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Stories of Smartness and Whiteness in School Pictures and Yearbooks

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the way that discourses of smartness and whiteness are produced and reproduced in schooling. Using an approach grounded in narrative research, I explore the convergences and contradictions between my own educational autobiography and the representations of schooling found in my school pictures and yearbooks. In my analysis, I argue that white supremacy played an important role in the construction of my own story of smartness throughout my primary and secondary schooling experiences. I also argue that yearbooks form powerful “artifacts of smartness” (Hatt, 2011, p. 448) that can be used to interpret and interrogate personal experiences as well as larger societal discourses of smartness and whiteness in schooling.

Narratives and stories are powerful ways of structuring and reproducing discourses in schooling. As Connelly and Clandinin (1990) have pointed out, narrative is both a natural phenomenon and a method that scholars can use to understand the “storied lives” that all of us lead (p. 2). For many, stories and narrative bring to mind particular genres with formal characteristics. However, as Kramp (2004) reminds us, narrative structure is not limited to a story. Narrative traditions are rooted in the natural language, oral histories, and storytelling traditions of indigenous peoples who have told stories for thousands of years (Chilisa, 2011). These forms emerged as socialization instruments to pass along the “history, philosophies, theories, concepts, categories of analysis, and interpretations” that were necessary for survival in local communities (Chilisa, 2011, p. 139). Further, scholars working from diverse perspectives, like critical race theory, testimonio, and narrative inquiry, also have used stories and narrative as methods to challenge positivist forms of knowledge production (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012; Fernández, 2002; Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steeves, 2013). As a researcher of color I take seriously Gloria Anzaldúa’s call to “rewrite history using race, class, gender, and ethnicity as categories of analysis” and create “theories that cross borders, that blur boundaries” (1990, pp. xxv–xxvi). I believe that engaging in the “living, telling, retelling, and reliving [of] stories” is one way to produce the “new kinds of theories with new theorizing methods” that Anzaldúa envisions (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

Stories about smartness, about what it means and who has access to it, are lived, told, and retold in U.S. schools in many ways. In this article, I apply a critical narrative analysis to explore how smartness operated in my own school community. By “smartness,” I refer to an ideological system and accompanying cultural practices that hierarchically position individuals in unjust ways. This definition is informed by Hatt’s (2011) description of smartness as a practice that is done to other people as a means of social positioning and control. She argues that smartness is inequitably distributed and functions as a form

of raced and classed symbolic capital that limits the identities that students are able to ascribe to themselves. Drawing from critical whiteness and disability studies, Leonardo and Broderick (2011) assert that smartness is an ideological system that both serves white supremacy and is in many ways analogous to the ideology of whiteness. They stress that discussions of smartness as a social construction fail to completely explore the way it operates with other systems of power and privilege, necessitating an ideological critique to dissolve smartness as a system of oppression. In this article I explore smartness as both an ideology and a cultural practice through a narrative analysis of my own K-12 schooling experiences. To investigate the way that my own story of smartness was lived, told, and retold throughout my primary and secondary education, I put my autobiographical recollections of schooling into conversation with a critical analysis of my school pictures and yearbooks. I argue that school pictures and yearbooks are powerful “artifacts of smartness” (Hatt, 2011, p. 14) that reproduce and enforce the ideological systems of smartness and whiteness in schooling.

White supremacy in schooling and society

As a historically situated ideology in practice, white supremacy has deep roots in schooling and society. Historically, whiteness has been a tool that has stratified opportunities for citizenship by law through both “scientific” and “common sense” understandings (Lopez, 1997) and continues to be a de facto citizenship requirement through anti-immigrant, assimilationist rhetoric (Martinez, 2007). Similarly, although opportunities for schooling are ostensibly open to all in the post-*Brown* era, the pervasive re-segregation of schooling (Orfield, 2001) and persistent gaps in achievement reveal a continuing opportunity gap that is stratified by race (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In the Southwest, legal white supremacy in citizenship and schooling has been replaced by de facto “attrition through enforcement” laws that make brown skin suspect and by efforts to establish institutional white hegemony through the banning of Mexican-American studies programs in schools (Garcia, Bybee, & Urrieta, 2014, p. 122).

The broad historical and contemporary trajectory of white supremacy in the United States allows us to examine the diverse manifestations of whiteness as an ideological system. In her introduction to *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*, Ruth Frankenburg (1997) outlines some of the theoretical contributions of critical whiteness studies (CWS) and their relationship to pedagogy. According to Frankenburg, one of the key contributions of CWS in education and related fields is the examination of, “the place of whiteness in the contemporary body politic in Europe and the United States ... both in the making of subjects and in the formation of structures and institutions” (1997, p. 2). Critical whiteness studies in education reveal whiteness as an ideological system built from a range of racial and nonracial elements that creates a “racial cosmology”—a taxonomy that benefits Whites in concrete ways and articulates groups of color relative only to one another (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011, p. 2209). As an ideology, whiteness produces individuals and institutions according to a stratified racial order with Whites at the top of the hierarchy.

As Leonardo and Broderick (2011) allude, whiteness is articulated only partly by race, and also constitutes itself through disparate elements like smartness, gender, class, and sexuality. Historically, the racial formation of whiteness as desirable depended on the literal subjugation of female bodies in patriarchal systems (Kitch, 2009). As mutually constitutive systems of domination, white supremacy and patriarchy depend on shared understandings that define all women and men of color as marginal “Others” relative to white masculinity (Johnson, 2005). Warren (2003) has argued that whiteness is akin to gender and other identities in that it is embodied and performed within particular discursive contexts.

One example of the complexity of performing embodied identities mutually constituted by race, class, gender, sexuality, and smartness can be seen in Julie Bettie’s (2003) ethnography of teenage girls and identity at a California high school. In her examination of Latina identities, she found that Mexican American high school students performed a working class chola identity as “a marker of racial/ethnic belonging” in opposition to the association of school sanctioned femininity with whiteness (Bettie, 2003, p. 190). The Latinas in her study employed symbolic oppositions that were enacted through gender-specific preferences in clothing and were often misinterpreted as differences in intelligence and moral differences in sexual practices. The sway of whiteness over our perceptions of other bodies in space recalls

Mills' (2003) argument that white supremacy includes “domination in the economic, cultural, cognitive-evaluation, somatic, and ... even the ‘metaphysical’ sphere” (p. 42). As a system, whiteness orders us into hierarchies that are mutually constituted by factors like race, class, gender, sexuality, and smartness even as it orders our consciousness and conceptions of reality.

Whiteness and the abolition of smartness

Leonardo (2009) provides a useful distinction concerning the ideological, ontological, and epistemological dimensions of whiteness that provides insight into dismantling white supremacy and related systems of oppression like smartness. He states that there are two main strategies regarding the uptake of whiteness in CWS scholarship: white reconstruction and white abolition. According to Leonardo (2009), white reconstructionists believe that whiteness can be “remade, revisioned, and resignified” to an anti-racist positioning and that white people should both acknowledge their privilege and use it in the pursuit of racial justice (p. 93). By contrast, white abolitionists believe the existence of white people to be the result of oppressive structures that recognize Anglo bodies as “white” and that Whites should commit “race treason¹” (Ignatiev & Garvey, 1996).

While the early work of CWS scholars like Peter McClaren and Henry Giroux could be characterized as reconstructionist, much of the recent work of scholars like Zeus Leonardo seems more abolitionist in nature. For example, Giroux (1997a) states that, while CWS scholarship had rightly, “unmask[ed] whiteness as a mark of ideology and racial privilege ... [CWS] fails to provide a nuanced, dialectical and layered account of ‘whiteness’ that would allow white youth and others to appropriate selective elements of white identity and culture as oppositional” (p. 385). According to Giroux, this “oppositional whiteness” is part of connecting white students to a “new ethnicity” that will help them to reimagine their social location and “rewrite whiteness within a discourse of resistance and possibility” (1997b, 1998, pp. 71–72). McLaren (2000) adopts a similar reconstructionist viewpoint, although he frames his argument more explicitly within the theoretical perspectives of radical multiculturalism and Marxism. He argues for Whites to “transgress the external determinations of white identity” and that Whites “must be interpolated in rearticulating the whiteness of the dominant class” (2000, pp. 182, 183). McLaren sees this articulation as part of a postcolonial or revolutionary multiculturalism that rejects, “the invisible norm of whiteness in a liberal swirl of diversity” (2000, p. 187).

By contrast, Leonardo (2009) sees the very existence of multiculturalism as evidence of the white normativity of schooling, and advocates for the abolition of all ideologies and institutions that prop up whiteness. As complementary ideological systems, whiteness and smartness intersect and support one another to reproduce existing relations of power in schooling. Indeed, from early scientific racism to eugenics, mass intelligence testing, the culture of poverty and the (more recent) bell curve arguments, hereditarian and cultural deficit theories of intelligence have used notions of smartness to reinforce racial domination (Valencia, 1997).

In *Getting Smart* Patti Lather (1991) explores the links between power and knowledge from a post-modern/post-structuralist perspective and connects notions of rationality to the liberatory projects of The Enlightenment and European Marxisms. In a similar vein, Leonardo and Broderick (2011) have argued that whiteness and smartness function as self-evident proof of one another, and therefore both ideologies must be abolished. Invoking Roediger’s well-known pronouncement about whiteness, they argue that smartness “is not only false and oppressive, it is *nothing but* false and oppressive” (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011, p. 2212). In the context of these views, I engage with smartness over other frameworks because smartness and whiteness are fundamental to each other and their mutual constitution requires the abolition of both concepts.

School pictures and yearbooks as cultural texts

The evidence of the complementary roles of whiteness and smartness is apparent in cultural texts like school yearbooks. According to Anthrop-Gonzalez et al. (2006) yearbooks, “uncover the hidden, complicated movements of our existence with/in school culture as well as take a more critical stance toward

unnoticed social discourses that occur in schools” (p. 32). Not only do they show us what we valued, but they also shed light on the roles we appropriated and show us how other people constructed our existence. As complex visual and written texts, yearbooks are one of many signs and symbols that are used to evoke the shared cultural understandings that produce notions of smartness in schools and society.

My approach to scrutinizing my own school photos and yearbooks is informed by Hall’s (2013) work on representation and the analysis of cultural texts. He argues that cultural texts can be analyzed in two ways, through (1) a semiotic approach that is concerned with signs and their role as “vehicles of meaning” (Hall, 2013, p. 6) in culture and (2) a discursive approach that examines how knowledge is constructed about, “a cluster (or formation) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of talking about forms of knowledge and conduct associated with a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society” (p. 6). While semiotic approaches are concerned with the how of representation, discursive approaches are more interested in the effects and consequences of representation (Hall, 2013). Hatt’s (2011) ethnography of smartness in a kindergarten classroom takes an integrated approach that examines both the formation of signs and their impact. In her article, Hatt investigates how artifacts like the “stoplight” and the “Shoe Tyer’s Club” organized student and teacher interpretations of smartness and positioned class members accordingly. Similarly, I argue that school pictures and yearbooks are powerful artifacts of smartness that hold particular meanings and position students within hierarchies of smartness and whiteness. Although a critical examination of yearbooks is subject to certain assumptions based on phenotype, surname, and selection bias, they are nonetheless crucial texts that (literally) re-inscribe formal and informal systems of in/exclusion in school settings.

Conceptual framework

This study uses complementary narrative and auto-ethnographic research methods as a way of studying phenomena, grounded in the belief that stories form the basis for people’s knowledge and understandings. Narrative research is an interdisciplinary approach focused on story and experience, it is strongly autobiographical (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and fundamentally relational as well (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2009). Narrative research data can be drawn from a variety of qualitative sources and can include things like photographs, field notes, interview transcripts, and life events (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Within the context of my study, I use artifacts like elementary class pictures and middle and high school yearbooks as well as a composite educational autobiography composed of my own recollections and interview data from my parents.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) assert that narratives can be distinctive, creative, and artful as well as structured and formal ways of transmitting information. They argue that narratives have an internal logic and are “temporal productions” in the way that they describe events in a temporal causal sequence (p. 55). Crucially, they point out that narratives have both a formal structure, with elements like plot and a beginning, middle, and an end, as well as different functions, like serving as chronicles, success stories, or moral tales (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). In my own analysis, I will be focusing on the way that my own story of smartness had the function of foregrounding a “white” “smart” Latino identity in primary and secondary educational spaces.

By engaging narrative auto-ethnography, my study relies on the work of Denzin (1996), Ellis (2004), and others as a way to develop “research, writing, story, and method that connects the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political” (Ellis, 2004, p. xix). I also employ narrative auto-ethnography in the context of my own contested, hybrid identity as a way to avoid the potential pitfalls of abolishing whiteness. According to Moon and Flores (2000), one problem with the abolitionist approach in CWS is that the destruction of white subjectivity results in race traitors seeking to appropriate an essentialized form of otherness (Moon & Flores, 2000). In order to overcome the emphasis on racial whiteness to the exclusion of other forms of domination, my work adopts an intersectional approach to whiteness and smartness based on the work of feminist scholars like Patricia Hill Collins as well as those in the Critical Race Theory (CRT) tradition like Kimberle Crenshaw and Mary Matsuda (Moon & Flores, 2000).

CRT shares with CWS a critique that the power and privileges of whiteness are invisible in a society where racism is normalized (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). However, CRT scholars critique liberal multiculturalism and argue that Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation (Ladson-Billings, 1998). They argue that normalized white supremacy is a function of the legal history of whiteness as a form of property (Harris, 1993) and has a historic and ongoing role in determining rights to citizenship and schooling (Lopez, 1997). Additionally, CRT responds to the analytic problem of re-centering whiteness by explicitly grounding its analysis in the stories, experiences, and testimonios of people of color (Fernández, 2002). By situating my work in the tradition of positional and identity-based methods like CRT and testimonio, I seek to answer Moraga and Anzaldúa's (2015) call for "theory in the flesh" that is born out of the embodied, physical realities of my life and in my own words (p. 21). By documenting the in/exclusion of white and Latina/o bodies in cultural texts, my school pictures and yearbooks, I implicate my face and body (as well as those of my peers) in the research process.

In telling my story of smartness I hope to provide insight into the role of schooling in the formation of hybrid identities as well as to explore the relationship between broader social processes and my own personal history. By placing my narrative within a larger social theoretical context, I also investigate how stories and social theory can inform one another (Clandinin, 2006). As an area of social research that challenges the positivist paradigm, narrative research relies on criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability. Following the suggestion of Connelly and Clandinin (1990), my research study strives to meet the criteria of "apparency, verisimilitude, and transferability" (p. 7) in its narrative, analysis, and research findings.

Data collection and analysis

The data for this study are drawn from recollections of my own schooling experiences, supplemented with interview data from my parents to create a composite (auto)biography. My examination of smartness in my pictures and yearbooks consisted of critically analyzing the officially sanctioned discourses that emerged from the layout of the text and photos, which were arranged under teacher supervision and approved by the school. In order to understand how constructions of my identity changed throughout my primary and secondary education, I transcribed, coded, and quantified the yearbook discourse and compared the occurrence of certain discourse and images over successive yearbooks. Since school yearbooks are visual artifacts, it was important for me to use a multimodal approach that examined both the written language and the visual grammar communicated through layout and graphic design (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). I used a process of open coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to identify broad categories that emerged from the data and then organized them into themes. As a researcher committed to social justice I paid particular attention to the way that stereotypical notions of race and smartness are reproduced as well as the ways that they are intentionally or unintentionally resisted. My analysis reveals that, in spite of some evidence of resistance, my high school yearbooks reproduced a dominant notion of whiteness and smartness that narrowly constructed my identity and positioning relative to my peers.

Researcher subjectivity and autobiographical context

My positionality is structured through being a Mexican American male with an interest in the examination of white supremacy in schooling and society. I grew up in a small farming town in central California where the great majority of students were Latinos, like me. The bus I rode to and from school would pass by endless vineyards, orchards, and fruit packing sheds where many of my schoolmates' parents worked, and where some of my schoolmates joined them to work in the summer. My siblings and I also spent time working in fruit packing sheds, on neighboring farms, and in the four and a half acres of grape vineyards behind our house. We also all attended the local elementary, middle, and high school where the majority of students qualified for free lunch.

However, describing myself as a Latino who grew up working in the fields and attending Title 1 schools creates an incomplete impression about my upbringing. Although my mother was born in Mexico, most of her family was already living in the Texas at the time and my abuelito had U.S. citizenship. My mother

and my father (who is White) have both been to college and made a conscious decision to buy a house with four and a half acres of vineyard attached to it in order to instill a work ethic in me and my siblings. The work that I did in our vineyard and on neighboring farms was not for family survival, but rather to be able buy things that I wanted, like school clothes, or to fund summer camp experiences. Although I saw men and women filing out of vans and into the surrounding fields each morning on the way to school and sat next to some of their children in the cafeteria, the reality is that their collective experiences were in many ways invisible to me. Similarly, although I attended Title 1 schools, my race and class made me the beneficiary of a number of formal and informal systems within those spaces that helped ensure my academic success and foregrounded the development of a “smart,” “white” identity. In the next section I explore how my hybrid identity facilitated a privileged standpoint that allowed me access to racialized and exclusionary elementary, middle, and high school spaces.

Findings: My story of smartness

Racialized tracking in an elementary honors program

My first notions of the connection of smartness and race occurred early in elementary school when I was placed in an honors class at my school that drew students from all around our district. Although I was not sure how these honors classes would be different, I knew that they were desirable because my older siblings had been through them. Being in honors was important enough to me that I remember feeling bad when my older brother teased me by telling me that my mother had to ask the school to let me in the class because I was not smart enough to get in on my own. Although subsequent interviews with my parents revealed that I was able to get in to the program based on (at least some) of my own merit, it is also clear that they went to great lengths to ensure that my siblings and I were a part of the program.

In the days prior to universal standardized testing, entrance to the first grade honors program for my oldest sister was based primarily on grades and teacher recommendations. Once my sister was in the program, it became easier for the five siblings that followed to also pass through the program provided we secured sufficient grades and a recommendation. When low reading scores from another sister who needed glasses threatened her position in the honors program, my father spoke of lobbying on her behalf. At another point we moved to a neighboring town and my father’s local business address was not sufficient to maintain our place at the school. My parents went as far as to give legal educational custody to a family friend whose address was within the school boundaries. These examples of parental intervention were clearly facilitated by factors like my parent’s class and their ability to navigate the educational hierarchy at my elementary school. Although they supported the program, my parents acknowledged that a downside was that the program was pretty static without a lot of movement in or out of the honors classes. Interestingly, the popularity of the honors program at my elementary school was at least partly responsible for its demise. With the rise of accountability metrics based on high-stakes standardized test scores, the other schools in the district were no longer willing to lose their “smart” students and the program was discontinued several years ago.

The use of highly subjective measures of smartness to track my peers and I into honors and regular tracks mirrored the racial and economic divisions in my community (Oakes, 2005) and translated into competition and conflict on the playground that often took on a classed and racialized tone. Whenever a soccer or a football game would get heated the kids in the regular classes would call the honors-track kids things like “white boys” or “stuck up” and the kids in the honors classes would call the regular-track kids names like “immigrant” or “wetback.” I remember having the vague impression that the Latino students in the regular classes seemed more “Mexican” than I was, and I remember being confused that there were white students in the regular classes. Because of perceived differences in smartness, language, and socioeconomic class, my honors class was ascribed with the characteristics of whiteness. Lewis (2003, p. 134) describes racial ascription as, “a collection of factors [that] provides information for making racial identifications;” this includes elements like language, skin color, socioeconomic status, name, and culture. This racial ascription also was based on an apparent discrepancy between the demographic distribution of my town, which is 77% Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010), and the 70% “whiteness” (as

defined by phenotype and surname) of my sixth grade honors class pictures in Figure 1. In addition to a heavy presence of blond hair and Anglo-sounding last names, an examination of successive elementary honors class pictures reveals the static nature of the program, with the same 20–30 classmates appearing together throughout the six years of elementary school. As cultural artifacts, these pictures construct whiteness as a key part of being a smart student in the honors program and speak to the systematic exclusion of Latina/o faces and bodies from spaces of smartness at my elementary school.

In fifth and sixth grade I continued in the honors classes and benefited from teachers who intentionally developed my identity as a good student and critically engaged me with events in the world. When I developed an interest in reading, my fifth grade teacher positioned me as a “reader” within our class—an identity valuable enough that it caused me to start reading “competitively” with a classmate. At one point she had the class do an activity where we were supposed to write where we would be in the year 2000, during our first semester of college. Referencing my identity as a reader I wrote, “A college bookstore” while other classmates wrote things like “Berkeley” and “UC San Diego.” It was not until I was in college with friends from that class who were attending Berkeley and UC San Diego that I realized that she had helped create self-fulfilling prophecies for each of us.

My sixth grade teacher added the aspect of smartness to my existing academic identity as a reader by putting me in situations that stretched my developing vocabulary and critical thinking skills. An energetic Latino who had received national awards for his teaching, my sixth grade teacher did innovative, transformative things like set up a radio production company with his students and organize a week-long outdoor education program in Yosemite National Park. Each of his students was required to research world issues and he helped us develop our ideas into radio shows that would air on the local public radio station. In addition to my research project, he suggested that I develop a radio show where I would talk about my opinions and he helped me produce an editorial piece on graffiti that aired that same year. He also positioned me as smart by having me act as “emcee” at a couple local fundraisers that he put on for his education programs. Although other measures of my academic ability, like grades and organization, were comparable or even worse than my classmates, after sixth grade, I never again questioned whether I was smart. Perhaps more importantly, that year I began to understand a key relationship between self-expression and perceptions of smartness: that if you can speak up and sound smart with your words, people will usually believe you.

Middle school: Spaces of privilege

In middle school our previous class pictures were substituted with a page in the yearbook surrounded alphabetically by students from the general school population. As such, the 70% “whiteness” of my sixth grade class picture was substituted for Hispanic majorities of 80% in seventh grade and 77% in eighth grade that are, unsurprisingly, much closer to the aforementioned demographic distribution of my town. Although there was relatively little numeric difference between the 389 seventh grade and 376 eighth grade students pictured each year, the increased size of the eighth grade pictures (from 39 per page to 24 per page) meant that section for my class year increased from 10 pages to 16 pages from one year to the next.

The students from my sixth grade honors class made up a large percentage of my college prep classes in seventh and eighth grades. However, because there was only one middle school in my town, I also ended up meeting students from the five other elementary schools who were considered smart, like me. Because we now moved from class to class, middle school made the differential education I was receiving even more apparent than before. Instead of spending all day in one honors class space, there were now several different college prep class spaces that evidenced the special separation of my classmates and me. With individual photos distributed among the general school population, this apartness is less apparent than the mostly white honors class photos of elementary school and manifested itself in other ways in my middle school yearbooks.

One example of the relative privilege of my peer group occurred during the visit of President Bill Clinton on the first day of school—an event featured prominently in my eighth grade yearbook. We were told that he would be visiting our campus during his reelection campaign because our school had been



Figure 1. School pictures of the elementary honors class in third and six grades.

built with federal funding and that he would teach a class on the first day of school to a group of eighth graders who would be selected at random. A short time later, I found out that I was selected for the class; I remember waiting for the first day with anticipation. When the first day of school came, I was surprised to find that the desks in the “special class” were almost entirely filled with friends from my college prep classes. According to the school’s website they currently serve a population that is 85% Hispanic or Latino, with 39% who are English Language Learners (ELL) and 79% who are “socioeconomically disadvantaged” (SED)—a term that indicates the percentage of students who receive free lunch (Abraham Lincoln Middle School [ALMS] Website, 2015). As indicated, an analysis of surnames in my middle school yearbook suggests a similar ethnic distribution when I attended school there 16 years ago. Assuming that the percentage of ELL and SED students also is comparable, how is it possible that a random sampling of my school population didn’t turn up at least a few students who were learning English or who were socioeconomically disadvantaged? Granted, my ability to identify students in those categories as an eighth grader would have been limited, but I distinctly remember knowing most or all of the students in the room. Since I mostly knew people in my college prep classes, it seems more likely that we had been hand-selected for that experience based on the same perceptions of smartness, class, and race that allowed us to be in the middle school college prep track. Just as we had been set apart in elementary school, my classmates and I were picked for a kind of “concerted cultivation” that was not available to other students in our school (Lareau, 2003, p. 2). If perceived whiteness, making self-fulfilling prophecies about college, or hearing our ideas on the radio had not yet convinced me and my peers of our smartness, having the “most powerful man in the free world” listen to us and answer our questions on the first day of school made the point loud and clear.

High school: Spaces of in/exclusion

An initial look at the yearbook from my senior year in high school might make someone doubt that I was part of a privileged group that enjoyed special opportunities throughout my primary and secondary education. Indeed, one of the first things I notice as I look back through it is the utter dominance of Latino students in almost all of the photos and the existence of various Latino-oriented organizations including: MECHA, Spanish Club, and a Mexican Dance team. Looking at the 237 individuals in my senior group photo it is much easier to count the 52 students with a white phenotype than the 185 who are not White. When I started to research my high school yearbooks and would see many of the same Latino students in each picture, I initially thought that my school had perhaps created a model of additive schooling similar to the one that Bartlett and Garcia (2011) describe in their study of a New York high school oriented toward the success of its immigrant Dominican-American student population.

However, just as the superficial details of my background can obscure as much as they reveal, the dominance of Latino students and organizations masks the absence of Latinas/os in other yearbook spaces.

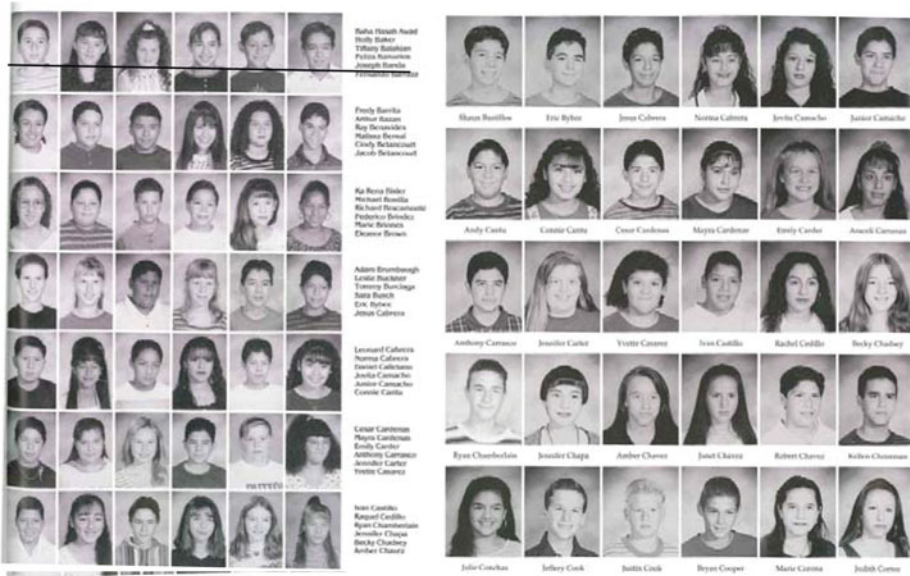


Figure 2. Author's yearbook page in seventh and eighth grades.

Table 1. Number of classmates pictured in the author's freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior yearbooks, respectively.

	Freshman Yearbook	Sophomore Yearbook	Junior Yearbook	Senior Yearbook
Number of Classmates Pictured	384	321	266	189
Average Picture per Page	48	33	32	22
Number of Pages in Class Section	8	10	9	9

A deeper analysis reveals the same systems of racial in/exclusion evident in my elementary and middle school pictures. The most glaring discrepancy in my high school yearbooks is the gap between the 384 students individually pictured in my freshman class with the 189 of us pictured as seniors. Somehow, over the course of four years nearly half (49%) of the class of 2000 gradually disappeared from my high school yearbooks. Although the non-white majority on my yearbook page is only slightly higher than in middle school and remains relatively constant over the four years (80%, 79%, 92%, and 89%, respectively) the increase in picture size (48, 33, 32, and 22 pictures per page, respectively), should have produced an increase in the number of picture pages as it did in middle school. However, because of the aforementioned yearly decrease in students pictured (384, 321, 266, and 189, respectively) the number of picture pages remains mostly constant (8, 10, 9, and 9, respectively—see Table 1). In other words, in order for my senior class picture section to remain the same length as previous yearbooks, the size of each individual picture must be increased over successive years to make up for the mostly Chicana/o Latina/o students that are no longer included.

Using 2000 Census data, Yosso and Solórzano (2006, p. 1) have written of a “leaky educational pipeline” for Chicana/o students. They assert that out of 100 Chicana/o students who start at the elementary level, 54 of them drop out (or are pushed out) of high school and 46 will graduate. Of the 46 who graduate, 26 will pursue postsecondary education, with approximately 17 enrolling in community colleges and nine enrolling in four-year institutions. Of those 17 in the community colleges, only one will transfer to a four-year institution. Out of the nine Chicanas/os attending four-year colleges and the one community college transfer student; eight will graduate, two will receive a graduate or professional degree, and 0.2 will receive a doctorate. By contrast, of every 100 white elementary school students, 84 will graduate high school, 26 will graduate with a bachelor's degree, and 10 will earn a professional or graduate degree.

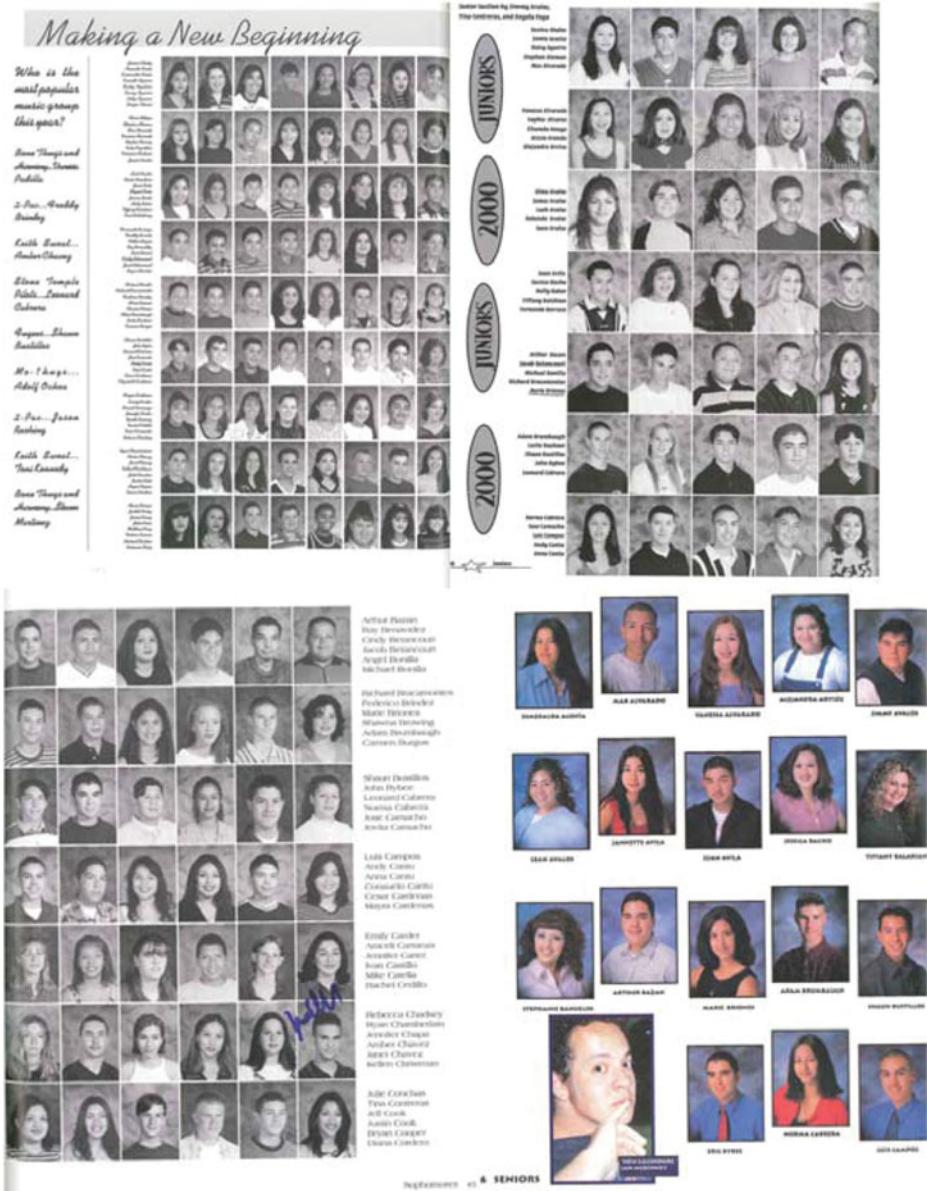


Figure 3. Author’s yearbook page for freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior years, respectively.

A comparison of yearbook pages in Figure 3 provides a stark visual example of the leaky pipeline for Chicana/o Latina/o students in the graduating class of 2000 at my high school. The decreasing numbers of students of color pictured on my yearbook page is an indication of their decreasing engagement with the cultural world of my high school. That this lack of engagement is at least partly the result of institutional white supremacy is evident in the yearbook pages where notions of smartness are front and center.

In contrast to many of the other parts of my yearbook, the “Senior Stars” and Advanced Placement (AP) pages in Figure 4 are spaces where white surnames and phenotypes feature prominently. These pages stand in sharp contrast to the yearbook sections for the aforementioned Latino clubs like MECHA, Spanish Club, and the Mexican Dance team and point to a high level of in-school segregation. While Latina/o students had access to culturally affirming clubs and activities, they were noticeably absent from yearbook spaces where they were likely to be positioned as smart. Looking at my sixth grade class photos in Figure 1 reveals how the segregation and exclusion of Latina/o students from “smart” spaces occurred



Figure 4. “Senior Stars” and Advanced Placement yearbook pages.

across time and in multiple schools in my community. Indeed, comparing my senior yearbook with my sixth grade class picture reveals that my one elementary honors class of 29 mostly white students (out of several hundred students in sixth grade classes at five elementary schools) accounts for close to half (40%) of the seniors considered “most likely to succeed” and “best all-around” at the high school in my community.

As my school pictures and yearbooks make clear, formal and informal school systems combined with my own background in ways that separated, benefited, “smartened” and “whitened” me relative to the other Latina/o students I attended (and gradually did not attend) school with. My own story of smartness shows that the racialized system of tracking from honors spaces in elementary school to college prep and AP spaces in middle and high school provided me and my peers with explicit messages about smartness that were implicitly connected to notions of whiteness as well.

Discussion/Conclusion

In her auto-ethnography of whiteness in her hometown, Kenny (2000) argues that whiteness in the United States occupies a hegemonic position because it cannot and will not speak its own name. In other words, because whiteness is defined in relation to what it is not, it occupies an invisible, default position of power. The construction of whiteness as powerful relies on more than simple categories of phenotype and national origin. Rather, “whiteness is a set of social, economic, and historical practices on the quotidian and systemic levels. It is ... about cultural content rather than skin color” (Kenny, 2000, p. 115). In response to Kenny’s call for cultural workers to do their homework by reflexively turning to their own neighborhoods and growing-up places (2000), I have used my recollections, pictures, and yearbooks to conduct a critical narrative analysis of the complementary roles that whiteness and smartness played in my K-12 schooling experiences.

My narrative analysis of my own story of smartness reveals the myriad ways that the ideology of “smartness” was mutually constituted with whiteness to have an oppressive and stratifying effect across several schooling settings. My elementary school honors class photo is the racial inverse of the demographics of my predominantly Latino community—an inconsistency that was voiced in racialized conflicts on the playground. Although my middle school yearbook picture pages are more representative of my community, my personal recollections reveal that students in college prep courses were afforded special opportunities and were separated from the general school population. Lastly, my high school yearbooks reveal an over-representation of white students in “smart” yearbook spaces and a gradual disappearance of Latina/o Chicana/o students in my yearbooks from one year to the next. Following the suggestion of Coffey and Atkinson (1996), I have organized my narrative with a beginning, middle, and end structure that corresponds to my elementary, middle, and high school pictures and yearbooks. By

paralleling my narrative form to these artifacts of smartness, I highlight the function of my story of smartness: to illuminate racialized and exclusionary of notions of smartness across space and time.

Smartness and whiteness are tools for sorting and ascribing power and social capital to students and must be overcome both as ideologies and cultural practices. This is no easy task, as some efforts to rearticulate smartness along a relativistic model of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2011) can inadvertently re-inscribe the same oppressive, stratifying systems that they seek to overcome (Carrillo, 2013). Like Leonardo and Broderick (2011), I too am suspicious of efforts to reform or rearticulate the ideologies of whiteness and smartness and believe that much discursive work still needs to be done to root out and continually transgress them. Engaging with smartness and whiteness at the level of cultural practice and performance might be an easier task, and much of the work on community cultural knowledge and community ways of knowing (see also Urrieta, 2013; Yosso, 2005) helps to undermine the way that smartness and whiteness operate in schooling. Continuing to interrogate our own stories of smartness might be a fruitful first step for scholars in the academy, many of whom have undoubtedly benefitted from being positioned as smart through interlocking systems of privilege and oppression. The reflexive work of investigating our own smartness frees us to transgress it and will allow scholars engaged in this work to act in more socially just ways to build more inclusive educational environments.

Notes

- ¹The concept of “race treason” can be traced to the work of Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey (1996) in the book *Race Traitor*, a collection of essays from a journal of the same name that Ignatiev founded in 1992. For Ignatiev and Garvey, being a race traitor implies acting contrary to the interests of whiteness and is captured in the phrase “treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity” (1996, p. 10).

Notes on contributor

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