Black youth, ethics, and the politics of respectability in psychological research[1]

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This article examines a model of racial identity that educational researchers in the United States regularly employ to explain the subjective processes that inform the academic and social decisions that black youth make in US North American schools. The analysis demonstrates that, despite the explicit challenge that this model poses to white dominance in research with US students of African descent, the ethics that informs such scholarship is constrained by an unarticulated politics of respectability that subverts an announced project of affirming black humanity. The article concludes with a discussion of the significance of research with black youth populations, especially within the contexts of changes in communicative technologies associated with US post-industrialism and globalisation.

Introduction

Historically, social movements have exerted their influence on dominant institutions in society, albeit each with its own inflection. For instance, in the United States, clandestine anti-slavery activities among captive and free Africans during both the colonial and antebellum periods, the network of African Free Schools of the mid-1800s, the National Baptist Convention and its auxiliary, the Women's Convention, at the turn of the twentieth century, and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s represent some of the earlier social movements that successfully intervened in particular ways on dominant depictions of people of African descent in the US. More recently, black social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, what is

commonly called the Civil Rights and/or Black Power era, have provided the impetus for an intellectual challenge to pathological characterisations of black culture in social science and the media in contemporary US society (Cross, 1991; Jones, 1991; Ladner, 1998 [1973]).

Over the last three decades in particular, scholars in the fields of education, psychology, and sociology have illuminated an array of cultural resources that persons of African descent in the US draw on to mediate their experiences across various social settings and contexts. For the most part, scholars in the US who pose this challenge associate views that disparage black culture and life with a particularly white conservative brand of racism. Certainly, this perception is not without foundation (Stefancic and Delgado, 1996). However, there is ample evidence to indicate that conservatives, liberals, racists and anti-racists alike promulgate the idea that black culture is of limited value in society and that it offers little in the way of social or psychological capital (Scott, 1997). For example, racial conservatives readily use disparaging imagery of black culture to mobilise public opinion around exclusionary social policies and to rationalise the disproportionate social and economic burdens that black people suffer in US society. Similarly, racial liberals evoke 'damage imagery' to explain cultural differences and to argue for tolerance and for policies of remediation, rehabilitation, and social inclusion (Scott, 1997).

Along these lines, in this article I analyse a stage model of black identity born of the 1970s social movements that researchers and educators often use to explain the subjective processes that black youth bring to bear on the academic and social decisions they make in school in contemporary US society. For the most part, those who employ this model in their work also demonstrate commitments to the ideas of diversity and social justice. However, as I show in the following sections, despite the overt challenge that this scholarship presents to white supremacist discourses, the ethics that informs this body of research subverts an overt project of affirming black humanity.

I am especially interested in the ways that the ideology of respectability shapes the direction and endpoints of black identity stage models in ways that theoretically moderate what passes for healthy black youth identities. Respectability is an ideology of middle-class morality that is intimately linked to white nationalism in western Europe and in the United States. It established itself in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the standard for appropriate behaviour through the regulation of gender and sexual norms (Mosse, 1985). These norms define the manners, morals, and sexual attitudes that are often taken for granted in western societies. They include ideals of manliness and their effect on the place of women in public and private life as well as on those who accept these norms as compared to those who are depicted as licentious, perverted, sexually permissive, diseased, and otherwise abnormal (Mosse, 1985; White, 2001). These norms hold their sway nowadays through the discursive regulation of public and private life, especially as it relates to the hold that particular discourses have on what passes for acceptable forms of pleasure and sexual gratification. Writing along these lines of the norms of heterosexuality, Bhattacharyya (2002) made the following observation: 'Made legitimate through recourse to such forces as biological imperatives, the need to propagate the species, the sanction of religion, the stability of society and the growth of the economy, [the norm of heterosexuality] appears to offer lovers no personal pleasures at all. Instead, sexuality is handed over to the higher pursuits of social ordering and lovers are rewarded by the affirmation that they are good citizens' (p17).

As Bhattacharyya suggests, the norms of respectability are remarkably conservative. However, decisively liberal scholars in the US typically take up these norms to counter racist discourses in black identity research. As I shall explain, the uptake of these elements into stage models become problematic as, theoretically, they tacitly marginalise the vast majority of straight adolescent black males and render almost erased from the human landscape straight adolescent black females and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender black youth. Although studies that describe the application of these models provide numerous examples of struggle and empowerment, they often do so in ways that undermine a larger project of challenging white supremacy in psychological and educational research: even as these studies seek to affirm and legitimise the developmental processes of black youth, they do so in ways that reinforce the supremacy of white US North American culture by establishing the standards and values of respectability as the endpoints or the highest stage of human development. This is perhaps nowhere more evident in US scholarship than in the ambivalent use of 'ethnicity' as a marker of cultural difference, a signifier that assumes a particular and an arguably exclusionary view of citizenship and history in the United States (Morrison, 1992; Sleeter, 1992).

To support my claims, I first recap the literature on adolescent black identity and education in the US to establish the intellectual terms of the challenge as I view it (see Duncan, 2005, for a previous discussion along these lines). I follow this discussion by showing that the purchase that certain identity models have on the research on black youth subjectivity is attributable less to their explanatory power than to their commitments to the values that inhere in the politics of respectability as described above. I reiterate that such commitments result in the marginalisation of the majority of black youth and conclude this article by raising for discussion the significance of rethinking black adolescence more broadly in the context of the advances in media technologies attendant to post-industrialism and globalisation.

Black youth and identity research in education

Educational researchers who study black adolescent identity development in the US draw largely upon the work of William E. Cross, who began to develop his theory of *nigrescence*, or of becoming black, in the early 1970s (Cross, 1991). Cross's theory charts the movement of individuals through five to six stages of ideological metamorphosis; scholars apply similar models to identity studies of other marginalised social groups, such as other youth of colour and gay, lesbian, and transgender and biracial adolescents (eg Cass, 1979; de Anda, 1984; Poston, 1990). These stages of identity development generally occur across three major levels of awareness or cognitive organisation: *pre-encounter*, *encounter*, and *post-encounter* levels that resemble dominant justice models, in terms of both structure and content (eg Kohlberg, 1981, 1984). This point is significant as it demonstrates the identity-morality nexus that allows respectability to maintain its purchase on research with black youth populations. I clarify this point in the following section.

As it relates to general theories of *nigrescence*, during the pre-encounter stage, societal values and conceptions of what it means to be black dominate an individual's sense of self. In other words, individuals on this level demonstrate wholesale identification with the dominant white culture and, in some instances, express contempt for black culture. Generally speaking, a person encapsulated in this stage has a poor or negative conception of what it means to be black, if not of their own self. Some researchers note that the state of 'self-denigration and admiration of Euro-American conceptions of normalcy transcend class distinctions among Pre-Encounter ethnic minorities in that these world views are the same for both lower and middle classes' (Gay, 1985, p45).

According to the theoretical formulation under discussion, movement onto a subsequent level occurs when individuals encounter an event or events that compel them to confront questions of race in society. This encounter compels an individual to re-evaluate her or his status as a black person in US society and may result in double consciousness of the sort that Du Bois surmised divided the Negro-American self – 'two thoughts, two unrecognisable stirrings, two warring ideals in one black body' (Du Bois, 1989 [1903], p3). Black identity models describe this level as a transitional period in which individuals may opt to reassert their identification with the dominant white culture. However, encounters also may be confrontational and dislodge individuals from their colour-blind perspectives. In the event that this occurs, individuals may resort to uncritically accepting things associated with black culture and repudiating institutions and values associated with the dominant culture.

For example, according to some researchers, these encounter-level confrontations account for the so-called self-segregation of black youth in US public middle and high schools. They posit that black peer groups are comforting to their members because they provide answers to perplexing questions related to race and identity, questions that neither their white peers nor adult family members can adequately address. For instance, black youth, Tatum writes, 'know how to be black. They have absorbed the stereotypical images of black youth in the popular culture and are reflecting those images in their self-presentation'. Further, she notes, 'joining with one's peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy. What is problematic is that the young people are operating on a very limited definition of what it means to be black, based largely on cultural stereotype' (Tatum, 1997, pp60, 62).

According to general *nigrescence* models, some individuals remain in the stages of the encounter level while others move onto a post-encounter level. Here, individuals come to terms with their primary cultures in ways that do not necessarily entail the rejection of the dominant culture. Development of an appreciation for black culture is grounded in lived conditions, which, by extension, includes the development of personal criteria for what it means to be black. Also, on this level, individuals may consolidate aspects of their identities to achieve consistency across domains of human activity. In addition, persons on

the post-encounter level are less reactionary and generally refocus their energy from wanton aggression toward groups and individuals that they perceive to be different to directed anger against racist and oppressive groups and institutions. These individuals may even move to higher stages where they transcend ethnicity and adopt multicultural or universal identities.

As I indicated in the introduction, an impetus for the formulation of the aforementioned black identity model is a larger project of correcting inaccurate and/or derogatory explanations for the subjective responses of black youth to various social institutions. Researchers often aim to clarify the subjective experiences of black youth in order to foster an understanding of them by teachers and administrators and to devise appropriate interventions to promote their healthy development and success in school and society. For example, Tatum observes that few positive messages are communicated to black youth in society: 'Often, African Americans are either invisible (simply omitted from discussion) or represented in ways that are based on negative stereotypes. Absent or distorted images cannot inspire or reinforce the positive outcomes of educational and economic achievement'. She cites studies that suggest that as a consequence of these cultural distortions and omissions black students adopt oppositional identities that lead them to reject academic achievement. She also points out that curricular interventions can influence these students to gain new frames of reference that include those that view academic success as consistent with 'a genuine African-American identity' (Tatum, 1992, pp331, 333).

Rethinking black youth and identity research: theoretical, methodological, and ethical considerations

The model described in the previous section is popular among researchers and educators who work in urban and suburban schools in the United States. Although the model seeks to describe the subjective processes of black students in integrated or predominantly white schools, it is commonly used in teacher education and school leadership programs to prepare students, most of whom are white, to teach in or lead schools with predominately black student populations. Researchers, educators, and counsellors often consider black identity models useful for diagnosing student problems and for developing culturally responsive strategies to facilitate policies of remediation, rehabilitation, and social inclusion. In many ways, black identity models pick up where theories of North American psychology leave off: if dominant models have capped the development of black people at childhood and adolescence (see, for example, Hall, 1904), black identity models theoretically complete the life span by moving them from adolescence to mature and respectable adults.

As I've noted elsewhere (Duncan, 2005), despite their progressive origins in the US Black Power movements of the 1970s and their currency as theoretical and pedagogical tools, black identity models often rely on questionable philosophical premises that limit their power to explicate the learning and developmental processes of black youth. For one thing, scholars of culture and psychology have long called into question the assumption that development is solely a process of cognitive reorganisation in the direction of a single irreversible universal endpoint or that it occurs solely within the head of the individual (eg Kessen, 1990; Packer and Tappan, 2001). Instead, human development is viewed as a culturally mediated, historically contingent process. As such, 'the dual process of shaping and being shaped through culture implies that humans inhabit 'intentional' (constituted) worlds within which the traditional dichotomies of subject and object, person and environment, and so on cannot be analytically separated and temporally ordered into independent and dependent variables'. In addition, scholars assume mind to be a function of social life. In other words, mind is co-constructed and distributed, emerging in the 'joint mediated activity of people' (Cole, 1996, pp103, 104). Although those who use black identity models in their work are careful to note that developmental processes are tied to contextual factors, critics point out that any notion of human agency in these models is obviated by the over-emphasis that they place on external forces in the construction of the self; studies on child-rearing practices in black communities also suggest that such emphasis is misplaced (eg Barnes, 1972; Spencer, 1988; Ward, 1996).

Black identity models also exhibit a strong tautological character. Early studies of black identity research were generally conducted with students on university campuses who often shared the same social milieus of the researchers who, themselves, had similar experiences as black undergraduate students at predominantly white schools. Thus, it is not surprising that research conducted to test these models tends to show consensual validity. Although the black adolescent populations to which these models are applied nowadays are much more diverse than those in the university studies, the scholars who study these black youth often have had college experiences that are comparable to those

of the previously noted researchers (see, for example, Tatum, 1997, pp75-77). Along these lines, the endpoints of these models strongly favour the liberal ideological values that reflect the social milieus of the university research settings in which they were developed. In other words, when it comes to studying the subjective processes of black students, the focus is largely on race relations. This focus has both theoretical and methodological problems.

Theoretically speaking, the idea of race relations, as commonly understood, implies an acceptance of the belief that racial categories in the US are fixed and are defined by biological factors (Darder, 2002; Miles, 1989). Viewing this construct in this manner ignores the political dimension, or the relationship of power, that accounts for the colour-coded stratification of cultures in society and that gives race its significance in the US. Methodologically speaking, much of the research that follows this direction subordinates inquiries into the school and classroom experiences of black students to questions of how these pupils get along with their white peers and teachers or adjust to curriculum and educational programs devised for their inclusion and/or remediation. These foci in studies with black students also tend to privilege integration and the values of assimilation and equality in the various constructs and operational definitions that guide much of the research in this area.

Black identity models also recapitulate developmental processes as moving from concrete experiences to abstract states, and privilege the latter state over the former, as exemplified by the characterisation of the highest stage of development in these models as ethnic transcendence and the adoption of universal or multicultural identities. The process of recapitulation in these models proceeds from experiences of separation, detachment, and inequality to ideal states of equality, integration, accommodation, and eventually assimilation and conflict resolution. This developmental trajectory biases researchers to favour consensus over incommensurability and the future over the present. Such bias results in research that psychologises resisting or uncooperative black students when analyses of their educational contexts would be more appropriate and instructive. For instance, according to black identity models and to the justice models they resemble (eg Kohlberg, 1981, 1984), students who view liberation and self-determination as preconditions for integration are characterised as being at the encounter level of identity development and the pre-conventional level of moral development, with the assumption here being that they are

less mature or developed than their post-encounter level and (post) conventional level peers.

The emphasis on assimilation and integration as the implicit aim of development and education often results in the arrogation of youth who embrace these values and the denigration of those who do not. It is here, in the real-life applications of black identity models, that their commitments to the ideology of respectability are revealed. As indicated in the introduction, respectability is an ideology of middle-class morality that is intimately linked to white nationalism in western societies. As the tacit guideline that defines the normative manners, morals, and sexual attitudes that are taken for granted in the US, these standards take on colour-coded meanings in the public realm where we associate whiteness with respectability in opposition to the way we imagine blackness, its cultural corollary (Ignatiev, 1995; Morrison, 1992; Roediger, 1991).

In a related vein, black feminist scholars in the United States (eg Carby, 1998; White, 2001) and the United Kingdom (eg Mama, 1995) offer more of an internal, or emic, critique of the legacy of black identity models produced in the wake of the US Black Power movement, as evident in the work of Cross and his progeny; this critique also explicates more vividly the purchase that respectability has on the research conducted among black populations. These scholars argue that such work often equates the experiences of black *males* with the experiences of black *people* in their theoretical formulations and surmise that, consequently, it imposes yet another restrictive social identity on people of African descent, especially black women. Carby (1998), for one, implicates the politics of respectability in such scholarship, arguing that it valorises highly educated, upper middle-class black males, exemplified by W.E.B. Du Bois, and disparages uneducated, working-class black males and black women of all stations of life.

Also, according to black feminist scholars, black identity should be understood as being shaped by the 'intersecting' or 'interlocking' experiences of race, gender, class, and sexuality in the lives of individuals, in contrast to its typical one-dimensional treatment as simply an artefact of race in history, psychology, black cultural studies, and popular culture. They posit, for instance, that the social and material processes that shape the identities of black women are likely to be qualitatively different from those that shape the identities of black men. In addition, it follows that the various aspects of one's social location, or

'positionality', may contribute to one's identification with ideas, beliefs, goals, attitudes, or opinions shaped by different and, in some instances, even conflicting, ideological systems. For example, during a series of the high-profile trials that took place in the US during the mid-1990s, celebrity O. J. Simpson was accused of murdering his wife and her friend. It is conceivable that a black woman observing the court cases could simultaneously identify with the defendant, a black male, based on shared experiences of race, and empathise with the victim, a white woman, based on shared experiences of gender. Some black feminist writers, such as Lorde (1984), also point to the unabashed heterosexism of dominant notions of black identities and the concomitant erasure of gay and lesbian experiences in the scholarship; similarly, filmmaker Marlon Riggs confronted the identification of blackness with a hypermasculinity born of the 1960s Black Power movement in *Black Is…Black Ain't* (1994). Of special relevance to the present argument is White's (2001) central critique of dominant black identity formulations. Here she specifically points to respectability as undermining the capacity of these movements and the scholarly traditions they inform to embrace the full range of identities that constitute black humanity. According to White, of particular significance is the fundamental role of gender and sexual narratives in mediating the social construction of blackness. They inform the sexual myths in the US about black males that have contributed to their lynching, an act that often included genital mutilation, as well as those about black females that have formed the rationale for the wanton raping and sexual exploitation of black girls and women (White, 2001). The conflation of racialised bodies and wanton sexualities is anticipated by the striking similarities of the discourses that characterise the anthropological literature on race (Baker, 1998) and the medical literature on heterosexuality (Katz, 1995). These discourses emerged in the US in the late nineteenth century with the professionalisation of the university and the rise in social prominence of university-trained experts. For the most part, these academic and professional discourses reinforced extant popular racial imagery and survive today in the public domain as common-sense notions. The intuitive shared vocabularies that give popular expression to these 'scientifically-proven' notions serve to make legitimate, and even to intensify, violence committed against persons of African descent in western societies.

Thus, that black identity researchers seek to counter common-sense notions about black culture and life is to be lauded. However, counter-

discourses are 'Janus-faced and contested' and though black identity studies pose a challenge to conventional discourses about black youth, they often do so in ways that privilege the stories of black students who uphold the values of respectability and that suppress the stories of those that do not (White, 2001). As suggested above, the politics of respectability is discernible in research in the values that characterise the endpoint of 'achieved' black identity. These values convey the implicit message to black youth, for instance, that the US white middle-class norm is the standard to which they should aspire, in school and in society. Black youth who do not conform to these standards are construed as 'militant', 'rebellious', 'surly', and as having 'attitude adjustment issues'.

As I have argued, of equal and perhaps of even greater importance is that the suppression of 'wanton' voices contributes to the denial of social contradictions that leave intact chronic patterns of oppression within black communities and the larger society. This point is observable, for instance, in the almost complete erasure of female, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students from research on black adolescent identity and black youth culture. Interestingly, African-centred cultural models often assert values, such as integrity and harmony, which are amenable to affirming in black identity research an explicit recognition of the aforementioned marginalised groups. And, in some instances, these values have found expression in the public positions taken by African-centred leaders. For example, in the late 1970s the founder and chief theoretician of the Black Panther Party, Huey Newton, argued for the feasibility of his organisation uniting with the Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements 'in a revolutionary fashion' (1995, p152). More recently, Afrocentric scholar Molefi Kete Asante revised his view that attributed homosexuality to European decadence (*People with a History*, 1997). However, the stranglehold of respectability remains evident in the 'apparent paradox' in research that results in the exclusion of the sexual and gender realities (Monteiro and Fuqua, 1995, p167).

Beyond the politics of respectability: toward a critical understanding of subjectivity

I pause here to distinguish between the politics of respectability that has been the subject of my critique and other notions of respect that characterise constructive relations in US black communities. As described previously, the former refers largely to (a tacit) conformity to

racial norms that disparage black humanity. However, other forms of respect in 'mainstream' black culture constitute the meaningful worlds which black people inhabit and foster among them a sense of recognition and community. These relations are characterised by the values of gratitude, generosity, and helpfulness, by a code of decency and fidelity, and by an ethics that seeks 'both care-fullness and fairness, both hand-in-handedness and even-handedness' (Walker and Snarey, 2004, p131).

In addition, there are theoretical or methodological alternatives to the models critiqued in this article that may be more amenable to the study of black youth. For instance, certain bicultural theories emphasise the ways that the distinct sociocultural milieus students of colour encounter in school and society shape their social and psychological processes and are amenable to providing culturally mediated, historically contingent accounts of black youth subjectivity (Darder, 1991). Darder, for one, describes four major bicultural response patterns: *alienation*, *dualism*, *separatism*, and *negotiation*. Cultural alienation reflects responses in which an individual identifies with the dominant culture and rejects identification with the primary culture. Cultural dualism is characteristic of those individuals who maintain separate identities, one that allows acceptance in the primary culture and another that allows acceptance in the dominant culture. Cultural separation describes individuals who remain entirely within the primary culture and who adamantly reject the dominant culture. Finally, cultural negotiation describes individuals that seek to mediate, reconcile, and integrate their lived experiences in ways that honour the integrity of their primary cultural identity while working to socially transform the society at large.

In contrast to the stage models described in the previous sections, bicultural theory attempts to explain the range of conscious and unconscious responses that can be found along a continuum that exists, conceptually speaking, between primary and dominant cultural forms. Darder is concerned with the extent to which these responses support *bicultural affirmation*, a condition that fosters self-determination and autonomy and that is akin to the self that Du Bois longed to attain, the merging of the 'double self into a better and truer self' within which 'neither of the older selves [is] lost' (1989 [1903], p3). According to Darder, cultural alienation and cultural separatism responses move individuals away from bicultural affirmation whereas cultural dualism and cultural negotiation responses move them toward it. To be clear, though, a movement in the direction of bicultural affirmation does not necessarily work in the emancipatory interests of an individual, as in cultural dualist responses that fail to challenge the dominant order in which the person lives.

However, in Darder's view, 'bicultural affirmation response patterns may hold the greatest emancipatory possibility in respect to the struggle for cultural democracy in the schools' (Darder, 1991, p57). I concur with Darder's points; however, I would add that movement *away* from bicultural affirmation does not necessarily work *against* the emancipatory interests of students of colour. In a white supremacist society, temporary separatism may function as a strategic move in the direction of personal and social liberation. This is a critical point as researchers and educators readily disparage the values of self-determination and resistance, manifested in forms of cultural separatism, that are often at the heart of the perspectives that many black youth bring to bear on their experiences in school and society (Duncan, 1996).

Like Darder, Mama (1995) rejects imagery of black people as unitary, fixed, subjects. She instead proposes a notion of subjectivity that considers the various discursive positions to which individuals have access to make meaning in their lives. Mama takes her idea of subjectivity beyond its discursive aspect and analyses human experience in terms of intrapsychic processes. In such processes, personal relational histories constitute the various positions from which and changes in how individuals make meaning of who they are. According to Mama, these subjective processes 'involve constant negotiation and change in the course of social relations'. Along these lines, a racial subjective position is but one dimension of the subjective processes of individuals. What this means is that, within such a conceptualisation, black youth are not simply black, white, biracial, gay, or lesbian 'but rather complex, multilayered beings, with a capacity to move between positions, create new ones, and constantly negotiate and renegotiate their identities as they struggle to make sense of a world in which fixed categories are constantly subverted and changed'. Viewing identity in this way opens up possibilities that the 'experience of contradiction, and the unease they generate, may also give impetus to cultural creativity and self-development' (Mama, 1995, p142).

Finally, the critique presented in this article should not be interpreted as an argument that black youth exist in the world as self-evident and distinct entities. Although I highlight certain untheorised dimensions of identity, black youth experience multiple life worlds, including those related to other youth cultures as well as to

larger black cultures. Like other adolescents, black youth experience a 'metamorphosis', to quote one adolescent black female in response to the question, posed in a related study, 'how would you describe yourself to yourself?' (Duncan, 1996). This project also focuses on the stories of black youth who search for inclusive solutions to dilemmas related to conflicts resulting from multiple subjective positions. For instance, I discuss in detail elsewhere the lived experiences of Clayton, a gay Muslim, whose identity cannot be easily separated into distinct domains and analysed in terms of identity statuses, developmental stages, or bicultural response patterns (Duncan, 2005).

Rather the experiences of black youth, like all youth, are informed by competing discursive positions that shape their subjectivities in ways that are complex and contradictory even as they are partial and in flux. The indeterminate character of subjectivity is attributable to the various sexualities, class locations, and cultural, religious, and/or political affiliations that constitute the discursive positions to which individuals have access to shape a world that is at once shaping them. Autobiographical and biographical sources, for example, are replete with stories of young black men and boys who wrestle with issues of gender and sexuality, as well as critiques by black women and girls of society's prescriptions of gender roles and sexual conduct (eg Carbado, 1999; Carroll, 1997; Dawsey, 1996; Kelley, 1997; Rose, 2003; Sapphire, 1997; The Black Girls, 1995). The general experience of black youth is a study of the ways that respectability is implicated in and seeks to moderate their public and private lives in school and society. Clearly, the lives of these young people defy easy placement within models of black identity that purport to explicate their subjective processes. Further, there appears to be no affirming public place for them within a world of fixed categories informed by notions of respectability. At what cost to them and, indeed, to the broader society do we marginalise and erase their realities in our research?

Conclusion

As stated in the introduction, recent black social movements in the US have provided the impetus for much of the contemporary critical work conducted by black scholars throughout the African Diaspora (see, for example, Hanchard, 1994, 2003 and Prashad, 2001 for evidence of how these movements inform a trans-national politics that reaches beyond US territories). Certainly, the increasing interconnectedness of the world provides individuals access to different cultural forms to constitute their subjectivities and, importantly, to assert into the public realm identities that challenge conventional racist caricatures of them. This point is critical, for the forces of white supremacy know no geographical boundaries in their imposition of sexual myths on racialised bodies (Bhattacharyya, 2003). At the same time, responsively, the activities of racialised youth take on a global character to challenge disparaging myths, as evident, for instance, in the international appeal of hip-hop culture. More broadly speaking, as Hanchard (1994, 2003) and Prashad (2001) argue in their respective projects, black social movements evince a recursive trans-national politics, as evident in, say, the emulation of the rhetoric of the Black Panther Party by the oppressed Dalits in India and the representatives of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front, who called themselves 'Yellow Panthers'.

To be clear, shifts in the global economic and economic landscape also destabilise and exacerbate social uncertainties. The world order under post-industrialism and globalisation 'is not settled or secure, but fraught with anxieties, as well as scarred by deep divisions' (Giddens, 2000, p37). Changes in communicative technologies are directly involved in promulgating extant racial imagery and, as such, give special importance to the moral imperatives of research and pedagogy to promote citizenship and social justice, in addition to their technical functions to promote the equitable distribution of socially recognisable and employable skills. Access to communicative technologies by black youth, therefore, is a means for them to obtain control over both the material forces and the symbolic imagery that shape their lives. In a broader sense, flexibility and fluidity – the bane of respectability – are characteristic of the ways that many black youth negotiate life. Moreover, these qualities are promoted with exposure to the kind of pedagogy that the social, cultural, and economic changes created by globalisation now require of citizens of the US and other societies.

Yet, these assets are deemed liabilities when embodied in black youth; ethically speaking, their virtues are customarily construed as social vices. However, the suppression of these qualities not only undermines the vitality and autonomy of black youth. The inhibition of these qualities in the name of respectability within broader social contexts also places societies at risk by making them vulnerable to undemocratic forces that contribute to mass displacement of workers, to the social destabilisation of communities, and to ecological devastation. In this sense, the suppression of black youth subjectivities in research and in the classroom in the service of parochial notions of humanity and

invented exclusionary traditions associated with respectability may very well be symptomatic of larger forms of repression. It bears to reason, then, that the uncensored voices of black youth may indeed yield sources of an ethics in research that has far-reaching implications for loosing the stranglehold that respectability has on individuals, institutions, and societies in an increasingly shrinking world.

Notes

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