‘WHERE I'M FROM IS A PLACE DIVIDED’:
NEGOTIATING MULTIPLE SELVES IN ACADEMIA AND BEYOND

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Abstract

In a social and political context that increasingly privileges standardization and high-stakes accountability as a panacea for equity and equality, the author discusses the benefits and challenges faced by persons of color embracing the complexity engendered by multiple identities and multiple contexts in academia and beyond. Drawing upon her educational experiences as a woman of color in academia, she outlines five themes that may resonate with other academics’ journeys, whether they find themselves currently struggling through a doctoral program or trying to figure out how best to mentor their students. The essay highlights the examination of one’s own multiple and conflicting identities as crucial to negotiating the demands and unintended consequences of life in academia, particularly for those from non-dominant backgrounds.

My journey as a woman of color in academia began, in the broadest sense, before I entered primary school. Neither my parents nor my grandparents had been to college, and only my mother finished high school in Cuba, but there was never any doubt that I would accomplish what my parents referred to as “estudiar y ser bien educada,” an aspiration that suggests much more than its literal translation to “studying” and being “well educated.” Although my earliest memories of teaching and learning are of my mother reading with me in Spanish out of a primer very similar to the one that she had as a child, the concept of being educated continues to signify much more than learning to read and write. In various communities of color, being well educated conveys mastery of academic knowledge and skills, but also signifies awareness of social and cultural codes necessary for participation in mainstream society (Bartlett, 2007; Quiñones, 2012). While my parents might have had a sense of what it would mean for me to be bien educada in their native land, no one in my family knew what that meant in mainstream U.S. society—where it would take me, what it would cost, and what opportunities it would offer.

Assuming that identities are dynamic and inherently contextual (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998), in this essay I reflect on how I continuously construct and negotiate multiple selves as a woman of color in academia. Rooted in my identities as a person of color, daughter of immigrants, and learner of English as a second language, the identities that I construct and negotiate in various academic and social spaces have led me to examine the critical personal, social, and institutional implications of being a professor while simultaneously identifying with the “margins” of mainstream society. In the current social and political context of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and the Race to the Top (Department, 2010) initiative in education, which have progressively privileged standardization and high-stakes accountability as panaceas for equity and equality, I argue that it is crucial for professors to embrace rather than attempt to simplify the complexity engendered by multiple identities in multiple contexts. Through a deliberate and critical engagement with this complexity, scholars of color (and their allies) can negotiate the demands of academia while working toward social justice in education and society. The following five themes, which have emerged from my own educational experiences, serve as a frame for such engagements in my ongoing journey as a woman of color in academia.

Beginning(s)

Because identities have always played a central role in all of my experiences as a woman of color, I begin with the theme of “beginnings,” not necessarily in the chronological sense, but in the sense that recursively considering where I come from continues to inform who I am always in the process of becoming. I was born in Puerto Rico to Cuban immigrants of very modest rural and provincial origins. My parents never learned to speak English, so when my family moved to Florida, when I was eight years...
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old, I had to learn English quickly to “catch up” in school as well as translate important documents and correspondence for my parents. Despite very concrete encounters with language and cultural difference, the tightly-knit immigrant community in which we lived was so insular that I did not fully grasp or experience what it might mean to be a “person of color” in mainstream U.S. society until I went away to college. Leaving the comfort and security of my community helped me become more aware of the intersection of identities and the cultural contexts in which they are constructed.

When I went away to Brown University for my freshman year of college, I searched for whom I “really” was, fueled by a desire to “know myself” fully and to determine where I belonged and what I should become. Instead, I realized that I had many identities, manifest in multiple selves. I was a “good student” who wondered constantly whether she’d been admitted to Brown by mistake. I studied and socialized with affluent peers while working shifts at the university cafeteria to supplement my scholarships and loans. I was a “Cuban-Puerto Rican-American” daughter and granddaughter who seemed to have less and less in common with her parents and close relatives, finding it increasingly difficult to “fit in” whenever I went back home given cultural and gendered expectations about what my future should look like.

As a Latina, a student, and a future career woman, the identities that are part of my “beginning(s)” had to be negotiated in the context of broader social and professional expectations that often overlook the role of cultural norms. For example, in a current debate about women’s career trajectories, some argue that women who opt-out of high-level jobs or careers at the apex of their trajectories negatively impact opportunities for all women in the professional world (Slaughter, 2013). Regardless of where one may stand on that issue, it is noteworthy that in various commentaries related to this debate, women are usually treated as a single monolithic category. The idea that White middle-class women and African American, Latina, or Asian American women might have different cultural perspectives on such an argument seldom surfaced. Such debates about women in the workplace often overlook how, for example, being a woman of color and/or negotiating cultural expectations about motherhood might factor into the conversation. My increasing awareness of beginning(s) has demonstrated how my academic identities have been, and are, continuously constructed in relation to others’ with and beyond academia.

Relationships

Relationships become more and more complex at the interface of our professional and personal lives. While the support of family and friends has been key to maintaining my focus and sanity when I was exhausted or started to lose my resolve, in some cases, I have felt family ties become strained due to my relatives’ unfamiliarity with the particular demands of academia. As the first in my immediate and extended family to graduate from a four-year college and pursue a graduate career that has culminated in an academic position, my relatives might wonder, rightfully so, what it is that I am so busy doing all the time when I am not teaching(!). To close this gap between my professional reality and that of many of my relatives, I have had to work on repairing and sustaining relationships from my cultural home that I once took for granted. That is one of the casualties of life in academia that initially took me off guard, but I have since learned that it is common among faculty from socioeconomic backgrounds similar to mine.

I have also forged new relationships, sometimes against the odds and in unexpected places. In academia, an environment that often breeds competition and self-promotion, where is there room to develop authentic relationships with those who have had common experiences, or to work through assumptions when there haven’t been shared experiences? In my experience, it has been possible to cultivate such authentic relationships when we attend to how our multiple identities inform our positionality in the various contexts in which we practice. For example, as an educator and a qualitative researcher, I have been enriched by the personal and professional relationships that I have cultivated in the sites in which I have taught and conducted research. By positioning myself as a learner and participant in my field and discipline over the course of many years, I have come to a more nuanced understanding of who I am (becoming) in and through my work, and how my research and scholarship have been shaped and informed by my identities and experiences.
Positionality in Research, Scholarship, and Pedagogy

My initially limited awareness of the intersection of multiple identities and their cultural and social contexts crystallized in the context of practice when I began my professional journey as an English teacher in an ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically diverse school in northern California. In the midst of planning and implementing curriculum in my classes, I realized that I had internalized a public discourse of color and gender blindness that I had not been aware of as a student, but became increasingly evident in my teaching practice and interactions with my own students (Pollock, 2004). At one point, when I was counseling a very talented student to pursue the best possible educational trajectory for herself in spite of her reluctance to distance herself from significant family obligations, I realized how the meritocratic discourse of individual advancement made a collective identity and her sense of responsibility to her family seem like lack of initiative and ambition. Very similar to my student, I had struggled with living far away from my close family and had mixed emotions about my responsibility to my ailing grandparents; I always felt too far away, yet I was unable to move back “home.” In academia, home might be, for many, where the job is, or perhaps home may perpetually be “somewhere else.” Amidst discourses of rugged individualism and personal advancement, the spiritual, cultural, and gendered expectations that I negotiated were most often incompatible with my professional and scholarly ambitions.

Informed by these personal and professional negotiations and uncertainties, I have come to understand how my research and scholarship can (and perhaps should) always reflect my positionality as a woman of color. Since I began graduate school, through the eye-opening phases of dissertation writing and seeking an academic position, to my current work as an assistant professor, my scholarship and research have been centered on the identities, curricular experiences, and academic achievement of students from diverse backgrounds. The longer I remain in academia, the more I recognize the nuanced connections between positionality, research, and scholarship, and the more committed is my deliberate stance as a woman of color in the midst of pressure to be color and gender mute (Pollock, 2004).

Recognizing that women and people of color in predominantly White institutions are often expected to lead in every diversity initiative (Stanley, 2006), my stance informs how I approach my responsibilities as a professor in an urban public institution. I have the privilege of serving in a diverse university, working with current and future teachers who come from all backgrounds, some similar to mine and many quite different from it. Through my teaching, mentoring, and advising, I encourage all teachers to become transformative educators who can practice strategic subversion by preparing future generations to disrupt the status quo and fight for social justice (Delpit, 1991; Morrell, 2007). As an assistant professor, I have the opportunity to focus my purpose and commitment to making theoretical as well as “in practice” contributions to social justice in education.

Support and Community

Even as I teach and advise students, cultivating relationships with my own peers and mentors has been instrumental in managing the wide range of roles and demands that women of color in academia often negotiate. Seeking support in multiple contexts is crucial because each nurtures certain aspects of some identities and not others. There have been many communities that have supported my multiple selves, such as those consisting of close family and friends who have supported me in my personal life, particularly as I juggled the responsibilities of work and home as a new mother. Other communities of support were made up of dedicated mentors, such as my dissertation advisor and committee members, who believed in and respected my research interests. Yet others consist of fellows and mentors whom I met through fellowship opportunities in connection with the professional organizations to which I belong. All of these spaces have been generative and life-affirming for me throughout my personal and scholarly journey. They are welcoming spaces in which to think, feel, and create within what can sometimes be a chilly climate for women of color in academia, where our particular experiences and challenges are often overlooked (Allan & Madden, 2006).

What are some of the characteristics of contexts that can forge and sustain such supportive relationships? I believe that surrounding myself with people who share my commitments has led me to
supportive communities in every stage of my academic journey. While I do not expect to reconcile all of
the multiple selves that I have alluded to in this essay, sustaining relationships in various contexts with
people who have similar commitments keeps me accountable and focused on the work that matters to me
the most. My commitments in teaching and scholarship are centered on research and practice that moves
us a bit closer each day to social justice for and with students from minoritized and marginalized
communities (Moje, 2007). As an assistant professor, I seek collaborators who share these commitments
and I share my goals and beliefs with the students that I mentor. As I strive to contribute to the field in the
areas of curriculum, multiple literacies, and English teacher education, I can also promote social justice in
my current academic home by fostering supportive communities among my own students and colleagues.

Embracing and Expressing Liminality

Finally, I have embraced liminality as the sustaining frame of mind for my journey. A term derived
from līmen, the Latin word for “threshold,” liminality is the sense of being in suspension, in-between, at
the borderland of multiple cultural worlds (Caraballo, 2012). It has taken me many years to feel at peace
with not feeling entirely “at home” anywhere. A central focus of my research, negotiating multiplicities
and identities as they are continuously constructed and negotiated in the various contexts in which we
practice (Caraballo, 2011), has become the single common thread in my personal, professional,
intellectual, and spiritual lives. These ideas inform my interactions and relationships in academia and
beyond, where negotiating multiplicities has become, for many of us, crucial to our personal as well as
professional journeys.

In closing, I convey my experience of liminality by sharing a poem that I wrote years ago in one of
several graduate education classes that significantly impacted my thinking about becoming a scholar-
educator. Framing literac(ies) as essential to conscientization and cultural survival (Paris, 2012; Sealey-
Ruiz, 2005), our professor challenged us to make ourselves vulnerable in ways that might encourage our
own students to make themselves vulnerable to us. Inspired by Willie Perdomo’s (1996) “Where I’m
From,” my poem symbolizes my embracing liminality as I negotiate multiple identities as a first-
generation Cuban immigrant, daughter of exiled parents, granddaughter, a doctoral student, traveler, New
Yorker…and it ends with a foreshadowing of identities yet to be constructed as I embark on other
journeys as a mother, partner, professor, and scholar, among many others.

A Place Full of Something Missing

Inspired by Willie Perdomo’s “Where I’m From”

Where I’m from depends on how I feel
scrutinized, nurtured, liberated, defiant, loved, optimistic, full of potential

Where I’m from is a place divided
by skies, mountains, the sea.
There is guayaba but also cream cheese,
There is salsa and techno
Women sitting on the porch in the late afternoon watching
Cell phones ringing in imitation Coach purses
There are hello kisses and no personal space
Everybody’s business, furniture on lay-away
Meddling relatives
Unconditional love.

Sometimes I am from an island
a few hundred miles away
a place I know from my parents’ stories.
I am from a pueblo where the main street is bustling with lack of work,
where women bring their own bags and stand in line
at the free-market stores
buying 2 or 3 eggs, a pair of rubber sandals
and spending half of their month's wages.
Where the government shops are empty of customers and merchandise—
flies go in, lose interest, and move on to pester the street vendors.
I help my aunt figure out where to get a chicken for dinner.
My grandfather rocks in his rocking chair past midnight, telling me stories of his youth.
His eyes look past me every so often
when he enters a world of his own.

Where I am from there are high rises
take out
everything delivered
fast-moving trains and
many ways to be anonymous
many things to not see

Where I live there is the general and the particular
a life of mine
playing in the Ivy League
reminiscing in exile
my days my own
full of something missing.

There are broken bits of the past inside me
where I’m from—yet
I can touch the split
where a Soul is new.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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