
White Girls Constructing Abstract and Embodied Racial Identities in an Urban Elementary School

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In this paper I examine the ways that three fifth-grade girls from different socioeconomic backgrounds formed and reformed their racial identities in a diverse urban public school. Although the girls were labeled as “White” by their parents and the school district, none identified as “White.” Drawing on data from an ethnographic study of children’s identification strategies, I look at the conjunction of race, socioeconomic class, and human geography to analyze their identity work. I find that at this particular site, Whiteness is both an abstract category and a personal, embodied identity for the girls and their peers.

White Girls’ Abstract and Embodied Racial Identification Strategies

In this paper I examine the ways that three fifth-grade girls from different socioeconomic backgrounds formed and reformed their racial identities in an urban public school. Although all three girls were labeled as “White” by their parents and the school district, none identified as “White.” Drawing on data from a multi-year ethnographic study of children’s fluid identification strategies at Gonzales Elementary¹, a diversely populated urban school (Zacher, 2005a), I look in brief at the conjunction of race, socioeconomic class, and human geography, the ways the girls lived in their city, to analyze their identity work. I found that at this particular site, Whiteness was both an abstract category and a personal, in-the-moment, embodied identity (cf. McDowell, 1999) for the girls and their peers. Findings are critical for teachers who work in diversely populated classrooms and for urban educational researchers in the broad field of “identity” research.

A close examination of the children’s individual identification strategies offers insights into how White students in social justice classrooms may cope with issues of difference, and suggests numerous ways that teachers can capitalize on students’ “elusive” identities (Yon, 2000). The classroom teacher in this study, a White woman named Ms. Jean, taught her diverse fifth-grade students from a perspective that was “multicultural and social reconstructionist” (Banks & Banks, 2004); in her class, students were introduced to ideas of oppression and structural inequality through language arts and social studies curricula. In addition,

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

she tried to give students some responsibility for taking an active role in their learning (ibid.). In other writing, I have shown how the ways students took up and reworked the ideas on offer was sometimes less than socially just, and was often done in service to their own identity work and social maneuvering (Zacher, in press).

The three “White” girls at the center of this analysis responded to their teacher’s pedagogy and their diverse environment in various ways. Cody, who was the daughter of upper middle-class parents², avoided being White, despite having a White best friend and no other realistic racial identification option. Christina, the daughter of middle-class parents, had only Latina friends and chose to claim a Latina identity; in other words, she pretended to be someone she was not in this classroom. Liz, the third student in my brief analysis, was the daughter of poor, sometimes homeless, parents, and she denied being White, saying she was uncomfortable with the label, despite having blue eyes, blond hair, and, like Cody, no other visible option. There was one other White girl in the class—Jordan, Cody’s best friend—who labeled herself as White, and two White boys, one of whom labeled himself as White, the other as Jewish. Cody, Christina, and Liz’s stories are of particular interest here because they show how class, race, gender, and social justice factors can play out in individual children’s lives.

These girls’ profiles also show the multiple approaches to racial labels that children have, and the ways they use such labels in their strategic identity enactments (Hull & Zacher, forthcoming; Zacher, in press). In the classroom, Whiteness was an abstract construct against which other races could be compared to, and, usually, seen as victimized by. For instance, in their study of slavery, which included reading the book *Sojourner Truth: Ain’t I a woman?* (McKissack & McKissack, 1992), students of all races in this classroom showed their ability to recognize and label acts of violent racism. In a month-long unit on the “Cycle of Oppression,” they also learned how to distinguish between classism, racism, sexism, ableism, and other “-isms,” and to recognize such acts in the past as well as the present (Zacher, 2005b). However, Whiteness was also an embodied racial identity; Liz and Cody were both

² For this analysis, “upper middle-class” signifies homeowners whose household income is above \$250,000/year; “middle-class” signifies homeowners or renters whose income ranges from \$150,000 to \$249,000; “lower middle-class” signifies renters with incomes of \$30,000 to \$149,000; “working poor” signifies renters who work and earn up to \$29,000; and “poor” signifies renters who may or may not receive government benefits like Section 8 housing credits, live in housing projects, and/or are homeless, and who have no stable incomes.

pale skinned, with blond and dark blond hair respectively, and neither of them could embody any other racial identity. Christina had the ability to pass as Latina on looks alone, but Liz and Cody had no such alternative. No matter what they preferred, Whiteness was read onto their bodies by others, in and out of school (Butler, 1999; Dyer, 1997; McDowell, 1999). Below I briefly review some studies on Whiteness in schools, and then move to discuss the girls themselves.

White Identity In and Out of School: Two Key Studies in Brief

Researchers have begun to focus on the ways junior high and high school students construct racial identities (Olsen, 1997; Yon, 2000), and some have focused specifically on White students (Finders, 1997; Perry, 2002), but as yet we know very little about how White elementary school students create and maintain their racial identities³. Yon's (2000) ethnographic account of identity work at a diverse Toronto high school focuses on the convergence of race, culture, and identity in students' lives. In her comparative ethnography of two California high schools, one mostly White and one diversely populated, Perry (2002) highlights the contextually contingent nature of racial identity, particularly, in these cases, White identity (or identities)⁴. Although neither study looks explicitly at how students use space to create and maintain identities, each offers a radically new perspective on how students in diverse environments negotiate emergent identities as they talk about themselves and others (Yon, 2000).

These researchers emphasize the process of "identification" over any notion of fixed identity, arguing for "a process that is continuous and incomplete... a constructed and open-ended process" (Yon, 2000, p. 14). Perry writes that "identity is that by which we define ourselves, a name we call "home," even if only *temporarily* or *strategically*" (p. 73, emphasis added). Cody, Christina, and Liz, like Perry and Yon's subjects, made strategic choices about how to identify as they engaged in "a process of investment in and identification with the meaning attached to one's social location" (ibid). Because identities are always "produced in specific historical and institutional sites" (Hall, 1996, p. 4), research into identity formation in school must account for both the ways the girls identified in school and the ways they used the city to do so. In this school context, for example, it was a viable option for Christina to claim a Latina identity, since her two best friends, both of whom claimed and

³ For a psychological perspective on the racial identity formation of African American children, see Tatum (1997).

⁴ For additional insights into the ways Whiteness is portrayed in popular culture and the arts, see Dyer (1997).

were ascribed Latina identities (Hagood, 2002), were willing to allow her such a claim.

Studies such as Yon's and Perry's, with their intense foci on race, culture, and identity, shed some light on what high school students in diverse (and not-so-diverse) settings do throughout the school day, in and out of class, to identify as certain types of people. They provide no clean-cut examples or answers, because, as both authors note, this is a messy business, and "White students' identities, like all racial identities, were fickle, multiple, and often contradictory" (Perry, p. 2). Each project touches on the role of the city and the school in setting up certain racial dynamics, and both also go into the classroom to show students talking and interacting in class (and in other out of class settings) with each other. Perry in particular paints a broad picture of the social groups at Clavey and Valley Groves high schools⁵, and we are left with a complete sense of the social landscape.

However, what is missing from the studies, and what this essay's analysis hopes to offer, is a micro-level perspective on the identity work of students in one classroom, done with attention to city, school, and community contexts⁶. They tell us about the broad, school-wide nature of students' identity politics and identifications, but we do not know enough about how students (re)create their identities in interactions with their peers, with their friends and their enemies. Nor do we know much about how younger White children in diversely populated settings like Gonzales Elementary identify racially. The gap here is one of scale: in the sections that follow, I rely on such work, which has begun to make clear how race, culture, and identity are diffuse, negotiated, and contradictory in schools, to make my own claims about how these three girls identified in their classroom.

Methodology

Site and Participants

Gonzales Elementary was a small public kindergarten through fifth grade school with approximately 250 students; about 1/3 were African American, 1/3 Latino/a, 1/6 White, and 1/6 Asian. Over the past seven years, the principal had endeavored to draw neighborhood middle-class (mostly White) families to the school as she maintained the interest

⁵ These are much like the portrait done of social groups by Laurie Olsen (1997) in her study of immigrant high school students at another California high school.

⁶ For other studies about race, identity, and schooling from institutional perspectives (as opposed to more student-centered studies like these), see Ferguson (2001), Lei (2003), and Lewis (2003).

and support of existing African American and Latino families (who tended to be working-class and/or poor, and who usually lived in other, more distant, neighborhoods). The school's stated goal was to promote tolerance and work for the advancement of the civil rights of all of its students.

Research Questions

To investigate these issues in the girls' lives, I asked the following questions of my data: 1) How do each of these "White" girls identify racially, and for what purposes? And 2) In what ways do the girls use the city, their social networks, and other resources to position themselves as certain kinds of children and make their identity claims?

Data Collection and Analysis Strategies

The goal of my larger project was to investigate the salience of particular identity categories in literacy events. To accomplish this, the major method I employed was ethnography (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Erickson, 1986; Geertz, 1973); specifically, participant-observation sessions two to three times a week, for two hours a day, over the course of a year. Data sources were numerous, and include my field notes of in and out of school events, tape recordings and transcriptions of all events in which recording was possible; copies of all student work; digital photographs taken of students in and out of school; and interviews with a total of twenty students (Weiss, 1994). In addition, I had eight focal students (Christina and Cody among them) that I followed throughout the day, from home to school and back again. These home visits gave me valuable insight into the out of school lives of Cody and Christina; due to her constantly shifting home circumstances, Liz's mother was unable to accommodate my requests for such a visit. Christina's mother was one of my key adult informants, and she often told me stories about Christina and other children; some of her assessments of her daughter's identity work are included in my findings section.

I interviewed my focal students alone and in their friendship groups to gather more contextual data on how each girl presented herself racially alone with me and with her friends. Liz, who had no close friend, invited Marcus, another low-status student, to our pizza lunch/interview; Christina brought DeAndre and Vanessa on separate occasions; Cody brought Jordan and Ella together (all students are described in more detail below). In the larger project, I analyzed the data using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As I collected data, I created analytic categories with which I described participants' ongoing identity work as I saw it; I also created categories to describe what participants were doing with the multicultural curricula on offer in the classroom (Zacher, 2005b). In keeping with the tenets of

grounded theory, I continually reworked those categories as I collected and analyzed more data. In this article, in addition to hinting at some of those findings, I have conducted a conjunctural analysis of the many contingent factors that came into play in shaping these girls' racial identities (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005).

Findings

The Girls' Identities in the City

Geographers of childhood have urged us to pay more attention to the everyday spaces and spatial discourses that surround children (Gagen, 2000; Holloway, 2000; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Valentine, Skelton, & Chambers, 1998) to understand how children's interpretations of events and spaces influence their life choices and possible futures. How children use city spaces is determined, I argue, by their "deeply racialized" way of seeing cities (Cross & Keith, 1993, p. 4). For example, Cody and her two best friends, who also came from upper middle-class families, lived in houses their parents owned. Cody lived near the school in a mostly White neighborhood, and carpooled with her friends, who also lived near the school. Although she chose to refer to herself by a variety of ethnic identity labels instead of by the label White, she had no social need to pretend to a non-White identity. Her home and her neighborhood were mostly populated by White people, and most of those—except at school—were middle-class and upper middle-class. Given Cody's interview answers (above) about her racial identity, Whiteness seemed to be something to be avoided in the abstract, but, unlike Christina and Liz, she did not seem uncomfortable to embody Whiteness.

Christina lived in a rented house in a racially mixed Latino and White neighborhood. She was either driven to school by her mother or took the city bus (an acceptable practice for fifth-grade students in this city). Christina had asked to ride the bus because riding with Latino and African-American middle school students from her neighborhood fostered the image of "ghetto" that her teacher said she consciously created for her peers. According to Christina's teacher, who lived 3 blocks away in the same geographically bounded area, the neighborhood was a gentrifying mix of working-class and middle-class residents, but Christina purposefully described it as a "kinda cool, half-ghetto" neighborhood populated by people named "Vato, Chico, and Cruiser." These urban Latino nicknames sometimes connote gang affiliation; using them to name her neighborhood's denizens was yet another way Christina tried to distance herself from a middle-class White identity that, as I show below, she did not see as useful in school. Her mother reported that Christina often talked to these men—who were usually day laborers

waiting to be picked up for work at a street corner near their house—to practice her limited Spanish.

Liz, who had lived in apartments all over the city with her transient single mother, was either driven to school (often arriving late) or sometimes, when location permitted, was put on the school bus. Unlike Cody, who talked proudly about her house, or Christina, who used her neighborhood to foster her non-Whiteness, Liz had little to say about her homes to me or to any of her peers. At one point in the year, her mother and the classroom teacher arranged for Liz to stay with Jordan, Cody's best friend, in a temporary foster situation. While her mother tried to regain control of her finances and her life, Liz lived with Jordan. Although Jordan's mother reported to me that Liz seemed to enjoy doing her homework at their house and having a routine (Ms. Jean also described a lack of routines at Liz's mother's house), Liz did not speak much about being fostered with Jordan, and Jordan and her friends Cody and Ella did not socialize with Liz any more than they had before. Liz's mother eventually moved the family in with some of her own relatives, and little was ever said about the foster situation in the classroom again. These physical moves and the seeming lack of social ramifications show how disconnected Liz was from her peers, and how, due to her family's financial and housing problems, she was unable to use the city in her efforts to distance herself from a White identity. Christina played down the bourgeois nature of her neighborhood to distance herself from the class privileges associated with Whiteness; Cody seemed unaware of such privileges and appeared to simply enjoy and take pride in her home life; Liz, however, seemed at the mercy of events and seldom used her housing situation(s) to make identity claims.

Abstract and Embodied (Physical) White Identities

White feminists argue that Whiteness is often “learned simultaneously with a negative connotation, in terms of its attachment to privilege and exclusionism” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 73). At Gonzales, engagement across racial groups was promoted through school activities and the social justice curriculum, and particular Whites or groups of Whites (activists in the Civil Rights Movement, for instance) were championed for their efforts to break down barriers for and with people of color. However, Whites in the curriculum were generally not seen as victims, and they were linked with privilege and exclusion. This *mélange* of viewpoints on Whiteness may have resulted in the phenomenon that (as with one of the women in Frankenberg's study) the girls were “more sharply aware of racial *oppression* shaping Black [and other people of color's] experience than of race *privilege*” (1993, p. 59) in their own lives. Such a distinction may have been one explanation for why Christina claimed to be a Latina, and Liz refused to be called White;

they may have been either unconscious of the privileges of Whiteness (especially Liz, whose family was very poor), or attempting to get away from its assumed privileges by avoiding the label altogether (McIntosh, 1988).

In short, none of these three girls directly labeled themselves as White. Cody's friendship group included Jordan (who self-identified as "Irish" and "White") and Ella (who had been born in Mexico to parents who gave her up for adoption, and had been adopted as an infant by White parents, and identified as "Mexican,"). She had a fourth friend, Keisha, a troubled African American girl with whom she socialized and played in school. The girls purposefully excluded Keisha from out-of-school social activities because she was "difficult," they said. Cody's friends had many of the accoutrements and hobbies of upper middle-class children; they had cell phones, computers at home, and spent lots of time online emailing friends and playing with virtual pets and creations. Cody avoided being labeled as White, settling on German, Yiddish, and "a little Hispanic" (the last part drawn from a dark-haired, probably Mexican great-grandfather), but she was happy to label Jordan, and hear Jordan label herself, as White.

Christina's friends Marta and Vanessa both self-identified as Latina (of Mexican and Salvadoran/Venezuelan ancestry, respectively). The school recorded Christina's ethnicity as "W" for White in kindergarten, on a form filled out by her parents, and her parents were both White, her father Jewish. However, despite "knowing" she was "not a Latina" (according to a conversation with her mother that her mother relayed to me), she most often identified herself as Latina. She told her parents that one reason she preferred to be known as a Latina was that Marta and Vanessa "made fun of" White people. She used a variety of tools to maintain this identity, including writing an essay at school in which she transformed her Aunt Tamara into her Tía Tamára. Her brown hair and brown eyes made it easier for her to pass as Latina than it would have been for her had she been blond. However, she was not above invoking her father's Jewishness to make a connection with Vanessa, who was a self-styled specialist on the life of Anne Frank (Zacher, forthcoming).

Christina was an accomplished dancer out of school, and she enjoyed reading, talking on the phone, and sharing news about hip-hop and "Latin" music with Marta and Vanessa. The girls also gossiped about their peers and the boys in their social circle. They were a socially powerful trio, as evidenced by the group's connection to equally powerful boys and by their ability to "get away with" bad or rude behavior, as Jordan and Ella explained to me. Christina was best friends with DeAndre, the "most popular" boy in school by his own and his peers' estimation, and the leader of a group of African-American and

Latino boys—and her friendship with him cementer their groups’ shared social power (for a more comprehensive description of Christina’s social network, see Zacher, in press).

Christina had the ability to pass as Latina, to look Latina enough to be considered as one. Her friend Vanessa had roughly the same skin color, and darker hair, and might have tried to pass as White, but Marta had much darker skin and could not have passed. This privilege, Christina’s ability to switch and embody both Whiteness and Latina-ness, is of course not fair. It is, however, indicative of her social power in the classroom, and her keen sense of the classroom’s racial dynamics and social hierarchy. Unlike Cody, whose material privileges—home-owning parents included—were substantial, Christina was the child of middle-class parents and had fewer class privileges. Had she accepted “White” as her identity, and foregone her attempts at a Latina identity, she would have been forced to join either a group of lower-status Latinas (who did not have the social power of Christina’s group) or Cody’s group, where she seemed neither to fit nor to want to be.

Unlike Christina and Cody, Liz had little choice in several key areas of her life, and her case was steeped in tensions between race and class. As bell hooks notes, “class matters. Race and gender can be used as screens to deflect attention away from the harsh realities class politics exposes” (hooks, 2000), and Liz’s schoolwork and interpersonal relationships were doubtless affected by her family’s fortunes. On the other hand, in a school where all differences were named, and students read historical fiction that often cast Whites as genocidal racists (e.g., Armstrong, 2001), race was still quite salient for Liz. She liked to be called by “all the things” that she was, including Irish and German, and explained that “When I say, ‘I’m White,’ it doesn’t feel right. If I say ‘I’m White,’ it feels weird to say that.” In short, she denied being White, although to all appearances, and by all of the school adults’ standards, she was.

This denial of Whiteness seemed to indicate that Liz recognized a connection between Whiteness and privilege (McIntosh, 1988), but her understanding was not sophisticated enough to decouple race and class, or for her to use her family’s poverty to separate her in the eyes of her classmates from middle-class and upper middle-class Whites. Although, even had she been able to do so, she would probably not have wanted to emphasize her family’s poverty the way that Christina de-emphasized her own family’s middle-class status. Liz’s case represents some of the contradictions inherent in these girls’ identifications with Whiteness, contradictions that I discuss below.

Conclusions

We must be very careful when we label students, and we must take into account the multiple, and sometimes contradictory, pieces of

evidence they offer us to explain their own identity choices. Christina, for example, offered her teacher and peers many pieces of evidence to prove her Latina identity, and was skillful at pretending to be something she was not. She needed to identify as a Latina for social reasons, in order to fit in with a friendship group that she deemed popular, cool, and worthy of membership. In a feat of pretension, she used her extensive knowledge of Latino culture and identity categories to do so. This choice, which was accepted by her peers with limited success, was made for many reasons; it behooves researchers and teachers to look at not only the causes of such identifications but also the usefulness of them for students in the present moment. Her claim to be Latina may have been rooted in a denial of Whiteness, or in White guilt, but her more visible reasons had to do with her immediate social life.

Liz and Codys' stories offer us other lessons. In both of their cases, I have hinted at how parental social class impacts students' life and school experiences. "White" was an uncomfortable identity for these girls to claim, particularly for Liz, who was already low on the classroom status hierarchy and who may have felt that embracing a White identity would lower her status further in her diverse peer group's eyes. The social justice curriculum, and the social dynamics surrounding it, might have left these girls with little desire to be "White," but Jordan, another "White" girl, did claim her Whiteness with no apparent guilt or second thoughts (Zacher, 2005b). The curriculum might then be partially at fault, particularly for highlighting the many ways Whites repeatedly took away and denied the rights of others across time. At the same time, Ms. Jean was careful to discuss the many helpful, activist White people who did work for social justice, and Cody, for one, researched several White heroines for a unit on the women's factory strike of 1909 (Dash, 1996).

However, just like Christina, Liz and Cody were also actively maintaining their identities (Hall, 1996). They were trying on new social costumes, and using these costumes to angle for more peer approval. In other words, they were trying, as all of us do who learn, teach or research in diverse settings, to make the best of their limited resources in a racially sensitive environment. Avoiding or denying one's visible racial identity may not be a tenable long term strategy, but in this classroom, as the girls learned how to ameliorate injustices and fight for social justice through their teacher's curriculum, avoidance and denial must have seemed like good choices for the girls to make. In hindsight, with the luxury of time to analyze my data, I can suggest that Ms. Jean might have used the ongoing situation to explore Whiteness and racial identification in the current age.

She might, for example, have had all of the students in her class investigate the reasons behind their own current racial identity claims, looking at the notion of race abstractly. At the same time, she could have

had them explore the physical boundaries of embodied racial categories, such as skin color and hair color, that offer some people a chance to shed their identities and pass while seeming to confine others to distinct and inflexible categorizations. To deal with, and, indeed, build upon such shifting identity work, teachers must be aware of broader contexts, in and out of the classroom, in which their students are creating identities (Cazden & Mehan, 1989; Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, & Ellis, 2002). In addition to making for good, connected teaching, such knowledge can allow teachers to be sensitive to students' choices and be aware of the agency they are displaying.

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