

“Racializing” Class

By Beth Hatt-Echeverria
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As I step out of the airplane and head towards the terminal, I think to myself, “I am finally home.” My sister picks me up and we begin the three-hour ride back. While we are driving, she updates me on the latest news from our small town: So-and-so got married, had a baby, got arrested. Eventually we turn off the highway onto a graveled road and drive another fifteen minutes going by cornfields, farmhouses, and cow pastures. I look up at the sky and smile at being able to see the stars — there are no city lights here to hide them. I sigh and have the feeling again of being “home.”

The road ends at my grandma’s house where instead of hearing cars going by you hear the wind blowing through the leaves and nothing more. I notice a fire on the edge of the cow pasture. I go in the house and ask my grandma about it: “Oh, one of our calves died. Forrest Wayne (my cousin) started the fire to get rid of it.” My brother comes in the house and begins telling me about two deer he killed that morning. My brain seems foggy while talking to him. I had not talked about deer hunting in a long time. Slowly, my memory clears and I remember what a button buck is and to ask what part of the woods he was in and where his shots hit the deer. I feel that I am losing a part of myself because this world now seems foreign to me rather than life at school.

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During Thanksgiving dinner I get asked questions about how much longer I will be in school and what I am going to be when I am finished. I feel tense talking about it. I am the second person and first female in my family to receive a bachelor's degree, let alone a graduate degree. My grandma asks me what degree I will have and she does not realize that a Ph.D. involves the title of doctor. The conversation soon changes to discussing medical expenses, feeling manipulated by insurance companies, and concerns about paying fees. I begin thinking about how poor or working-class people are controlled by bureaucracies — can I not stop being a student for a second?

I arrive back at school and wonder where I really belong. Have I lost my roots? I brought back a pair of my grandpa's overalls — should I dare to wear them here? Will I be accused of being unprofessional? I do not like this game. I am learning the rules of how to talk, what to know, how to dress, and who to know but I feel like I am losing myself in the process. I fear that if I let go I will quit being real.

—Beth

Wow! What an accomplishment! I finally turned it in; my dissertation, finally it was all done. I was getting ready to go home, all dressed up. I was wearing my dark gray slacks and my royal blue long-sleeve shirt, nice and pressed. I learned somewhere along the way that people with my phenotype (short and dark) get treated better at airports if they're dressed up. I had a plane to catch right after I turned in my dissertation so I was in full costume. I had my Kenneth Cole watch on and my Motorola cell phone in hand. I felt so proud, so accomplished. I walked toward the student store with my head up high and with a special strut in my walk, looking around and not seeing any other brown bodies in sight.

I needed to buy some gifts for the family so I was looking around the clothing section when a white middle-aged man wearing sweat pants approached me. "Excuse me," he said. "Can I ask you a question?" I was a little puzzled, but I smiled and said, "Sure." He proceeded, "You see that shirt over there with the logo on the front right side, do you have it with the logo on the sleeve instead?" Immediately I felt the blood rush to my head and I must have turned bright red. I stared at the man with anger, but was unable to say more than, "I don't work here."

After my reply, he smiled with a look of satisfaction that I cannot fully describe. He looked me up and down and said, "Well, I'm sorry. I thought you did." He then proceeded to tap my shoulder and walked away with a smile from ear to ear. He never once asked anyone else about the shirt, and left the building. I knew that this whole interaction was not a mistake and I asked myself what could make a person so miserable that they'd want to do something like that deliberately. So, I have a Ph.D. now? How does that change things? And I know that it does, in some ways, but it most certainly doesn't in others.

—Luis

The previous vignettes provide a snapshot of how we, the authors of this paper, interacted with the institution of education while in graduate school. In an effort to explore how racial and class oppressions intersect, within this paper we will use our autobiographical narratives to depict cultural and experiential continuity and

discontinuity in growing up white working class versus Chicano working class. We specifically wanted to focus on “racializing class” due to the ways class is often used as a copout by working-class whites to deny the existence of white privilege (Rothenberg, 2002) and to address the ways scholars of color romanticize being working class (Brayboy, 2003).

Academic discussions of oppression typically compartmentalize various “isms” into separate, static categories (i.e. racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism). As an alternative, we offer a more dynamic, complicated picture of oppression in everyday life. One reason for this effort is that the compartmentalization of oppression arises from imperialistic and institutionalized motivation to quantify, order, and label the world in order to “know” it and, consequently, control it (Foucault, 1990; Willinsky, 1998). Oppression and discrimination have become classifications used to sort and categorize groups that then become perceived as faceless, nameless, and emotionless people (Urrieta, 2003b). The discourse becomes rational rather than personal.

However, authors such as Connell (1987) and Noblit (2002) have suggested that gender and class are verbs rather than categories or nouns. We propose that the lived experience of oppression is fluid, dynamic, and constantly being re/created rather than being set structures or categories that define people and how they experience and interpret the world. The lived experience of oppression includes overlapping layers of the various “isms” and forms of privilege that are constantly being re/negotiated and are experienced according to time and situation. Oppression is always personal and “up-close” — it is never rational.

Patricia Hill Collins’s (2000) work, *Black Feminist Thought*, will be utilized as a foundation for understanding structures of oppression. Within her book, Collins uses the term “matrix of domination” as a conceptual framework for how hierarchical power is organized. Power is viewed, “not as something groups possess, but as an intangible entity that circulates within a particular matrix of domination and to which individuals stand in varying relationships.” (p.274). The “varying relationships” she refers to are gender, race, class, sexuality, and nation systems of oppression that intersect depending upon individual identities rather than being separate categories. As an example, she discusses the way gender oppression does not influence all women the same way — race, class, and sexuality matter greatly as well. Through Black feminist thought, she hopes differing groups will identify similar points of connection to further social justice projects. She states:

Not only do intersectional paradigms prove useful in explaining U.S. Black women’s experiences, such paradigms suggest that intersecting oppressions also shape the experiences of other groups as well. Puerto Ricans, U.S. White men, Asian American gays and lesbians, U.S. White women, and other historically identifiable groups all have distinctive histories that reflect their unique placement in intersecting oppressions. (Hill Collins, 2000, p. 227)

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Our analysis will build upon Hill-Collins’s “matrix of domination” in two distinct ways. First, we will emphasize the idea of privilege. Privilege is typically found in the shadow of discourse concerning oppression. In order to understand and work against oppression, we must also work to understand privilege within our lives and how it, and we, act to reproduce oppression. Hill-Collins states:

Although most individuals have little difficulty identifying their own victimization within some major system of oppression— whether it be by race, social class, religion, physical ability, sexual orientation, ethnicity, age or gender— they typically fail to see how their thoughts and actions uphold someone else’s subordination. Thus White feminists routinely point with confidence to their oppression as women but resist seeing how much their White skin privileges them. African-Americans who possess eloquent analyses of racism often persist in viewing poor White men as symbols of White power. . . In essence, each group identifies the oppression with which it feels most comfortable as being fundamental and classifies all others as being of lesser importance. Oppression is filled with such contradictions because these approaches fail to recognize that a matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors. Each individual derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone’s lives. (p. 287)

In accordance with Hill-Collins, we claim that oppression and privilege not only intersect but are dependent upon one another to continue. In order to work towards social justice, the discourse of oppression must be expanded to include ways that privilege and oppression intersect. For this reason, our narratives include privilege as well as oppression.

Secondly, complimenting Hill-Collins’s idea that intersecting oppressions shift and are, “organized through diverse local realities,” we will integrate Bourdieu’s (1977) focus on human agency and habitus¹ from his theory of practice. Within her analysis, Hill-Collins includes an “interpersonal domain of power” that functions, “through routinized, day-to-day practices of how people treat one another (e.g., micro-level of social organization)” (p.287). Her analysis frames day-to-day interactions as a piece of the matrix of domination. Bourdieu (1977), however, frames daily interactions as the *central* place for understanding the power relations of the habitus.² It is within daily interactions individuals come to understand their agency, to see the structures of society (the matrix), and to interact dialectically with and within those structures.

Bourdieu’s *Theory of Practice* (1977) also includes ways individual innovation and improvisation alter social structures by people acquiring or learning to imitate the practices of a second habitus.³ According to Bourdieu, the secondary habitus (if it is acquired at all) is acquired through social institutions like schools or through other forms that allow us to experience disruption in our taken-for-granted knowledge and ways of being (i.e., summer camp, friends, cultural and religious organizations, etc.). An example of second habitus acquisition is how we, both possessing a primary working class habitus (upbringing), have “successfully

played” in the schooling game by acquiring Ph.D’s through achieving a secondary habitus. In essence, we have altered the structure by not “going” where our working class habitus most likely would have led us: away from graduate school.

We believe that the dialectic Bourdieu posits between structures and agency does not undermine the notion that hierarchical structures exist. However, Bourdieu’s theory of practice allows the “isms” to be viewed as cultural acts occurring in daily interaction rather than being stagnant, fixed categories like the image of the matrix suggests. Therefore, we use the idea of the matrix to highlight visually what the structures of oppression might look like in society, but not to suggest they are fixed as an immutable reality.

We particularly hope that by inserting “practice,” we can stress that the more extensive exercise of agency comes in being productive and proactive in responding to oppressive structures. Always resisting and being reactive to oppression is a limiting standpoint involving fewer resources. (Anzaldúa, 1987). For example, when under attack, the victim can only react defensively in response to the oppressor, especially when cornered (physically, symbolically, emotionally, etc.). But, when in the offensive, individuals with an adequate understanding of power dynamics and their agency can exercise greater possibilities and strategies in bringing about social change through their daily conscious practices (Urrieta, 2003a). Collins’ states, “Neither Black feminist thought as a critical social theory nor Black feminist practice can be static; as social conditions change, so must the knowledge and practices designed to resist them” (p.39). By inserting practice theory, we assert that individual agency is not just reacting to or “resisting” changing social conditions, but should also include being proactive and productive in conscious practice to bring about social change (Urrieta, 2003a).

Our narratives should be read framed by Hill-Collins’s matrix of domination and Bourdieu’s theory of practice. They are purposefully structured to encourage co-reading and to be left to the reader’s interpretation. We invite you to look for similarities, differences, and contradictions within them. Rather than intending to “represent” the broad spectrum of experiences in being working class, white or Chicano, they are intended to begin a discussion about alternative ways of understanding the lived experience of class oppression, racial discrimination/privilege, and ways of working against/beyond them.

Narratives

During the Fall of 1999, we (the authors) began the same graduate program but arrived with very different lived experiences. Luis, a Chicano, was born and raised in Los Angeles. He arrived being suspicious of white students and had previously never had any personal (other than professional) contact with whites. Beth, a white female, grew up in a small, white, working class town in Indiana. She did not grow up experiencing very much diversity and the majority of her knowledge of people

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of color came through her college coursework and books that she had read. She was not confronted with acknowledging white privilege until she attended college.

In the beginning of our graduate coursework, we did not sit beside one another nor did we socialize very much. As critical class discussions developed throughout the first semester, we surprised ourselves by becoming allies in trying to work against hegemonic, conservative perspectives held by other students and faculty in the program. Beth became Luis’s ally regarding racial issues while Luis became Beth’s ally regarding gender issues and we complemented each other regarding issues of class. Although our critical perspectives came from very different standpoints, we found a common ground to stand on through our working class backgrounds and our desires to work for social justice. Through our friendship, Beth learned more about her white privilege especially when she and Luis made identical points within their graduate classes but only Beth’s comments seemed to be listened to while Luis’s were ignored. Luis, on the other hand, learned that not all white people are wealthy and that allies can be found in the most unexpected people and places.

We wrote our narratives independent of one another and then read them in search of themes. Due to their personal nature, the narratives were difficult to write especially for the ways they leave us open for critique. Within our multiple identities, we are both privileged and oppressed, which leads to insight to some forms of oppression and ignorance of others. If we omitted discussing our personal privileges, then our discussion of oppression would be partial and incomplete. Consequently, we humbly include a discussion of privilege in our narratives.

Learning Life’s Lessons

Beth

My environment growing-up included blue-collar parents, a single parent household, limited adult supervision, and a low-level family income. I believe my family background is a *strength* in that it provides me a unique perspective from many people in academia. Also, it enabled me to be aware of some of the ways financial and educational power can be used to oppress the working class.

Growing up, our food came from either the garden or my father’s hunting trips. We never ate beef. Instead we had deer, squirrel, and rabbit that my father hunted himself, not to mention, rocky mountain oysters (i.e., pig testicles) fresh from my grandpa’s hog farm. My dad taught me a lot about nature. When accompanying him on hunting trips, I learned how to look at deer tracks in the sand and know whether it was made by a doe or buck. I also learned how to recognize deer paths, skin a squirrel, and look for mussels in the river.

Rarely do people in my community move outside of the county. Even those who move away to attend college often choose to stay and work in a factory rather than move away to begin a career in their field of study. In fact at one point in time,

a large portion of my family all lived on the same road. I have also observed my aunts and father take care of my grandma by cooking, cleaning, and providing rides for her. My decision to move away to attend graduate school has been difficult for my family to understand. I had been taught to value a sense of home and community, which I seemed to be turning away from by moving.

—
Luis

A Portrait of Me

*Since you don't like to hear me,
How would you rather see me?
Where would you rather have me?
Growing corn in blood red fields,
Old huaraches, full of mud,
Growing beans by dusty roads,
Starving, hungry, sun-baked hands,
Is that how you'd like to see me?
Quiet, smiling, standing-by,
As you take my picture with a Polaroid?
A nice exhibit of your travels!
In your album of memories . . .
Nameless, mute, all broken down,
There . . . you wouldn't have to hear me.*

My father was the last *campesino* in a long line of farmers in the community of *Nocutzepo* in *México*, land of his ancestors the *P'urhépecha* and my own. *Michoacán*, a land not only rich in resources, but also rich in biculturalism, bilingualism, and of a complex racial ambiguity where the stepping stones of time created a magnificent yet painful mosaic of the Mexican nation.⁴ My father was the last, but I am the first. I am the first to graduate from high school, the first B.A., the only M.A. and the only Ph.D. Relevant to this family past, I wrote the above poem during a doctoral seminar. That is how I felt being the only Chicano/*Indígena*⁵ in my doctoral cohort after moving from *Aztlán*⁶ to North Carolina as I tried endlessly to make my points heard, much less understood, by my privileged peers.

My earliest memories of a home are in East Los Angeles (Boyle Heights). My family and I lived in a garage that was remade into a large “room” that had our beds, the kitchen, a table, and a small restroom all inside the same space. I don't remember my father being around very much because he had several jobs and worked multiple shifts, but my mother was home with us all the time. We rented the “room” from an older lady, “Bebita,” who watched over us sometimes when my parents were not around. She was a very fair skinned and tall “Señora” who often corrected our Spanish, including my parents, especially my mother. Even today my mother says that it was Bebita who taught her how to dress *como gente decente* (like a decent person), implying people of a higher social class.

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I don't remember much about school, probably because I didn't speak English, but my mother says I taught her the alphabet and the pledge of allegiance during my first month in kindergarten. Sometimes I remember my dad would help Bebita out with the gardening, especially the *milpa* (corn). Usually, Bebita would give orders and we would obey. I would pull the water hose for her and I remember the smell of the wet earth after a long hot day. *Mande Usted* was the appropriate response, “Give me an order,” perhaps it was, or maybe it was just the remnants of *peones* responding to a *patron*'s orders. I was too young to know, but I knew I was poor and “too Mexican” because although I don't remember what I learned in kindergarten, I do remember the kids laughing at me for wearing Mexican cowboy boots to school.

Learning to Labor

Beth

My mother has worked in a glass factory for the past fifteen years while my father has worked for the past 28 years out of a millwright union. I began working in the eighth grade by bussing tables at a local cafeteria and continued to work in food service up until I entered college. While my hands grew soft in college, my family experienced pain for their labors.

My mother recently mangled her hand in machinery and will never regain full use of it. Her employer pushed her to return to work within two days of her injury to avoid increasing their accidental rate of injury. My father broke his leg while working and my older brother is missing a thumb as a result of his labor in a furniture factory. Despite their literal blood, sweat, and tears, my mother, father, and brother are looked down upon for not having “an education.” If murder was redefined as deaths due to poor working conditions, the number would be significantly more than the amount of traditional murders. In 1990, 2.4 times more people were killed in the workplace due to purposeful violations of the law than were murdered at home or in the street (Lynch, Michalowski, & Groves, 2000). The fact that we do not define murder in this way is an example of the lack of critique of middle class culture, the corporate world, and capitalism.

Time and time again I witnessed the labor of the women in my family being controlled by their husbands. I saw women stuck in miserable marriages due to financial dependence and husbands who abused this economical power they had over their wives. My parents divorced when I was ten years old and my mother suddenly found herself in search of work in the public sphere after having worked at home (i.e., private sphere) for ten years. Work was hard to find, food was scarce, and I remember searching harvested cornfields for left over corn to have food to eat. At that point I swore I would never be financially dependent upon a man and I perceived education as my way out. Acquiring an education became an act of independence and ensuring my future children would never want for their basic needs.

Luis

By the time I begin to have memories of school (about third grade), I remember doing quite well and being told I was “smart.” I also attended Catholic school and somehow I knew that I was “better-off” than the other kids in the neighborhood because my dad had to pay tuition. Right before I started the eighth grade, however, my father lost his job as manager at a felt company and he couldn’t afford the tuition any longer. On weekends I became an unlicensed public street vendor. We had just bought a nicer, bigger family home ten miles from East L.A. and dad was determined not to lose it no matter how much work it took, which included everyone’s work even us children.

When I transferred from Catholic school to public school, my teachers automatically assumed I was “smart” (for that very reason) and I was placed into Honor’s classes. I continued to excel in middle and high school. I became involved in numerous programs that directed me toward a college education, including tracking, but I did not really know what tracking was. I just knew that I was smart because I had always been told that. In fact, I didn’t really feel academically challenged again until my junior year in high school.

I disliked the stigma attached to my family and me as we tried to survive by selling eggs and produce in the streets, but that was when my family and I became like a piece of art. As in a Native woman’s rug, we all cooperated like strings tightly woven together to form a beautiful design. It was a humbling experience that helped me identify with immigrant struggles, struggles I had previously over simplified. For example, before, I would get upset at immigrants selling oranges in the streets because I knew that the police would come after them and somehow I thought they were doing something wrong. I felt embarrassed because I felt like they made all of us Latinos look bad (in the eyes of white people), but after my experience in similar situations I understood that they were just trying to survive in a system that denies them the right to work. My experiences as a street vendor gave me strength, dignity, confidence, and the drive to be successful despite my contradictory conditions.

The contradictions were well pronounced and hard to understand for a young adolescent. I knew that our family economic situation was not good because I stopped attending Catholic school (I attended from third to seventh grade), because I didn’t have a lot of “nice” clothes,⁷ and because there were times when there wasn’t enough food. At the same time, I lived in a semi-private neighborhood in a house that had a built-in swimming pool.

Motivated by a cousin, my father tried his luck at gardening as a business, a move that proved to be economically fruitful and one that is labor intensive. I hated when my father made my brother and I work after school during weekdays. This meant I had to stay up very late to finish the ridiculous amounts of homework I was assigned. At that time my homework assignments seemed more tedious and mechanical than intellectually stimulating. No one seemed to understand my

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situation as a family member or as an honor’s student, not my father who needed our labor, and not my teachers who assumed that I had all the time in the world to do my schoolwork.

My father would often get angry at my brother and I for not working fast or hard enough. But, he would also become frantic whenever we told him we did not want to go to school anymore and would make us work to exhaustion only to ask if we were ready to go back to school again. He hated when we scraped the skin off our hands, when we got blisters, or when we turned very dark from the sun. Obviously, I began to make connections, perhaps the very same connections my father made in the very sensitive racial context of *Michoacán* where these were signs of racial, social, and economic inferiority. At the same time, he would make fun of us for not having “manly” hands and for not holding the axe hard enough, like a man; thus the blisters.

Several things became clear in my mind. To keep a “nice” house you had to work hard. Families were groups of people and everyone had to unconditionally cooperate, like it or not. Implied was the message that indigenous blood was strong, but indigenous features were not good, that physical labor was dignified, good, and masculine, but also not of high social status. Schooling required a lot of work for my ultimate goal, which was college at the time and some of us had to work harder than others. The one thing that was clear and I had sworn to myself was that I would not end up working as hard as my father and one day I would have enough to take care of him.

Learning to “Play School”

Beth

Growing up working class, I learned that acquiring a formal education does not make a person more valuable. Unfortunately, I often received a different message in school, especially when I attended college. At times, I have struggled with the question, “If education equals success, then are my parents and brother failures because they do not have an education?” Also, throughout college I encountered numerous downcast faces and eyes accompanied by silence when I answer the question, “What do your parents do for a living?” When I receive this reaction, I think about when I worked with my mother in her factory. I witnessed her pass out due to working in extreme heat without appropriate break time and pushed to work at the fastest pace possible. I also think about how I have witnessed her work a swing shift (i.e., a weekly shift from days to evenings to midnights) for many years and I have seen the toll it has taken on her. My mother works much harder than I ever have in undergraduate or graduate school. I want to look at the people asking the questions and tell them these things. But this is a voice that has been silenced by “educated” people because of the higher esteem placed on educational credentials

than working class experience or knowledge. I continue to struggle with understanding how much value should be given to educational credentials because I have chosen to be a part of the institution of education.

These are but a few of the lessons I have learned by experiencing the world through the lens of the working class. My parents may not have had an “education”, but they have taught me valuable lessons that I, unfortunately, was taught to devalue in school. Within school walls, I learned that *I* needed to change, that my knowledge from home was inferior, that achieving academically was the only way for me to become “somebody.” I learned those lessons well.

Luis

I made excellent grades and exhausted myself in high school trying to live the “American Dream.” When I did encounter failure, I blamed myself — meritocracy was in place. In college, however, I underwent a drastic identity change when I learned about the War of the North American Invasion, the genocide of Native Americans, and the exploitation of Chinese railroad workers.⁸ I embraced a strong and clear sense of ethnic pride and took a political stance as a Chicano.

I began to reflect on my upbringing and the many situations I had encountered with racism, subtle forms of discrimination, and social and economic oppression not only in the context of the U.S. but also in the rich family history my parents brought with them from Mexico. I was upset and angry in many ways and felt a strong sense of urgency to change this hostile society. I realized that I had not been educationally “successful” because of an overly simplified democratic and just society, but despite the many barriers that were set up in my path.

My identity re/articulation as a Chicano in college helped to change my views on Latina/o education in the United States. Schools seemed like a good place to begin a process of social change to benefit Latina/o children. Through the process of social consciousness that I acquired while at UCLA, I was determined to return to my community, as did a number of people in my graduating cohort and “help out.” We were determined to “change” the world. We wanted to go back to our communities and give back, even if only to give back the children their real names *en Español*. After graduation, I became a bilingual Social Studies, Language Arts teacher in the Los Angeles area. I made a conscious choice to work with bilingual eighth graders, mostly Mexican, over working with English Only Asian students in the other side of the district/freeway.

After proposition 227 was passed in California, bilingual teachers and students were actively harassed in ways not previously experienced before. Although there was always a stigma to the label “bilingual” it seemed like Proposition 227 was the “green light” some teachers, administrators, and parents needed to openly make prejudiced/racist comments about us. In desperation, I left my eighth grade classroom with the goal of gaining the credential that would allow me more of a

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voice to continue the struggle to make things better for Latinos in the US, especially in Education.

Learning about the “Other”

Beth

A part of white, working class, rural culture is a careful construction of an “us versus them” dichotomy. The category of “them” can include people who are not white, academics, people who live outside the county, and people from the city. The most deeply embedded construction is that of people of color. Growing up, my community was 99% white except for the only doctor in the county and his family, who were Filipino-Canadian. I used to argue with my grandmother for saying negative things about African-Americans and with my mother’s racist comments always framed by a fear of African-Americans. Through my own reasoning, I had concluded that skin color was not enough to judge a person, but that was the limits to the depth of my understanding. At that point in time, my ideology was that everyone should be “color blind” when it came to race.

While a freshman in college, I decided to take African-American Literature because I thought it would be a “good thing for me to do.” Little did I know how it would change my life. Within the classes (a year long requirement of two courses), for the first time I was a racial minority. We read work by W.E.B. Dubois, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Malcolm X. I heard a discourse that contradicted my life. I learned the history of racial bigotry in the United States that had been omitted from my previous education. My K-12 schooling had not even included the common surface level attempt at celebrating diversity through the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday.

My color-blind ideology shattered. By saying “race didn’t matter,” I was devaluing the rich, cultural history of minority racial groups and the everyday lived experience of being a racial minority in a racist society. However, through my narrow white-vision, after the course I romanticized all people of color as being poor, suffering, and stoic. I understood I had lived an “easier” life and joined thousands of other white liberals in believing it was my duty to “save” the world.

Not until years later was I confronted with the reality of a middle class that was not 100% white. How was I to fit this into my schema of seeing all people of color as having suffered more than myself? How was I to make sense of the notion that all white people had more privilege than people of color when meeting a person of color who grew up with parents that were physicians? Due to growing up white, working-class, I believed that all someone needed in order to have an “easy” life was money. It was then that I began to understand white privilege. I had previously connected my privilege with economic capital — not the actual *color* of my skin. Through this realization, I began to understand that I had privilege just in simply being white.

Luis

The only images of white people I had growing up were those on TV and in school (my teachers). My neighborhoods growing up were almost completely Latino in terms of ethnicity, usually completely Mexican or Mexican American for that matter. Occasionally, a Central American family and once in a while a Filipino, Chinese, or Vietnamese family would move into the neighborhood. There were two black students in my graduating high school class, and a handful of white students whose parents worked at the school. Out of a graduating class of almost six hundred and fifty students, the valedictorian was a white male, and the salutatorian was a Chinese American female. Those were the images of status, intelligence, and high class that we had of “others.”

On Television, I remember watching programs like “Leave it to Beaver” and thinking that all white people were rich, that their homes were spotless, and that white moms wore aprons and baked cookies everyday. I wanted chocolate chip cookies, not *pan dulce*, even though it was delicious. I also remember watching “Good Times” and thinking that all black people were poor and lived in the projects. I wasn’t exposed to either group, but society had created images in my mind of these and “other” groups through television.

The curriculum sustained those images by aggrandizing whites, especially in history. In terms of science and inventions I never heard of any non-white inventors. In my mind, all white people were rich and somehow superior in multiple ways. I actually remember reading old biology books and thinking that maybe there was some element of truth to Darwin’s theory of evolution, especially after looking at the charts in some of those texts. It wasn’t until college that I began to unlearn some of that and to see the damage this society inflicts on non-whites by actively promoting white supremacy. The racialization of class is actively tied to this, and learning to equate whiteness to middle or higher class is part of that white supremacy.

I was recently hired as an assistant professor in a tenure-track position in a research one university. Does it mean that I am now middle class? Perhaps according to some random definitions using income brackets I am, but most of my “ways of knowing and experiencing the world,” my standpoint if you will, comes from my working class and Chicano/*Indígena* background. I am proud of my past. It gives me strength and inspiration. Will people continue to make assumptions about me based on who I am and how I look — most certainly, without a doubt. It no longer shocks me when a white person comes up to me eager to practice their child-like Spanish, or when they assume that I need “help” because I’m just a poor disadvantaged *barrio* kid who is “making it.” But, at the same time I refuse to romanticize and promote the image that I’m still doing gardening or selling eggs to survive.

Privilege

Beth

What was previously left unsaid within my narrative was the continuity I experienced between my world growing up and graduate school. I grew up white in a white dominated community and then attended graduate school in a community that was dominated by whites as well. Although I was constantly reminded of my blue-collar roots, I was rarely reminded that I was white.⁹ Alternatively, Luis was constantly reminded that he was not only working class but that he also was the non-white “other.” His way of seeing the world was perceived as being due to his “racial” and “class” biases and not as objective critiques and views of the world, which implies that only whites, particularly white males, can view the world through unbiased eyes.

I have recently completed my fifth year of graduate school and accepted a position at a university in my home state. Going home, however, is a very different story for me now than during my first year of graduate school. Within the past five years I married a Mexican man and had a beautiful baby girl who is biracial. Through my relationship with them, going home now means experiencing lessons in white oppression. Suddenly, a world that once seemed so familiar has become strange by seeing things that the presence of my husband and daughter bring into view. I have especially become aware of the assumptions embedded in white privilege. For example, despite my husband’s impeccable English laced with a southern drawl, many people from my community assume he still needs to learn English *after* speaking with him numerous times. Assumptions are made concerning how long he has been in the United States, whether he eats tortillas or not, and even whether Mexicans eat breakfast. My bi-racial marriage has allowed me to better see the *practice* of racial oppression where previously it had been blind to my “white” (blue) eyes. While standing beside my husband, I see us being ignored by sales clerks in stores, feel the constant gaze upon us as we walk through the mall, and experience often where we must “use” my whiteness to get by in the world.¹⁰

I may have grown up working class but I also grew up with privileges in speaking English, largely experiencing cultural continuity between home and school, and always having authority (teachers, bosses, professors, etc.) figures who looked similar to me — to name a few. I had lived the majority of my life without having to think about my race and how it influenced the ways people perceived me and the numerous spaces it allowed me to occupy and feel like I belonged.

Luis

I try to recognize my privileges in terms of my economic situation as well as in my gender privileges. Beth and others student colleagues did what they could

to initiate me in a journey to recognize my gender privileges and to analyze and interrogate my patriarchal views.

The experience of interacting with different people and my own through higher education helped me open my eyes to gender privileges. I must say that, contrary to the image that people have of Chicanas and Latinas “as being submissive,” it was Chicanas and Latinas who taught me the most about my male privileges, how I practiced them while growing up, and also how to fight against them while in college. My graduate school experience and interacting with women of different races in my doctoral cohort only solidified that and I continue to struggle with my male privilege in my personal life.

It seems rather ludicrous in retrospect that certain things would be taken for granted, such as me giving orders and making key decisions while working with groups of women on school projects. Recently, an Asian woman colleague and friend pointed out how “condescending” and paternalistic I was when speaking to two women colleagues about their future career goals and plans. I spoke and gave advice to them in a way that was “nice,” but approvingly and disapprovingly father-like and authoritative. Since I already had a job, I acted as if I had the authority and know-how to almost tell them what to do with their academic lives. Recently, I also caught myself writing an e-mail to a group colleagues of both genders where I used the male pronoun “he” throughout my e-mail message without even thinking twice about it. In fact, it was not until I got a reply and my message was copied into the e-mail that I noticed what I did.

Coming home is also a constant struggle because I have been taught through my home habitus that the women in my family will serve me in multiple ways. In my home culture, this usually includes one’s woman partner, mother, sisters, sister-in-laws, nieces, and women cousins. It is difficult in these situations to recognize and counter one’s privilege, and that helps me understand white privilege a bit. Why would I want to, or take the initiative to give up something that benefits me? For example, why would I say, “no, don’t do my laundry,” or “stop cooking my food,” or “I’ll press my own pants”? It is a constant struggle to continue to see the privileges more clearly as time passes because they become the norm, simultaneously, it is quite easy to know about the privileges and to not do anything about them.

As an instructor at California State University, Los Angeles, I tried to incorporate the topic of gender in my class and I would openly talk about my experiences and failures in the struggle against sexism. As an ethnographer, I often engage in observing and studying my surroundings and my class was not an exception. As the class progressed I took note of how the small number of males, particularly the two white males, were the most vocal. The day we were to discuss gender,¹¹ I organized the class into groups and I placed one male in each group deliberately. Each group was asked to choose a leader and sure enough all of the males (with the exception of one) were chosen to speak for their group. When I pointed this out to the class, the students were in shock. But, I used this as an entry point to talk about the issue

of sexism and male privileges, not only as an issue of discrimination and oppression, but most importantly as an issue of unnoticed, taken-for-granted societal male privileges.

The Matrix, the Standpoint, and the Practice

The matrix of domination is like a net that falls over society, communities, and individuals. It weighs down on us and can make it difficult to “move.” The net has a different design, consistency, and weight for each of us. By inserting practice into the matrix, we are looking for the places where the net is weak, unraveling, and ways we can work together to remove, alter, or change it. We are also highlighting how individuals have the agency to learn to maneuver themselves with and within the net by acquiring a secondary habitus and using the knowledge gained - not for self-fulfillment and economic gain — but to consciously loosen or cut through the net. Through discussing differing standpoints of oppression and privilege, we can find ways to re/theorize or re/teach in order to better “see” the net (matrix). A better visualization of the net can help all of us to understand power and how power can be strategically used and subverted for societal change and social justice.

Through our narratives we have sought to move beyond the categorization of oppression to a more complicated, dynamic view of how forms of oppression and privilege operate in everyday lives. Specifically, we have aimed to contextualize the ways class and race intersect. Although Beth grew up working-class, learning about labor, and the feeling of being second-class — she also possessed white racial privilege. Luis’s narrative depicts the ways class operates within race (i.e. Latino culture) and how racial oppression is separate from but also connects with class oppression. As our narratives illustrate, oppression and privilege have many different dimensions that are over-simplified and depersonalized through the categorization of “isms.”

Collins’ *Black Feminist Thought* and Bourdieu’s *Theory of Practice* are theoretical tools, which allow us to (re)conceptualize oppression and privilege as dynamic, intersecting, and non-essentializing. Simultaneously, they allow for commonalities within categories as we (Beth and Luis) discovered through social/economic class, which enabled us to “see” a more complicated picture of oppression and privilege. Our commonalities included our experiences growing up, learning about labor, and the (dis)enabling characteristics of education. Our class experiences also limited our mobility and, hence, our exposure and access to racial groups other than our own. That is, our working class experiences were directly linked to our conceptualization of racial differences as well. This suggests that race and class are not distinct categories but are in close relation with one another. Consequently, they must be, like all the other “isms,” studied in conjunction with each other rather than as separate categories.

Ironically, schooling served to simultaneously reinforce our second class

status and impose values of meritocracy upon us while also allowing us to rethink our working class backgrounds as *strengths* and encouraged us to develop a more critical consciousness of oppression and privilege. How can we work towards shifting the practice within classrooms so that education enables versus disempowers? We believe one part of the solution is ensuring that all teacher education programs create opportunities for students that disrupt and challenge the assumptions they make about the world. Students should be encouraged to explore the ways that oppression and privilege have intersected within their own lives. A single course in multi-cultural education is insufficient — their assumptions must be challenged throughout the program.

As teacher-educators, our goal should be that all teachers enter schools with a critical consciousness that allows them to not only discuss oppression and privilege (i.e., rhetoric) but to also *understand* it (i.e., net) in their everyday lives. Only through understanding oppression and privilege as being embodied within their identities and practiced through everyday actions, can teachers exert agency through inhibiting “automatic” responses (i.e., assumptions, body posture in presence of authority, etc.) and improvise¹² ways of dismantling the “net” in their everyday actions. Perhaps, then, we will be a step closer towards working together in removing the weight of the “net.”

Notes

¹ We find the following definition of habitus useful: “Habitus can be understood as, on the one hand, the historical and cultural production of individual practices — since contexts, laws, rules, and ideologies all speak through individuals, who are never entirely aware that this is happening — and, on the other hand, the individual production of practices — since the individual always acts from self-interest.” (Webb, Schirato, & Danaher, 2002; p.15).

² Please note that Bourdieu (1950) does name a “matrix of power” but for the purpose of this paper we chose to focus on Hill-Collins’ “matrix of domination.”

³ Holland et al talks about this concept as “figured worlds.” See Holland et al 1998.

⁴ Mexico and “Mexicans” have been essentialized as a homogenous people in the US, but this rather large country is one of the most diverse culturally, racially, and linguistically. Racism, gender, class, and other issues characterize Mexican society. For a more detailed discussion on Mexican societal racism against indigenous people. See Urrieta (2003b).

⁵ *Indígena* literally means indigenous or those of strong indigenous descent who choose to claim that as part of their identity.

⁶ *Aztlán* is the mythical land of origin of the Aztecs or Mexica people. In the Chicano ideology, *Aztlán* is designated to mean the Southwest as the Chicano homeland or the land invaded by Euroamericans.

⁷ Since I had always worn a Catholic school uniform, a marker of status in a different context, I was unaware of the differences in clothing amongst public school students. Every thing seemed to matter from the shoes to the hairstyle. This of course was also an issue in the Catholic school setting but nowhere near to the same degree, especially when it concerned the number of outfits required to “fit in.”

“Racializing” Class

⁸ Obviously this is only an example of the new perspectives in historical interpretations I encountered while at UCLA.

⁹ I should note that there were occasions where critically thinking faculty and students challenged me to critique my own whiteness and privilege.

¹⁰ I am referring here to instances such as looking for apartments or complaining of poor treatment in businesses.

¹¹ Again, this statement is an example of how privilege works and how we need to have people with different perspectives pointing things out for us, even if at times it seems bothersome. Notice how this statement makes reference to “the *day* we were to discuss gender.” Beth accurately pointed out that one of the criticisms is that issues of gender are not given enough attention in classes and are often confined to one class period. In reflection it is a bit ironic that I would say “day” in the singular, but it is also telling because I did set only one day of my class to talk about gender issues. However, I found coupling gender with talking about male privileges helped a lot of the males in class understand the issue better.

¹² To learn more about improvisation as agency, see Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998).

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