Essentialism Versus Complexity: Conceptions of Racial Identity Construction in Educational Scholarship

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In this article, I critically review North American education-related literature on identity construction among Black youth. I integrate this body of scholarship to reveal an implicit two-pronged model for examining identity among racialized persons. The first level of analysis involves unveiling collective strivings for a coherent racial identity in the face of a racist society. The second level concerns the underlying complexity, rupture, and ambivalence that such collective quests for identity tend to mask. Multicultural and antiracism education fail to adequately consider the second level of identity, resulting in both approaches presenting an oversimplified and unsatisfactory view of racial and cultural diversity.

Keywords: race, ethnicity, identity, poststructuralism

Dans cet article, je présente une analyse critique de la documentation scientifique nord américaine dans le domaine de l'éducation en ce qu'elle traite de la construction de l'identité chez les jeunes noirs. Je fais ressortir de ce corpus un modèle d'analyse implicite comportant deux axes. Le premier niveau d'analyse implique le dévoilement des efforts collectifs pour en arriver à une identité raciale cohérente par rapport à une société raciste. Le deuxième niveau d'analyse porte sur la complexité, la rupture et l'ambivalence sous-jacentes que ces quêtes d'identité collectives ont tendance à masquer. L'éducation multiculturelle et antiraciste ne parvient pas à considérer adéquatement le deuxième niveau d'identité, ce qui donne lieu, dans les deux approches, à une analyse simpliste et insatisfaisante de la diversité raciale et culturelle.

Mots clés : race, origine ethnique, identité, poststructuralisme

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Identity is one of the most discussed and contentious issues in both the social sciences and society at large. This is no surprise given its significance within the human condition. It has everything to do with how people acquire a sense of belonging and how they situate themselves within a wider social context. In education and other social science disciplines, scholars have expended much energy exploring how youth from diverse cultural backgrounds produce meanings and

identities in relation to dominant discourses and representations that construct them as the racialized Other. In this article, I draw on critical, cultural, post-colonial, and post-structural theory to provide a selective, integrative, and critical analysis of the North American research on identity construction among Black youth. The studies reviewed demonstrate a theoretical shift in the ways education-related scholarship has taken up issues of culture, community, and identity. Rather than treating these concepts as fixed, discrete, and easily represented entities as was once the case, scholars have increasingly come to view them as hybrid and contradictory concepts, constantly produced and reproduced in relation to shifting constellations of knowledge (e.g., racializing discourses) and power within the larger society.

The literature on identity highlights two levels of identity construction and the tension-laden ways in which they interact. The first level concerns the defensively situated, collective identities or essentialisms that racialized communities construct in relation to a dominant culture that represents them in homogeneous and stigmatized terms. Such defensively situated forms of consciousness represent communal efforts to challenge dominant representations through the construction of positive but equally essentialist images of community. Although marginalized communities may attempt to portray such counter-hegemonic, collective identities as static and easily recognizable forms of consciousness, often anchored in a romantically imagined homeland (take Afrocentricity, for example), they are in fact cultural forms that are constantly being reworked both from within collectivities as well as through negotiations with a continually shifting broader social context. The second level of analysis involves the complex, multifaceted subjectivities that such seemingly homogeneous, defensively situated, collective identities can often mask. Such within-group division and complexity suggest the need to always place the word *community* in quotation marks.

The education-related literature dealing with identity-related themes has failed to draw explicit attention to the distinction between these two levels of identity, and I argue that emphasizing one at the expense of the other can lead to difficulties in understanding identity formation among marginalized persons. Multicultural and antiracism education oversimplify the dynamics of cultural diversity and racism because both approaches fail to adequately consider the second level of identity that entails the hybrid, contradictory, and fluid character of racial and cultural diversity (James, 2001; Pon, 2000; Walcott, 1997).

A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE LITERATURE ON IDENTITY

As Dei (1996) pointed out, the issue of how racialized youth produce their identities in relation to the educational system and the broader society is crucial to understand the sources of their engagement with or alienation from school. Consequently, North American researchers in the field of education and other disciplines have explored how racialized youth occupying different subject positions (e.g., related to race, ethnicity, class, gender) exercise a sense of agency in negotiating the various labels and knowledges imposed upon them within and outside schools.

Four areas of controversy characterize the growing literature on racial identity. First, to what extent does race influence the process of identity construction among racialized youth? Second, to what degree does race influence the relationships such youth make with the educational system and other aspects of the dominant society relative to other identifications that they can take on, such as those pertaining to class, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation? Put differently, where racialized youth are concerned, to what extent can race be considered a privileged marker of identity? Third, in what ways do these different social statuses coalesce and intersect to shape identities? Fourth, to what degree can racial identity be considered a centred, recognizable, and bounded phenomenon? In exploring the phenomenon of identity construction, scholars have made a discernible conceptual shift over the last two decades as they have embraced, to varying degrees, a postmodern theoretical perspective. More specifically, these scholars have moved from a view of negotiated racial identities as fixed, discrete, and coherent to seeing them as culturally hybrid processes that constitute one of multiple identifications that "are constantly crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, of gender and ethnicity" (Hall, 1996, p. 444).

The well-known work of Fordham and Ogbu (1992) illustrates the earlier perspective on racial identity construction. Employing evidence from qualitative, in-depth interviews with students from an inner-city Washington DC high school, these authors argued that the Black community in the United States has developed an oppositional subculture that rejects virtually everything associated with the dominant White culture, including the pursuit of such mainstream (i.e., White) success ideals as educational achievement. Hence, Fordham and Ogbu presented a community that negotiates an externally imposed, negatively represented label by constructing an essentialized, relatively coherent, and knowable positive identity for itself. The authors do not discuss the ways in which

various statuses — such as class, ethnicity, or gender — intersect to shape this communal identity. Where social class is concerned, for example, they pay little explicit attention to the fact that the subculture they examined is situated in an underclass context. The oppositional communal identity that they write about is seemingly centred entirely on race.

In another study, Fordham (1988) interviewed academically successful Black students in the same school visited for the previous study and found that many of these students adopted what she referred to as a raceless persona to achieve goals emphasized by the dominant society. A raceless persona entails minimizing one's relationship to the Black community to circumvent the stigma attached to being Black. Black youth adopt such a persona to succeed in school and achieve upward mobility. As Fordham (1988) wrote, if students "are not successful in minimizing their ethnic group membership — that is, appearing raceless — their chances of achieving vertical mobility are seriously diminished" (p. 80).

Fordham noted that the decision of Black students to adopt a raceless persona is negatively sanctioned by peers. Having their behaviour constantly monitored by less successful peers drains the energy of students that might otherwise be devoted to "the pursuit of academic excellence and other creative endeavors" (Fordham, 1988, p. 81). Interestingly, Fordham found that female students were more inclined to adopt a raceless persona and strive for academic success than male students, who tended to be more reluctant to forsake the beliefs and values of the Black community.

In all, Fordham and Ogbu appear content to depict a somewhat one-dimensional Black consciousness, forged and projected in relation to prevailing, stigmatized constructions of Blackness within the dominant White society. Their analyses imply an either/or scenario between Black and White culture. They portray the spaces in between these discrete cultures, such as the spaces occupied by Fordham's high-achieving raceless students, as spaces of isolation and emotional torment rather than legitimate sites for the production of hybrid, intersubjective identities as scholars such as Bhabha (1990, p. 4) and Walcott (1997, p. 42) have characterized these "in between" locations. To claim that someone can adopt a raceless persona implies that recognizable racial identities exist to which they do not conform. Such a perspective implies the need for people to belong to one community or the other, with there being discrete, clear-cut ramifications for socioeconomic mobility for each community.

My quarrel is not with the contention that the Black underclass community in Fordham's and Ogbu's research intersubjectively constructs the oppositional collective identity to which these investigators point. On

the contrary, studies (e.g., Fordham & Ogbu, 1992) that explore such defensively situated collective identities are invaluable for the insight they provide into the alienation and anger marginalized groups feel living within the context of a Eurocentric, racist society. Rather, my concern with these studies is twofold. First, as indicated above, the ways in which class, ethnicity, and gender combine to shape the construction of this collective identity in different ways at different moments are virtually ignored by Fordham and Ogbu. Instead, their analyses imply that the static communal consciousness they depict is something to which virtually all Black Americans subscribe. Second, the complexities and contradictions that lie behind this outwardly projected, oppositional collective consciousness are far from adequately explored because the authors reduce such complexity to a homogeneous, clearly bounded racial essence. Although Fordham and Ogbu (1992) detail the experiences of Black students with strong academic potential, they depict such students as withdrawing from the educational system in various ways in conformity with the anti-academic Black sub-culture that the authors describe, hence implying the existence of virtually impenetrable and immovable communal boundaries. Put another way, the agency exercised by racialized subjects is portrayed as unable to escape the confines of a clearly bounded Blackness, resulting in the reinforcement of reified and socially constructed notions of racial difference and its conflation with immutable cultural difference. Subjectivities that transgress these confines are characterized in outsider terms (e.g., Fordham's raceless youth) rather than as forms of agency that challenge, stretch, and possibly shift and demonstrate overlap in the imagined boundaries that separate different racialized communities.

Waters' (1994) research illustrates a theoretical leap forward in thinking about racial identity. In a qualitative study employing in-depth interviews, she examined how various forces influence the construction of identities among second-generation Caribbean youth in the U.S.A. Waters argues that first-generation Caribbean immigrants see Black Americans through the same negative lens as the dominant American society while they accentuate their immigrant ethnic identity to prevent the dominant society from funneling them into the stigmatized Black American racial category. Put differently and more succinctly, they emphasize an ethnic identity to shield themselves from being racialized. Second-generation Caribbean youth, then, have a decision to make in constructing their identities. Do they adopt the ethnic (and anti-Black American) identity emphasized by their parents, or do they identify with the Black-American subculture described by Fordham and Ogbu?[1,2] According to Waters, a number of variables influence this decision, most notably social class. Youth from

middle-class Caribbean families, who have more frequent contact with White Americans and perceive more opportunity for social advancement,[3] are more likely to identify themselves as Caribbean (Waters describes such participants as having an ethnic identity). Those from lower-class backgrounds, on the other hand, tended to identify more strongly with Black Americans (Waters describes these youth as having a Black American identity).

In her research, Waters demonstrates how a number of factors – most notably race, ethnicity, and social class – combine and intersect to frame consciousness and shape identities in specific social locations. [4] Although she complicates the idea of a Black community to some degree, the various collective identities that she points to (e.g., the end product of the intersection of these forces) come across as somewhat discrete, fixed, and stable. In the following quotation from a Haitian research participant, Waters provides an illustration of a so-called ethnic-identified person:

When I'm at school and I sit with my friends and, sometimes I'm ashamed to say this, but my accent changes. I learn all the words. I switch. Well, when I'm with my friends, my black friends, I say I'm black, black American. When I'm with my Haitian-American friends, I say I'm Haitian. Well, my being black, I guess that puts me when I'm with black Americans, it makes people think that I'm lower class. . . . Then, if I'm talking like this [regular voice] with my friends at school, they call me white. (Waters, 1994, p. 807)

This narrative reflects ambivalence and a complexity that Waters does not adequately consider. This individual manoeuvres between two sources of identity — Black American and Haitian American. The identity to which this participant subscribes is clearly contingent on prevailing circumstances and interactions. This quotation explodes the notion of discrete, coherent identities — whether collective or individual — and instead hints at the idea of multiple, sliding identities that are incomplete, contextual, and overlapping. Waters' analysis fails to engage such complexity because in her quest for theoretical coherence she forced complex subjects such as this youth into one of her clearly bounded ethnic or racial identity categories.

James (1997) presented a somewhat more complex and satisfying analysis. Examining the formation of identities and educational aspirations among African-Canadian teacher candidates at Toronto's York University, he was interested in the experiences of students in a faculty of education with an access program that recruited students from traditionally disadvantaged communities. He found that these students — all of whom were from an economically disadvantaged Toronto neighbourhood — wrestled with a contradiction within the university setting. On the one

hand, they experienced a sense of discomfort within an institution that they felt to be Eurocentric and largely inhospitable to diversity. On the other hand, they felt a desire to succeed to provide professional role models for Black youth and to help deflate stereotypes that portray Blacks as lazy and intellectually less capable. While highly critical of the meritocratic principles by which the university purports to operate, the students nevertheless endorsed its ideology and adhered to it to achieve their aspirations. Rather than subscribing to an oppositional social identity that denounced academic achievement, these students saw education as a vehicle for challenging the prevailing, stigmatized representations of Blackness.

James' analysis illustrates an active, scholarly engagement with fragmented identities of Black students resulting from the complex, contradictory relationships that students produce with the meritocratic ideology, opportunity structure, and the university. Unlike Fordham and Ogbu's analyses, James does not portray an oppositional or critical Black consciousness and upward mobility as diametrically opposed entities. James gestures instead toward a fluidity between the Black community that he studied and the dominant society by depicting Black Canadians ambivalently grasping for the success ideals of the latter without denouncing their Blackness.

Drawing on postmodern notions of multiple and cross-cutting positionalities, Yon (2000) presented an ethnographic analysis that explicitly and pointedly challenges popular conceptions of race, culture, and identity as fixed and unchanging entities. Through in-depth interviews and participant observation with teachers and students at a Toronto high school, Yon revealed the complex and multifaceted ways in which the students negotiated hegemonic representations of race and culture. He provided a glimpse of the multiple, contradictory, and conflicting identifications that students take on from one moment to another, demonstrating how racial and cultural boundaries are policed, contested, and permeated under varying circumstances. The following quotation from one of Yon's participants, a Jamaican-Canadian youth named Trevor, illustrates how individuals negotiate identity categories:

Like some of these characters I see in school, like the way they dress. [pause] I'm not, well, I don't want to be perceived that way. Like you see them walking around. They have a certain walk, certain clothes. If you say the wrong thing they'll turn round and start arguing. I don't like to categorize myself. There are days when I feel like, "normal" — whatever "normal" is. I don't categorize myself in a way that I have to wear this, this, or this or else I'm not Black. I don't know. Some of them want to be so pro-Black. Like they will only date Black girls. I find I don't. There is nothing wrong with dating Black

girls but there is nothing wrong with dating White people either. So I can go both ways. But for some this is not accepted, so I guess I would not be Black in that sense. (Yon, 2000, p. 85)

Trevor is an example of a youth struggling to break free of an externally imposed racial label and trying to find the sense of agency needed to construct his own, subjective sense of identity. As Trevor explains, "I just want to be a regular guy with my own mind. . . . I want to be seen as Trevor, not just Black" (p. 86). At another time, however, Trevor denies a Black identity to students of Guyanese, Ethiopian, and Somalian descent, who, in spite of their skin colour, he does not consider to be Black. Hence, one moment Trevor is fighting the hegemonic constraints of Blackness that have been imposed upon him and threaten to render him a mere object. The next moment he seems to embrace this identity, the borders of which he carefully polices.

In a similar instance, Yon demonstrated how subjects negotiate not only racialized constructs but also other types of representations. He talked with a young woman, Margaret, who described the frustrations she experienced living within the hegemonic categories of Black and woman which, like Trevor with respect to Blackness, she often found confining and oppressive. In a moment of counter-hegemonic defiance, Margaret declared, "bust being Black and bust being a woman. That is a form of oppression because you are limited in those two little notches" (Yon, 2000, p. 93). At other points, however, Margaret readily invoked these categories, particularly in the context of the anti-racist and anti-sexist activism in which she participated, illustrating the complex and fluid nature of her identity.

Yon's analysis offers a glimpse of the plural, fragmented, and contradictory nature of identity. Although scholars such as Fordham, Ogbu, and Waters drew attention to intersubjective forms of agency exercised by racialized subjects in constructing their own collective forms of identity against dominant representations of Blackness, they seem to portray this negotiation process as culminating in fixed and centred communal identities. Yon can perhaps be criticized for not paying more attention to such collective responses to racism and prevailing representations. Intersubjective quests for community, while by no means ignored by Yon, seem to be subordinated to the anthropologist's goal of illustrating the divisions and contradictions within hegemonically recognized social groupings. At the same time, an ethnography that challenges the dominant idea of cultural or collective identity as an entity comprised of a knowable set of attributes that neatly characterize a collection of people by illuminating the fragmented, complex, and perpetually unfinished nature

of the phenomenon represents an invaluable contribution. From Yon's postmodern perspective, identity formation is an ongoing process of producing identifications in response to hegemonic representations of various racialized groups, genders, social classes, and sexual orientations. Making identifications in relation to these multiple constructs results in individuals having multiple, contradictory, and overlapping identities, with the identity that one asserts at a given time being contingent on the circumstances of the moment. Such a perspective is not conducive to the idea of a discrete, coherent community, whether based on race or any other social status.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EQUALITY-RELATED PEDAGOGIES

The theoretical evolution in thinking about issues of culture, community, and identity outlined above has fueled much criticism of the two major pedagogical paradigms for accommodating diversity and promoting equality in Canadian schools and society: multicultural education and anti-racism education. In Canada, multicultural education emerged as an application of the federal multicultural policy within the educational system (James, 2001). This approach works from the assumption that racism and ethnic hostilities stem from people's lack of familiarity with other cultures. With this premise, multicultural education emphasizes the need for learners to "study 'foreign' cultures, participate in 'multicultural days,' or go on field trips to 'cultural communities' and community centres" (Pon, 2000, p. 284). Educators view such activities as vehicles for learning about and promoting sensitivity and respect toward diverse cultures, thereby countering negative attitudes toward these cultures and, as a result, improving race relations.

The multicultural approach to fighting racism has come under much attack. Critics have described how multiculturalism works to construct minority groups in static, essentialist, and exoticized terms in addition to situating such groups outside the Canadian nation (e.g., Bannerji, 1996; James, 2001; Walcott, 1997). Walcott (1997) argued that multicultural discourse is premised on the idea of heritage, resulting in a reductive striving for cultural "simplicity and knowability" (p. 122) by relegating ethnic and, in particular, racialized Others to static, externally rooted identities. For him, multicultural discourse works to transform human subjects into "knowable objects through a simple, uncomplicated story of origins" (Walcott, 1997, p. 123). Critics have also criticized multicultural education for equating race with ethnicity and culture. They have inferred from this position that, in the multicultural perspective, race is no more

salient than ethnicity in matters of socioeconomic and political inequalities (e.g., Bannerji, 1996; James, 2001). Insofar as racial inequality is seen to exist, multicultural educators have played down structural explanations in favour of explanations pertaining to cultural differences (Pon, 2000). Finally, critics of multicultural education have noted its view of racism as a product of ignorance, negative attitudes, and individual prejudices, hence playing down the ways in which racist ideologies are woven into the various structures and institutions of society (Troyna, 1987).

Other scholars have hailed antiracist discourse as a significant advance over multicultural initiatives to combat racism in Canada and other parts of the world (e.g., Dei, 1996; Troyna, 1987). Where multicultural educators have been accused of merely celebrating differences — that is, tackling racial intolerance and inequality through a song-and-dance festival approach – antiracist educators have taken aim at prevailing structural inequalities and their material consequences for various racialized groups (e.g., Troyna, 1987). Anti-racism education has been defined as an "action-oriented strategy for institutional, systemic change to address racism and the interlocking systems of social oppression" (Dei, 1996, p. 25). Moreover, far from merely celebrating cultural and ethnic differences, antiracist educators recast issues of race and difference as issues of power and equity (Dei, 1996). Dei (1996) wrote, "While the notion of culture(s) and cultural differences are relevant to anti racism discourse, it stresses that a romanticized notion of culture, which fails to critically interrogate power, is severely limited in the understanding of social reality" (p. 27).

As great a leap forward as antiracism represents in the fight against racism and racial inequality, scholars have vigorously critiqued this movement in the last decade for what they see as a tendency to rely uncritically on essentialized or homogenous conceptions of racialized communities (e.g., Yon, 1999b), or what I refer to as defensively situated essentialisms. Such a strategy suppresses the intra-group divisions, ruptures, and contradictions scholars such as Yon highlighted – a strategy that many scholars feel to be misguided given its effect of reinforcing the notion of the essentialized (and stigmatized) racial Other (e.g., Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1996; Yon, 1999b). Put differently, the strategy of anti-racism further reifies the normative-deviant binary it is designed to critique. As Yon (1999b) wrote, "[O]ne effect of the practices induced by [the desire to project a coherent, positively-represented community in the face of racist practices and representations] is that positive images seem the only way out and as a result new caricatures of community, albeit positive ones, replace old ones" (p. 637). Hall, in an interview with Yon (1999a), expressed his concern with this very scenario: "[I]n the long term, a politics which does not

recognize that its unities are nothing but fragile constructions across differences doesn't have much of a chance in the political arena. . . . That is my guess." (p. 98).

DISCUSSION: ACCOUNTING FOR TWO LEVELS OF IDENTITY

In this article I have traced a progressive, theoretical evolution in the way North American scholars have taken up issues of culture and identity. Scholars have portrayed Western societies such as Canada as contexts where the dominant society represents racialized minorities as a stigmatized Other, people who are constructed as having fixed, settled, and stable identities that are rooted outside of — and therefore are deviant from — the European Whiteness that constitutes the imaginary (normative) glue of Canada as well as other Western nation states. The identity-related studies I have reviewed in this article demonstrate the various ways scholars have conceptualized both communal and individual identity construction on the part of racialized people in relation to the dominant society. In this literature, scholars have demonstrated a shift in thinking about identity to see defensively situated forms of consciousness as contingent and tentative and beneath which lie intra-communal ambivalence, rupture, and complexity. Scholars such as Fordham and Ogbu (1992) presented a somewhat stable, essentialist, oppositional Black culture with little explicit consideration for the various social statuses that interact with race to shape this collective consciousness, such as class or gender. Fordham and Ogbu also gave scant attention to the heterogeneity and complexities that underlie the contingent, oppositional, collective consciousness that they point to.

Waters (1994) considered the intersection of multiple social statuses, but for her these statuses seemed to coalesce into seemingly fixed, easily recognizable, and mutually exclusive ethnic and racial identities. Like Fordham and Ogbu, she failed to entertain the possibility that her identity categories are contingent, defensively situated, essentialisms that screen a multiplicity of ambivalent and complex subjectivities. Scholars such as James (1997) and, in particular, Yon (2000) have advanced the way identity is conceptualized by abandoning the coherence and the fixity that comes with overemphasizing collective identities in favour of fragmentation, contradiction, hybridity, and fluidity. Scholars (e.g., Yon, 2000) who elucidate such a postmodern perspective on identity formation remain mindful of the reality that racialized, gendered, heterosexist, and ageist arrangements of knowledge and power that prevail within the broader society influence the production of multifaceted subjectivities. At the same

time, because of their agency, the people who are objectified by such arrangements of knowledge and power continually test, push, and redraw the boundaries of such hegemonic discourses.

People who are racialized will inevitably assert defensively situated, communal identities in response to societal representations that construct them as the negative Other. As Fordham and Ogbu (1992) maintained, people assert such oppositional identities to enhance the self-esteem of communal members and offer psychological protection from the onslaught of attacks and insults that come with living in a racist society (see also Miller, 1999). Racialized people can themselves actively and consciously suppress intra-group complexity to build solidarity through the projection of coherent, oppositional, communal identities. In such cases, the multiplicity of positionalities within the community is policed into line with a collectively constructed, homogeneous racial identity — a scenario Hall (1996) referred to as a quest for "innocence" (p. 443) that results in us-versus-them dichotomies. Fordham and Ogbu (1992) illustrated this idea in their discussion of the sanctions that exist within the oppositional subculture that they describe. According to these investigators, many talented and capable Black students felt compelled to conform to this communal identity and failed academically because they did not want their peers to label them as "acting white" (p. 288).

Yon (1999b) further demonstrated this point in an ethnographic study that solicited the reactions of two groups of high school students to the 1994 Isaac Julien film *The Darker Side of Black*. Yon described the film as one that disrupts the notion of Blackness as a homogeneous or essentialized entity, portraying instead the complexities, conflicts, and discontinuities within this community. Yon noted the largely negative reaction to the film on the part of the mostly Black student audience, whom he saw as grasping for a cohesive Black community that is easily distinguishable from its racial Other. The students viewed efforts to complicate essentialized notions of Blackness as inimical to efforts to build such a community. In summarizing his observations, Yon (1999b) wrote, "'difference within' is ironed over by the desire for valid representations and positive images of community that would allow coherence, solidarity, and recognition within and at the same time from outside" (p. 638). Whereas researchers such as Fordham and Ogbu tend to become stuck at this level, Yon correctly treated such quests for community as merely a first level of analysis. Scholars such as Yon strive to excavate such outwardly projected, defensively situated, communal identities to expose the rich tapestry of multiple, complex subject positions that such communal identities inevitably conceal. As is

the case with discourses produced within the dominant society, boundaries that marginalized communities construct in the production of defensively situated, collective forms of consciousness are constantly being negotiated and transgressed by members of these very communities. As James and Yon helped illustrate, in actual lived experience, different cultural forms and communal identities weave in and out of each other (see also Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1996).

Failure to excavate outwardly projected communal identities when thinking about issues of race, educational achievement, and social mobility leads to an overemphasis on culture or collective identities, thereby homogenizing racialized youth who, in turn, are stripped of any real sense of agency. Individuals are encased in their static cultural or communal environments which furnish the basis for interventions that gloss over the unique, constantly shifting relationships individual members of such "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1991) make with their own communities *and* aspects of the dominant society. Such a perspective on identity makes it easy for people to conclude that Asians do well in school because of these aspects of their culture, or Blacks fail to do well because of these cultural tendencies (e.g., their oppositional outlook), hence suppressing intra-group difference and possibly minimizing the effects of structural barriers such as a Eurocentric curriculum or differential treatment from teachers, administrators, and so on. In postmodern approaches to culture and identity construction, by contrast, cultural or communal identities are not afforded such deterministic clout. In this perspective, although communities may project oppositional, seemingly homogeneous collective identities in the face of perceived oppression and unequal treatment, it is recognized that behind such outwardly projected communal identities different cultural influences and other social statuses interact, collide, and are negotiated in different ways at different moments by different people. Hence, the approach eschews simple, culturally reductionist and essentialist explanations for issues such as the educational underachievement of particular groups.

Arguing for such a perspective does not extend a licence to ignore group-based differences and inequalities or collective identities such as those premised on race, gender, or sexual orientation. Indeed, with a postmodern perspective, the danger exists of falling into a fragmented universe of situated identities and forms of consciousness that make it seemingly impossible to think about group-based identities, issues, mobilization, and interventions (Collins, 2000; Diawara, 1993). An overemphasis on hybridity and the associated blurring of ethnoracial boundaries can also result in

observers playing down the bitter tensions that arise in conflicts between marginalized and dominant groups, thereby misportraying the nature of racism and racist struggle in Canada and other societies (Loomba, 1998).

To build a remotely thorough picture of identity construction in the context of a Eurocentric and racist society, it is important to consider the various, collective ways in which racialized subjects resist racist representations and treatment, being careful to account for — as Waters (1994) helped to illustrate — the various forces (e.g., class, ethnicity, and gender) that combine to shape such defensively situated collective identities at different junctures. Hence, researchers working within a postmodern frame can strengthen their scholarship through a more explicit, critical integration of the insights of scholars who emphasize defensively situated essentialisms (e.g., Fordham and Ogbu, 1992; Waters, 1994), a perspective postmodernist-informed work is often too quick to dismiss in its effort to convey complexity.

At the same time, I urge academics, activists, educators, human service providers, and policy makers to recognize the limits of such collective identities and wrestle with the reality that members of racialized and other communities do not experience and negotiate communal identities or the larger society in a uniform or consistent fashion, however much communities may sometimes attempt to foster such an impression. Instead, the forces of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality combine in unique ways at different moments for different individuals, resulting in individuals constantly making different kinds of identifications with aspects of their own communities as well as the broader society. Put differently, while marginalized people constantly strive for a coherent sense of community, communal members are continually arguing over what their community ought to look like and who is to be included/excluded. This negotiation takes place in the in-between spaces where cultural and ethnoracial boundaries separate as well as overlap (Bhabha, 1990; Walcott, 1997), resulting in cultural identity being an inevitably hybrid entity. The fact that identity construction can be viewed as a process rather than a product should make change more foreseeable and open up many new political and interventionist possibilities. When essentialist categories are invoked for political purposes, critics plead that they be invoked strategically, that is, with a clear and explicit recognition that they are temporary and contingent, not fixed for all time (Spivak, 1993; see also Sooknanan, 2000). The idea of a strategic essentialism differs from a defensively situated essentialism in that the former actively engages rather than suppresses difference and is perennially conscious of the fact that the appeal to essentialism is always a political and conditional act.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this article, I have argued for the integration of various elements of the education-related literature on racial identity to construct a model that encourages researchers to explicitly account for two levels of identity. First, investigators need to examine the ways in which various social statuses interlock at particular moments and particular social locations to shape the production of essentialist, defensively situated collective identities on the part of racialized people. As Fordham and Ogbu (1992) and Waters (1994) contend, such defensively situated identities represent collective efforts to challenge or counteract dominant, negatively represented constructions of a given social group. When looking at such imagined communities, anyone concerned will find that the key issue is not what these collective identities look like in any kind of objective sense, but what the people who project such intersubjective identities *want* them to look like to those constructed as outsiders at specific locations and moments.

Researchers might consider employing postmodern perspectives to highlight the various ways individuals negotiate, engage, and resist such collective identifications from the multiplicity of subject positions that comprise a given racial community. Put differently, it is important to account for the unique ways different social statuses continually intersect to complicate collective strivings for coherent racial identities. Although collective or intersubjective forms of racial identity can frequently work to protect and empower racialized youth living within a hostile, Eurocentric environment (Miller, 1999), the imposition of defensively situated (counter-hegemonic) essentialisms can be, as Yon's (2000) interviews with Trevor and Margaret illustrate, just as confining or oppressive as the negatively valued representations that circulate within the dominant society. In both cases, human subjects are objectified through the imposition of confining, static labels — a situation that provides fertile ground for intra-communal classism, sexism, and homophobia. For this reason, it is worthwhile to explore the diverse effects of these racialized communal forms of consciousness along with the multiplicity of ways in which individuals negotiate and make sense of them. Accounting for intra-group division, ambivalence, and rupture exposes the unstable and fluid nature of collective identities.

In light of the approach to understanding identity that I advocate in this article, teachers, administrators, and curriculum developers are urged to apply or use multicultural and antiracist paradigms in a critical

fashion that harnesses the strengths of these approaches while acknowledging their limitations. Although well-intentioned, multicultural and anti-racist models encourage people to think in terms of discrete, bounded collectivities that possess recognizable sets of attributes that distinguish one group from another. Such an approach perpetuates a we-them view of difference — a simplistic, binary perspective that reinforces the backbone of racist discourses. To be sure, educators should, as antiracist education encourages, take seriously the power imbalances and material inequalities associated with racial differences, along with the defensively situated racialized identities people might take on in response to racist discourses and treatment. At the same time, it is important to realize the limits of such social categories and remain mindful of the complex, fluid, and contradictory nature of identity production and racial and cultural diversity. The adaptation of a critical, non-essentialist approach to cultural difference in schools would provide students with theoretical tools to challenge racist discourses that construct exoticized and stigmatized Others and help them to develop a more complex and thorough understanding of racism and its interaction with other social statuses, such as ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. It would also provide researchers and school officials with a framework for teaching, understanding, and accommodating diversity in a more comprehensive, equitable, and inclusive fashion, one that simultaneously acknowledges both the very real effects as well as the explanatory limitations associated with racial categories.

Finally, much has been written on the need to revamp multicultural and anti-racist educational initiatives based on the theoretical perspective that has framed this analysis (e.g., Hébert, 2001; James, 2001; Pon, 2000; Yon, 1999b). Critics have employed this perspective in arguing for such initiatives to account for prevailing power imbalances, to actively deconstruct White, male, and heterosexist normativity, and work to engage rather than suppress difference within communities while only occasionally and strategically emphasizing difference between. Where directions for further scholarship in this area are concerned, academics and activists might jointly explore what such a pedagogy might look like and they can facilitate it.

NOTES

1   Waters (1994) also identified a third identity option for second-generation youth: an immigrant identity, characterized by youth taking pride in their ethnocultural background but (unlike the ethnic-identified youth) not in opposition to Black Americans. Youth who adopt this identity tend to be recent immigrants from lower class backgrounds. According to Waters, in an America with a "racial classification system which tends to push toward an either/or designation of people as black or white," the immigrant-identity option will prove difficult to hold onto (pp. 815–816).

2   Waters (1994) argued that the identity options have profound implications as far as the educational aspirations and vertical mobility chances of Caribbean immigrant youth are concerned. She maintained that those who retain their ethnic identities appear more likely to achieve socio-economic success than those who assimilate to the Black American subculture. For Waters, the greater likelihood of upward mobility for ethnic-identified immigrants is largely due to the fact that Caribbean families in the U.S.A. emphasize education.

3. Waters (1994) identified perception of the opportunity structure of the dominant society as an intervening variable in the social class/social identity relationship among Caribbean youth. She noted that ethnic-identified youth in her study, mostly from middle-class backgrounds, tended to play down the existence of discrimination and perceived a largely open opportunity structure. She wrote that these kids "gave answers I suspect most white Americans would give" (p. 814) regarding race relations in the United States. Similarly, the students who adopted a raceless persona in Fordham's (1988) study expressed "a strong belief in the dominant ideology of the American social system: equality of opportunity for all, regardless of race, color, creed, or national origin; and merit as the critical factor in social mobility" (p. 67). By contrast, the racially identified youngsters in both Waters' (1994) and Fordham and Ogbu's (1992) research, most of whom were growing up in lower-class contexts, perceived limited opportunity for Blacks in the U.S.A. and therefore saw little point in taking their education seriously. Perception of this strain — the malintegration of culturally defined goals and legitimate means of achieving them for Black Americans — appears to result in Black youth embracing the oppositional subculture that Fordham and Ogbu (1992) describe. With such simplistic, linear analyses, these authors reinforced their problematic portrayal of ethnic and racial identities as bounded, mutually exclusive entities.

4   Strangely, Waters neglected to discuss gender.

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