



Chapter 11

NEGOTIATING THE MARGINS

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I NEVER WANTED to be White growing up. It is a good thing because I was not. But now, I am almost White in some people's eyes. How this happened tells not only a piece of some of my life story but, in hindsight, has allowed some of my critical thinking around racial and ethnic identity formation.

CHILDHOOD CONTEXT

My transformation of color has not been my own doing but a reflection of a larger racial project in this country. Reflections on my racial transformation, raised by one parent not familiar with the racial system of the United States and the other having internalized the system so well, figured critically into how I have been able to think about identity formation. I had to for survival's sake—both in the world and to make sense out of the subtleties of human interaction.

When I came to the United States with my mother as a small child, we were not White. My mother is a Filipina, not Filipina American, as she always reminds me even after 40-plus years. Whereas my father is a White American, he sustained some subtle and not so subtle demotions in status as a result of marrying a non-White person. Certain neighborhoods, while not closed to him as an individual, became closed to him as part of our family. (In the 1950s up until recently, mixed marriages always resulted in a demotion of status of the White partner.) However, I also think that gender figured in. My father always retained a significant aspect of his Whiteness because he was male and this was his country. Because of this, there was always a gap in his understanding, that although I was his daughter, there were certain barriers I encountered because of the construction of my gender, my race, my ethnicity, and stereotypes of interracial marriage and the children of these marriages.

Growing up, people queried me in ways that exposed their own confusion over ethnicity, race, and nationality. As a young child, insistent queries about "where I was from" yielded typical answers. I would give my school or my address, but I would be perplexed by not getting the answer right, cued by the continued questions that basically demanded an explanation for the way I looked. By some time in first grade if I answered the Philippines, a place I hardly remembered, people's questioning would relent. Of course, the variation most mixed-race people or persons with ambiguous phenotypes are asked is "What are you?" as I got older. I had to also learn to answer this question with all the history of race relations, global relations, and war that formed it. My early answers, followed by more questioning, implied that I lacked the intelligence to comprehend the question's simplicity. My lack of comprehension, and later my refusal to make it easy for people, would bring it back to the question "Where are you from?" I became aware at a young age that this line of questioning told me I was different, and it bred a certain level of self-consciousness. To have answered Filipino American was not a viable answer in the 1960s or even early 1970s; further, raised by a mother who only gave up her Philippine citizenship a decade ago, Filipino American did not really exist for her. At the time I was growing up, people hardly knew where the Philippines was or where the origin of such people was geographically located. Arriving in this country at a young age, I belonged to a small age cohort of Philippine-born Americans with Filipinas for mothers, Americans for fathers, negotiating the cultures, customs, foods, and ethnic identity.

Two of my maternal uncles were living in the United States by the time my mother and I arrived, followed shortly thereafter by my aunt, a first cousin of my mother. (The Filipino system of relations is generationally derived so that the cohort of relatives of my mother's age or her cousins and brothers and sister are all considered aunts and uncles.) We always lived within about an hour's drive of each other's families. We celebrated birthdays and holidays together. Because my father had been disowned by his father and my father was an only child, we had only his mother and her sister and her sister's husband as family. Thanksgiving was a holiday reserved for gathering with the "American" side of the family, who also lived fairly close. Meanwhile, I corresponded with one of my aunts in the Philippines and several cousins all throughout my childhood. Filipino culture was reinforced by our isolation from the American and White side of the family, continued correspondence with the Philippines, and the prolonged visits by family and friends (fictive kin). As with other cultures, a visit was always open-ended, and relatives and friends could stay for what might otherwise be seen as rude or too long. I benefited greatly from this contact. I started out multilingual; I regularly received international mail; I had three communion dresses. Some of the Filipino style was also more difficult as I grew older and inevitably wanted to be more like the other kids. The food at our house was different; the food in my lunches was different; my clothes and

hairstyles were different until I had more say in style. The physical cutoff from part of my father's family had seemingly little, if any, negative impact on my developmental years. However, in retrospect, its absence and the minimal contact with my paternal grandmother and great-aunt and uncle left us being raised in so many ways Filipino style. Because I was the first child, much of my mother's acculturation was more evident on me than on my brothers, and in part this was a gender issue, too.

In essence, from the beginnings of my conscious memory, I learned to negotiate the margins and became quite comfortable there. We were one of the only two non-White families on the block on which we resided from third grade to my graduation from high school. The neighborhood had a covenant that the family would laugh about forbidding Filipinos in the neighborhood except as gardeners and maids. What was laughable was that it was a working-class neighborhood in which people could not afford to hire gardeners or maids. At family gatherings, amidst the occasional joking about the covenants, overt discussions analyzing the juxtaposition of class and race took place that enabled me to understand the pretense associated with White privilege during those times.

We were watched closely by our neighbors and other people as we grew up. Hindsight has attributed this watchfulness to expecting the worst from us children and the friends we brought home because we were not White. We also experienced this in varying degrees with different teachers at school—surprised that I could perform well or not believing I had completed certain assignments without parental assistance.

There were many subtle ways in which I learned about White privilege. Whereas I can think of many experiences so commonly shared by people of color (e.g., parents disapproving of my dating their sons, expectations that my relatives would be uneducated, or that I would be grateful to receive certain recognition or opportunities), the truth was that on my father's side my relatives were uneducated, not having finished high school. He was the first to go to college and graduate. My Filipino family was educated with advanced degrees and distinguished accomplishments. I remember a not-so-subtle interview with my mother-in-law-to-be over 20 years ago when I was engaged to her son. In a manner of attempting to be sensitive, she asked if my uncle who was going to play the piano at our wedding spoke English. In the context in which the question was asked, one learns early that certain assumptions belie such a question. And being less mature than I am now, I laid the snare and simply answered "Yes." And then she went on to ask about his occupation and offered me some options, janitor being among them. At this point, I gave her information about the family, which not only addressed her assumptions about race and ethnicity but inherently addressed class issues. I explained that he was a Ph.D. chemist as was my other uncle, that both were multilingual, and that this was a well-educated family. It was so interesting that there was never any question about my father's White family and their class standing. Repeated experiences like

these over time with well-meaning people, usually people who liked me, were instructive about the juxtaposition of race, class, and ethnicity.

In high school, I remember my debate coach pulling me aside to counsel me that I could do better than the boy I was dating. Because I was going through a phase, if his intentions had been purely about the fact that I was dating some bad characters, his counsel would have been appropriate as a concerned adult. But the counsel included pointing out that I was not like the other non-White kids and that I was jeopardizing my reputation (the possibility of becoming more acceptable to Whites) if I continued to date Black and Chicano kids. The reality is that whereas White boys were interested in me, their parents were not.

The experience of my ambiguity through others' eyes, and the advantage of living in the margins, played out throughout my lifetime in many significant ways that ultimately shaped some of my understanding of what experience is possible by not being clearly recognized or labeled. I grew up in the Los Angeles area during the Watts riots and then significant rioting in the greater Los Angeles schools in my high school years. We would go through lockdowns at school and the call for law enforcement from surrounding cities to bring the high school under control. The conditions surrounding me sound still like what is posed as extreme at some high schools now. Kids were carrying knives and using them; some kids carried guns, but this was less frequent than today. Murders and suicides occurred that were race related. Even though I attended an integrated school, the attitudes were not integrated, and come riot time, there were the Whites and the Blacks. The Chicanos and the few Asians became virtually invisible. This was an instructive experience. Ironically, I was relatively safe being seen as neither Black nor White. The margins was a place of observance of how hostilities and tensions worked, how loyalties were formed, and how group belonging was enacted.

It is interesting how the race of Asians, and particularly mixed-race Asians, has been transformed in the past 25 to 30 years. Whereas some aspects of race seem more fluid, some aspects seem more apparently rigid. I need to remind myself that something has changed about race rules such that, in some contexts, if I am not Black, then I am considered White. With the change in some Asian Americans' status in America's eyes, many of us have been allowed to be honorary Whites ironically during a time where many of us have fought and want to hold on to our ethnic identity.

Whereas in my most recent work I articulate more clearly the co-construction of gender and race, I have multiple experiences upon which to reflect that make the pages of textbook analysis of gender and race very real. Perhaps because I was an observant child, I noticed how I was being genderized. My father came from a fairly traditional and conservative background, and there were definite ideas about how a "young lady" acted, and these would be passed on to me by my grandmother and great-aunt and great-uncle and my father. These comments would include my paternal

great-uncle asking how I kept my figure so trim (when I was only 11 and quite a skinny kid) and never on my brothers' physical appearance. My paternal grandmother and great-aunt were likely anorexic as they were so artificially thin-looking and obsessed with staying thin. So being a woman was about looking thin, attending to my figure, and being quiet. And at some level was the message that if this was kept utmost in priorities, despite my difference, I could be an attractive girl and ultimately woman. On my mother's side of the family, an aunt by marriage to one of my uncles, would also struggle with her body, her hair, and manners to model appropriate ways of being a female. On the other hand, my mother's behavior was labeled heathen, pagan, and unfeminine by some relatives; she was not considered fit to instruct a daughter in the rules of womanhood. My mother not only allowed me to be a "tomboy," she encouraged my athleticism and discouraged some very manipulative behaviors associated with femininity. She was questioned and reprimanded by the relatives on both sides for allowing me to be this way lest it influence my sexual orientation. My mother was outspoken, never apologized for her intellectual brightness, and would point out flaws in data or logic in her brothers' or my father's discussions. Her brothers did listen to her. The family stories included recognizing the role of my maternal grandmother as a strong woman basically utilizing her cleverness, entrepreneurial skills, and intellectual brightness to get the family through World War II in the Philippines. My maternal grandfather, though loved and appreciated, was a background figure. There seemed to be no question or reason to hide the fact that my maternal grandmother's line carried the gene for multiple intelligence and that all her children (my mother, aunt, and uncles) had it and were expected to use it.

INFLUENCES

Although I never set out to study myself, and in many ways have not directly, my experiences have undoubtedly informed some of the basis for my work. However, I must say that I never felt tortured about being mixed-race, perhaps because I was raised primarily in a Filipino family and Filipinos are very mixed. It is also possible that individual personality played a part. Whereas I am quite sensitive, there are ways in which I am quite thick-skinned; thus comments have not had as much impact on me as they might have on someone else. I grew up with overt discussions of gender socialization, class structures, colorism, ethnic and racial oppression, and the fact that these were all constructions that subsequently privileged some and disenfranchised others. My father was seldom an active participant in these discussions when he was present; he often left the room. Interpretations of the timing of his leaving were sometimes offered to me privately. My mother was significant to my development as a strong female who never felt the need to apologize or hide her or my intelligence. At the same time,

she accepted intelligence as normative and made sure that I never based a significant aspect of my self-worth on this fact. Her belief in herself, her pride in being Filipino to the point at times of being Filipinocentric, her kinship with many American Indian beliefs and spirituality and with people of color, and her disbelief that White persons were superior to anyone, allowed her to pass on tools to challenge subsequent messages I would encounter.

I also have been fortunate to have teachers who encouraged me and were patient in different ways, despite some of their stereotyping of me. These experiences have also allowed me to recognize that people can have their prejudices and may still offer something positive in skills building.

My undergraduate experience at the University of California at Riverside yielded several wonderful professors who inspired me and mentored me. I graduated with a double major in psychology and sociology. This double major was evidence that I was trying to contextualize individual process as well as understand some of the individual differences that might influence group process and even social stratification. Both majors had very strong influences on me. My ultimate decision to pursue a graduate degree in psychology boiled down to my understanding of the variety of jobs I might be able to pursue with an advanced psychology degree in comparison to a sociology degree—whether or not this was factual at the time. My psychology professors who were influential in my interest in psychology were Ovid Tseng (cognitive psychology), Austin Riesen (animal behavior), and Sally Sperling (learning). Their influences show how small acts of kindness and a little bit of individual time can have significant impact on a person. I worked as an undergraduate research assistant with Professors Tseng and Riesen. Both would discuss their work and talk to me as a person capable of following what they were saying or thinking despite the incredible knowledge and experience gap between us. Professor Sperling was one of the few female role models in the psychology department and a great believer in contextual learning and learning from feedback. I remember failing an exam and her enacting a policy with those of us who did fail to take the same exact test with notice so that we could learn from our mistakes.

In sociology, I was very fortunate to take several classes from Jane Mercer (educational assessment) and Edna Bonacich (economic theory of groups and group oppression). Group process was something not discussed in psychology and it made so much sense. Professor Mercer had just developed an alternative intelligence and educational assessment tool in an attempt to remedy the negative evaluation and bias operating against Chicano children in the Riverside County area. She made students think about biases and what we assume is fair. Professor Bonacich introduced me to the literature on slavery of kidnapped Africans and imported Asians and Mexicans, the internment of Japanese Americans, and the genocide of Jews. Class discussions were powerful and encouraged critical thinking. Other than my friends on campus, hers were the only classes in which I was in the

company of significant numbers of minority students. The work that some of my other professors taught seemed cutting edge in that path-analytic models were being used to explain the fact that the world is not simple and multiple influences impinge upon a person's experiences at different times. Symbolic Interactionist Theory has left an indelible mark on my theoretical thinking and model building. This sociological influence is apparent in my Ecological Model of Racial and Ethnic Identity Development.

I initially pursued a doctoral degree in experimental psychology, completing the course requirements and a master's degree under William Banks at Pomona College (one of the Claremont Colleges) while I was at Claremont Graduate School. I was very fortunate to work with Professor Banks, who was very patient and kind to me even though he could see that my talent did not rest in this area. I simultaneously worked with Richard Tsujimoto at Pitzer College. I was captivated by his course work on moral development. He was another very kind person who extended himself and made time for simple discussions as I attempted to develop a research project on the codevelopment of moral, social, and cognitive development in children. As I did, my interest in experimental psychology became almost nonexistent. My awareness that I lacked the passion and creativity to overcome the frustrations of experimental psychology led me to terminate my studies. I knew that if I finished the degree I would feel compelled to work as an experimental psychologist, and I knew I would be unhappy and fairly uncreative. I reapplied to graduate school in clinical psychology and was fortunate to have the opportunity to work with Stanley Sue at the University of Washington for two years. He offered course work and discussions that picked up where my undergraduate interest in sociology had ended. Professor Sue's guidance for my first two years of graduate training was critical. He helped students, particularly minority students, develop a network and bonds that have endured through moves and life changes. He also provided the foundation for making the link between psychology and sociology through community psychology. Also critical in my graduate training were Shirley Feldman-Summers for encouraging me to explore the role of gender in mental health and William Friedrich for introducing me to another way of thinking systemically about small systems, particularly families. Although psychology still was not overtly providing me the bridge between cultural information, gender, and group process, family systems work in light of my previous sociology course work provided another layer of conceptualizing group process.

When I completed the internship necessary for the clinical psychology degree, I was exhausted. I carried out my dissertation research during that year and lived an hour's bus commute from campus. Ironically, my goal to complete the degree, even if I was too tired to contemplate the next step, opened the door to considering a clinical career, even though I had explicitly trained to be an academic psychologist. In doing this for what I thought

might be an interim year or two, I found that I really enjoyed it and was still able to write and publish. Another influence on staying in clinical work was that I valued lifestyle greatly, which included climate, people, and culture. Seattle provided a definite cohort of Asian Americans, a temperate climate, and friendly people.

In hindsight, I realize that I would not have been able to produce the body of work I have if I had been at a major research university. Conceptual work, which is my forte, is not encouraged nor highly valued in psychology, particularly in the early stages of one's career. My first conceptual work came from my dissertation and centered on the conceptualization of family functioning and gender roles in families in the mid 1980s. Subsequently, my work of the past decade has focused primarily on identity development. One last academic experience informed this work.

I took a visiting professor position at the University of Hawaii in 1990. I had already planned that during this year I would explore the possibility of pulling together a group of researchers and writers who had taken up the theme of racial and ethnic identity in contemporary time but from the perspective of mixed-heritage people and edit a book. However, after several months in Honolulu, the passion to pursue this volume waned. This was the perfect setting to reinforce the notion of how contextualized racial and ethnic experiences are. I even questioned if I had somehow exaggerated the importance of racial and ethnic identity (along with some of my colleagues). However, with several trips back to the mainland, it was clear that this was an issue that needed to be tackled.

My work has benefited from odd juxtapositions of experiences and friends and colleagues who often see things differently from each other. Rather than taking sides, my experience of making sense of the margins has been to take whatever gifts each person offers and come to my own conclusions, which are undoubtedly a synthesis of all the thinking to which I have been exposed. Truly, one's work never develops in a vacuum. Conversations with and the work of several contemporary colleagues across disciplines have influenced my work. Those who have been most salient in both ways include psychologists Laura Brown, William Cross, Jr., Dorsey Green, Christine I. I. Hall, Janet Helms, Ronald C. Johnson, George Kitahara Kich, Robin LaDuc, Manuel Ramirez, Derald Sue, Michael Thornton, and Joseph Trimble; sociologists Edna Bonacich, G. Reginald Daniel, Abby Ferber, Cookie White Stephan, and Teresa Kay Williams; philosopher Naomi Zack; historian Paul Spickard; and feminist scholars Gloria Anzaldúa, Patricia Hill Collins, and Aida Hurtado. I am indebted to the challenges to which my colleagues before me rose, laying the foundation so that I could do the work I do at this point in time. I am forever indebted to my ancestors who still continue to guide me. Last, I am indebted to my mother who paid the price of being an unconventional woman, which ultimately allowed me to develop into who I am and the work I produce.

RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS

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