8
MY THREE CULTURES: NAVIGATING THE MULTICULTURAL IDENTITY LANDSCAPE[1]

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[We] cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later *[emphasis in the original] to become human beings.* —Paulo Freire

I am Asianlatinoamerican.[2] Although I have never been to China, I am racially what my parents describe as "100% pure Chinese." During my formative years, we lived in Peru, South America, and later moved to the United States. I learned to speak Chinese first, mainly to communicate with my grandmother, a traditional Chinese woman who rarely ventured beyond the boundaries of the Chinese community in Lima. I then learned to speak Spanish in school in Peru, where we lived until I finished high school at the age of 15. I started learning English when I came to the United States to attend college. After completing my doctorate, I started my university teaching career in Los Angeles, California, and I am currently teaching in San Francisco and residing in the city with my two Pomeranians, Tyler and Dino. I am trilingual (English, Spanish, Chinese) and I speak all three languages with a slight accent. I used to be concerned about the accent in my speech, but in recent years I have adopted a different attitude: My accent might simply be an indication that I probably speak more languages than my conversational partner. I "look Asian American," yet at times my Latino culture is most prominent in some communication settings. I strongly identify with all three cultures, and they are more or less integrated into this complex entity that I label as my "multicultural self." Such integration,[3] however, is an ongoing process. In this essay, I explore how I negotiate this multicultural identity in my daily communication experiences. More specifically, I discuss (1) the nature of identity, (2) the co-creation and re-creation of my identity in everyday encounters, and (3) the negotiation of identity as a liberation process.

The Nature of Identity

Broadly defined, identity is a person's conception of self within a particular social, geographical, cultural, and political context. Identity gives the individual a sense of self and personhood and an intepretive frame of experience (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993). Identity is abstract, complex, multidimensional, fluid, and amorphous (Cupach & Imahori, 1993). People have multiple identities—ethnic, racial, occupational, socioeconomic, sexual, gender, and relational—which Cupach and Imahori describe as "interconnected cultural identities" (p. 114).

Collier and Thomas (1988), consistent with Geertz's (1973) conceptualization of culture as historically transmitted systems, define cultural identity as "identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has shared systems of symbols and meanings as well as norms/rules for conduct" (p. 113). Sarup (1996) further notes, "identity is a construction, a consequence of a process of interaction between people, institutions and practices" (p. 11). In short, cultural identity is a social construction that gives the individual an ontological status (a sense of "being") and expectations for social behavior (ways of "acting").

Cultural identity can be characterized as political, fluid, and nonsummative. First, cultural identity is political (Appiah, 1996; Harvey, 1993; Moraga, 1983; Sarup, 1996; Thornton, 1992). Cultural identity separates individuals on the basis of ingroup-outgroup differences. Appiah (1996) elaborates, "if other people organize their

solidarity around cultures different from ours, this makes them, to that extent, different from us in ways that matter to us deeply" (p. 39). Such contrasting loyalties are necessarily associated with political power. Citing Ernesto Laclau's work, Sarup (1996) maintains that

> the relations between groups are constituted as relations of power; each group insists on its difference on the basis of the exclusion and subordination of other groups. . . . If the oppressed is defined by its difference from the oppressor, such a difference is an essential component of the identity of the oppressed. But in that case, the latter cannot assert its identity without asserting that of the oppressor as well. (pp. 59–60)

A dominant group, to maintain its status in the hierarchy, will seek to keep others in lower positions. One powerful way to accomplish this is through discursive practices.

"Why won't you just be like everybody else?" is a remark that I have often heard directed to people of color or to other people who do not conform to the "norm." Underlying this seemingly innocuous remark are cultural conceptions of power and privilege. Who is this entity called "everybody else"? It is the dominant group who determines who and what is normal or deviant, desirable or undesirable, right or wrong, successful or unsuccessful, beautiful or ugly, human or subhuman, native or alien, us or them. Being like "everybody else," the identification to the dominant group, takes on a natural appearance, remains unnamed and unquestioned, and therefore disguises and hides power relations between the oppressor and the oppressed. For people of color (or other marginalized groups), "being like everybody else" is a double bind: Regardless of how we attempt to be like the dominant group, our very presence would almost automatically label us as the "other." This assimilationist view directs the marginalized person to try harder and harder to adhere, obey, and follow the rules of the dominant group—rules that he or she can never fully and completely participate in creating.

For an individual with a multicultural identity, this can be a site of multiple tensions. People who are multicultural and multiracial are often expected to choose and privilege one aspect of their background over others, and such tension can be manifested externally or internally or both. Thornton (1992) notes that while some multiracial individuals are demanding political representation through the creation of a unique census category, others are concerned about losing political power associated with their primary racial identity. He cites the example of an African American/Native American man who believes that a distinct multiracial category will dilute African American political representation. For Moraga (1983), this tension is both external and internal. As a fair-skinned Latina lesbian, she describes her struggle with her own internalized racism ("light skin is better"), classism ("feeling superior to poor and uneducated Mexicans"), and heterosexism ("heterosexuality is better"), which eventually propelled her to political activism.

Being monoracial and multicultural, my own experience with my multicultural identity has brought about internal and external conflicts. As a child in a Chinese family, I was expected to always listen to my parents, never question their authority, and never demand an explanation for their actions toward me. My primary duty was to excel in school and consequently, I was expected to do school-related work every day, year-round. I never had a weekend to relax or a summer to play. Being about a full school year ahead in my math, I questioned my father one summer day about the purpose of doing school work every day when all my friends were having fun. He was surprised that I questioned him. After giving me an explanation, he told me in Chinese, "You are becoming like a white ghost" (which can be translated into English as "You are becoming 'too Westernized'"). Although I felt like saying that I have never lived anywhere but the West, I could not think of further upsetting my father.

I have also experienced external conflicts with my multicultural identity. Although I always introduce myself as multicultural during my first class meeting with students, some inevitably express that they are very glad to have an "Asian professor teaching communication courses." These students seem to be genuinely delighted to have an Asian role model. Given that

both Asians and Latinos are underrepresented in the communication discipline, I sometimes feel that I am not properly representing the Latino part of me. Although I have become more comfortable with the persistent internal and external tensions associated with my multicultural identity in recent years, I am always mindful of them in my everyday interaction.

Second, cultural identity is fluid (Martin & Nakayama, 1997; Sarup, 1996). In other words, one's cultural identity is ever evolving, growing, and changing. It is never static; as Sarup (1996) notes, "identity [has] to do not with being but with becoming" (p. 6). I have experienced—and will continue to experience—many subtle and profound changes in my multicultural identity. I still recall my attempts to repress my Chinese identity during my adolescent years. Whether this was a product of adolescent rebellion against parental insistence that I should be Chinese above all else or a sense of identification with my Latino peers or a fascination with my new American culture seems immaterial. During my college years, I slowly started reembracing the Chinese in me. I started having a deep appreciation for Chinese philosophy, wisdom, and the hardships that many Chinese have endured in foreign lands. I became interested in my family story—why and how they left China during the Communist Revolution. I also became fascinated by how Asian Americans give voice and legitimacy to their own experiences through oral histories and literature.

Third, cultural identity is nonsummative (Cupach & Imahori, 1993). In other words, one's cultural identity is not a simple addition of the component parts of one's cultural background. To put it another way, one cannot get a complete sense of my multicultural identity by simply adding my Chinese, Latino, and American parts. I am more than the sum of those individual parts. The combination of my experiences, values, beliefs, and perceptions in all three cultures constitutes a new gestalt, a fluid entity that I describe as my "multicultural self." This can be observed when I speak to my family over the telephone. We usually start our conversation in one language (usually Chinese), then I would start speaking English and Spanish, and in a few minutes we have a phone conversation using all three languages. Typically, when I speak Chinese with my parents, I feel more like a child and would often behave differently than an independent and free-thinking adult. I switch to English when I have something serious to discuss and to Spanish when I have strong emotions to express. However, I cannot say that those cultural parts of me only "come out" when I speak in that language, for I have directly and openly disagreed with my parents in Chinese, expressed my love for them in English, and discussed my plans to redesign my home in Spanish. My identity transcends the boundaries of those individual cultural components.

The Co-creation and Re-creation of Identity

Cultural identities are co-created and re-created in everyday interaction. In other words, we create our identities with those individuals with whom we interact (co-creation) and in the context of specific communication episodes and encounters (re-creation). The process of co-creation and re-creation of identity can only occur through *dialogue.* Freire (1970) writes:

> Dialogue is the encounter between [people], mediated by the world, in order to name the world. Hence, dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them. (p. 69)

Put in another way, co-creation of identity cannot occur when there is an attempt on the part of one of the communicators to, consciously or unconsciously, dominate the other physically or symbolically. This process of domination between oppressor and oppressed is, in Freire's terms, "by prescription." He further maintains that "every prescription represents the imposition of one individual's choice upon another, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber's consciousness" (p. 29). Genuine co-

creation of identity becomes difficult when asymmetrical power relations exist.

In my daily encounters, I have experienced numerous instances in which the other interactant attempted to prescribe a label, an identity for me. A long time ago, when I was involved in a play for a church fundraiser, the director demanded, "Show your Oriental anger!" I first thought that I did not hear him correctly. I was completely dumbfounded when he repeated the same command. I objected to the label "Oriental" and I was not sure what "Oriental anger" was. Finally, I uttered, "I do not understand you. . . . How does anger come to have a derogatory ethnic label? Is it supposed to be different from your (an older man's) anger, a woman's anger, or some other form of anger?" I then proceeded to tell him that if we were going to work together, we needed to come up with labels that were comfortable and agreeable to both of us. He did not understand.

Although this process of prescription is not always necessarily a conscious or a malicious one, we need to be mindful of it and its potential harm. When we allow this process to occur, we are tacitly choosing to participate in a transaction as *objects*—not subjects (in the above example, I would not have been an active agent in the communication but rather a passive fulfillment of whatever characteristics, attributes, and expectations the director had of an "Oriental" and his particular brand of anger, "Oriental anger"). In other words, we are not affirming our humanity as free agents with a capacity and potential to create, to construct, to wonder, and to venture when we are reduced to the status of objects or things (Freire, 1970). To put it differently, *both* interactants are responsible for this process of identity creation. If one prescribes, the other needs to be aware that unless the prescription is resisted and the transaction redefined (in the same example above, I reclaimed my subject position, in the end, by negotiating the terms of interaction that were acceptable to both of us), a true co-creation of identity cannot occur.

Freire's (1970) notion of prescription resonates with Cupach and Imahori's (1993) concept of "identity freezing." They maintain that identity freezing occurs when one interactant imposes an objective and public identity (like a stereotype, whether positive or negative) on the other (Cupach & Imahori). For example, if I tell an Asian student that she must be good with numbers (presumably a positive stereotype), I am freezing her identity and prescribing our relationship. With this example, I also want to point out that prescription and identity freezing are not necessarily restricted to intercultural encounters but are applicable to intracultural relations as well.

As I indicated earlier, to co-create and re-create identities, we need to participate in the process, in Freire's (1970) terms, "as subjects of the transformation" (p. 108). When someone tells me, "You are not a typical university professor," I often ask what they mean by the statement. In the process, we usually uncover some stereotypical attributes of university professors that I do not possess (I do not smoke a pipe; I do not have gray hair (yet); I am not absent-minded) and some stereotypical qualities that I do possess (I am nearsighted; I am constantly reading; I am nerdy). I usually follow up this discussion with another question, "What does it mean to you that I am not a 'typical university professor'?" This usually prompts a discussion that allows both of us to co-create and re-create ourselves as we develop a greater sense of connectedness and understanding of each other's perception of self and interpretive frame of reference.

Fundamental in dialogue or dialogical action is cooperation. Freire (1970) further notes that cooperation "can only be achieved through communication" (p. 149). In other words, communication is intrinsic to the process of co-creation and re-creation of one's cultural identity. Another example appears to be in order. I have been a member of the La Raza Caucus of the National Communication Association (NCA) since I was a graduate student. As the name might indicate, the primary focus of the La Raza Caucus is on Chicano(a) and Latino(a) culture and communication, and most members are of Latin descent. Although some members of the caucus attempted to prescribe, or "freeze," my Asian identity, most welcomed my presence. We entered the dialogue as subjects mutually defining our unique cultural identities. Through communication, we have achieved, over the years, a great sense of

understanding, fondness, and familiarity with each other, and I became the first Asianlatinoamerican to serve as chair of the caucus.

The Negotiation of Identity as a Liberation Process

Negotiating identities is a process involving both parties. Freire (1970) describes this as a "process of liberation" (p. 28) in which both oppressor and oppressed find freedom.

Because of my multicultural identity, I have felt, at times, that "I am neither here nor there." Although San Francisco is a city characterized by a rich cultural, ethnic, social, gender, and sexual diversity, I sometimes feel like a foreigner in the crowded streets of Chinatown or Clement (another predominantly Chinese populated area), the congested streets in the Mission (a predominantly Latino district), or the busy streets in the Marina (a predominantly affluent Euro American area). For many Chinese Americans, I am "not quite Chinese." For many Latinos, I am "not quite Latin." For many Euro Americans, I am "a person of color." This view of marginality, of "otherness," is one of isolation, invisibility, alienation, and deprivation.

Otherness represents the undesirable, degraded, exiled, suppressed, deviant, disenfranchised, and incongruous elements of the "ideal order." As I stated earlier, otherness and the ideal order must exist together for they are the opposing extremes of a dichotomy. Dichotomies, according to Sarup (1996),

> are exercises in power and at the same time their disguise. They split the human world into a group for whom the ideal order is to be erected, and another which is for the unfitting, the uncontrollable, the incongruous and the ambivalent. (p. 9)

If I were to subscribe to this view of otherness, I would have automatically accepted a less privileged subject position.

I endorse another view of marginality. Marginality may also be conceptualized as resembling Turner's (1990) notion of liminality, a threshold or space "in between" states. He further elaborates, "The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae ('threshold people') are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (p. 147). Reminiscent of Turner's notion of liminality, hooks (1990) maintains that marginality is a "space of radical openness" (p. 149). Although such space is never a safe place, hooks argues that it is necessary to locate oneself there to find alternatives, envision possibilities, and create a future. In other words, marginality can be a position and place of resistance to the dominant power. Citing her earlier book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center,* hooks further explains her view of marginality as a site of radical possibility:

> To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. . . . Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. . . . This sense of wholeness . . . provided us with an oppositional worldview—a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, . . . [and] strengthened our sense of self and solidarity. (p. 149)

This view of marginality is empowering and liberating. Negotiating one's identity from the cultural margins can allow us to see things from both the center and the margins—a perspective that those who attempt to prescribe labels for us simply do not have.

Although the margins are our sites of resistance and survival, Trinh Minh-ha (1995) cautions that if we reclaim the margins "as our exclusive territory, [the oppressors] happily approve, for the divisions between margin and center should be preserved, and as clearly demarcated as possible, if the two positions are to remain intact in their power relations" (p. 216). To challenge these power relations, she calls for the work of displacement. Minh-ha further elaborates, "by displacing, it never allows this classifying world to exert its classificatory power without returning

it to its own ethnocentric classifications" (p. 216). The active creation and re-creation of our own identities are acts of displacement.

Summary and Conclusions

In this essay, I have explored the political, fluid, and nonsummative nature of cultural identity. I maintain that cultural identities are co-created and re-created in interaction only when dialogue, cooperation, and communication—not prescription or identity freezing—exist between interactants. I also argue that negotiation of identity from the margins—and engaging in acts of displacement—can empower us to enter the dialogue as subjects rather than powerless objects or prescribed labels.

NOTES

1. The title invokes James Clifford's (1992) notion of travel and traveling identities. Smith and Katz (1993) argue that "travelling provides a means for conceptualizing the interplay among people that are no longer so separate or inaccessible one to the other. Travel . . . suggests social, political and cultural identity as an amalgam, the intricacy of which defies the comparative simplicity of 'identity'" (p. 78). However, I do not intend to imply a "spatial essentialism"—that is, the view that multicultural identities are fixed in absolute spaces. I am suggesting quite the contrary: a landscape metaphor to indicate that "multicultural identity spaces" are fluid and constantly evolving terrains with ever changing colors, fragrances, shapes, and sizes. I dedicate this essay to my parents.

2. I am using this label to imply an integration of my three cultures. This term places all three cultures together without separation, division, or hyphenation that might imply disconnection between them. Further, I do not intend to suggest that my multicultural identity is linear and hierarchical—Asian, then Latino, and finally American—as the label might appear to indicate. Such a label is a limitation of language.

3. The term "integration" is used here to indicate union, connection, and unification. However, I do not claim that such integration is necessarily harmonious and free of tension. In fact, I argue that tension is vital in the process of self-definition, identity negotiation, and personal liberation.

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KEY TERMS

cultural identity
identity freezing
liminality
marginality
negotiation of identity
otherness
power

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Yep's essay starts with Paulo Freire's quote "[We] cannot enter the struggle as objects in order *later* to become human beings." How does the essay explain and illustrate this quote?
2. Yep suggests that we have multiple identities. What does he mean? What types of identities do you have when you are communicating with someone from the same culture? Someone from a different culture?
3. Yep observes that power is inherent in relations between groups. How is power manifested in those relationships? How is power related to "otherness"? How is power related to identity?
4. How are cultural identities co-created and re-created? Describe a communication situation in which you co-created and re-created your own identities. Describe a situation in which your identity was prescribed by the other communicator.
5. Yep presents two views of marginality. How are they similar? Different?

9

CHICANA Y CHICANA: DIALOGUE ON RACE, CLASS, AND CHICANA IDENTITY[1]

DOROTHY LELAND / JACQUELINE M. MARTINEZ

Situating Ourselves in Theory and Practice

One way of understanding how people make sense of their everyday world is to look at how culture functions as context. The meanings ascribed to any experience or perception are mediated by various cultural contexts (Hall, 1981). Identifying these contexts and how they function to correlate specific perceptions or behaviors with their interpretations help people to understand how they come to construct the very meanings they take from their everyday experiences.

This paper is the product of the effort of two academic feminists to explore with each other our processes of coming to consciousness as Chicana.

[1]This paper was originally presented in 1995 at a Women's Studies colloquium at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.

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