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THREE STORIES

Case Studies in Critical Ethnography

In this chapter, we meet three imaginary critical ethnographers, Joan, Robert, and Nia, who are each facing one of the biggest challenges of qualitative research: how to effectively and substantively interpret the relevant data and experiences encountered during fieldwork. They are each grappling with how to *theorize* and *analyze* the layers of meanings, symbols, implications, narrations, and possibilities they recorded, witnessed, and enacted. Both student and seasoned critical ethnographers confront this fundamental question: “How do I interpret what I have learned and discovered in the field?” As I have stated, in my view the ethnographer must have a certain command of theoretical knowledge in order to comprehend, critique, and communicate the worlds that were engaged with and inhabited in the field. Although our three ethnographers use a specific set of theoretical concepts for their individual projects, it is important to keep in mind that these concepts are not rigidly exclusive to any one project; indeed, they could be adapted between and among all of them to varying degrees and with varying emphasis. I have chosen to assign certain theoretical concepts to each case study based on how directly I felt they fit the nature and purpose of the project, not to determine or exclude their value for any particular subject.

In each of the three hypothetical case studies, the ethnographer faces a different set of issues and problems, but in combination, the three stories represent difficulties most of us have confronted in our projects in one form or another. I have imagined and created these three stories in order to encompass a wide range of problems and possibilities that the qualitative researcher might experience. We will follow Joan, Robert, and Nia through each section of the text as they variously struggle through the ethnographic challenges of critical theory, ethics, and performance.

CASE 1: LOCAL ACTIVISM IN WEST AFRICA

Key Concepts in Postcolonial and Marxist Theory

Joan is a graduate student conducting an ethnographic study of a group of indigenous global justice activists in a particular country in West Africa. These activists are working toward more just and fair policies for international trade and investment, as well as to reduce the proliferation and misuse in global arms trade. The group asserts that corporate investors constantly relocate and move money and jobs in and out of poorer countries at rapid speeds as soon as the companies turn a profit or the economy

fluctuates. They do this with no warning or preparation for the locals, and as a result leave the local economy devastated and people out of work. The group argues that these global corporations are playing “global casino” with the lives of poor people. The activists also mobilize citizens in villages and in cities to demonstrate against free-trade policies. They state that poorer countries are forced to increase their exports all at once; therefore, there is an excess of goods, resulting in a fall in their prices and profits. Poor countries make little profit for what they export; at the same time, richer countries gain a surplus by selling the “cheap” goods of poor countries at higher prices. As a consequence, poor countries must export twice as much to earn a small surplus; therefore, what little surplus they do earn is used to pay off debts.

Joan worked with the activists in their campaign to assist local farmers, whose lives are distressed by free-trade policies, with tools, transportation, and equipment. One local farmer said to Joan in an interview,

I can't compete with the big agricultural businesses because they dump their imports like rice and cotton, and the people suffer. How? I am a rice farmer with just a tractor and a hoe. I can produce only 15 bags of rice. I don't have the technology to produce a lot of rice. I travel very, very far to the market—a full day—to try to sell my rice. But the big business can sell their rice cheaper than I can sell my rice, and so the people buy their rice, because the people are so poor. I am a peasant farmer. I cannot compete with those big companies.¹

The activists are also waging a campaign with international organizations against weapons trading. They maintain that firearms contribute to the devastating casualties of tribal conflict, civil war, massacres, torture, and assassinations; moreover, they assert that arms proliferation in the United States and Europe is profiting from more than half a million women, men, and children who are killed around the world each year. In collaboration with other international organizations, the activists send e-mails and information announcements to legislators and policymakers in richer countries with this quotation from Amnesty International, IANSA, and Oxfam (1999):

The world's most powerful governments, who are also the world's biggest arms suppliers, have the greatest responsibility to control the global trade. The five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council—France, Russia, China, the U.K., and the U.S.A.—together account for about 88 percent of the world's conventional arms exports; and these exports contribute regularly to gross abuses of human rights.

As the activists work locally and globally against the uncontrolled proliferation and misuse of arms and in mobilizing their countrymen and women to join the international fair-trade movement, Joan participated with and observed them at every level. She was a cop performer in meetings and planning sessions, in recruitment and petition drives, in teach-ins and demonstrations, and in international correspondence and

regional collectives. In addition, Joan conducted in-depth interviews and extensive oral histories with key members of the group. She is committed to fieldwork and dialogical engagement. However, with all her preparation and sincere dedication to fieldwork and ethics, Joan never ceased to be both unsettled and frustrated by the effects of globalization. One of the most striking discoveries for Joan was the power and significance of globalization upon her work and upon the lives of the people around her. Joan came to understand that local inquiries, especially in the developing world, must be mindful of transnational economic interests: trade, investments, foreign exchange rates, technological access, foreign debt, labor, and the flow of capital. These multinationals guide economic realities, but they also guide the cultural and social realities of poverty and prosperity that, in turn, shape local knowledge and narratives.

Joan had not been prepared for the force of globalization upon the everyday life of the country. She came to understand that globalization is a critical factor for ethnographers because it has transformed geographical boundaries, capitalist production, national sovereignty, and social structures in a way that deeply affects the rights and well-being of humankind across the planet. An important part of her research was coming to understand how the everyday affairs of local life and individual thriving are influenced by global power. As a critical ethnographer, she grappled with the dubious truths within the positives and negatives of economic globalization: the prosperity of the few at the expense of the many, a prosperity that simultaneously results in innovations in human communication, technological efficiency, and educational expansion. Joan has observed the positive side of globalization with its startling advancements in communication. People from all over the world are forming alliances and connections that have enormous effects. But she also observed the negative side: Natural resources upon which local citizens depend were being devastated for cooperate interests and profit because local communities suffering under the dire circumstances of poverty feel they have no other choice but to destroy their natural environment to exist.

As Joan witnessed the effects of the global economy on the West African country of her fieldwork, she also witnessed what local activists were doing about it. First, the activists were steadfast in seeking nonviolent and creative measures to pressure and persuade multinational corporations to set fair standards for labor practices and environmental protection. Second, the activists formed alliances with other members of civil society who were working to develop international laws and trade agreements that would be enforceable by creating accountability measures of conduct for the establishment of fair-trade practices. Third, the activists also worked with other members of the international community in a campaign to more effectively democratize international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, so that developing countries would have greater representation and a stronger voice in decisions that guide the global economy.

The Final Stages

Joan was in the final stages of her fieldwork and was beginning to organize and log her data. As she gathered interview tapes and field notes from her journal, as well

as newspaper clippings and other relevant documents, she began separating them into thematic clusters. Three main clusters developed from the morass of data. Joan realized that each one of the three clusters was a central issue that most ethnographers conducting fieldwork on global justice in developing countries or the global South would examine: (a) *postcolonialism*, (b) *globalization*, and (c) *local activism*. These three major clusters would be further divided and refined into more discrete or specific themes. From each of these three themes, a number of subthemes (up to four or five) might evolve. However, it was these general or overriding themes that directed Joan to the particular theoretical methods that she needed to interpret her data and to build up her critical ideas. From the general domains of postcolonialism, globalization, and local activism, Joan employed theories related to materialism, specifically *postcolonial critique* and *Marxist theory*.

The second half of this story provides a general outline or definition of specific theoretical concepts, followed by examples that illustrate how these concepts may be applied in critical ethnography by using concrete examples from Joan's fieldwork.

Key Concepts in Postcolonialism

As Joan read the most current literature on postcolonial theory and tried to understand how the theory related to the time and space of her fieldwork, she discovered that the term *postcolonialism* refers to phenomena that are much more extensive than the particular time period after independence or imperial occupation. Postcolonialism, therefore, is not substantially a historical date, as in "post-colonialism" (after colonialism), but rather it represents formations of meanings and practices. Postcolonialism refers to the multiple forms and locations of discourse, performance, politics, value, and the "everyday"—both past and present—that emanate from the history of colonialism (Appiah, 1992; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1998; Loomba, 1998; McClintock, 1994; Young, 2001).

For Joan, as a critical ethnographer, the more useful term is *postcolonialism*, written without the hyphen to indicate the broader and more complex cultural politics that encompass the historical epochs of colonial rule and independence, as well as the contemporary era of globalization and postmodernity. She requires postcolonial theory to analyze her fieldwork experiences.

Postcolonial theory argues that in countries constituted by a colonial past—whether it is the Americas, Asia, or Africa—postcolonialism entails "all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present" (Ashcroft et al., 1989, p. 2). Therefore, when the critical ethnographer enters into a country with a colonial past, he or she also enters into a postcolonial present, with all the symbolic and material remnants passed down from the history of colonialism. Because postcolonial theory asserts that the aftermath of the colonial past exceeds the historical moment or transition from colonialism to independence, we examine how the colonial epoch—for better and for worse—profoundly affected education,

language, geographic borders, religion, governmental structures, and cultural values that are carried forth to the present and will continue to be carried forth in the future.

While postcolonial theory examines various circumstances that constitute the present setting—settlement and dislocation, economic and material stratification, strategies of local resistance, as well as representation, identity, belonging, and expressive traditions—in order to more fully comprehend this present, postcolonial theory also examines and reenvision history.

Postcolonial theory disentangles and critiques the social, cultural, and political implications of both the colonial epoch and the epoch referred to as *neocolonialism* (Nkrumah, 1966, 1968, 1969). Postcolonial theory examines the silenced expressions and subordinated practices that occur on the margins of power and brings them to the center of analysis. It debunks the taken-for-granted superiority of the metropolitan or imperial “center” that occupies not only the material institutions of power and dominance, but also how superiority figures into the imaginations of both the oppressor and oppressed (Ashcroft et al., 1989). For the critical ethnographer who is new to the literature, delimiting the complex and far-ranging inquiries that span postcolonial theory can be a challenging undertaking. Therefore, Joan chose to focus on four specific areas of inquiry in postcolonial literature: (a) language and hybridity, (b) place and displacement, (c) appropriation and mimicry, and (d) neocolonialism and three notions of development.

Language and Hybridity

The language and hybridity area of examination is important in fieldwork because it addresses the profound importance of language relative to cultural identity and belonging as well as the multilayered implications when an imperial language displaces a people’s native language. The results are a complex hybrid of meanings and cultural practices. One’s language reflects one’s identity and belonging: who they are, where they come from, and their class status and power. We understand language to be a systematic means of communication inherited by culture, tradition, and history to name things, to express needs, wants, and desires, as well as to be the product and producer of knowledge and value. We exist through language. Hybridity refers to mixed origins or the offspring of dissimilar parentage. In the postcolonial context, hybridity marks the tensions, dialectics, and appropriations amongst colonizing forces and those who were colonized. It encompasses the varying and multiple mixtures of languages, discourses, and practices that resulted in the history of colonial contact.

Conceptualizations of language and hybridity helped Joan interpret (a) how her learning the local language evoked trust and respect from her consultants, (b) how speaking the local language is an act of resistance and an affirmation of identity for local people, and (c) the significance of cultural symbols, codes, practices, and values in a country comprising of a mixture of traditions both from a colonial past and from multiple ethnic groups.

BRIEF HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Globalization and colonialism begin with Christopher Columbus and the search for wealth and power. This continued for 450 years under European colonization. Colonialism developed during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries from the quest for profit and explorations of discovery. Colonialism escalated in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries with the settlements and exploitation of lands in Africa and Asia for the purpose of expanding the market for Western goods, controlling the natural resources of indigenous lands and exploiting the labor of native people (Young, 2001).

Most of Europe sought colonies in Africa and the Pacific. In what is popularly called "the scramble for Africa," European nations partitioned the continent of Africa and carved up the islands of the Pacific at the historic and notorious Berlin Conference between 1884 and 1885 (Young, 2001, p. 31). The result was that the Pacific Islands and almost every part of the African continent became a European colony. With advanced technology and military capabilities, Western nations easily conquered Africa and the Pacific. Western imperial domination was justified by the attitude that the West should control these areas in order to protect what Westerners viewed as weak peoples (Young, 2001, p. 50). According to Robert J. C. Young, the citizens of the imperial countries "supported this view especially because, with the exception of Japan's control of Korea, the power holders were white and their subjects were people of color" (Young, 2001, p. 31).

Modernity and technology burgeoned as colonialism made Western nations rich through the extraction of labor and resources from colonized countries. "By WWI, imperial powers occupied or controlled nine-tenths of the territory of the globe," but this state of affairs began to change when, at the end of the second World War, "the Bolshevik Revolution emerged from chaos and destruction changing the nature of European class politics as well as the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer" (Young, 2001, p. 59).

The nineteenth century is marked by a history of imperial appropriation, while the twentieth century is marked by a struggle for independence (Young, 2001, p. 60). Colonialism came to an end as resistance movements began to emerge both within the imperial countries and even more forcefully within colonized territories. After World War II, these overpowering resistance movements made the colonial enterprise far too costly by "creating a barrier to Europe's own expansion" (Young, 2001, p. 43).

After colonialism ended, a new era of imperial domination was forming that is referred to as *neocolonialism*. The term *neocolonialism* was introduced in 1961 by the president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah (president of the first African country to win its independence from the British). Neocolonialism refers to the "imperial system of economic exploitation, in which the metropolitan center drains the resources of the periphery while at the same time encouraging it to consume its manufactured products in an unequal, unbalanced system of exchange" (Young, 2001, p. 47).

Place and Displacement

Place and displacement address the range of effects and material consequences within the dynamic of migration from one local site to another, as well as migration from one's homeland, as the colonized margin, to the colonial center of the European

or global North metropole. This theme also illuminates the effects and what it means to live and travel out of feelings of necessity and desire between dichotomous spaces that are demarcated as the margin and the center, between the “third world” and the “first world.”

Conceptualizations of place and displacement helped Joan interpret (a) how “freedom of movement” became so highly valued and desired and how it often guides and determines everyday actions; (b) how identities and names are given to those who travel and live abroad and the historical implications of such naming; (c) the relationship to region, land, and ethnicity among those migrating to and from other areas in the country; and (d) the cultural, social, and economic differences between rural life and city life.

Appropriation and Mimicry

Cultural appropriation is cultural borrowing, or it is to take something from something else by means of borrowing, recycling, or sampling aspects on one cultural form to recreate another. Appropriation involves an intertextual process of creating or revising an object, idea, or subject from another object, idea, or subject to create another or different version. Appropriation is not intended to imitate or to make one form identical to another or to necessarily make it known that appropriation has even taken place or to reveal that in creating this new form something had been borrowed. Mimicry, however, is the *act of mimicking or imitating behavior. It is the act or ability to simulate the appearance of someone or something else; to act in an effort to resemble or to be identical to someone or something else.* Appropriation and mimicry examine the internalization of colonialism by the colonial subjects. They are concerned with the psychodynamics of the “native” who believes the discourse of superiority and believes that he or she is the “inferior native.” They illuminate the various ways indigenous people mimic the Europeans to live the illusion that they are “like him”—like the colonizer—or not like other indigenous people. The concept of appropriation and mimicry helped Joan in articulating (a) those who are accused of internalizing the racial and national inferiority perpetuated by their colonial “masters”; (b) the source and styles in the denigration of speech, dress, mannerisms, and economic status that is described as “white” or “European”; (c) the ambivalence toward the educated and rich among the population, the belief that they are complicitous with European life and values on one hand, and in opposition and defiance of them on the other; and (d) the strategies and motivation in adapting or appropriating “whiteness” for the purpose of turning back on it and both ridiculing and interrogating it.

Neocolonialism and Three Notions of Development

The term *neocolonialism* was developed by the first president of Ghana, West Africa, Kwame Nkrumah (1966, 1968), after Ghana won its independence from the British. It basically refers to the economic and political control—without assuming direct governance—by a powerful country over its former colonies or over less economically positioned countries where the poorer countries continue to remain

economically dependent on the rich, industrialized nations through international institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization.

Development is contradictory and paradoxical, both as a category and as a historical process. I pose two descriptions that relate to the ethnographic inquiry of our case study. Elias Kewku Asiama states,

Above all, Development is that human effort and ability to manage both the natural, human, scientific, and economic resources in the advancement of the most underprivileged in society. Development is the ability to create consciousness and the acceptance of the responsibility of taking into consideration the fact that the earth must be left better habitable for the future generations. This means, development leads to both analytical and reflective considerations of what should be accepted by humanity that would enhance dignity and self-image in a globalizing world. (2003, p. 6)

The second description of development, by Arturo Escobar, describes it as “a domain of thought and action” that constitutes “characteristics and interrelations” along

three axis: the forms of knowledge that refer to it and through which it comes into being and is elaborated into objects, concepts, theories, and the like; the system of power that regulates its practice; and the forms of subjectivity fostered by this discourse, those through which people come to recognize themselves as developed or underdeveloped. (Escobar, 1995)

A third description of development comes from the idea that in the second half of the twentieth century, development has come to refer mainly to the processes of change occurring in the newly independent countries of the Third World. The concept is used to describe the

natural processes of capitalist expansion (industrial development, the development of natural resources), but more frequently it implies the actions of a national government or international organizations, such as the World Bank, to purposefully enable those types of activities that promise a better life and alleviate suffering. In short, development has increasingly come to mean something we do, rather than something that happened to us. (Schech & Haggis, 2000)

The concern in terms of neocolonialism is with contemporary power relations and global imbalances. It articulates how developing countries are manipulated and governed by remote control through the economic force of northern and economically advanced countries. It examines the inequities of poor countries, who must concede to the demands of the rich countries in the North, particularly in the form of trade

and other economic factors. The theme of corruption explores the operations of the ruling elite in the home country and the consequences of their greed, duplicity, and corrupt practices on local suffering in terms of tribal wars, increased poverty, and human rights violations.

The concept of neocolonialism helped Joan in illuminating (a) the attitude of local people toward corruption in their country, (b) how the work of local activists is made more difficult by local authorities, (c) the connection in local suffering and global inequity, and (d) the levels of control the global North has over the economic futures of those in the global South.

Additional postcolonial terms that were helpful to Joan include:

ALLEGORY: A story, poem, or picture symbolically referring to a contentious action or situation. Allegory is significant for post-colonial writers for its rhetorical and political force in its critique of orthodox histories and imperial representations of colonized subjects.

ALTERITY: Alterity is derived from the Latin *alteritas*, meaning the existential state of difference or otherness.

CONTRAPUNTAL READING: Edward Said offered this term to describe a manner of reading English literature that unveils implications of imperialism and colonial processes. Derived from music, the term implies counterpoint readings of texts that points to hidden machinations of colonial power.

NATIVISM: The rhetoric of decolonization as a return to indigenous or traditional practices and cultural forms as they existed in pre-colonial society.

RHIZOME: A root system that spreads across the ground instead of downward, and grows from multiple points as opposed to a single tap root. In post-colonial theory it is used to denote structures of imperial powers that function rhizomically rather than monolithically, or as hierarchies, binaries, and centers. Instead, power positions are constantly diffused and intersecting within the rhizome of imperial cross-sections and spreads.

Key Concepts in Marxist Thought

The Marxist doctrine states that the development of human society is based on and determined by economic and social forces. Therefore, Marxism is concerned with how modes of production and class structure influence knowledge and the nature of existence. Marxism claims that it is not the consciousness of people that determines their being, but rather the opposite: Their social being determines their consciousness. In other words, poverty, exploitation, and wretched material conditions determine how one thinks and acts in the world. For Karl Marx (1977, 1983; Marx & Engels, 1976), it was the economic formation of a society and power arrangements that directed both social relations and individual awareness.

TRADITION AND MULTIPLE/ ALTERNATIVE MODERNITIES

Modernity is centuries old and ironically as old or older than the formations of some traditions. Dilip Gaonkar reminds us that modernity came slowly, “bit by bit” (then and now), spanning a range of postmedieval histories through machinations of exchange, encounter, and confrontation that were “transported through commerce; administered by empires, bearing colonial inscriptions; propelled by nationalism; and now increasingly steered by global media, migration, and capital” (Gaonkar, 1988, p. 169). As multiple as modernity is in its different stages and formations across the globe and within nations, it is universally understood as *the* post-Enlightenment phenomenon of progress that does the work of advancing knowledge and existence. As Lawrence Grossberg states, “Modernity is always built upon a distinction through which the modern (nation) distinguishes and separates itself—spatially, temporally, and culturally—from the premodern or traditional” (Grossberg, 1994). Alternative/multiple modernities are modernities that question how the past works upon the present and how the past and present merge to create certain consequences and representations of reality. The notion of alternative modernities also demonstrates that non-Western people engage and critically generate their own “hybrid modernities,” which often means taking what they need from Western discourses and practices and then keeping what they need from their own traditions.

Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye (1997) explores the dilemmas of tradition:

To say that a belief or practice is handed down to a generation is to say that it is bequeathed to the generation, passed on to it. But what this really means is that the belief or practice is placed at the disposal of the new generation in the expectation that the generation would preserve it. But the preservation of it, in part or in whole, would depend very much on the attitude the new generation adopts toward it and would not necessarily be automatic, as the word “transmit” would suggest. If we look back across the line, we find that some of the cultural values created . . . are dropped by subsequent generations, or they simply sink into oblivion—winnowed away by time. Those values were, for one reason or another, not accepted, maintained, or preserved by subsequent generations. This means that the continuity and survival of a pristine cultural product depends on the normative considerations that will be brought to bear on it by a subsequent generation. The forebearers—the previous generation—do not “transmit” their cultural creations as such; what they do rather is to place them at the disposal of subsequent generations of people. But the subsequent generations may on normative or other rational grounds either accept, refine, or preserve them or spurn, depreciate, or abandon them. The desire or intention of a subsequent generation to preserve or abandon inherited cultural products often results from some kind

of evaluation of those cultural products and the tradition they lead to. Such critical evaluations are essential for the growth and revitalization of cultural tradition. (p. 222)

Gyekye is reminding us that tradition is a thing “made” and “remade” based on generational will and “critical evaluations.” Tradition is not an automatic or natural inherent progression; it lives only through the deliberate considerations of proceeding generations (Madison, 2010).

Joan chose the following key terms and definitions from Marxist theory in her research. These ideas were central in illuminating the complex webs of meaning that Joan encountered in a “developing world” context.

Capitalism

Capitalism is an economic system in which the private ownership of wealth (or capital) is structured toward the accumulation of more wealth (or surplus). Jan Aart Scholte (2000) defines capitalism, within the present global economy, by the following five processes. First, capitalism is a structure of production in which economic activity is oriented first and foremost to the accumulation of surplus. In other words, capitalist producers (who might be individuals, private firms, publicly owned enterprises, or other collective actors) attempt to “amass ever-greater resources in excess of their survival needs” (p. 95). Second, under capitalism, surpluses are invested in further production, “with the aim of acquiring additional surplus, which is then reinvested in still more production, in the hope of obtaining still more surplus, and so on” (p. 95). Third, capitalism offers “abundant opportunities to transfer surplus, especially from the weak to the powerful” (p. 95). Fourth, many other problems and conflicts remain dormant, because poor peoples in the South are unaware that much of their country’s “limited surplus value is being transferred to the North through the repayment of global debts” (p. 96). Fifth, “Today, the structural power of capitalism is such that most of the world’s population regard surplus accumulation as a ‘natural’ circumstance and can scarcely imagine, let alone pursue, an alternative mode of production” (p. 96).

Joan could not avoid implicating the dubious nature of capitalism in her analysis of the global justice movement in West Africa. The literature on capitalism aided Joan in addressing questions regarding the inequities she experienced around her and how its roots and foundations can be identified.

The Circuit and the Hidden Abode

The circuit is the mechanism sustaining and generating capitalist production. It is composed of varying levels that take the basic form of production, distribution, consumption, and reproduction. The circuit is continuously moving, while each

condition of production is dependent on the other. The *hidden abode* refers to the condition of the circuit and capitalist production that is hidden in the everyday. Labor and the market are in many ways consciously “seen” and clearly experienced; therefore, this phase of production is apparent. However, there still remain hidden forces that translate and justify the circuit through behaviors, values, symbolic acts, and discourse that obscure and code certain operations that are not apparent (Marx, 1977) and often not seen.

The idea of the circuit and hidden abode aided Joan in articulating (a) how much of the work of the activist is in their attempt to bring to light the mechanisms of the global economy and arms trade that were hidden from the general public, (b) how trade rules are put into place and how profits are made and accumulated, and (c) how the machinery of production, distribution, consumption, and reproduction is working for the benefit of some at the despair of others.

Alienation

The product produced by the worker is now alien to him or her in exchange value; that is, the worker cannot afford to buy the very product he or she has produced; it stands opposed to the worker and is an objectification of his or her labor. The worker is also “unfulfilled” by this work. The labor does not belong to the worker, but to the capitalist owner. According to Marx (1977, 1983), the worker sinks to the level of a commodity. Laborers become “things” because their work does not belong to them—the worker feels alienated from his or her own work and then looks to the leisure time within the home community to feel free, human, and expressive.

Joan witnessed many entrepreneurs, farmers, and craftspeople who took pride in their work and felt a sense of ownership relative to their labor. However, the concept of alienation helped Joan (a) name and decipher the others who labored for long hours of the day but could barely make a living for themselves or their families; (b) articulate why their labor was not a source of pride, but rather an obligation and a dread; (c) express the sense of resentment on the part of laborers, who feel their wage was not equal to the labor they provided; and (d) articulate the absence of alienation when wage and benefits were equal and fair.

Class Consciousness

In Marxist theory, class constitutes divisions among groups of people in a society based on their economic resources and the values, opportunities, aesthetics, and social arrangements that evolve from these divisions. Those who accept uncritically the oppressive power arrangements of the world will form dominant or ruling class values and interests—although, according to traditional Marxism, they operate under a *false consciousness* (Marx, 1977, 1983). However, when the proletariat or subordinate classes are aware of the inequity of the world from the need, value, and perspective of their class positioning, they reject the interest of the oppressive class and are then operating under class consciousness.

The concept of *class consciousness* was useful to Joan in (a) the manner the activists articulated class stratifications within their own country; (b) the manner stratification divisions operated based on education, cultural capital, and moral values; and (c) how the activists focused on poverty and the political economy in their efforts to enlighten local people of class divisions.

Commodity Fetishism and Materialism

The desire to consume is built into the society in order to sell products and keep the economy efficient. Commodity fetishism creates the desire to own and to possess an object—the commodity. A fetish has magical powers. Marxism asserts that commodities become a fetish because of our obsession to have them and because of the power they hold over us to consume or attain them. The commodity concepts aided Joan in interpreting (a) the influences, for better and worse, of popular culture and the media in interpolating or seducing people to buy what they cannot afford and to obsess over material objects such as cars, clothes, and jewels; and (b) how the activists expressed the challenges in combating commodity fetishism and the obsession some of their people have with the images and material objects represented in and advertised by American popular culture. In Marx's opinion, commodity fetishism became pervasive especially in capitalist society, because this kind of society is based almost totally on the "production of commodities by means of commodities." That means that market relationships influence almost everything that people do, something that was not the case in precapitalist societies, where commerce was much more restricted.

The concept of commodity fetishism plays a crucial role in Marx's theory because it links the *subjective* aspects of economic value to its *objective* aspects, through the transformation of a symbolization of value into a reification that attains the power of an objective social force. Subsequently, he clarifies that many different economic phenomena can be "fetishized" (the fetish of money, the fetish of interest-bearing capital, etc.) to the extent that they attain an independent power vis-a-vis the people. But these further developments of commercial fetishism nevertheless have their origins in commodity trade.

Hegemony and Interpellation

In its traditional definition, *hegemony* meant political control and domination of one state over another. The cultural critic Antonio Gramsci (1977, 1978, 1994) used the term differently to mean the manner in which dominant classes controlled and exploited subordinate groups by consent, thereby masking exploitation by convincing the exploited that their condition was natural to them, even good for them. Cultural institutions, at the level of superstructure, create ideas and images of acceptance and acquiescence to the *status quo*. The central feature of Gramsci's notion of hegemony is that it operates without force. We give consent because we are interpolated and prescribed to believe that the interest of the power bloc is really our interest. It becomes our worldview, and through hegemony we are in complicity with our own subordination.

Interpellation refers to the manner in which representations and messages in culture—particularly media, art forms, advertising, and so forth—coerce, seduce, or call us forth to accept the ideologies and value that these forms project. Interpellation is a concept of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1969) to describe the process by which ideology addresses the (abstract) preideological individual, thus effectively producing him or her as subject proper. Henceforth, Althusser goes against the classical definition of the subject as cause and substance: In other words, the situation always precedes the (individual or collective) subject.

The concept of hegemony helped Joan by (a) addressing the question of how people can act against their own best interest by causing injury and harm to their own people; (b) asking why some local people kept corrupt and brutal leaders in office; and (c) examining how people are oppressed by consent and out of the direct control and view of the oppressor.

Neoliberalism/Neoconservatism and Political Economy

Contemporary political economy refers to various approaches in the relationship between economic processes and sociopolitical behaviors. Political economy is interdisciplinary in that it draws from both the humanities and the social sciences in examining how political institutions and economic systems (capitalist, socialist, and a combination) operate and affect institutions, culture, and human behavior. Political economy is concerned with economic ideas and behaviors and their relationship with belief and action. *Neoliberalism* is a late-twentieth-century philosophy, born out of classical liberalism (that was influenced by neoclassical theories of economics). The central values of neoliberalism are free markets, free trade, privatization of public-sector economies, and deregulation. The term can be confusing because *liberal* commonly refers to someone who endorses government support for domestic programs and progressive taxes, opposes war, is pro-labor, and is critical of big business (Blau & Moncada, 2005; di Leonardo, 2008). *Liberal* in these terms is not the same as neoliberalism or a neoliberal. Neoliberalism can often function in opposition to the general liberal principles just listed. *Neoliberalism* and *neoliberal* are more aligned with “neocons” or neoconservatism, a philosophy that at its core is a commitment to individualism within politics, economics, and society where government regulations and social welfare assistance are impediments to individual freedom. Neoliberalism is an ideology that believes human well-being is better served by “liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills” within structures and institutions that generate, promote, and sustain strong property rights, free markets, and free trade, all of which takes precedence over the interest of labor, social services, and local entrepreneurship” (Collins, di Leonardo, & Williams, 2008; Harvey, 2005).

Praxis

Marx envisioned a world in which people were no longer divided by class and no longer alienated from one another or their own labor due to the capitalist mode of

production. He envisioned an unalienated world through the idea of *praxis* (Marx, 1977, 1983). Praxis is the creation of alternative ways of being and courageous engagement with the world in order to change it.

The concept of praxis encapsulates the intensions and practices of the local activists. This concept helped Joan (a) articulate the dedication of the activists in their intervention upon poverty and injustice, (b) address the question of the British cultural critic Stuart Hall (1997): What can we do about the “problems that beset our world”?; and (c) adapt a vocabulary to help make the notion of “hope” more tangible and empirical.

CASE 2: SECRETS, SEXUALITY, AND ORAL HISTORY

Robert is an oral historian focusing on the personal narrative of three gay men who, at varying levels, are concealing their sexuality. Each of the three men has different reasons for not coming out, and each of them is from different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Robert chose an effective method to select the subjects for his study: He met with members of the gay and lesbian organization on his campus and spoke with them; he gave them a copy of his lay summary indicating who he is, what he planned to do, his research questions, the role of the participants, and the measures he would take to safeguard their anonymity and confidentiality. Robert asked the organization if they could advise him on where he might place announcements for his study and if they would recommend individuals who might be interested in participating. He also asked if there were other support groups or organizations that might have access to such individuals. After reading the summary and listening carefully to Robert, the organization was convinced that he would protect the identities of his subjects and that his study would contribute to a heightened awareness and sensitivity to gay and lesbian concerns. They agreed to assist Robert in locating individuals and to provide a list of other groups that might be amenable to recommendations.

Through references from several organizations that are aligned with and supportive of the particular interests and issues that would affect the individuals Robert wished to interview, he was able to identify three men for his study. In the initial meeting and screening interview with the three men, Robert explained his method for anonymity and confidentiality. Because of his thoughtful and detailed explanation, the men felt secure and protected and, so, consented to participate in the study. Robert developed a trusting and close rapport with each of them and conducted in-depth interviews over a period of one year. Introduced as a friend, Robert accompanied the men to various locations and events and met family members and close friends.

Each of the men embodies his own unique life story and reason for concealment.

Harry is a wealthy, middle-aged businessman with a wife and a three-year-old daughter. He is the chief executive officer of a large corporation. Harry has been married for five years; he and his family live in the Midwest. He has a stable marriage and is a loving father. No one knows of his bisexual lifestyle except his support group and his male partner of two years.

Jim is a 21-year-old first-generation college student. He is on a football scholarship at a state university. He comes from a fundamentalist Christian family in a northwest rural community. Jim is in the early stages of his first same sex relationship. Only two trusted friends know about Jim's relationship. He has no plans to tell his family.

Raymond is an 18-year-old, popular high school athlete, from a middle-class family that has lived in the same southern town for four generations. Raymond received a full scholarship to attend a state university in the Northeast. He is the first in his family dating back to his great, great paternal grandfather who did not attend a particular historically black university. Raymond has not disclosed his sexuality to anyone except a school counselor.

Over the year that Robert conducted his interviews with Harry, Jim, and Raymond, he was often struck by the differing degrees of alienation and fear each man expressed at the thought of openly revealing his sexuality. Each man referred to very specific individuals whom he felt would not understand and must never know. Harry observed that all three of the men carried this burden of secrecy with them in the day-to-day activities of their lives, not because they were afraid of discrimination or shame from society at large, but more because of the disappointment, scorn, or pain it would cause specific individuals: certain colleagues, family, and friends. They felt the secret was the only form of defense for themselves, as well as for those individuals who were integral in their lives.

However, Robert made an interesting observation. He realized that full disclosure for each of the men seemed to be both desirable and frightfully unimaginable: Each man expressed a feeling of being forcefully pulled between an internal need to tell and external demands to keep the secret. When Robert asked the men why they wanted to be part of his study, they each expressed, in their own terms, the feeling of a necessary and longed-for "freedom" that narration before a trusted listener in the naming and reflection of their fears and desires would provide. The freedom through narration the men expressed reminded Robert of what the anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1982) called *definitional ceremonies*, where socially marginalized individuals "regularly seek opportunities to appear before others in the light of their own *internally provided interpretations*" (p. 105). The constructed meetings of the in-depth interview become performed narrations and performative self-reflections in which the narrator is both the actor and the audience of his own life story and his own interpreted life meanings. It is during these definitional ceremonies that we may come into the fullness of our human capability—and perhaps human desire—to watch ourselves and enjoy knowing what we know (Myerhoff, 1982). Narrative is both the joy-filled freedom of expression and a confirmation. Harry, Jim, and Raymond were active narrators, appreciating the enduring consolation and the liberatory experience their definitional ceremonies provided. As the study was coming to an end, each man expressed to Robert the value of the life history project in contributing to a greater sense of clarity and awareness of what it means to make certain life choices and the contexts that generate them.

Robert contemplated the power that narration as definitional ceremonies has to serve a purpose beyond organically healing and providing comfort; more specifically

in the case of Harry, Jim, and Raymond, narration served to reveal the ways in which (hetero)sexuality is insidiously and covertly ingrained in human interaction and valued at most every level of social life, and it helped to expose the multiple disguises and forms of homophobia, from quiet disapproval to blatant aggression. Robert felt comfort in knowing that each narration put a human face on and added a particular history to the idea of the Other and social justice relative to what it means to be gay and to feel you must hold your life together by a secret.

Robert contemplated the method of interpretation that would best illuminate the meanings embedded in the stories told by each of the men. On the one hand, entering their narratives from their own point of view necessarily required an understanding of how subjectivity is formed and expressed. He would therefore turn to theories of *phenomenology*. On the other hand, entering their narratives from the social and cultural universe that informs their point of view is deepened through theories of *semiotics* and *symbolic interactionism*. Moreover, examining the sexual politics that surrounds the personal and public domains in which each man must navigate is elaborated in the articulations of *queer theory*. Although each of these theoretical domains inherently overlaps at varying points and degrees, Robert's method of interpretation would more consciously and strategically embrace theories of subjectivity by combining queer theory with theories of phenomenology, semiotics, and symbolic interaction to address his research question.

* * *

We will now turn to brief descriptions of key concepts from theories that illuminate subjectivity: phenomenology, semiotics, and sexuality. Each theoretical perspective will then be applied by using examples from Robert's study.

Key Concepts in Phenomenology

Phenomenology encompasses multiple perspectives. It is not a "single unified philosophy or standpoint" (Moran, 2000, p. 4). There is transcendental phenomenology, existential phenomenology, hermeneutical phenomenology, and phenomenology that emphasizes Marxist theory, feminism, and semiotics. The basic premise of phenomenology is that the perceiver determines meaning, and therefore it is human perception, not external influences or objects of the material world, that is at the core of our analysis. Just as traditional Marxism argues that economic conditions determine our reality, traditional phenomenology argues that it is human consciousness that determines our reality. Whatever appears in the human mind as it manifests itself in consciousness is the phenomenological project. Therefore, interpreting everyday life experience, from a phenomenological view, requires a close analysis of how ordinary human consciousness perceives its day-to-day lifeworld.

Although phenomenology encompasses a blend of perspectives and cannot be contained by one viewpoint, like in all schools of thought, criticism of its foundational elements still abides. Many Marxists claim that phenomenology remains inherently

individualistic and regressive in its preoccupation with individual perception rather than the material forces of power, domination, and false consciousness that influence it in the first place (Moran, 2000). Phenomenology is also at the center of the deconstructionist critique that rejects the possibility of a full presence of meaning; that is, meanings can never be fully present, apparent, or authentic in human consciousness—true meaning is always colored and filtered through the very consciousness that phenomenologists embrace. However, the deconstructionists and Marxists notwithstanding, critical ethnographers embrace phenomenology's orientation toward embodiment and perception, both in the telling and enactment of experience. We understand that human perception, on the one hand, reveals idiosyncratic meanings, contingent truths, and felt-sensing perspectives that are born from materiality, power, and the complexity of presence and, on the other hand, uncovers what it feels like to experience all these elements up close and personal. As Moran writes,

Phenomenology attempts to recognize and describe the role of consciousness in the achievement (*Leistung*) of knowledge and is not wallowing in the subjective domain purely for its own sake. Indeed, the whole point of phenomenology is that we cannot split off the subjective domain from the domain of the natural world as scientific naturalism has done. . . . What then is the enduring influence of phenomenology? It is frequently argued that the main contribution of phenomenology has been the manner in which it has steadfastly protected the subjective view of experience as a necessary part of any full understanding of the nature of knowledge. (pp. 15, 21)

As Robert examined the personal narratives of the three men, the following key concepts guided him in his analysis and search for meanings that spoke from the position or consciousness of the men themselves.

Bracketing and Dasein

Edmund Husserl (1999; Heidegger, 1961, 1962), considered the father of phenomenology, introduced the notion of bracketing. He felt that in order to reach pure perception (or *transcendental subjectivity*) it was necessary to bracket or put aside all scientific, philosophical, and cultural assumptions. For Husserl, the bracketing enabled a direct line to unadulterated perception or subjectivity without the messy interference of outside forces. However, many critics have disagreed with Husserl. A critic of phenomenology, Dermot Moran (2000), states, "Phenomenology is the story of deviation from Husserl; the history of phenomenology is the history of Husserlian heresies" (p. 3). Martin Heidegger (1961, 1962), Husserl's student, disagreed with the notion of bracketing the surrounding world of influences and asserted that we must consider the historicity and the facticity of living in time and space. There is never a "pure" interpretation. Therefore, we cannot bracket out the material, historical world for some ideal perfection of internal consciousness.

One of Heidegger's (1961, 1962) most significant contributions to phenomenology—one especially relevant to ethnographic interpretation—is his concept of *Dasein* or “being.” For Heidegger, *Dasein* constitutes existence, and in German it literally means “there being” or “being there.” The idea of *Dasein* is that when *being* meets the world and discovers that there are Others with which *being* must share the world of existence, then anxiety, dread, and meaninglessness soon follow. The paradox is that *being* can only know itself through the Other and thereby through dread. Heidegger therefore asserts that *being* must find a way past anxiety and dread; thus, to live in the world with Others, *being* must find a way to care and make peace with the world. The main point of difference between Heidegger and Husserl was the intrinsic perception of the everyday world contaminated (for Husserl) by materiality versus the perception of the everyday world as inseparable (for Heidegger) from social, cultural, and historical influences. In other words, they differed on the point of *transcendent consciousness*. But true to the phenomenological investigation, they both were concerned with how the world comes to appearances in and through human consciousness.

Because Robert's introduction was to present the meanings and experiences he gathered in his data from the perspective or consciousness of the men themselves, he employed phenomenology as both a justification for embracing the standpoint of his subjects and as an analytical framework. The particular concepts of bracketing and *Dasein* helped him address (a) the tension between individual and idiosyncratic meanings and descriptions that are based principally on the singularity of the perspective rather than the social forces that guide it; (b) how much of the narratives should focus on the singularity and uniqueness of the experience, rather than its political implications; (c) the question of living in a world with Others that creates dread and inhibition, as the men felt social pressure to hide their full identity; and (d) how the three men attempted to reconcile *Dasein* by making peace in their particular spaces with Others.

Appearances and Bad Faith

Although Husserl (1999) and Heidegger (1961, 1962) laid the foundation for phenomenological analysis, there are three additional thinkers who are considered within the realm of existential phenomenology and whose ideas were particularly relevant to critical ethnography. First there is the existentialist and Marxist theorist Jean-Paul Sartre. It is Sartre (1993) who popularized the phrase “bad faith,” meaning that people's recognition of their own freedom makes them feel anxious and afraid. Therefore, feeling the responsibility of their own freedom to be too terrifying, they turn away and run from it by imagining they are behaving under rules and norms by which they must abide (Sartre, 1993). In bad faith, one goes by the rules or follows the expected norm in order not to disturb the *status quo* or to rock the boat even if the person feels it might be better to do so. As a result, one takes “refuge from anxiety in ‘bad faith’” (Magee, 2001, pp. 216–217). Sartre felt that phenomenology allows us to reflect more thoughtfully about our own affective, emotional, and imagined life as it could be more meaningfully lived.

Bad faith was an invaluable concept to Robert in (a) describing how these men chose within their own personal interactions not to disrupt the dominance of heteronormativity for fear of the consequences; and (b) providing a way of describing in more detail the fear, relative to social and familial rejection, that contributed to why they denied the truth of their identity.

The Body and the Other

The two other existential philosophers, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1969) and Emmanuel Levinas (1987, 1996) concerned themselves, respectively, with notions of the body and the Other. Merleau-Ponty extended the relation of phenomenological consciousness to the human body. He most eloquently brought mind and body together by articulating how the living human body experiences and *takes in* the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the intersection between human beings and the world is a relation that comes into being through the personal, lived body. It is the body that brings us into the spatial world—experience is embodied as much as it is perceived. Merleau-Ponty states, “My body does not perceive, but it is as if it were built around the perception that dawns through it; through its whole internal arrangement, its sensory motor circuits, the return ways that control and release movements” (Moran, 2000, p. 424).

Emmanuel Levinas, arguably more than any other phenomenologist of his time, “wanted to redirect phenomenology from a self-centered subjectivity to a deeper understanding of Otherness” (Moran, 2000, p. 19). Levinas’s special contribution to phenomenology was in his concern for ethics, particularly as they relate to the appearance of the Other in our subjective sphere. For Levinas, “Prior to any act, I am concerned with the Other, and I can never be absolved from this responsibility” (Moran, 2000, p. 348). To be face to face with the Other, for Levinas, demands protection and loving justice: “Prior to any act, I am concerned with the Other, and I can never be absolved from the responsibility . . . to see a face is already to hear ‘Thou shalt not kill’” (Moran, 2000, pp. 43–44).

Robert’s work very much wanted to connect the perception of what appears in the mind with the felt-sensing body. The concepts of the body and the Other helped Robert (a) address the question of how the body is both affected by and also affects meaning and experience, (b) rescue phenomenology from accusations of self-centered musings on one’s own detextualized life, and (c) show how phenomenology can intimately connect the self with the Other out of necessary obligation to responsibility and justice.

Subjectivity and Belonging

Phenomenology concerns itself with human perception or the *subjective view*, but we shall now go a step further by asking how this subjective view is formed in the first place. In order for there to be a perception or a subjective view, there must be a subject, and in turn this subject is composed of meaning and history. Therefore, subjectivity begins with an individual identity, a site of consciousness, and a thinking self.

However, because the subject thinks and must then think from a body moving through particular spaces, subjectivity is not a pure free-floating consciousness but comprises several factors: language, desire, sexuality, symbolism, and ideology, to name a few. This means that subjectivity is constituted by and within political, social, and cultural productions of meanings and practices. Therefore, it is important to see subjectivity as always historically produced within different contexts and not as a single, fixed identity. We must also acknowledge, according to Aimee Carrillo Rowe (2005, p. 17), that “there is no subject prior to infinitely shifting and contingent relations of belonging.” Indeed, what we call “subjectivity” may be thought of as an “effect of belonging—of the affective, passionate, and political ties that bind us to others. Belonging precedes being” (p. 17). Robert’s interpretive work with oral history and personal narrative drew upon aspects of phenomenology, but it also required an understanding of the specific dimensions of subjectivity. The following key concepts illuminate subjectivity as it relates to particular concerns regarding how symbols and sexuality serve in the making of the subject.

The Unconscious

Subjectivity is not only a factor of history and discourse; it is also elaborated most effectively in theories of the unconscious (Weedon, 1987). In psychoanalytic theory, the unconscious is central to the formation of the self, the subject, and subjectivity. Sigmund Freud (1963, 1980), the architect of psychoanalysis, set forth the idea that the psyche is composed of three fundamental levels: the conscious, the preconscious, and the unconscious. For Freud and other theorists of the unconscious, our dreams, myths, symbols, and that which is displaced, condensed, and repressed has the greatest influence upon what forms our being. From this view, consciousness is “infinitesimal” to the power and influence of the unconscious.

Carl Jung (1981, 1997) extended the notion of the unconscious to the idea of a *collective unconscious* found in all human beings and manifest in what Jung called archetypes or universal images found in dreams, works of art, myths, religions, philosophies, and so forth. According to Jung, archetypes are symbolic expressions communicated across time and space based on the instinctual behavior and natural inclinations of all humankind (Jung, 1981). According to Jung, we produce and are produced by the ubiquitous and universal archetypes that surround our existence.

The concept of the unconscious in Robert’s work addressed (a) those moments in the narratives that were expressed, revealed, and brought to consciousness for the first time through the act of telling and, in contrast, (b) why certain implications and origins for ideas and points of view are not addressed and why they are unknown to the narrator.

Language and Desire

Subjectivity is further layered by the contribution of the psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan (1966) with his emphasis on language and desire. For Lacan, language

is the very condition of the unconscious and therefore of subjectivity. Although the human subject cannot be reduced to language, according to Lacan there can never be a subject without it. Desire is inseparable in the formation of subjectivity, because it is desire that is the driving force in humankind's innate and unconscious need for completeness and recognition. In the struggle for completeness and recognition, desire is not simply sexual force but a part of existence and what constitutes being human. Desire is not simply for a body, but for the Other—the desire to be recognized, to feel free of lack and loneliness. It is the desire to be desired.

The concepts of language and desire helped Robert address (a) the question of how language, in the case of narration, orders and conceptualizes one's very being; (b) how language forms and discovers experience by making the unknown now known and manifest; (c) how the need expressed in the telling is beyond sexual need, how each man experienced the human and universal need for recognition; and (d) how our needs are compounded into a desire to reveal our true selves, particularly by the added need of not wanting to experience rejection.

The Sign and Symbol

A sign is a being or object that possesses information. Semiotics is an analytical technique examining how signs perform or evoke meaning and communication within a particular context (Barthes, 1975, 1987, 1988; Saussure, 1959). Every entity is a potential sign; therefore, semiotics may encompass entities as diverse as a piece of clothing, a photograph, a song, a building, food, machinery, or a road sign. An integrated system of signs becomes a social code. Signs comprise two primary parts: first, a mark that is written or spoken (that carries the message), called the *signifier*; second, a concept or thought (through which content is conveyed), called the *signified*. Semantics is understood as the meaning of signs and syntax and as the relational arrangements of signs to each other (Greimas, 1983). In addition, semantics and syntax combine to form deep structures and systems of meaning, as well as the making of meaning. Semiotics aims to uncover the dynamics beyond surface meanings or shallow descriptions and to articulate underlying implications. Semiotics also aims to discover the structures of events—that is, the sign system or rules that govern conduct. In studying the sign, you must examine the system of relations that enable the meaning to be produced.

Through the concepts of sign and symbol, Robert could contemplate (a) how the men, from their unique perspectives, are surrounded by symbols and signs whose meanings and value they lift from their empirical world and then rearticulate, represent, and thickly describe in their narration; and (b) how certain signs and symbols relate to objects that hold powerful meanings that shape behavior and how they influence the interactions and attitudes toward others. This leads us to the area of symbolic interaction. Growing out of philosophical pragmatism, the basic premise of symbolic interactionism is threefold: (1) It is the idea that we relate to objects and living beings based on the *meanings* we have for such objects and beings; (2) our meanings for objects and beings are derived from communication and relationships—that is, from

social interactions with others; and (3) these meanings move between the social to the individual and are therefore shaped and guided by an interpretive process undertaken by an individual subject (Schwandt, 1997, pp. 148–149). Herbert Blumer (1969), influenced by George Herbert Mead (1938), describes several key dimensions that comprise symbolic interactionism:

Let me remind the reader of the basic premises of symbolic interactionism: Human group life consists of the fitting to each other of the lines of action of the participants; such aligning of actions takes place predominantly by the participants indicating to one another what to do and in turn interpreting such indications made by the others; out of such interaction people form the objects that constitute their worlds; people are prepared to act toward their objects on the basis of the meaning these objects have for them; human beings face their world as organisms with selves, thus allowing each to make indications to himself; human action is constructed by the actor on the basis of what he notes, interprets, and assesses; and the interlinking of such ongoing action constitutes organizations, institutions, and vast complexes of interdependent relations. (Blumer, 1969, p. 49)

Symbolic interactionism is therefore a method of analysis that describes human beings as both products and producers of symbols. These symbols are constructed and reconstructed, whereby meanings (and meanings of those meanings) form social processes that guide human behavior and experiences, and whereby the “complex interlinkages of acts that comprise organizations, institutions, division of labor, and networks of interdependence are moving and not static affairs” (Blumer, 1969, p. 50).

Symbolic interactionists insist that in order to understand the actions of a people it is necessary to conceive their objects as they conceive them. Although there are larger structures or system principles that govern social life (i.e., capitalism, sexual norms, ethnic hierarchies, ecological determinators, etc.), the symbolic interactionist places primary emphasis on the explanations and interpretations of these systems by social actors and the respective points expressed that describe the situation (Blumer, 1969, p. 58).

Symbolic interactionism provided a framework that helped Robert (a) articulate how the men both created and were created by their symbolic universe; (b) how names, descriptions, and judgments were given to objects and beings in the narrators’ world that made the ordinary new and extraordinary; and (c) how meaning was brought forward that implied history, social interaction, and politics.

Key Concepts in Sexuality

The personal narratives in Robert’s study of gay men and the significance of their nondisclosure concerned how these men as human beings, and therefore as symbol-making creatures, were particularly influenced, guided, and constituted by their sexual identity. Robert drew on the following concepts for his analysis.

Sexuality, Heteronormativity, and the New Homonormativity

The term *heteronormativity* refers to the view that heterosexuality is or should be the normal or legitimate sociosexual arrangement in society (Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997). Heteronormativity therefore regulates any sexual practice that does not comply with dominant heterogendered practices by calling them “deviant” or “amoral.” Where does heteronormativity begin? Where does it come from? Louis Althusser (1969, 1970) argues that our images and representations, along with our notions of what is called *the real*, marks the historical and material conditions of life. In other words, we are interpolated or pulled in by the symbols and representations that surround us and, as a result, construct what we believe to be real: “The heterosexual imaginary is that way of thinking which conceals the operations of homosexuality in structuring gender and closes off any critical analysis of heterosexuality as an organizing institution” (Ingraham, 1997, p. 275).

Heteronormativity may define heterosexuality as “natural,” but many critical thinkers have argued that heterosexuality is neither natural nor inevitable, but is instead “contrived, constructed, and taken for granted” (Ingraham, 1997, p. 289). This means that biological *possibilities* are guided, sustained, and reaffirmed by economic, political, social, historical, cultural, and familial formations, symbols, and structures. Therefore, any one of us is potentially outside the norm of heteronormativity. Chrys Ingraham (1997) writes,

Ask students how they learned to be heterosexual, and they will consistently respond with stories about how they learned to be boys or girls, women or men, through the various social institutions in their lives. Heterosexuality serves as the unexamined organizing institution and ideology (the heterosexual imaginary) for gender. . . . Most important in these theories is the absence of any concept of heterosexuality as an institutional organizing structure or social totality. (p. 288)

The move from heteronormativity to what Lisa Duggan calls the “new homonormativity” is the move toward a sexual politics of neoliberalism in the new millennium (Duggan, 2002, p. 179). She argues that by producing “gay equality rhetoric” and lobbying for neoconservative policies, homonormativity hopes to promote a libertarian/moderate/conservative gay politics. Duggan (2002) states,

The new neoliberal sexual politics . . . might be termed the new homonormativity—it is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and privatized depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (p. 179) . . . the private-in-public claims and publicizing strategies of “the gay movement” are rejected in favor of public recognition of domesticated,

depoliticized privacy. The democratic diversity of proliferating forms of sexual dissidence is rejected in favor of the naturalized variation of a fixed minority arrayed around a state-endorsed heterosexual primacy and prestige. (p. 190)

The conceptualization of sexuality and normativity provided Robert (a) a means to extend his symbolic and phenomenological interpretations more directly outward to systems, structures, institutions, and cultural politics relative to how the sexuality of these men was regulated in ways that were beyond their control, their own perception, and analysis; (b) a way to focus on the politics of sexuality in a critical analysis of the consequences and implications of each narrator's lifestyle and his choice in keeping it a secret; and (c) a way to combine structures and cultural politics, guided by theorists of sexuality and normativity, with a phenomenological approach that considered experience as told through the meanings and perspectives of the narrator.

Sex and Gender

Sexuality contains the complex and varied ways in which biological possibilities are shaped by social, economic, political, and cultural structures (Wood, 2004). This means that both *sex* and *gender* categories are within certain sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts. This brings to mind distinctions between gender and sexuality. Sex is typically defined as “the biological identity of the person and is meant to signify the fact that one is either male or female” (Ingraham, 1997, p. 285), whereas gender is described as the socially learned behaviors and expectations that are associated with the two sexes (Ingraham, 1997, p. 284). Sex is distinguished as biology and defined as natural, while gender is viewed as nurtured—that is, learned or achieved. What is problematic about this well-received generalization is that distinguishing sex from gender in this way “reinforces the nature/culture binary, opening the study of sex to the domain of science and closing off consideration of how biology is linked to culture” (Ingraham, 1997, p. 286). Ingraham (1997) lends valuable insight to the gender/sex divide that is worth quoting at length:

Sex as a category of analysis can never exist outside prevailing frames of intelligibility. By foregrounding gender as dependent on the male-female binary, the heterosexual assumption remains unaddressed. We need to question our assumptions about sex and gender as to how they organize difference, regulate investigation, and preserve particular power relations, especially those linked to institutional heterosexuality. . . . All of the institutions involved in the production of sex as a biological category defined as male or female, where each is distinct and opposite from the other, are participating in reproducing lines of power. (p. 286)

The distinction between sex and gender aided Robert in (a) clarifying the ways in which not only gender, but also sex, are classified and regulated by society; (b) how the

concepts of sex and gender were signified in interpreting the narrators' own perception of gender and how these significations were further complicated and layered by homosexual desire; and (c) how the social construction of gender is further complicated when same-sex preferences do not comply with sexual dichotomies of male and female.

Queer Temporalities

According to the *World Book Dictionary* (1980 edition), the adjectives *queerer* and *queerest* mean "differing from the usual or the normal." As verbs, *queered*, *queering*, and *queers* mean "spoil the effects or success of." The term *queer* is an appropriation of pejorative meanings, as in "peculiar," "bizarre," "strange," and so on, and therefore, like a wise and recalcitrant trickster, the queer movement has flipped and reversed the term to radically interrupt its negative meaning by breaking it open and remaking it into a symbol of resistance, inclusion, and advocacy. To be queer is to "spoil" discourses and practices based on exclusivity and oppressive normativity. To be queer is to claim difference as a necessity in the world. Queer theory has emerged as one of the prominent areas of academic scholarship that thoughtfully and fundamentally challenges notions of heteronormativity, bringing powerful insight to what it means to live, love, think, and act outside constructions of the norm. As Sue-Ellen Case (1990) writes,

Queer theory, unlike lesbian theory or gay theory, is not gender specific. In fact, like the term "homosexual," queer foregrounds same-sex desire without designating which sex is desiring . . . [queer] works not at the site of gender, but at the site of ontology, to shift the ground of being itself. . . . Unlike petitions for civil rights, queer revels constitute a kind of activism that attacks the dominant notion of the natural. The queer is the taboo-breaker. (pp. 2–3)

This brings us to the notion of "queer time." The transgendered bodies, subcultural spaces, and certain contested identities have their own logics, contradictions, and relations to temporality. According to Judith Halberstam (2005), queer time "shifts our attentions away from discreet bodies performing their desires" (p. 2) and offers alternative frameworks for how time and place are performed within cycles of life: birth, childhood, courtship, family, marriage, adulthood, old age, and death. The past and the future in queer time exist outside the normative. Hoang states (2007),

Among many paths that delineate "queer time," two of the most generative for me include (1) retracing a young person's secretive and circuitous routes to queer culture (through music, art, literature, popular culture) and (2) revisiting the various scenes of queer pedagogy (not only in the classroom and library but also in the park, street, bar, basement, kitchen, chat room, and bedroom). (p. 183)

Queer identity inspired Robert and provided (a) another vocabulary with which he could make the leap from *this is the way it is* to *what if* (Denzin, 2003; Thomas, 1993); (b) an analysis, examples, and a vision for what it means to live your choices openly, without fear of rejection; (c) the vocabulary needed to suggest what to do about the problem of “coming out”; and (d) a means by which difference can be understood, embraced, and celebrated without shame or secrets.

Additional terms that were useful to Robert:²

GENDER NON-CONFORMING: An individual whose gender expression, identity, or gender role differs from gender norms associated with their assigned birth sex.

TRANSGENDER: An assigned biological sex does not coincide with their felt identity. This includes individuals who do not feel they fit into a dichotomous sex structure where they are identified as male or female.

INTERSEX: A range of conditions associated with atypical development of physical sex characteristics.

CISGENDER: Individuals who have a match between the sex they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their gender identity.

ASEXUAL: A person who does not experience sexual attraction or has little interest in sexual activity.

FROM “INVESTIGATING QUEER FUTURE MEANINGS: DESTRUCTIVE PERCEPTIONS OF ‘THE HARDER PATH’”

by *Dustin Goltz (2009)*

The future is not known to anyone. However, there are mechanisms in place that suggest basic blueprints, providing outlines, goals, and potentials. Weddings, marriage, children, grandchildren, and perhaps great grandchildren suggest a model to work from, a social foundation that is perpetuated in film, television, religious institutions, and political debate. What does it mean to exist in a space outside of these blueprints and images, to be denied access to the dominant scripts? (p. 562). . . . Queer theory provides a theoretical lens to understand how perceptions of futures are constructed, perceived, regulated and foreclosed, challenging the limitations and violent exclusions of what constitutes the “normal” (Warner, 1999; Yep, 2003). These exclusions work to naturalize heterosexuality, casting the possibility of additional or multiple sexualities, lives, and futures outside the socially constructed boundaries of intelligibility. (p. 564)

CASE 3: COMMUNITY THEATRE: CONFLICTS AND ORGANIZATION

Nia's concentration is in organizational communication. She is interested in the *effects* of nonprofit community theatre organizations on lower-income, ethnically diverse communities. Her central question is, What are the most effective methods relative to leadership and service that local theatre companies employ to assist and aid individuals in the development, renewal, control, and sustenance of their own communities?

Nia's present study focuses on the Cross Bridges Performance Collective, located in an economically neglected inner-city neighborhood in a major northeastern metropolitan city. Cross Bridges is composed of two main programmatic components. The first is the main-stage production series. The series produces staged performances in which community members participate at all levels of the production process, ranging from publicity, hanging stage lights, building sets, and acting, to playwriting and adaptation. The second component is the performance educational workshop series. It comprises workshops in which improvisation, creative dramatics, puppetry, and image theatre are utilized to teach reading and communication skills, leadership and problem solving, and storytelling and oral history.

Nia has observed the company for two years. She has participated in the performance workshops and the main-stage productions. After working with Cross Bridges, Nia has been impressed by how the young and the old in the workshop series are transformed through performance methods and techniques as they find pleasure in reading, envision new alternatives for solving problems, and imagine new ways of thinking about their community and their futures. Nia has also participated in two main-stage productions and volunteered for the job of stage manager. She was inspired by the success of the company in bringing hostile factions of the community together through various staged performances. Nia witnessed how the most volatile and contested issues boiling among community members were dramatically transformed through the empathic force of performance into productive struggles for understanding. As the rehearsals progressed and opening night drew closer, Nia was deeply moved by the bond that formed between cast members. The barriers of hostility and old resentments that harbor fear and unfamiliarity had gradually worn down during the rehearsal process through the coalescence of bodies and minds working and creating together. Rehearsals became the forum to imagine and to desire a new way of building relationships and community.

Nia's work with the company was a labor of love. She had become an enthusiastic supporter of community theatre and its power to make meaningful change happen. She admired the company members and was in awe of their commitment and their skills.

The season was nearing the end, and the company was getting ready for the last show on the schedule when the director asked company members if they would like to experiment with something new. For the final performance, the company made

the decision to take part in a newly instituted experimental, cross-cultural program sponsored by the city's Urban Arts Exchange Project. The Exchange Project sponsored qualified individuals from certain areas of the city to participate as artists-in-residence in other communities that were located at a distance from their home community. The purpose was to create a cultural exchange of ideas, methods, and experiences and to bring artists from different economic and ethnic backgrounds together that might not otherwise come into contact with one another. Cross Bridges was optimistic and welcomed the opportunity for this cross-cultural exchange.

Two individuals from outside the Cross Bridges community signed up as residents. The men were from a theatre company in the surrounding area of the city, and each had considerable experience in acting, directing, and technical theatre. The members of Cross Bridges anticipated and appreciated the expertise these individuals would bring to the company, and the residents were excited about the ways these men would assist the company in helping to mount a successful production. Nia was delighted by the inclusion of artists from outside the local community of Cross Bridges, as it would expand the notion of "community" and "ethnicity"; moreover, it would broaden the reach of Cross Bridges by making outsiders aware of the significance and success of arts organizations in the inner city. But it would do something more: Nia's study now had policy implications for the future funding and implementation of the city's Urban Arts Exchange Project. The success of the artists-in-residence experiment at Cross Bridges would provide an exemplary case study for policymakers who are working to provide funding and to implement arts programs in economically disenfranchised communities throughout the city. The cross-cultural exchange held great possibilities.

Everything was now set. The residents had arrived. After just a few weeks, the residents had adjusted and settled into the culture and community of Cross Bridges, or so everyone thought. As the residents began rehearsals for the main-stage production, everything seemed to be going well. However, as the rehearsals got underway, things slowly began to unravel. Nia noticed that the men seemed aggravated and displeased during the rehearsal process. She noticed that they were starting to make insulting comments about the director and were becoming more and more critical of her approach. She was aware that the artists-in-residence had their own particular style and method, one drawn from their local theatre company and performance orientation, and it seemed they were becoming more and more exasperated by this different approach by the Cross Bridges director. Moreover, they resented feeling forced to comply with the director's authority. The covert racial and sexual insults were making Nia very uncomfortable.

The residents subtly and indirectly began to express their discontent with the director to the other cast members through suggestions of incompetence and insinuations that she was exploiting their time and expertise. A few cast members were becoming uncomfortable with these harsh judgments and negative comments, and the cast members began slowly to separate along racial lines. For the sake of the show and for the unity of the cast, the director attempted to address levels of their dissatisfaction. When

she learned that the residents felt she was too authoritative and that they wanted more input, she asked for their help with tasks she thought would genuinely make them feel included. But she was immediately accused of exploiting them and their time. When she learned they felt exploited, she suggested that other members from Cross Bridges assist them with the work they felt was siphoning their time and energy. But the residents became angry and accused her of belittling their talents and capabilities. By the time the rehearsals had finally come to an end and the show opened, the accusations and animosity felt by the two residents toward the director had become so obvious that, for fear of splitting cast relations any further, the director felt it best to withdraw a bit from interacting with the cast members. When this happened, she was accused of not caring about the cast and attempting to claim all the credit for the success of the show.

Although all the cast members remained loyal to the project, there was a general feeling of tension and unease. Those who felt a strong allegiance to the company and the director resented the animosity and the insults, which had racial and sexist undertones, toward the black female director and which were experienced not only backstage, behind the scenes, but also in the open space of rehearsals. However, at the strongly voiced request of the director, they never confronted the residents and continued rehearsals without any disagreement surfacing. However, the tensions were deeply felt.

Nia was deeply saddened, because the exalting experience of working with Cross Bridges now turned into a nightmare. There was a clash of values, and for Nia, the very goal of the Urban Arts Cross-Cultural Exchange had abysmally failed.

When the show finally ended, the two residents left Cross Bridges, and the director vowed never to work with them again or to participate in the Urban Arts Exchange.

Nia's challenge as a critical ethnographer and a student of organizational communication was to interpret the provocative tensions and layers of conflicts she witnessed within the organization. She decided that her interpretive method would primarily draw from *feminist theory* and *critical race theory*.

Key Concepts in Theories of Difference: Race

Theories of difference are concerned with the histories, consequences, and contexts of what it means to be unlike the norm, the majority, the comprehended, or to be outside certain registers of power. Theories of difference that encompass how race, gender, and sexuality operate confront the complexities of identity, belonging, and language by and within realms of politics—and I use “politics” in the same way Ingraham (1997) does, to mean “all those social, material practices in which the distribution of power is at stake” (p. 290).

Difference is full of complexity. There are obviously differences within difference. Those who are of the same race but a different gender—or of the same gender but a different race—complicate any notion of a clean or neat division of difference. The same can be said of sexuality and class. There are differences within differences, yet there are

profound realities of sameness across different divides. A poor, black, gay woman born outside the United States is multiple “different,” and each difference matters more than the others depending on the particular context or situation she must confront. Yet, in certain circumstances, she may feel more affirmed in a gay community than in a black community, and in other circumstances she may feel more at home in a black community than in a feminist community. Differences both intersect and diverge depending on specific contexts; however, to be different is always to be positioned against a norm.

Nia turned to theoretical conceptualizations of race and gender to help guide her through her analysis. The following terms were central to her understanding of the complex dynamics and frictions that erupted during her fieldwork research.

Race, Essentialism, and Social Construction

Critical race theory begins with the presupposition that race does not exist solely as a biological fact and is therefore less a product of nature and more a product of social classification and identification. Therefore, it is the social, political, and cultural processes of classification and identification that constitute race or racialization (Torres, Miron, & Inda, 1999). For essentialist thinkers, the body occupies a pure presocial and prediscursive space. The essentialist-versus-constructionist debate concerns what constitutes the *natural* and what constitutes the *social*: “While the essentialist holds that the natural is repressed by the social, the constructionist maintains that the natural is produced by the social” (Torres et al., 1999, p. 6). Constructionists, however, reject the idea that there is a natural human determinant or an essential fact of existence that precedes social, economic, and political processes. However, the term *strategic essentialism* argues that there is no pure order or essence in what it means to be human but rather that, as a “rhetorical maneuver,” essentialism has its place (Fuss, 1989; Spivak, 1988). Therefore, strategic essentialism asserts that the use of essentialism for useful ends depends on who is using it and how it is being used, as well as to what purpose. The postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak (1988) reminds us that we are born into nature and we are born into history, therefore essentialism can be powerful for the dispossessed. Thus, interrogating essentialism does not necessarily entail dismissing it. The problem, according to Spivak, is when it moves from something provisional to something permanent.

The concepts of race and social construction guided Nia in (a) analyzing how race became a barrier in communication between the residents and the director, all of whom believed themselves to hold no racial prejudices and who prided themselves on their sensitivity to and engagement with difference; (b) analyzing the very nuanced, convoluted, and obscured ways racism operated in the company through unconscious habit, naturalized practices, and white supremacy; and (c) providing a framework for understanding how the director, company members, and the residents are constructed as racial beings according to certain assumptions about their own race as well as the race of others.

Race, Structure, and Image

Understanding racialization as a process or construction leads us away from thinking about race as simply “natural” or biological and leads us to thinking about the *power dynamics*—ideology, images, and institutional formations that hold race in place. This means that physical appearances of what people may look like in racial terms, how we enact and react to these appearances—classify and identify them—becomes a legal, political, social, and historical reality (Guillaumin, 1999, p. 45). Therefore, race is a “human construct based on ideology with regulatory power within society” (Solomos & Back, 1999, p. 68). As the argument for racial construction is made, pulling it away from biological determinism toward a more radical discussion of social and political power, we see how race is formed and embedded by class and economic stratifications. Making the point that racial difference is a prevailing feature of American life that is inherent in structures of hierarchy, the critic Stephen Small (1999) states,

Racialized structures are the institutional pillars of society. They are the routine, recurrent and organized features of contemporary life. The idea of “racialized” structures has two key components. First, it refers to the distribution of valuable resources such as political power, employment, education and housing. Primarily this aspect involves who owns what, works and lives where, and has good health. Secondly, it refers to the normal, recurrent and routinized procedures of institutions that shape and constrain our daily lives, from politics (voting and political representatives), economics (businesses, employment), education (universities, schools), health (hospitals) and other spheres of social life (family, media, music, sport). These behaviors and actions sustain the distribution of resources. (p. 50)

With these words in mind, we may agree that racial categories are produced and reproduced by everyday American activities of inclusion and exclusion (Ong, 1982, p. 267), and we may also add that the economic and political implications of race are always simultaneously operating through images, values, and desires that are racially oriented. Critical race theory analyzes the complex machinations of racialization in the various ways it is created, sanctioned, and employed, but it also illuminates the various ways race is an effect of our imagination and how racial symbols and representations determine our understanding and attitudes about race in the first place. These racialized images and ideologies turn back to shape structures, just as structures shape us. The cultural critic Cornell West (1991) reminds us that structures are not simply economic and political creations; they influence desire and value. It is images, not ideas, that dominate. Racialization therefore becomes a reciprocal circling of institutional process and individual ideology, each shaping and empowering the other. This is a complex and often hidden circling.

The concept of structure and image was an elaboration upon Nia’s analysis of race as construction, and it guided Nia in (a) understanding how construction actually

works and what the forces and factors in society are that contribute to the construction of race above and beyond others, (b) analyzing how structure and image are conceptualized in critical race theory as a means out of which the subjects in her study operated, and (c) understanding how image was key in articulating how representation in performance and popular culture informs identities and how they are treated as a result of representation.

Whiteness and Privilege

We must keep in mind that critical race theory is not simply directed at the racialization of so-called minority identities or the social constructions of people of color; the construction of *whiteness* is also under examination. Critical race theorists point out that whiteness is often perceived as nonracialized; they argue, however, that whiteness is in fact a construction of race and that it forms a structural position of racial privilege. The most ardent theorist on whiteness states,

In contemporary social settings, whiteness has been identified as a core set of racial interests often obscured by seemingly race-neutral words, actions, or policies . . . the phrase white culture is proffered to convey the material relations of social structures that reproduce white privilege and racism in this country, quite apart from what individual whites may feel, think, and perceive. (Frankenberg, 1993, pp. 196–205; qtd. in Hartigan, 1997, p. 185)

Critical race theorists argue that “whiteness is a taken-for-granted experience based on varying ‘supremacist assumptions’ that are sometimes critical, sometimes biological, sometimes moral, sometimes all three” (Bonnett, 1997, p. 213). The repeated phrase in much of the literature on race theory is that “whites have privilege whether they want it or not.” White privilege is often masked as neutral social arrangements and institutional operations that seem to have no basis (Bonnett, 1997). Michael Eric Dyson (2003) states, “The genius of unarticulated, invisible whiteness is that it was able to impose its particularist perspective as normative” (p. 40). In other words, not only does the very invisibility of whiteness or its seemingly racial neutrality operate through machinations of privilege for a particular group, but these machinations are masked, distorted, and instituted as being normative.

The discussion of whiteness pointed Nia toward (a) the unmarked and unnamed ways in which the residents, in manner and attitude, were not simply constituted by racial privilege but were, more importantly, so uncritical of the privilege they inherited that they behaved with arrogance and entitlement when a racialized Other was placed in a position of authority/power over them; (b) how white privilege does not necessarily equate with white supremacy or racist acts and how white members of the company from the same community as the residents were an integral and active part of the company; and (c) an analytical framework upon which she could articulate the ingrained assumptions of white supremacy, particularly when supremacy becomes in tension with racialized Others where its own (unconscious) superiority is impeded.

WHITE PRIVILEGE: UNPACKING THE INVISIBLE KNAPSACK

by Peggy McIntosh

I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks. Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable. As we in Women's Studies work to reveal male privilege and ask men to give up some of their power, so one who writes about having white privilege must ask, "Having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it?" After I realized the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are justly seen as oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way. I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence.

Key Concepts in Theories of Difference: Gender

Nia also employed the next set of terms to unravel the very discreet but penetrating ways the problems of gender combined with race surfaced in her fieldwork.

INTERSECTIONALITY Identifies how interlocking systems of power affect those who are most vulnerable. Intersectionality examines differences: class, sexual orientation, age, gender, race, and disability as complexly interwoven. Kimberlé Crenshaw was the first to combine the theory of intersectionality with black feminist theory in 1989 in "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." The term is also historically linked to the concept of "simultaneity" set forth by members of the Combahee River Collective (1970), who articulated the multiple effects of race, class, gender, and sexuality upon the lives of women of color. Patricia Hill Collins conceptualizes intersections of inequality as the *matrix of domination*.

Feminism and Power

Generally, feminist theory is concerned with power differences between men and women and how these differences impact the public and private domains of our lives (Butler, 1990; hooks, 1990; Warren, 2003; Weedon, 1987; Wood, 2004). Feminist theory is concerned with gender inequities and "who does what and for whom, what

we are and what we might become” (Weedon, 1987, p. 1). With the understanding that sex usually refers to biological differences between the male body and the female body, feminist theory focuses on how these differences are performed, hierarchically classified, and materially arranged in the social world.

Feminists have also been in tension over the struggle for representation and membership in dominant institutions, at one end, and the struggle to dismantle or eliminate the very foundations of these institutions on the other. Many feminists feel the feminist movement lost its significance when it ceased in great measure to condemn patriarchal systems and focused more on the empowerment of a few women. This is certainly the case with certain feminist researchers, whose narrow understanding of empowerment does not consider broader implications for women who are not the same race, ethnicity, or nationality. Achola Pala (1977) states,

I have visited villages where, at a time when the village women are asking for better health facilities and lower infant mortality rates, they are presented with questionnaires on family planning. In some instances, when the women would like to have piped water in the village, they may be at the same time faced with a researcher interested in investigating power and powerlessness in the household. In yet another situation, when women are asking for access to agricultural credit, a researcher on the scene may be conducting a study on female circumcision. (p. 10; qtd. in Carby, 1997, p. 123)

The researcher’s notion of empowerment does not comply with that of the women she is researching or their needs. Therefore, the researcher’s notion of empowerment does not take into account the very institutional mechanisms that disempower the subject of her research. The controversy over women, empowerment, and what constitutes a feminist perspective that incorporates a broader and more useful agenda for women can be traced by what has been described as the three movements or waves in the development of women’s rights. The first concerns itself with women’s inclusion and access to institutions that had historically been denied women. In this case, the concern was for the liberty and freedom of women to enter the doors of these institutions and structures and to be represented in them, but not necessarily to change the structures themselves. The second movement or wave was also concerned about access and membership, but it was also concerned with the transformation of the structures themselves relative to discrimination practices at multiple levels (e.g., women, family, race, sexuality, economic inequities, and the environment). Second-wavers were interested in transforming institutions to make them more just, to build a more equitable society. The third wave, however, for many contemporary feminists is more global in perspective and more visionary in its concern for overlapping oppressions of difference. (I shall describe it shortly through the concepts of *material feminism* and *ecofeminism*.)

Feminist theory aided Nia in (a) addressing the interpenetrating domains of race and gender, particularly because the director was Othered by both race and gender;

(b) analyzing discrimination, relative to the residents, as an intermix of race and gender; and (c) analyzing how patriarchal structures and practices position and discipline women with narrow choices—as a black female director, was she outside the domestic and patriarchal boundaries of women’s work?

Material Feminism and Ecofeminism

The “material” in material feminism means the emphasis is on divisions of labor and the distribution of wealth both nationally and internationally, as well as how meaning and value (relative to freedom and opportunity) are constituted globally. Material feminism responds to pressing global issues of inequality and exploitation, as well as charges by so-called third-world feminists and people of color around the world that feminism in the West is out of touch with the struggles and debates outside the interests of white, middle-class, heterosexual women in the United States and Europe (Minh-ha, 1989; Mohanty, 1984). Chrys Ingraham (1997) states,

This call for an international re-evaluation of western feminism intersected with the circulation of newly forming critical knowledges such as Afrocentrism, post colonial criticism, post structuralism, neo-Marxism, postmodernism, and brought about a rethinking of feminist concepts and politics. Throughout the struggles and debates within feminism over the past 20 years, materialist feminists have continually worked to develop an analytic capable of disrupting the taken-for-granted in local and global social arrangements and of exposing the economic, political, ideological conditions upon which exploitation and oppression depend. (pp. 276–277)

As a form of critical postmodernism, materialist feminism argues that the interlocking web of patriarchy, capitalism, heteronormativity, and racism is neither abstract nor isolated, but it is interpenetrating and ubiquitous as it interacts at varying levels and degrees in regulating our everyday lives.

Karen J. Warren (2003), one of the leading proponents of ecofeminism, describes ecofeminism as feminism that employs gender analysis

to describe, analyze, and resolve the varieties of ways in which the unjustified domination of women and other subordinated groups of humans (human other) has historically been interconnected with the unjustified domination of “nature” (nonhuman animals and the nonhuman environment). (p. 5)

Ecofeminism is both a theory and a social movement that is concerned with the very nature and practice of oppression in all its formations. The feminist communication scholar Julia T. Wood (2004) states,

Ecofeminists believe that domination and oppression are wrong and destructive of all forms of life, including the planet. . . . For ecofeminists,

oppression itself, not particular instances of oppression, is the primary issue. They believe that, as long as oppression is culturally valued, it will be imposed on anyone and anything that cannot or does not resist. Thus, women's oppression is best understood as a specific example of an overarching cultural ideology that idolizes oppression in general. (p. 71)

Ecofeminism is a more radical position than traditional forms of feminism in its emphasis upon social justice relative to multiplication of oppression and their interconnectedness. Again, Wood (2004) states,

The goals of this movement flow directly from its critique of cultural values. Ecofeminists seek to bring themselves and others to a new consciousness of humans' interdependence with all other life forms. To do so, they speak out against values that encourage exploitation, domination, and aggression and show how these oppress women, men, children, animals, plants, and the planet itself. (p. 72)

Although all ecofeminists do not agree, across the board, on points of emphasis and the urgencies given to certain oppressive practices over others, "all ecofeminists agree that many environmental issues have a gender dimension and that many gender issues have an environmental dimension" (Warren, 2003, p. 6).

Problems of Gender in the Field: "Women Like Us and Women Not Like Us"

What happens when being a female in the field runs up against various cultural or gendered obstructions in building rapport and gaining access? What happens when both men and women in the field are uncomfortable or resistant because you are identified as a woman?

The anthropologist Kamala Visweswaran (1994) states,

If gender identification obscures difference and the workings of power, gender disidentification might expose difference and the operations of power, as part of the "articulation of democratic contestation" (Butler, 1993, p. 4). I thus distinguish between moments of gender identification (women like "us") from moments of gender difference or disidentification (women unlike "us") vis-à-vis racial, sexual, or class positioning. (pp. 595–596)

Perhaps it is at the point of disjunction and disidentification where the real work of rapport begins. We have learned that there is no "universal sexual asymmetry" and that "the oppression of women" is not one thing to all women everywhere. It is these points of tension—women unlike "us"—that need to be realized and studied before we can expect to build rapport and engage in meaningful dialogue. Coming to the recognition

of how the practice of gender and the perception of gender is a different reality in the field brings us, again, to the question of other experiences, histories, and politics of belonging. If we believe that “belonging precedes being” then this might be a place to start. How do sites and locales of belonging construct subjectivity and gender in ways that obstruct rapport and entry? The female ethnographer begins to excavate and interpret these locales and sites of belonging with the hope that she may learn how to negotiate the tensions and disjunctures that form the core of gender differences.

As a critical ethnographer, Nia felt that she wanted to include a feminist analysis that also especially addressed issues of class and political economy, because one of the missions of the theatre company was to inspire and promote economic justice in the community. Because the director was a black woman and because her performance dealt with issues related to the local/global nexus, it was important for Nia to include a feminist analysis that went beyond the racial and gender conflict with the residents to provide a deeper and more comprehensive examination of the feminist politics of the director. Nia was careful not to make the conflict with the residents the full story. Because the director played a significant role in Nia’s research, it was necessary for Nia to understand the philosophy that guided the director’s artistic productions. As a critical ethnographer, Nia understood she could not provide a substantive analysis if she did not study the theoretical principles that guided one of the central subjects of her study; therefore, examining gender and difference from a global perspective was important.

WARM-UPS

1. How might the theoretical concepts organized under each individual case study be applied and extended to the other case studies? For example, can Nia borrow certain concepts from postcolonial theory in her analysis of the community theatre company? How can Robert use Marxist theory in his project? Discuss how specific concepts may be especially relevant to your project and/or other interpretive questions relating to critical fieldwork.
2. What might be additional theoretical questions or key concepts from the case studies that interest you and therefore motivate you to do further reading in a particular theory?

NOTE

1. This excerpt is from an actual field interview I conducted in the winter of 2000 in Ghana, West Africa. The excerpt is from a political activist describing the position of local farmers in his village in Northern Ghana and their struggle with big agricultural businesses and fair trade.