

Hybrid Chronicles: Biracial and Biethnic Perspectives on the Pedagogy of Unlearning Racism

Stéphanie Wahab

Portland State University, Portland, Oregon

Sunshine "Sunny" T. Gibson

University of Utah School of Medicine, Salt Lake City, Utah

This article details an autoethnography project of our odysseys into the pedagogy of unlearning racism. Our knowledge creation process forced us to re-envision both our locations in, and pedagogy of, anti-racism work, with particular attention to the challenges and dangers of teaching about, to, and from White privilege within social work. In the end, we are both troubled and invigorated by what we experienced, witnessed, and supported. By asking people of color to share their personal narratives of racism in the presence of Whites, teachers, facilitators, and diversity trainers stand to continue privileging Whiteness where Whites benefit and learn at the expense of people of color. Key Words: Autoethnography, Pedagogy, Anti-Racism, Privilege, and Biracial

Introduction

We, the authors, are an assistant professor and a graduate student from a college of social work in the western United States. One of the authors identifies as a Palestinian-French Canadian immigrant, who had experienced a challenging semester teaching a Diversity and Social Justice course to master's level social workers. The other author identifies as a biracial, fourth generation Japanese American graduate student who had waged some tough battles in her administrative position at the university's School of Medicine's Office of Diversity and Community Outreach. We met as members of the College of Social Work Diversity Committee, in addition to meeting as instructor and student in a social work practice course, during the year prior to the workshop we discuss in this paper. The associate vice president for diversity, at the university where we worked, had previously hired a trainer to work with selected students, staff, and faculty on diversity issues within the university. The trainer identified as a Chinese-American community therapist, documentary film maker, educator, performance poet, and author. Upon request from additional students, staff, and faculty, the university brought him back to provide a more extensive (2 ½ day) training to a broader range of individuals including members from the community who had ties through agencies to the university. We participated in this 2 ½ day training titled, *Unlearning Racism*, with 48 other individuals. At the forefront of the professor's agenda for attending the training was a desire to address how to teach to, and about, White privilege without reinscribing it. The graduate

student attended the workshop in hopes of learning more about how White individuals can be influenced to unlearn racism.

Method

Autoethnography, also recognized as a type of performance ethnography (Alexander, 2005), is understood as a genre of research that presents multiple layers of consciousness that connect the personal and cultural (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000). In autoethnography, the researcher shifts his/her gaze back and forth between the self and culture to explore and understand self and society. Hamera (1999) describes autoethnography as the/a performance of ethnography. In this performance, the performer/researcher couples her own lived experience with her personal and cultural histories to navigate the “busy intersections” (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 17) of multiple social identities (i.e., race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity).

Autoethnography thus engages ethnographical analysis of personally lived experience. The evidenced act of showing in autoethnography is less about reflecting on the self in a public space than about using the public space and performance as an act of critically reflecting culture, an act of *seeing the self see the self through and as the other*. (Alexander, 2005, p. 423)

Within this methodology researchers’ personal experiences are significant to the extent that they present a type of cultural performance (Lionnet, 1989).

Autoethnography grounds the methodology that informs this project. We reflect upon and dialogue about our individual experiences as biracial participants in the *Unlearning Racism* workshop we attended in October of 2004. Given the confusion, disruption, and unsettled feelings we experienced as a result of the workshop, it felt necessary to write and dialogue about our experiences. Our inclinations toward this relational process (dialogue) emerged out of our desperate yearning to process and better understand our experiences as biethnic/biracial participants in this workshop. Out of 50 participants in the workshop, 8 of us identified as biracial, approximately 16 identified as people of color, and 26 identified as White. Consequently, our knowledge creation process around this experience forced us to re-envision both our locations in, and pedagogy of, anti-racism work, with particular attention to the challenges and dangers of teaching about, to, and from White privilege within our discipline- social work.

A Note on Dialogue

As dialogue has been discussed across different disciplines, common themes such as participation, empowerment, reflexivity, transformation, collective thought, and shared meaning have emerged across the varied discourses. Dialogue is understood here as a related process where knowledge and meaning are co-constructed by the participants through the personal sharing of emotion, thought, experience, and questions. Our objective for this dialogue was to understand ourselves and each other better, as well as learn and critically think about the content and process of the workshop. Additionally, we felt that by critically examining our experience we might begin to uncover clues as to

how to improve the pedagogy surrounding unlearning racism. Ultimately, we were concerned that rather than interrupt racism, the workshop had actually perpetuated racism. Consequently, we wished and needed to understand our roles in this process. It also seemed to us that, as members of a small group of biracials and biethnics in attendance, we occupied a unique and complicated, even disruptive, space in the workshop.

Our dialogue journey began 2 days after the completion of the workshop and continued for the following 3 months, during which we engaged in almost daily exchanges through email and in-person conversations. In conjunction with our dialogues we individually recorded our own experiences, perceptions, feelings, and questions through respective written personal statements. Once written, we shared our statements with each other. What follows is a mosaic or bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) constructed through the piecing together of our written email dialogues and personal statements. We see ourselves as interpretive bricoleurs (Denzin & Lincoln) and this manuscript as “a pieced-together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (p. 4). Denzin and Lincoln’s notion of the qualitative researcher as quilt maker, one who “stitches, edits, and puts slices of reality together” (p. 5) aptly depicts our efforts in this project to “create and bring psychological and emotional unity” (p. 5) to the interpretive experience. Our quilting process is described in more detail below.

Making Sense-Making Meaning

The process we engaged to analyze our written texts involved multiple readings of our own and each others’ narratives, as well as paragraph by paragraph coding (in-vivo, open coding, and axial coding) of the texts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We used grounded theory coding techniques wherein the body of work was generated freely without a specific conceptual goal or theory in mind. Our initial coding process created 42 codes. From these codes we identified broader themes and named them. After this initial coding process, additional readings of the narratives took place to compare and contrast the themes across our individual experiences (axial coding). The process of comparing and contrasting our personal statements and dialogue texts across these themes led to a process of refining the themes. Ten major themes were identified, of which six are presented in this manuscript (discussed below). Once the major themes were identified we compiled all of our writing attached to these themes in one big pile and began to engage a quilting (piecing together).

We define our “quilting” process as “systematically organic.” This is to say that we engaged in a consistent and systematic process (over a period of 18 months) of inductively and intuitively piecing our personal statements and emails (associated with the six themes) together in a manner that outlined the chronology of our experiences, thoughts, and feelings, as well as presented our reflections, learning, and questions in a coherent manner. Our guiding intention (for the manuscript) was to present our shared experience as ethnic and racial *others* in the workshop, in addition to our individual perceptions of our shared experiences (which were sometimes similar and sometimes different). The quilting process also included rigorous efforts to exclude portions of our narratives that were repetitive. Choosing what to include and exclude in this article was a

tremendous challenge because our individual sense-making (analysis) processes were messy, reflexive, cumulative, and continued throughout the manuscript writing phase. We began with close to a 120 pages of (coded) writing for this manuscript. To create the codes we both read all of the written materials (emails and personal statements). The first time that we read the packet of materials we did not highlight or code the content, rather we wanted to absorb overall impressions, tones, emotions, and content. The second pass through the materials involved coding with highlighters. We would highlight sections that seemed relevant, interesting, confusing, contradictory, and/or noteworthy. During the third pass we assigned codes to the highlighted sections. We shared and compared our codes once we both had completed the third pass. The following phase involved the sharing and comparing of our codes. While we did not always use the same words to code a section, we discovered through dialogue that we frequently shared a similar meaning or understanding of a given highlighted section. In addition, there were numerous instances where our coding and interpretations of a highlighted segment differed. The dialogues that ensued facilitated a process of defining and refining codes, as well as the construction of themes. Themes were utilized as categories through which to organize the many codes. Ultimately, we ended up with close to 15 major themes, of which six are presented in this paper.

We chose to include, in this manuscript, the themes that we recognized as having shared in our experiences (even though our perceptions of these themes may have varied). The six distinct themes, around which this manuscript is organized include: (a) initial impressions and experiences, (b) container, (c) unpacking privilege, (d) vicarious oppression, (e) on being biracial, and (f) biracials unite! Our “messy texts” (Denzin, 1997)¹ committed to cultural criticism herein build upon each other’s reflections, representations, and understanding to provide a glimpse into our biracial and biethnic realities, engaged in resisting and transforming the oppressor within as well as confronting oppression outside of ourselves. Our quilt was intended to move from the “personal to the political, from the local to the historical and the cultural” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 5).

Themes of Shared Experience

Initial Impressions and Experiences

GS-² The first thing I remember is walking into the room and observing who was there. I looked at names and faces, some I knew and some I didn’t. We were instructed to pair off for a small exercise with a total stranger. A White woman chose me. The instructions were to share a little bit about ourselves in 2 minutes. I spoke first. Because the trainer asked us to, I felt obligated to share my ethnic background with this woman sitting across from me. She seemed intense and nodded as I rambled about my siblings, growing up in Oregon, and my work with students of color. Her eye contact was uneasy, intermittent, and restless.

Next she spoke. It was hard to listen. This woman began with her childhood, talking about herself and a “little Black boy” who befriended her as a fellow troubled

¹ Within the original quote, Denzin (1997) references Marcus (1994), p. 567.

² GS stands for graduate student

student at 6 years of age. I found myself asking, "Why is this relevant?" She went on to explain that because of these experiences and because this "little Black boy" was her friend at a young age, she was not racist. I'm thinking, "am I making this woman uncomfortable to the point that she has to present her case for why I should trust her?" She continued on to say that she lives in a rough neighborhood on the west side and was once afraid to go outside. She is a single mom with six kids who cannot afford to move, but then she asserted that she chose to live there. Maybe she read my face (the disapproval on my face that is) and decided to change her story. She told me that she was a victim of racism and was hated because she was White and had ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) as a kid. She knew what "it" (racism) felt like. Anyway, when all this ended, I knew I was in for a ride.

Next, we viewed a widely recognized documentary film on race, class, and gender made by the trainer. It was a very emotionally charged movie for most of the people of color in the room. I listened as loud sobs from familiar students of color, who were attending the workshop, resounded in the room. I stole a few glances at the White folks present; definitely not the same reactions right? I saw grimaces, efforts to outwardly show empathy toward all of these students experiencing this pain all over again. They looked confused. They looked scared. They looked overwhelmed. I felt like an interpreter. I could understand both perspectives, and could really relate to the reactions of both groups, notwithstanding my own.

P-³ The second day of the workshop started at 9:00 am on a Saturday morning. My heart had started to forcibly pound around 9:15 am when I realized that there had been no contract, no discussion, or presentation of purpose, boundaries, or roles by the esteemed facilitator/trainer. The day began with an immediate plunge into the well of emotional pain. From a clinical social work perspective, I was taken aback by the absence of contracting with the participants. What exactly were we doing? Who were all of these people? What was the agenda for the workshop? And why was I freaking out?

Forty-five minutes into the training, half a dozen people of color in the workshop, after some prompting by the trainer, had already shared very painful experiences of individual and institutional racism. Many in the workshop were in tears; some were silent, and others defensive.

GS- I felt awkward sitting there and when I came back down to a neutral emotional state, I started wondering if this was why we were here, that is, for White folks to feel better about themselves? I felt angry and confused.

A White man who grew up in Brazil shared his story. When he came to the U.S. he was treated badly in school because he spoke Portuguese and was different from the other kids. He ended by saying that he knew how we (people of color) felt. This elicited a polar reaction from me. I guess I put on my Brown person hat at the invocation of the us/them dyad. I started to feel shaky and emotionally charged. I had to tell him that his experience, although valid, is not the same as racism. He cannot presume to understand or equate the oppression he experienced as a White person- because he's White! As I shared this, the trainer asked him to sit by me. I was not comforted by his touch. A girl next to me rubbed my back. The guy who shared the story asked for a hug.

³ P stands for professor.

Students shared incredibly painful experiences of racism that had deeply impacted their lives. I was in awe of these students, many of whom I'd worked with before in my capacity as a university employee. They were so resilient, so articulate, and so strong in working toward their goals amidst hostility and racism. I have to admit that I questioned the purpose of picking their scabs, so to speak. Why were they obligated to share this with all of us? Is this for the purpose of justifying to White people that racism exists? If it is our job to share pain so White folks can learn, isn't that reinforcing the oppression people of color experience everyday? Then, I really thought about the students, how they had developed thick skin to succeed on our campus, how that skin was completely penetrated and their soft cores oozing with pain for all to see. How will they heal after this is over? How can they go back to their classes, jobs, and neighborhoods after this? Where is their solace? Maybe it was supposed to be in seeing all the White folks learn about racism. Well, that's a terribly inadequate parting gift, in my opinion.

Container

P- Forty-five minutes into the training, I harnessed the bold Palestinian within as well as the White privilege that has facilitated my confidence in speaking my mind throughout my adult life, to interrupt the workshop process in order to pose a question. My question was directed at the trainer. Where is the container for the work that we are doing here? It appears to me [my voice starts to tremble and becomes unsteady] that this process is all about people of color's shame, fear, humiliation, and pain being on display for White folks. If I'm going to stay through today and tomorrow I need to know what we are doing and the purpose of these activities.

Much to my shock (how dare he ignore me?) and disappointment, our trainer completely dodged my question. Rather than directly addressing the question, he went on to speak about the benefits to people of color from telling their stories and being listened to and believed (by White people).

GS- The trainer did not answer. He smirked slightly and seemed miffed that a participant would question the process, but as biracial people, we've really done that our whole lives! There was an uneasy feeling in the room after the interaction. The trainer seemed paternal, almost patronizing in his "wait and see" type of attitude. By not answering the question he had established a boundary that questioning or asking for the purpose of what we were all doing was not acceptable.

P- The trainer's response to my question triggered a deep shift to a place within; a lonely, secret, familiar, and well-protected place of rage. I felt invisible, uncharacteristically rattled, and completely destabilized. Along with trying to figure out what was going on for me, and where this reaction was coming from, I spent much of the next 2 hours trying to decide if I was going to stick it out through the rest of the day. I made two uncommitted attempts to leave the workshop before the lunch break, but stayed after a handful of folks encouraged me to stay.

I cried in my seat all morning! As I reflected on my uncharacteristic gushing of emotions, I realized that I was in attendance at the workshop as a Palestinian first, a biracial second, and a White person third (as if I can ever separate these identities from one another). I had asked the question about the container because I wasn't convinced that this workshop was a safe (I'm well aware of the difference between comfortable and

safe) environment for me as a Palestinian-American. I knew there were going to be university colleagues and administrators there. I feared negative repercussions from Zionists who might be in attendance, and I wondered if any of them would be reviewing my tenure file in the coming months. Campus Watch, an organization whose mission is to “critique and harass liberal and progressive scholars of the Arab world” (Sherman, 2005, p. 20), had been in the foreground of my consciousness all year. While I understand that not all Zionists hate Palestinians, the oppression of Palestinians as a consequence of Zionism makes it very difficult for Palestinians to feel safe around Zionists. In addition, as a consequence of a much more politicized Arab-American identity post September 11, 2001, I’ve been counseled by Arab-American academics to “keep quiet” in the classroom, and at university functions, about my thoughts and feelings about American foreign policies in the Middle East.

Unpacking Privilege

P- Later that morning the trainer invited us to engage in an exercise around Peggy McIntosh’s list of White privileges (McIntosh, 1988). He asked individuals in the room to stand if the statement he read applied to them. Examples included,

If you’ve ever been stopped by the police while driving for no apparent reason, please stand up. If you’ve ever been followed around by security in a store, please stand up. If you’ve ever felt like you had to change the pronunciation or spelling of your last name in order to fit in stand up.

Consequently, I was up and down like a yo-yo throughout the exercise. The trainer stated, “If you cannot find positive representations of people of your ethnicity in the media, please stand up.” I stood up. He turned to me and said, “In all the years that I’ve been doing these trainings this is only the second time that a White person stands up for this question.”

“I’m not White!” I exclaimed.

GS- So we moved on to this exercise called *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* that was supposed to illustrate privilege for everyone. It was interesting to have to make choices so quickly. I found myself constantly questioning my decisions, was I pulled over because I’m Brown or was it really not profiling? Then, I got into this crazy cycle of meta-cognitive questioning that totally consumed me. There were some experiences of oppression that he named that I had experienced, but not daily or weekly. Did that make them less hurtful? Or was I simply protected by my social class and half-White shell? Some were obvious, for example, not being able to find Band-aids that match my skin tone. Then, I questioned the fact that I was questioning, and it was a very difficult experience to straddle this privileged and oppressed divide that was increasing as the exercise developed, and I didn’t know on which side to jump!

P- He looked at me with confusion and disbelief. “What is your ethnicity?” he asked.

“I’m Palestinian,” I stated with pride.

“Oh, yes, yes.....I understand now [not sure what he understood]. I bet people think you are White all the time, and then you really get to hear what they think of Arabs.”

“Well, I am part White (my mother is French-Canadian of British and French ancestry).” Not only was I struggling with my own demons of ethnic and racial fraudulence, but I was doing so publicly.

GS- I found it terribly ironic that in a group about unlearning racism my friend was profiled and called out as someone whose experience was invalid, in a way; mostly because of how she looks. The construction we were working under had no space for her because it was based on a Black/White polemic. Then, as soon as the group relabeled her, we moved on. Wow! That really struck me as ironic. It totally re-enforced what we were supposed to be unlearning in the first place.

Vicarious Oppression

GS- I was trying to articulate some language for this notion of group experience and I came up with the term vicarious oppression to mean that the actual experience or incident might not be directed at me, but the effect is just as real and direct. I have not seen it anywhere before, but that doesn't mean someone else didn't coin it. Maybe it's not the right terminology, but that is how I'm conceptualizing the idea at the moment. Maybe primary versus secondary oppression would be better? I'm still brewing that one.... Part of the impetus for my need to characterize this phenomenon is because of my own group identification; I will react, be affected, and feel differently to oppressive situations than others. I guess I'm saying that if I identify as a person of color (or half a person of color) that is going to affect my identity and sensitivity to oppression. Also, if I am dealing with a situation where a student is oppressed, and I am trying to advocate for that student and then fail because of the institution's racism, I'm faced with two experiences. One experience is the vicarious or indirect experience that I had with the student sharing her hurt with me, and the second consists of my own direct experience with how I tried to handle the situation that resulted in the affirmation of my own personal oppression as a person of color.

P- Despite being born and raised in North America, with all kinds of White and class privilege, my reaction to the dismissal was entirely from my sense of my identity as a Palestinian. Despite the realization that there is no comparison between my individual experience of marginalization and dismissal in this workshop with the experience of 38 years of occupation and Palestinian oppression, I became conscious of a deep symbolism, that is, as Palestinians we are frequently invisible, ignored, and our personal and collective suffering goes unaddressed.

I know that Palestinians have tried telling their stories on countless occasions and what actual difference has that kind of sharing facilitated? The oppressive, humiliating, inhumane manner in which those living in Israel are treated and live has not changed. Telling their stories, even to Jews and Zionists through dialogue groups (<http://traubman.igc.org/global.htm>), has not changed the political, social, and economic realities that inform their collective daily lives.

GS- My grandfather was assassinated for helping Japanese immigrants with legal and language issues. He was a community leader who incited many because he advocated

for immigrants, being one himself. Members of my Japanese side of the family were sold shovels for twice the price from the back doors of shops because they were "dirty Japs." They were interned for being Japanese. They would have lost all their land and assets after the war if it weren't for a kind-hearted White friend, but many of their associates were not as fortunate. These historical accounts penetrate my identity, my view of the world, and my interpretation of racism. It's not business; it's personal. My group experience is informed by racism. Even though I have not experienced much racism and oppression, as a person of color I inherit that vicariously from society.

P- While you and I may not have suffered the same kinds of individual racist experiences to the extent that our darker skinned brothers and sisters (those who don't pass) have and do (because of our White and class privileges), our sense and experiences of who we are as people of color is directly informed by racism due to the experiences of our family members and ancestors. Our experiences and stories of racism, while informed by our White privilege, are exactly that....OUR experiences of racism.

Let me make sure I understand your conceptualization of vicarious oppression/racism. First of all, it is experienced by those who identify as people of color. An experience of vicarious racism occurs when one individual's own experiences of racism are replicated, validated, mirrored, and/or triggered by other people of color's experiences with racism. This trigger is informed by how one personally identifies racially and/or ethnically. For instance, if I am biracial but I define myself as racially White, my experience of racism is quite different from someone of the same blend who defines herself as a person of color (my understanding of the way the world sees me versus the way I see myself). I wrote racially White because I believe that your writings are beginning to decipher between race as a social identifier and race as a performance, specifically as it relates to Whiteness.

On Being Biracial

GS- Part of me feels guilty about being part White. I guess deep down I see how I have benefited from being biracial. I got some of the White privilege and some of the diversity programming benefits of being Brown. It almost makes me feel guilty that I can choose which camp to associate with, while others who are not both cannot. Whites cannot insert themselves into communities of color like I can, and yet someone who is not part White does not get as much buy in as I do from White groups. I sometimes feel like an impostor in both camps. My mother is White, and I wonder how differently I would have been treated if she was Brown. She always came to my school and was the more visible parent growing up. Might I have been treated differently as the Brown child of a White woman versus a Brown woman? I think some teachers thought I was adopted, which made my mom a saint in their eyes as well. The fact that I did well in school just reinforced the racism that I was only succeeding because I was being raised by a White parent.

P- Unlike you, I've never benefited from diversity programming because in the eyes of institutions, as an Arab, I'm considered Caucasian. I've benefited from White privilege. In my opinion, this White-washing of Arabs is just another form of racism, another way of truly making us invisible. So, while I have White privilege I am also erased and discounted simultaneously.

Prior to attending the workshop I had wondered if there would be a place for me as a Palestinian. Would there be place for me as a biracial, hybrid biethnic? Would I be forced to choose one of my identities? If I was made to choose, will I choose to focus on my oppressor status and White privileges, or will I choose to focus on my oppressed status as an Arab-American and a Palestinian? Or, I wondered if there would be room and support for me to explore the intersections of these complicated identities as well as how I navigate them?

Imposters and Frauds

GS- I think other biracial folks re-experienced their own identities being questioned too. We're always dealing with not being _____ enough. Whatever your ethnicity is, you have to somehow prove it. You are held to a higher standard because you're only a part, not a whole. And yet, in one sense you represent the oppressor and oppressed; a dichotomy that literally defies all social construction! This schizoid existence is a total anomaly to self and others more often than not. There is a tremendous amount of guilt, at least for me, in defining who I am and where I stand, and why; a sense of obligation to communities of color to shoulder the oppression and fight for justice; a sense of distance between my White mother and myself; a sense of never really belonging; a kind of homelessness of the soul that is always restless, adapting, shifting for a space that fits perfectly, but never finding it; a life of constant questions about who you are, where you are from; a vantage point of both, and neither, and all at the same time; a sense of guilt for the privilege I've been afforded by my White mother; a sense of longing that my Japanese father would uncover his ethnic identity and share it; a feeling of tremendous longing to pass for one identity simply to fit in.

P- A gentle White man stood at the front of the room as people gathered from the lunch break. The trainer looked at him and said, "Do you have something to say?" The man (I will call Patrick) responded affirmatively and the trainer gave him the microphone. Patrick began, "There is a woman in this room who has been in a lot of pain all day and she is thinking of leaving. I think we need to do something so that she doesn't leave."

The trainer looked put-out, "okay- bring her up." The White man turns to look at me. I'm sitting in the far back of the room and the entire room turns around to stare, a caged animal in a zoo. Nobody says anything. Dead silence. I don't know what to do. While I'm now visible, this isn't the kind of visible I had in mind. I get up and walk to the front of the room. I'm given the microphone. I look at the trainer and Patrick and ask, "What do you want me to say?" The trainer shrugs and Patrick asks if I need him to stand next to me. Could this be any more humiliating? I took a deep breath, prayed for a small amount of grace and courage, so that I might have some dignity in whatever it was I was about to say.

I continue to be confused about what we are doing here today. What is the purpose of all these activities and sharing? This morning when you dodged my question, I felt completely invisible. You thought I was speaking as a White person. I was speaking as a Palestinian. Palestinians are invisible to the rest of the world unless we/they are blowing our/their

(and other) bodies up because we've/they've tried every other means to bring attention to an inhuman, brutal occupation of 38 years. I wonder for whose benefit the spilling of people of color's pain is in this workshop.

The facilitator stood and calmly addressed the group. "People" he began, "I do a lot of work with Palestinians and Jews, and Americans need to know the face of Palestinians. Would anyone care to answer her question about what the purpose is of people telling our stories?"

In regard to my comment about wishing that I was darker, I believe there are two predominant reasons for this. First, I agree that part of this wish has to do with navigating the very challenging realities of being biracial that is, being the oppressor and the oppressed in one body. To some extent, I've often felt that it would be easier to just be one or the other, to not have to choose, explain, explore, justify, and navigate the multiple cultures. I also have to admit that the negative feelings such as guilt, shame, grief associated with my Whiteness can, and sometimes do, serve as an incentive to deny, ignore, and attempt to distance myself from my Whiteness. The second reason (and perhaps the most significant) is associated with the invisibility experience I mentioned. Since my emotional, psychic, physical, and psychological attachments seemed to have been stronger with my dad's side of the family, ever since I was very young, I've felt I identified more with my Palestinian ethnicity. I didn't think of it as identity as a child, I just thought of it in terms of where I felt comfortable, where I felt home, accepted, and most loved. This feeling has never gone away. It is a very deep feeling and experience that is implicit and lacks language, more like a truth or knowing. Never having been to Palestine, we, as kids, learned about Palestine through my father and family's narratives, memories, lenses, and experiences. I grew up knowing more about what it meant to be Palestinian (to my father) than what it meant to be Quebecoise (to my mother) because the cultures we respectively lived in (Quebec and the U.S.) were assumed.

GS- Perhaps the constant invasion of having our identities questioned is what made us (biracials in the workshop) want more privacy for our pain.

P- The trainer ignored my question earlier that day, my confession of not feeling safe, because he assumed I was speaking from a place of Whiteness. His assumption of my ethnic and racial identity ignited what I've struggled with my entire life; the part of my ethnic identity that I identify with the most is invisible to those who do not know me and those who do not have an eye for difference or last names. This type of experience often leaves me feeling like a fraud by virtue of having to prove that, and why, I also identify as a person of color. My sense of racial identity is complicated by the fact that according to the biological construction of race, Arabs are considered Caucasian. This use of a biological construction of race, rather than a social construction of race, obscures the reality that Arab Americans are an oppressed and now targeted group in the U.S. that faces discrimination, marginalization, prejudice, and stereotypes.

GS- Take me, for example, I am a fourth generation Japanese American biracial female. The heritage of language in my family was lost in the second generation. The third generation married outside the race and so did the fourth. The mixing direction seems to be making everyone more White in the performative, cultural sense (my four other siblings have mostly "White" identities). My nieces, who are one quarter Japanese,

will not be people of color as defined by themselves or society. If I have children, I will face this same dilemma because my partner is White.

Biracials Unite!

P- Perhaps the most comforting and positive aspect of the workshop was when the trainer had us divide into groups, though the exercise wasn't comforting right away, as we were asked to divide into two groups; Whites and people of color. Anger, confusion, and internal turmoil consumed all eight of us who identified as biracial or biethnic. Some of us were upset that we were being asked to choose one of our racial identities. A mixed African-American and White woman was furious that she remained invisible as a biracial woman even after a day and a half of intensive content and process about unlearning stereotypes and assumptions. Upon questioning the trainer about where *we* should go, he replied that we could form our own group. We were an afterthought. It was only when we formed our little circle of half-breeds that I finally felt safe in the workshop. Finally, after feeling invisible, being dismissed, and being asked to choose among our identities, we felt relieved at not having to straddle the line anymore. We felt like we could relax and turn off the loud internal dialogues between the oppressor and oppressed within. We no longer felt the need to defend, justify, advocate, or negotiate our mixed identities. It was soothing. I'll even go as far to say that I felt like I was home. There was an unspoken understanding amongst us. All day we had to pick and choose between our person of color experiences and identity and our White person experiences and identity, finally we didn't have to choose and there was no pressure to prove or explain how we identified. There was a feeling of peace and support, and I realized I had been longing for them all day. We all shared these feelings. Consequently, well intentioned White folks got up and requested I not leave. For one individual, I was the first Palestinian he had ever met, and he really wanted to learn about "what was going on over there." Was he not listening to what I'd been saying? Even when I speak (as a Palestinian) I'm not seen.

It has taken me months to begin to unpack the experience. In part I've chalked the experience up to poor facilitation. However, in moments of self-honesty, I admit that what I experienced in this workshop is simply another face of what I've recently struggled with in recognizing in my own teaching about oppression, liberation, privilege, and social change. How do we/I teach about oppression and privilege without reinscribing it in the process of teaching and learning?

Conclusions and Offerings

Our experiences in the *Unlearning Racism* workshop forced us to take a more profound look at our biracial and biethnic identities in the face of our own anti-racism practices and pedagogies. In our attempts to become more conscious of the ways in which we participate in oppressive and racist practices, we discovered how crucial it is for us to be supported to hold all of our identities (oppressor and oppressed) simultaneously, in order to begin to understand both how our lives have been informed by racism as well as how we perpetuate it. When asked to choose between our White and person of color identities, we felt defensive, confused, and mistrustful. Also, because life

has forced us to accept the fluidity of our own racial and ethnic identities, we experienced being asked to choose (explicitly and implicitly) between our identities as another face of racism where racial classification is imposed rather than chosen, and the end result is that we are either regarded as White (and our otherness becomes invisible) or a person of color (where our privilege becomes obscured). Being forced to choose a side evokes guilt, insecurity, and pain as well as undermines any sense of belonging. When asked to choose between one's mixed racial identities the performative sustainability of Whiteness (Alexander, 2004) becomes invisible and biological constructions of race and its racist underpinnings are reinforced.

The bright side of our experiences is that we discovered that, as biracial individuals who identify both as people of color and Whites, we have a unique perspective and sensitivity to navigating personal disclosure and the unlearning of racism in racially mixed groups. Perhaps due to our multiple identities of oppressor and oppressed, we are sensitive to, and available for, noting when and how White privilege gets reinscribed in certain anti-racism projects. Our ability to notice this practice however, has not yet allowed us to answer in full the question that has also been posed by Alexander (2004) and others, How can we teach and work with racially mixed groups without asking people of color to suffer and share their pain so that Whites may benefit?

In the end, we are both troubled and invigorated by what we experienced, witnessed, and supported in the *Unlearning Racism* workshop. By asking people of color to share their personal narratives of racism in the presence of Whites, social work teachers, facilitators, and diversity trainers stand to continue privileging Whiteness, where Whites benefit and learn at the expense of people of color. Additionally, people of color in the workshop may experience oppression in the workshop vicariously as they hear others share painful experiences. We strongly believe that our autoethnography presented herein supports us to critically examine how, in the words of Alexander (2005) anti-racism curricula, may "format and foment particular social tensions and thereby sustain borders of difference, even as they purport to democratize" (p. 433). While we believe that the solution goes beyond simply asking Whites to disclose and share their scars as well, we remain in a state of curiosity and quest for a different anti-racism pedagogy. As social workers who engage in clinical work, we certainly value and support the practice of focusing on individual lived experience within process work, however, we have now begun to question more critically if and how appropriate it is to focus on individual experiences when working with, and teaching, Whites and people of color simultaneously. How might we support Whites to learn about the effects of racism on people of color without asking people of color to suffer in the process? One suggestion is to limit the amount of personal sharing people of color are asked to make in the classroom by relying more on diverse external texts, films, art, and oral histories that depict the experiences of people of color. Another suggestion is to give equal attention to privilege and oppression in the anti-racism project. Avoid othering people of color by also focusing on privilege. For instance, when the treatment of children of color within the foster care system is discussed, it is then necessary to simultaneously highlight how White children within the foster care system are treated comparatively. While we recognize the extreme limitations of our ability to critically address these comparisons without also factoring how class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, ability, and age

inform the experiences of these individuals, we have chosen to strictly focus on race and ethnicity in this project.

In our attempts to address the question above, we've begun to think more profoundly about centering institutional practices, policies, and structures in the *Unlearning Racism* project. As previously mentioned, we have moved away from centering individual experiences and narratives in the classroom to centering oppressive institutions, policies, practices, beliefs, and norms. In addition, we rely more heavily on documentaries, films, pictures, and various texts to teach about oppression and privilege rather than rely on students in the class to do the teaching via their personal experiences. This is not to say that we no longer value and encourage the sharing of personal experience, but simply that we complement the personal with the collective in a manner that exposes the social, political, and economic structures associated with these experiences.

Finally, to move beyond the polemics of oppression and privilege in our teaching, we have begun to be more critical and attentive to the fluidity of our own social identities. For instance, there are certain days when we may identify more with our oppressed status (perhaps because of an experience of racism that we recently experienced) than our privileged status. Being cognizant of such an instance consequently forces us to be aware that even though we may be identifying as oppressed in any given moment, we may not be read as such by our students/audience due to our White (or class, or heterosexual, or ability) privilege. These moments of tension challenge us to be more critical about exploring the intersections of our multiple identities (where do my privileged and oppressed identities intersect?). As we become more critical of the spaces we occupy (which also shift according to context and audience), and the manner in which these spaces shift, we are in better positions to support others to do the same.

References

- Alexander, B. K. (2004). Black face/White mask: The performative sustainability of Whiteness. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(5), 647-672.
- Alexander, B. K. (2005). Performance ethnography: The reenacting and inciting of culture. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp. 411-441). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography: Ethnographic practices in the 21st century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed., pp.1-32). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 733- 768). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hamera, J. (1999). Editor's notes. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 19(2), 106.
- Lionnet, F. (1989). *Autobiographical voices: Race, gender, self-portraiture*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Marcus, G. E. (1994). What comes (just) after "post"? The case of ethnography. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 563-574). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McIntosh, P. (1988). *White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies*. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 923-948). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rosaldo, R. (1989). *Culture and truth: The remaking of social analysis*. Boston: Beacon.
- Sherman, S. (2005, April 4). The Mideast comes to Columbia. *The Nation*, pp. 18-24.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
-

Author Note

Stéphanie Wahab, PhD, M.S.W., is an Associate Professor at Portland State University's School of Social Work. Dr. Wahab's areas of specialization include social work practice, motivational interviewing, diversity and social justice, commercial sex work, and interpersonal violence. Dr. Wahab's work in the areas of diversity and social justice include anti-oppression curriculum development, clinical consultation, and research concerned with practice with and in marginalized populations. Dr. Wahab has 15 years of clinical social work practice and 13 years of research experience in the areas of health and mental health. Stéphanie Wahab Ph.D., M. S. W., Associate Professor, Portland State University, Graduate School of Social Work, P. O Box 751, Portland, Oregon 97207; Telephone: 503-725-5083; Fax: 503-725-5545; Email: wahabs@pdx.edu

Sunshine "Sunny" Gibson is the new director of the Office of Minority and Cultural Affairs at the Feinberg School of Medicine at Northwestern University where one of her duties is to build an educational pipeline and design programs to promote diversity and cultural awareness. Ms. Gibson earned both her BS and MSW degrees from the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. She began her career directing the Office of Diversity and Community Outreach at the University of Utah School of Medicine and helped build an extensive K-Grad school pipeline including more than 20 programs. She is currently working on diversity at the national level as a member of the Association of American Medical Colleges Minority Affairs Section Coordinating Committee as the liaison to the Committee on Admissions. Sunshine "Sunny" T. Gibson, Director, Minority and Cultural Affairs, Feinberg School of Medicine, Northwestern University 303 E. Chicago Ave, Chicago, IL 60611: Telephone: (312) 503-4476; Fax: (312) 503-4474; Email: s-gibson@northwestern.edu.

Copyright 2007: Stéphanie Wahab, Sunshine "Sunny" T. Gibson, and Nova Southeastern University

Article Citation

Wahab, S., & Gibson, S. T. (2007). Hybrid chronicles: Biracial and Biethnic perspectives on the pedagogy of unlearning racism. *The Qualitative Report*, 12(3), 414-429. Retrieved [Insert date], from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR12-3/wahab.pdf>
