsewhere.

Adapting to the American education system

Before I finished elementary school my parents decided it was time for me to take advantage of being an “American.” In order to do so I would have to become proficient in English. They thought the best way for me to

2 For more information on transnational perceptions of people along the Mexican-American border see Martinez 1994:68-117.
3 Miller (1996) writes about the lower prices along the Mexican-U.S. border and how they are an incentive for Mexican bulk shoppers who would resell the merchandise in Mexico.
achieve this was to attend school across the border in Laredo, Texas. I was heartbroken to leave my friends behind. It didn’t seem like much of a privilege then. What my parents soon found out was that I couldn’t enroll in public schools because I didn’t have a Texas address. Therefore I applied for a scholarship at St. Augustine High School, run by the Catholic church, where I was accepted. My parents had to make a tremendous effort to pay tuition but they thought it was a step that had to be taken. When I began seventh grade I realized my English was terrible: I just didn’t sound like the rest of the kids around me. I couldn’t understand much of what teachers said and I kept my distance from my classmates. I felt out of place. However, within a few months I realized things weren’t as different as I thought. The majority of my teachers could speak great Spanish and so could my classmates. There were several other girls from Nuevo Laredo and many others whose parents had lived in Nuevo Laredo before. The academic environment was more accommodating than I realized at first and I began to notice fewer differences between St. Augustine and Colegio Mexico. One thing that remained constant, however, was my parents’ inability to help me with anything related to school. I could never ask my mom or dad if a sentence was grammatically correct or if I had spelled a word right. They were clueless.

The majority of the time I thought I was equal to the other Mexican Americans in my high school. Then, as the drug war violence escalated, many Nuevo Laredo citizens moved to Laredo, some of my friends among them. These twin cities were a major hub for drug trafficking. In the past that fact hadn’t played a role in my life. When things began to change and the city became dangerous, however, I realized I couldn’t leave because my family couldn’t come with me. There were different nationalities within our family that prevented us from being together in Laredo, Texas. Neither my brothers nor I had reached the age of majority yet, so we could not yet petition for our parents to become legal residents of the United States. Additionally, my father said that even when we came of age it would be useless to file the paperwork because he wouldn’t be able to acquire a job to provide for us the way he had done thus far. I realized that many of my friends were in Nuevo Laredo as a choice but my family and I had no other option.

Everything remained the same until I entered high school. In 9th grade, our class size doubled and all of a sudden there were a lot of white kids in our class. The other private school in Laredo, Mary Help, was where the majority of the newly-enrolled white kids were coming from. I realized

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4See Richardson (1999:149-152) about the consequences of language flexibility in schools traditional policies that banned the use of Spanish in “American” schools.
then that I was in the “Mexican American” private school. Because Mary Help didn’t have a high school, the white kids there transferred to St. Augustine. Our class became polarized between the *gringos* and the *mexicanos*. Of course, despite being a U.S. citizen, I was part of the latter group. In St. Augustine being one of the *mexicanos* wasn’t a bad thing at all; in fact it was great. Other students perceived the *mexicanas* as more conservative, with better manners, which in my opinion was everything my parents wanted me to be.

As the years passed, I became more aware of the distinctions between them and us. *Gringas* were usually picked up by their parents in BMW’s, Mercedes, and Suburbans, all latest models. In my carpool parents also drove Suburbans, except they were ten years old. Although we wore uniforms, there was a clear difference in the clothes the gringas wore and the ones we wore. Gringas also achieved better grades, on average, than Mexicans. Some teachers thought it was because we Mexicans were lazy or didn’t pay enough attention to understand the materials. Their perception of Mexicans was very different from the one they had before, when they wanted to help ESL students in middle school. That is why many classmates and teachers were surprised when they found out I was attending Trinity University. The *mexicanos* didn’t usually go to Trinity. They stayed in town and attended the local community college or university or didn’t go to college at all, as was the case with most of my friends. On few occasions they would attend the University of Texas-San Antonio or Incarnate Word [also in San Antonio], but not Trinity.

**College life as a first-generation Mexican American, forming an identity**

I decided to come to Trinity in part because it was one of the few schools I had ever heard of. My parents couldn’t offer much advice, as I was a first-generation college student. All my parents cared about was that I got an education in the United States so that I would have a better life. They didn’t want me to be too far from home, however, so any schools outside of Texas were automatically eliminated. Having to stay in Texas, I thought Trinity was the best opportunity. Although I found out the cost of attendance at Trinity exceeded by far the amount my parents could afford to pay, I thought this was an opportunity I couldn’t bypass. After a great scholarship and a lot of loans, I decided I could go through with it. Coming to Trinity changed my world. I realized that I was attending a

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1 See Richardson (1999:123-152) and O’Toole (2011) for more information concerning the academic development gaps between Hispanics and Whites.
university that was full of the gringas and gringos I had met in high school. The majority of the student body were upper-middle-class non-Hispanic whites. I felt like an outsider. I was still in Texas but the Trinity University student body did not reflect to San Antonio’s Hispanic majority population. I began questioning if I really belonged here. The only Mexican Americans I knew were the custodial staff and cooks. The perception I had of myself was in jeopardy. Most of the people that surrounded me considered Mexicans to be and look like the Mexican-Americans they were in contact with: custodial people. I didn’t know where I fit in. Clearly, I wasn’t the all-American girl like most sorority girls at the university. Also, I didn’t want to be perceived as a dirty, ignorant Mexican, which is the perception many people have when they are not familiar with Mexican culture.

I began to notice the consequences of moving from a Mexican-majority environment to one in which I became the minority. I couldn’t blend in as easily. Although my skin color is not much darker and sometimes lighter than many white Americans, I presume there must be something other people see in me that sets me apart from them. I know one of those things must have been my accent. Although during high school I considered it a blessing that I didn’t have to speak much English, this had come back to haunt me in college. I tried assimilating into the white crowd thinking this would be the best way for me to improve my language skills but I wasn’t so successful. There was something inherently different between them and me. I just didn’t fit in. I didn’t understand their jokes and sometimes I didn’t understand what they said altogether.7

The first group of white American friends that I found was very racially insensitive. They believed racism was outdated and that any comment or joke that they made was just in a friendly manner. A couple of them thought it was funny to call me “Tortilla.” When I would tell them that I felt they were being racist they told me racism was passé and that they didn’t have bad intentions.8 I remember that once they made a joke about how I was paying for school. They asked if I was paying with tacos and tortillas and laughed. I told them I had a good scholarship/grant. They were very offended and thought I had an underserved advantage over them. They told me that their parents worked just as hard as mine or even more. It was not a hostile conversation but an exchange of viewpoints. I really believed that I deserved my admission and scholarship. A lack of discrimination had allowed me to be where I was now. Then they continued to ask more questions about how I got in and what my grades were. One of

7 See Garcia (2004:145-184) for the experiences of second-generation Mexican-American women in a University setting.
8 See Bonilla Silva (2006:53-74) for a description of attitudes that have racial undertones but are supposedly not intended to be racist.
my friends, Jane, was a transfer as well. Both of us had been rejected freshman year. The difference was Kate had a SAT score 200 points higher than mine. They thought we should all be measured in the same manner because, after all, the SAT determined how well we would do in college. I was really offended by their comments. They thought a number could determine how smart I was. This was the way America worked for them, not for me. Already by that time and still today I enjoy higher academic standing than every single one of my friends who argued that if I didn’t get a certain score, I couldn’t perform a certain way. These types of discussions became more frequent in time and I began to feel my “Mexicaness” more as they would say I was just “too much” for them. I was proud of my culture and didn’t want to pretend to be someone else around them. I withdrew from the group and only remained friends with Jane. I really needed to find friends that resembled my culture more.

In time I fell in with a group of Latin American students, many of whom were Mexican nationals. What they all had in common aside from their Hispanic background was high socio-economic status, something I didn’t share with them. My parents were hard-working people and they couldn’t afford to give me many of the things my new friends considered average. I realized that fitting in with this crowd would require a lot of effort on my part. Nevertheless, they felt more like home than the other kids. I began working to be able to purchase things that would make me more like them. It was important for me to be part of a group where I felt comfortable. In this instance, however, I trying to hide my true socioeconomic status and it was difficult. In general I believe Mexicans of certain status place a high emphasis on appearance to polish differences. Many of the young women who are now my friends are in serious relationships with sons of very wealthy men and I realize that is what their families expect of them. Little did I know that coming to Trinity I would end up playing cards with my identity. I had left my first group of friends because they were too different from me but I realized that in my new situation everyone was different.

After beginning my college life I realized that I could no longer have a single, integrated personality. I was changing as a person and many parts of me were contradicting each other. While I had avoided changing to suit my first group of friends, I eventually had to change to fit in with my current group of friends. Changing the way I portrayed myself was not just necessary at school but at home as well. When I would return to Nuevo Laredo to visit my family I had to play down my intellect. Family members

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9 For more information on playing down an aspect of one's identity or covering it see Yoshino 2006.
prided themselves in the fact that I was getting an education but they didn’t appreciate any display of knowledge with which they weren’t familiar. I began to realize that my life was becoming more and more fragmented. I would come home dressed in the way I would to fit in with the Latinos at school only to visit my grandmother, who doesn’t own a vehicle or air conditioning to use in 100 degree summer weather on the border. I didn’t feel that it was possible to belong in two different places at the same time. Many times my family members were offended when they would see that I was changing and becoming less like them and more like something else. While they appreciated my education, they didn’t think that there was anything more important than holding firmly to your roots and not letting go.\textsuperscript{10}

I was between a rock and a hard place when I began trying to determine my identity. In an attempt to neglect dealing with these identity issues I concentrated on school. I really wanted to prove to the academic community at Trinity that I was a valuable asset and that race didn’t affect my development in any way. I wanted to be a good exemplary Mexican in the Trinity community. I dedicated a lot of time to my classes and I began looking for opportunities where I could represent the university, which I really thought was important for a minority student to do. This attempt however was not exempt from identity conflict. The first opportunity that I had to represent Trinity was at the Harvard Model U.N. in Taiwan.

Naturally, I was ecstatic about the opportunity. Unfortunately, my parents didn’t share my excitement. They claimed that they had sent me to school solely to study and that anything additional was unnecessary. This was one of the challenges of being a first generation student. Not only did I have to compete against other students for opportunities, I also had to convince my parents that I deserved them and that they were an important part of my academic formation. The same thing occurred when I was going to represent Trinity at the Chicago Hispanic College Bowl Quiz. My parents didn’t think I should be traveling so far from home and that women in particular were extremely vulnerable when they weren’t under someone else’s protection. I was not being a good Mexican girl traveling so far unaccompanied. They didn’t think it was good for women to become too independent and to have plans or goals that deviated too far from home.

It seemed to me that my attempts to assimilate into the Trinity lifestyle were directly antagonistic to my family’s expectations. As I tried to become an outstanding student, my parents grew more skeptical about my academic

\textsuperscript{10} See Garcia (2004), Chapter Four, for details about the dilemma of the American dream versus holding on to Mexican cultural values and negative behaviors such as machismo.
goals. This, however, is a common occurrence for second-generation Mexican-American women (Garcia 2004, Perin 2005). They said I had changed so much and even mentioned that if they had known that education would make me such an independent thinker they wouldn’t have worked their lives away for this. It’s been a difficult time. Although I have excelled in other areas besides representing Trinity nationally and abroad, my parents lost interest. They weren’t here for either of my initiations into honor societies. They knew I was doing great in school but it was not what they had expected. I began to develop goals that didn’t include coming home after graduation and they were hurt. My life journey had taken me places I couldn’t have dreamt of. I didn’t regret any of it because it has helped shape who I am today. I know that my identity is my own and that it doesn’t have to conform to anyone’s expectations. I am not the woman my parents expected me to become, who educates herself and comes back to her small town. I am not a Mexican that takes advantage of the system to get ahead of whites. I am not the rich Latina who comes to college in America to find a husband. I am not the student who didn’t assimilate and fell through the cracks because I was a first generation. I am a combination of many different things and no stereotypes apply.

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Chapter 12

White Girl in an Unfamiliar World: Exploring White Habitus and White Privilege

By Hannah Westberg

Oftentimes the most valuable lessons come from stepping out of a place of comfort and into the unfamiliar. This essay describes Hannah Westberg’s experience in the summer of 2011 as she worked her first job waitressing in a Mexican restaurant where Mexican Americans outnumbered whites. As a white, blond-haired, blue-eyed female growing up in a predominantly white neighborhood and attending a predominantly white school, Hannah had never been the minority in any situation. In her essay, she analyzes how her experiences over the summer alerted her to the privileges bestowed upon her as a white female in a white-dominated society. In doing so, she uses Bonilla Silva’s concept of white habitus to explore how her own attitudes about modern racial issues were formed.

... spent the beginning of my first summer back from college in an idyllic daze, travelling to Chicago for my brother’s college graduation, to Hilton Head Island with a friend and her family, and to Nebraska to visit some relatives. But as soon as I returned home, reality set in: I needed a job. Freshman year of college I so fortunately survived with the money I had received as graduation gifts from various friends and family. But my bank account had dwindled and it needed to be refilled before school commenced in August. Furthermore, I faced the incessant taunting of my older brother, Josh, who seemingly found joy in reminding me of my worthlessness as a 19-year old who had never been officially employed in her life.
So, I began my job search. Countless applications later, I finally got a call from La Cocina, a Mexican restaurant down the road from my house that was hiring wait-staff. After a brief interview, the manager told me I got the job. I reacted with the same excitement that many feel after being hired for the first time. However, some of my friends laughed when I told them the news. I remember someone asking me, “Aren’t all the workers at La Cocina Mexicans?” Yes, many of the servers were Latinos, but I had also seen white servers working there on multiple occasions. Besides, what did it matter, anyway? I had no reservations about working with people of other races and I was pursuing a minor in Spanish so the job would be great practice for my speaking skills.

On my first day of work, the manager handed me an extra-large bright red La Cocina shirt and told me I would spend my first three days shadowing other servers so I could familiarize myself with the duties of waitressing. Then he introduced me to everyone during “line-up,” a quick meeting before each shift, during which the manager checks in with all of the servers. He also had the servers introduce themselves and mention what they like best about working at La Cocina. As the servers began stating their names and favorite things, I began to feel self-conscious and uncomfortable, and it wasn’t because of the oversized shirt engulfing my body. As I looked around the circle of people I counted silently in my head, “One… two…three…” other than myself, were there really only three white servers? Numerically, I had become a minority, a category that as a blond-haired, blue-eyed white girl in the United States of America, I had never found myself in before.

I couldn’t understand why I was feeling so out of place. Growing up, my parents always stressed acceptance of others, regardless of appearance or skin color. “Don’t judge a book by its cover, Hannah,” they would say, which led me to believe that it’s what’s inside a person rather than outside, that counts. I saw myself as prejudice-free and color-blind. I didn’t have any problems associating with people of other races. My high school even promoted diversity, designating one week each year to celebrate diversity with an all-school assembly. But standing there on that first day and on many days after that, I began to question the true extent to which I had been exposed to “diversity.” If my experience had been so integrated with other races, why was I feeling uncomfortable in an environment where Latinos outnumbered whites?

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1 I have changed the name of the restaurant to protect the anonymity of my co-workers there.
I didn’t know it at the time, but what I was grappling with during that first week at La Cocina was how my upbringing in white habitus shaped my identity as a white female. In his book, *Racism without Racists*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva defines white habitus as a “racialized, uninterrupted socialization that conditions and create whites’ racial taste, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their view on racial matters” (Bonilla-Silva 2006:104). The uncertainty I felt amongst my coworkers resulted from my isolation in the largely white suburb where I have lived for the past 15 years of my life. Overland Park, a suburb of Kansas City, is a majority white city with 84.4 percent white residents, 6.3% Hispanic or Latino residents, and 4.3% black residents (Overland Park Census 2011). The demographics of the city affected the demographics of my activities within Overland Park such that most of my social interactions within Overland Park were with other whites. Of all the sports I played throughout high school, all but one of my teammates had been white. The church I attended with my family was mostly white. My neighborhood was mostly white (although my immediate neighbors to the left were and still are a black couple). And my schooling had been completed with mostly white students. With the exception of my half-Colombian friend Christa2 and my African American friend Garrett, most of the people I spent time with on a daily basis were white. Though I had previously seen my lifestyle as diverse, I began to realize that it truly was not. As a participant in white habitus, “whiteness quietly [became] second nature” for me, so that I associated “white” with “right,” even if I didn’t do so consciously (Bonilla-Silva, Goar and Embrick 2006:231).

In her book, *Revealing Whiteness*, author Shannon Sullivan discusses a very similar phenomenon to Bonilla-Silva’s “habitus,” which she coins simply as “habit” and defines as “an organism’s subconscious predisposition to transact with its physical, social political and natural worlds in particular ways” (Sullivan 2006:23). Habits exist in a racialized world so they often lead to subconscious racial predispositions (Sullivan 2006:24). Furthermore, habits can be enabling and limiting: allowing their members to act in certain ways in some environments and preventing them from acting certain ways in others (Sullivan 2006:24). In my case, my white habits enabled me to be racially blind and comfortable in a majority-white environment but made it difficult for me to ignore race and feel comfortable when the demographics were flipped.

Any romantic notions I had about the job of being a waitress quickly dissipated in my first few days of work as I realized that I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. I struggled with the impossibly long menu and the

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2 I have given pseudonyms to all individuals in this essay in order to protect their anonymity.
intricate computer-ordering system. I thought I possessed talent at multi-tasking until I had to tend to five tables at once. And carrying drinks on a tray was not as easy and graceful as most waitresses make it seem. In my first three days alone, I almost lost a lady’s credit card, switched two tables’ orders, and spilled a drink on a customer. I spent the next few nights at home making a menu “study guide” and carrying a tray full of water glasses around my house as practice. But it was my struggles during those first few weeks that helped me to feel more comfortable as a minority among my Mexican American coworkers. In order to improve, I had to interact with my coworkers, who helped me with the utmost patience. And through these interactions I began to realize that I possessed some unfair and ridiculous prejudices about Mexican Americans in general.

Most sociologists would agree that my “social and spatial isolation” from minorities during my upbringing contributed to my sense of “group cohesion” among whites and to my attitudes towards minorities (Bonilla-Silva 2006:230). Cognitive psychology explains this phenomenon, suggesting that “in order to perceive our surrounding, we must use categorization,” which occurs subconsciously based on traits such as “physical similarity, proximity, or shared fate” (Dovidio et al. 1992). As a result, we typically categorize people based on their physical traits, of which race is often the most distinguishable. Those similar to us are placed in an in-group and those different in an out-group (Dovidio et al. 1992). Because I had matured within a majority-white environment, I subconsciously solidified my in-group as white and my out-group as non-whites (Dovidio et al. 1992). Furthermore we tend to make generalizations about people within our in-group and out-group categories, usually in the form of stereotypes that glorify the in-group and deprecate the out-group (Dovidio et al. 1992). As these subconscious stereotypes I had about Mexican Americans began to surface during my first weeks, I was able to recognize their irrationality, eventually breaking down my prejudices and building up friendships with my coworkers.

First, I should preface this discussion with a disclaimer that I am not proud of any of the stereotypes that influenced my perceptions of Mexican Americans. More importantly, I possessed these biases as a result of growing up socially and spatially segregated from minorities. Working at La Cocina, I began to notice a sort of hierarchy within the restaurant: Whites and Mexican Americans proficient in English were allowed to be servers while Mexican Americans who couldn’t speak English well were typically

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3 While the term “Mexican American” is typically used in social science to refer to people of Mexican descent who were born in the United States, for convenience I have chosen to use it more broadly throughout this essay to refer to both persons of Mexican descent born in the United States and Mexican immigrants to the United States.
consigned to be cooks, dishwashers, and bus boys. While I already had apprehensions about working with the servers, I realized that my apprehensions were even stronger about interacting with the cooks.

On the first day of work I was hesitant to interact with the men on the other side of the kitchen counter, men who for the most part spoke broken English and looked more “Mexican” than the servers. I remember thinking that they were staring at me more than necessary. In addition, there was one instance in those first few days where I had a short panic about my missing I-pod. I had left my car unlocked and my I-pod in the cup-holder. Upon realizing it was missing and frantically searching for it in my car, I began to worry that it had been stolen, perhaps by one of the cooks. Later on, I found it pushed far back under my driver’s seat.

Looking back I am extremely ashamed that I had any of these notions about the people I worked with. But I now realize that they were the product of white habitus and social schemata. I was submitting to the stereotype of Mexican men as criminals and sexual deviants, a common stereotype in the United States that has no statistical justification. These assumptions were all a figment of my imagination. There was no need for me to feel any more uncomfortable around Mexican men than white men. In fact, I should have felt safer in their presence than in the presence of white males, as such stereotypes of Mexican men “distort the reality that Whites commit most crime in the United States” (Pewewardy and Nocona 2003:59). It didn’t take long for me to realize the absurdity behind my initial apprehensions. The cooks were nice and friendly people who worked extremely hard for extremely long hours to make a living. Over the summer I got to know them better and our interactions became highlights of my often-boring workdays.

Despite my shaky start, I slowly became acclimated to the daily trials of working in a restaurant and more comfortable as a minority among my Mexican American coworkers. The more time I spent around them, the more I wanted to be around them. It was during the dead hours of the restaurant that I really began to get to know these people who I had initially been intimidated by. And as I got to know my both my white and Mexican American coworkers more intimately, I began to notice some patterns, particularly in the differences between my life and theirs. While these patterns certainly do not apply to all Mexican Americans or even to all of the Mexican Americans I worked with at La Cocina, they did open my eyes to certain aspects of my life and identity as a white female in the United States.
Among the servers my age, all of the white servers were attending four-year colleges, while most of the Mexican American servers were not pursuing a college education. Of those that were, I only knew of one, my friend Cristián, who was attending a four-year institution and two, Carlos and Emilio, who were attending a two-year community college. Cristián immigrated to the United States when he was very young and was the first in his family to ever attend college. His ability to go to college relied on the impressive scholarship he received from Kansas State University. In contrast, I attended Trinity University, an expensive private school in San Antonio, Texas and was one of many in my family to go to college. Was this discrepancy simply due to my family’s emphasis on education and my hard work as a student? While these probably played a factor in my decision and ability to pursue higher education, I have come to realize that another force strongly influences this situation: white privilege.

As a white female in a majority white society, I benefit from “a system of unearned advantages and assets” guaranteed through “subtle and overt acts of racism that perpetuate a system of social stratification and result in oppressive conditions” (Pewewardy and Nocona 2003:54). Compared to my Mexican American coworkers, I am more likely to graduate from a high school, have access to computer technology, earn a higher salary, attend and graduate from a 4-year college, retain employment during a downturn in the economy, be covered by health insurance, and accumulate substantial net worth (Jensen 2005: 4). In short, as much as I’d like to believe it, I did not get to where I am today by merit alone.

I don’t want to overlook the fact that my parents, and their parents, and their parents’ parents, were and are all very hard workers. My great grandfather, Ernst Westerberg emigrated from Sweden to the United States as a teenager in 1913, settling in Nebraska and working long hours as a farmer in a small Midwestern town. My grandparents and parents both grew up on farms and worked their way through college. But I cannot deny the fact that as whites, they held privileges in society that they passed on to me. Most whites fail to recognize the unfortunate reality of such unearned privilege, believing that socio-economic opportunities in the United States are now equal regardless of race (Gallagher 2003:23). These individuals operate under a veil of “color-blindness” which allows them to believe that their success relative to minorities is a “function of individual hard work, determination, thrift and investments in education” (Gallagher 2003:26).

Such notions mask the reality of today, a reality where minorities in the United States still face “racial stereotypes and prejudice, residential segregation, and significant health, wage and wealth inequalities” (Stewart and Dixon 2010:174). Focusing specifically on education, white native-born
men are at least twice as likely to have a college degree as Latinos (Stewart and Dixon 2010:185). Aligning with what I observed at La Cocina, Hispanics are over-represented at two-year institutions as compared to whites and have a lower chance than whites of transferring to a four-year institution after graduation (Alon, Domina, and Tienda 2010:1811). Some whites deny that these differences are a result of discrimination, attributing the differences between races to varying cultural values. There is little empirical support, however, for such a belief. Indeed, “if Hispanic students had the educational resources of whites, the Hispanic-white college enrollment gap would be eliminated” (Alon, Domina and Tienda 2010:1824).

Growing up in a middle-class suburb of the Midwest, I never had to deal with any discrimination. My white identity remains un-stigmatized: If I walk into a store I am not immediately designated as a potential shoplifter and as I drive down the street I am not regarded as a person of interest because of the color of my skin. Because my parents went to college, I was much more likely to pursue higher education than some of my co-workers, whose parents immigrated to the United States with little education (see Alon, Domina, and Tienda 2010:1808). Yes, my ability to go to Trinity relied heavily on an academic scholarship, but it also relied heavily on the money my dad had saved for each of my siblings and me to attend a four-year institution after graduating high school.

I began to feel guilty about my lifestyle in comparison to many of my co-workers. While I was working at La Cocina to make spending money for the year, most of the older co-workers survived exclusively on the income they earned there. A few of the Mexican waitresses my age also had a child as a result of a teenage pregnancy and were working to support themselves instead of going to school. While I do not know all the circumstances of these individuals’ lives, I do know the circumstances of my own. My dad has worked at the same stable job for most of my life, providing enough financial support for our family to live comfortably. Because of this, my mother was able to stay at home and raise my siblings and me, only returning to work part-time once we had reached high school. Having the constant presence of my mother in my life as I grew up definitely affected my identity. She was always there to help me with my studies and drive me to my extra-curricular activities such as sports practices and music lessons, activities that, I might add, always came with a price tag. Furthermore, my family has always valued family vacations. We’ve been all across the nation—to the beach, to the mountains, to the Grand Canyon, to Washington, DC. My parents never miss the opportunity to incorporate educational or historical lessons into our family vacations, often stopping at monuments or making time to visit museums while we’re away.
My ability to participate in so many activities in my childhood and to travel as much as I have rested on the socioeconomic status of my family, which as I have come to understand does not exist independent of white privilege. Talking with my co-workers throughout the summer I began to realize how much I took these privileges for granted. Many of them had not had the same opportunities as I had, opportunities for growth, learning, relaxation and enjoyment. One day I was talking about family vacations with my friend, Cristián, and he commented that he had rarely been out of the state with his family. While all of my co-workers loved soccer (we often spent down times at work watching the Women’s World Cup), I was the only one who played competitively on a travelling club team throughout high school. Why? I would guess it’s largely due to the fact that travelling teams require a lot of money and a lot of time invested by one’s parents.

Though guilt was an appropriate feeling for me to have, it was not a productive one. Feeling guilty wouldn’t eliminate the unearned privilege I held or remedy the inequalities of society. As journalist Robert Jensen has noted, “What matters is what we decide to do with the privilege” (Jensen 1999). Acknowledging white privilege is just the first step in making a difference. It was now up to me to use this knowledge to make little changes in my life that cumulatively might make a little change in the world.

As June turned into July and July into August, and it came time for me to turn in my two-week’ notice, I found myself a different person than the girl I had been at the beginning of the summer. Though subtle, these changes helped me come to terms with my identity as a white female. I had acquired a new group of friends, people that I spent time with both in and out of the workplace. I was much more sensitive to racial issues and aware of the stereotypes that affected my perceptions, recognizing and correcting them as they surfaced. I better understood and appreciated the opportunities I had and would continue to have as a white female. I recognized that these privileges did not extend to everyone in the United States, making me more inclined to support policies that seek to correct this injustice, such as affirmative action. I attribute these changes to my immersion among minorities. Research itself has shown that “white adolescents become especially conscious of their race-ethnicity in situations when they are in a numerical minority or in an ethnically diverse setting” (Grossman and Charmaraman 2009:141). If I had never worked at La Cocina, I may never have grown as I did from stepping outside of my white habitus and into a new and diverse environment.

And so, as the manager prepared to fill the void in servers he knew he would have once many of us returned to school in the fall, new faces
appeared on a daily basis: some white, some Latino. During their first line up we servers were asked to mention what we liked best about La Cocina, just as the servers had done on my first day. When it came to my turn, I knew exactly what I liked most and it wasn’t about the quality of the food or the amount of tips we made. “The people,” I stated firmly. And I meant it with all of my heart.

References


Chapter 13
Covering in Society: Enacting the White Stereotype

By Ashley Williams

Ashley Williams examines the experiences of African Americans who have to obscure their ethnic background in favor of a white social identity. As a privileged African American young adult, she often has to travel between the black and the white worlds rather than exist exclusively in one racially distinct environment. In this essay, Ashley analyzes her school and personal experience with regard to Kenji Yoshino’s concept of covering, which refers to the minimizing or downplaying stigmatized aspects of who we are as a way to avoid being subjected to subordinating behavior. Ashley also analyzes her experiences with regard to Karyn Lacy’s concept of strategic assimilation, which refers African Americans working and sometimes living alongside members of the dominant group, while simultaneously maintaining social ties with members of their own racial group.

Growing up my mom always told me there was a time and a place for everything. She would always tell me to mind my manners and watch what I said depending on where I was. As a young child, I interpreted this statement to mean that I shouldn’t talk about private matters in public. I thought it meant that I shouldn’t mix things related to school with things related to having fun, and that school was a place where work was to be done and our house was a place for me to have fun. I interpreted this cliché statement that my mother still tells me to this day were interpreted in the context of my environment. Before I entered the fourth grade I attended a majority black private school. It wasn’t until I reached the fourth grade and began attending a majority white elementary school that I really understood what my mother meant.

I soon realized that I was one of only a handful of black students. My mom began to remind me more often that there was a time and a place for
everything and I finally began to understand this statement in context of my
new environment. What she was really referring to was there are times
when I needed to turn off a certain side of myself that wouldn’t be accepted
in the majority white school that I attended. By turning off this “black” side
I wouldn’t be ostracized by my white classmates, who may have never
interacted with black individuals before, being that the majority of the staff
and students at the school were also white. I would be accepted and be able
to socialize with my white classmates easily because they would see that the
only difference between us was skin color. The sociological term for this is
called covering. It is used to explain why minorities feel that they need to
downplay certain aspects of themselves to be accepted in majority white
environments. The practice of covering is prevalent in my life and the lives
of many other middle to upper class blacks who grow up and socialize in
majority white environments.

The term “covering” was explained by Kenji Yoshino to describe the
strategy that minorities use to cope with a majority white environment.
Introduced into the sociological literature originally by Erving Goffman
(1963), it refers to the process in which individuals downplay mutable
traits, such as ways of speaking, forms of attire, and the like, in such a way
that permits them to fade into the mainstream and thus escape
stigmatization and discrimination (Yoshino 2006). Racial covering is very
commonly seen as “acting white”. Yoshino discusses the case of a black
woman, Renee Rogers, who worked as an airport operations agent at
American Airlines. She sued American Airlines because her job prohibited
her from wearing an all-braided hairstyle. The federal district court rejected
her argument, and first observed that cornrows were not distinctively
associated with blacks noting that Rogers had only adopted the hairstyle
after it had been popularized by a white actress. The court said that because
hairstyle, unlike skin color, was a mutable trait, discrimination on the basis
of grooming was not discrimination on the basis of race. Renee Rogers lost
her case (Yoshino 2006). Cases like these have been used by black parents,
especially middle and upper class black parents, to teach their children an
important life lesson: There are times when you will have to “cover” your
racial identity. This does not mean that black parents aren’t proud of their
race and culture. Rather, they realize that society does want blacks to fit
into a certain mold. Black children must learn to cover at a young age to fit
themselves into a white social identity and must continue to cover in their
adult lives in order to achieve upward social mobility (Halliburton 2007).

The idea of covering may seem incomprehensible to individuals who
are not minorities and don’t have to downplay specific aspects of
themselves to conform to the white social norms because diversity is
promoted throughout the workplace and at academic institutions.
Differences among ethnic groups are supposed to be celebrated and diversity is supposed to be encouraged in many different settings. Although many different institutions have adopted a policy of sensitivity training that makes visible the experiences of oppressed groups, the training has not exposed the existence of oppressive structures and discrimination that occur within an organization or at an academic institution. A study of white participants in both a corporate organization and an academic institution showed that employees rhetorically linked their support for diversity with larger institutional goals stressing oneness, unity, color-blindness, and uniformity. (Marvasti and McKinney 2011). Diversity thus becomes a vehicle for creating a unified identity. Color-blindness dismisses the relevance of diversity because “color-blind” people don’t see differences in the first place.

If respondents in Marvasti and McKinney’s study leaned toward a more color blind view they were more likely to support the idea that there is no need to promote diversity because everyone is the same. The appropriateness of diversity talk depends on how well it promotes the unity of the presumed community. The values of inclusiveness and togetherness are promoted as the core of what diversity should be. The respondents expressed opinions that showed they valued cultural differences and were able at the same time to embrace cultural assimilation and a white normative center. There was a prevalent belief that all racial and ethnic groups need to cooperate to assure that the dream of one cohesive unit at work was to be realized. Many respondents in the study seem to advocate “managed diversity” or what one respondent referred to as “difference within the norms” (Marvasti and McKinney 2011).

The theme of enlightened assimilation was prevalent in many respondents’ answers in Marasti and McKinney’s study. Enlightened assimilation is a prerequisite for a desired outcome of diversity and touts the virtues of assimilation and cautions against the excesses of multiculturalism. The findings of this study suggest that diversity is often more about seeing differences within an organization or academic institution rather than endorsing the actual definition of diversity and reducing discrimination. Support for diversity is not necessarily associated with challenging the status quo and structures of exclusion and domination but rather to maintain the hierarchy between whites and non-whites. Diversity is not about fighting discrimination but the focus is on overcoming differences and incorporating minorities into a majority white environment. Paradoxically, growing support of diversity at the same time tends to increase the amount of covering that blacks need to do in order to fit into majority white environments.
Although black parents realize their children need to “cover” in certain instances, they still want their children to maintain their African American identity. This will allow them to be able to socialize in both black and white environments. The term double consciousness was coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1897 to describe how a black person’s identity is divided into several facets. Double consciousness refers to one’s self-perception as existing simultaneously with one’s awareness of how others perceive her. Middle and upper class blacks teach their children to adopt a double consciousness that will allow them to turn their white identity “on and off” (Halliburton 2007). Black youth have been conditioned so well that as they age the ability to turn their white identity on when it is needed is becomes an automatic subconscious response to the environment they are in. (Halliburton 2007).

It wasn’t until I read about the concepts in college that I realized that my parents had implicitly encouraged me to develop a black person’s double consciousness from an early age and to put it to work in my everyday life. I remember a specific instance seeing my father switch his “blackness” on and off at his majority white workplace. Currently he is the only black sales advisor at the Mercedes-Benz dealership where he works. At the beginning of the day before he left for work he was his typical self. He spent most of the drive to the dealership on the phone with one of his best friends, who is black, and the majority of the conversation was filled with loud laughter, references to black culture and the occasional use of curse words, which is how I normally hear him speak. Once he got to work and sat down at his desk I noticed a switch in his demeanor and how he interacted with customers and fellow employers, most of whom were white. Even during his break he didn’t engage in the same type of conversation with his white co-workers that he did with his black friend just a couple of hours prior.

The only time I saw my dad revert back to his typical “black” behavior that day was when a black customer came in to discuss a problem he was having with his car. He greeted the man and I watched as they walked around the building and engaged in conversation. Over the course of about thirty minutes I heard my dad using the same type of language and humor that he used when he wasn’t at work. Once the man left my dad switched back to the language and demeanor he employed when he was dealing with white customers and co-workers. This type of behavior has been coined code-switching behavior and is increasingly used by middle and upper class African American parents and their children in order to live alternately in black and in white worlds (Ogbu 2004).

When blacks are in majority white environments they are forced to pull away from their black cultural identity and to modify their speech, their
laughter, their walk, and their mode of dress to conform to mainstream requirements, while still being able to maintain their cultural identity when in the presence of other blacks. Such behaviors have been referred to as accommodation without assimilation, in reference to blacks’ belief that they should assimilate into the mainstream without relinquishing ties to the black world (Lacy 2004). This idea is prevalent middle and upper class black families who have risen several rungs above the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder and recognize that assimilation is important to achieving economic success. They believe that blacks who operate in a majority white environment need to have two faces, they have to know how to present themselves in the white world as well as in the black world, and that most of the time the two faces will be completely different.

Blacks know that they do not have the option of membership in the dominant group and cannot escape from their ascribed membership in a stigmatized and subordinated group. Blacks know that they need to adopt white cultural and linguistic frames of reference in order to succeed in school or in other white controlled institutions that are evaluated according to white criteria. They learn and follow the standard practices for success in white institutions without giving up their racial identity. This allows them to maintain their sanity in a prejudiced society while helping them get ahead in white-controlled organizations (Ogbu 2004). Code-switching behavior is increasingly advocated by middle and upper class black parents because they have seen it is necessary in order to mask racial identity, minimize racial discrimination, and increase their children’s chances of doing well in social, educational, and occupational settings.

Middle and upper class black parents and their children still want to maintain ties to the black community and maintain their racial identity. My mom, with her love of clichés, has always told me to never forget where I come from. Before I moved to the suburbs, where my family currently resides, I lived in an area of Houston that would be considered the ghetto. All of my neighbors were black and of low socioeconomic status. During the day I wasn’t allowed to venture out and explore the neighborhood past my street and at night I wasn’t allowed to leave the house. There were several instances that I can remember hearing gunshots at night and the neighborhood across from mine was the site of a drive-by shooting. Although the neighborhood was dangerous at times, most of my neighbors were friendly. I interacted with most of the people who lived on my street and developed close relationships with many of the children around me with whom I remain friends to this day. The development of my blackness and my black racial identity began in my neighborhood.
Many black people associate their race with being part of a disadvantaged group (Martin 2010). My idea of what it means to be black was learned through interaction with my black neighbors. Once I moved to a majority white neighborhood and began attending majority white schools, my racial identity was constructed mainly through my interaction with social groups at school. At a young age my mom advocated maintaining close relationships with black individuals, regardless of class. As I entered high school, she advocated joining groups like Black Student Union to insure that I kept in touch with my black roots in a majority white environment. Blacks in predominantly white environments often maintain connections with the black world by participating in black religious and social organizations (Lacy 2004).

Middle and upper class blacks in majority white environments advocate assimilation into the mainstream because they feel their children will have the greatest access to resources that will benefit them later on in life. A study of middle and upper class black parents found that many of these parents supported assimilation (Lacy 2004). These blacks support their children when they attend majority white schools because they provide access to influential social networks. Attending a majority white school helps facilitate blacks’ ability to move back and forth between the black and white worlds in adulthood. Although they are supportive of their child dating a person of another race, black parents don’t typically encourage interracial marriage and would prefer that their child married another black individual. Such was the case with my parents, who completely supported my decision to come to Trinity and knew that I might be involved in an interracial relationship while I was here. Nevertheless, my dad has told me multiple times that if I did decide to marry a man who wasn’t black, he might not support my decision.

As black children get older they face issues within both the black and white community because they need to maintain two separate identities (Arnett and Brody 2008). Within the white world, blacks need to defy the negative stereotypes and assumptions that white individuals have about them. After black young adults graduate from college they are more likely to find people who are white as their co-workers and employers, and although blacks can assimilate culturally they can’t assimilate structurally. This means that black adults will continue to face challenges in gaining access to white-dominated social cliques, clubs and institutions. A study of Americans of several different ethnicities has shown that typically being “American” is associated with being white. When blacks are associated with negative stereotypic traits they are considered more of an out-group and are less likely to be included in the American identity. This result shows that typically fitting the black stereotype doesn’t help blacks achieve upward
social mobility because they won’t be received positively by employers (Rydell 2010). When blacks are perceived as having American [read “white”] characteristics they are received positively and are more likely to be considered American (Rydell 2010). Black youth can also be seen as acting “not black” if they don’t act in stereotypical fashion. This idea has prevalence in my own life because on many occasions I have been deemed as “not really black” by white peers. This is a phrase that I still cringe at because it implies that everyone who is black is either carrying a gun or talking in some sort of black slang. These comments concerning race can be perceived as either malicious in intent or simply reflecting ignorance on the part of white individuals who state them (Tatum 2004).

Black racial identity for middle and upper class blacks is fostered through social interaction within the black world and blacks who miss this experience fail to interpret correctly the cultural cues group members use to draw boundaries around the black world and these blacks are reduced to the status of outsiders (Arnett and Brody 2008). Opportunities to immerse themselves in information and contact with other people from their own racial background are crucial for black youth. There is concern about how growing up in a predominantly white community will have an impact on a black individual’s racial identity. As middle and upper class black youth continue to develop in majority white environments, they run the risk of being labeled a “sell-out” or “acting white” (Martin 2010). It is difficult for middle and upper class black youth to construct an identity that is both authentically black and traditionally middle class. During high school I took mostly Honors and AP level classes and spoke in Standard English in the presence of both black and white peers and was ostracized or called out on many occasions for acting too white.

Some of my black friends had the idea that striving to get good grades, do well in school, or socialize in a predominantly white environment were stereotypical white behaviors. On many occasions my male friends would tell me that I shouldn’t try so hard in school and instead focus on getting recruited for a college volleyball team. Due to the alienation I felt for being one of the only black students who was taking multiple AP level classes, I stopped putting effort into my schoolwork and instead focused on maintaining what I thought at the time was a typical black identity. I didn’t do homework, study for tests, and spent most of my time playing volleyball and interacting with my black friends. Once my mom realized the drastic drop off in the amount of effort I was exerting at school, she quickly helped me realize that my priorities weren’t straight. These types of issues are experienced by many middle and upper class blacks who strive for academic and professional success. As Ogbu (2004:24) notes, accusation of Uncle Tomism or disloyalty to the black community and fear of losing friends
and/or a sense of community are just examples of sanctions faced by middle and upper class blacks who engage in stereotypical white behavior. In my case there was pressure against “acting white”, especially against speaking Standard English, because my friends felt as if I was renouncing my black identity.

For a black individual to be accepted into the top echelons of corporations and in social organizations he or she must think, manage, behave like a majority group member and be white except in external appearance. Middle and upper class black parents have taught their children how to deal with the demands that they behave and talk like dominant group members and downplay stigmatized aspects of their personality in order to assimilate into a white dominated society. This has caused black youth to develop two separate identities which may or may not be accepted in majority black or white environments. Middle and upper class black youth who adopt a traditionally white identity may be isolated from the black community because other black individuals feel they are becoming estranged from black cultural traditions. All of these issues have salience in my own life because I feel as if I must assimilate into the mainstream to do well in terms of socioeconomic status but I still want to retain my ties to the black community without being perceived as “too white”.

References


