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Theoretically, proximity to privilege revolves around the idea that privilege is a form of social currency, which provides the means for social mobility upwards. However, this means of elevation is only applicable to members of marginalized communities, who are aligned with characteristics or behaviors associated with privileged classes. Furthermore, privileges are assigned based upon the standards created by those in positions of power, which then operates through systems and establishments such as education or banking. These manufactured standards seek to reinforce hierarchical interactions within every community, which causes a heightened sense of internalized competition amongst marginalized communities. Thus, the idea of proximity to privilege morphs into a tool used by privileged individuals in power as a means to disrupt community and mobilization of rebellion against inequality supported through systems of power. Proximity to privilege is an alternative representation of the ramifications when accounting for differences in gender, race, and sexuality. However, elements of all three methodologies as discussed in class: Standpoint theories, Intersectionality, and Border thinking are present in the concept of proximity to privilege. Standpoint theories are based on the notion that “Each oppressed group can learn to identify its distinctive opportunities to turn an oppressive feature of the group's conditions into a source of critical insight about how the dominant society thinks and is structured” (Harding 7). For example, Standpoint theories indicate that our own identity and lived experiences shape our own political views and perspective, which also alludes to the notion that we have predeveloped mindsets. Thus, we essentially inherit privileges based on our identities because our society is built on structural systems of power such as white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism. These systems of power instill core values that oppress marginalized communities; however, the reality is that even oppression is unequal to an extent. For example, a person of color who is lighter skinned and thus of a

closer proximity to whiteness has access to a higher level of privilege and opportunities on the basis of their predetermined identity compared to their peers. So, the respective lighter skinned individual has a different “standpoint” than a darker skinned member of the same community based on the difference of each one’s proximity of privilege in this case specifically colorist and racist standards. Likewise, Intersectionality theories acknowledge that one’s multiple identities, based on labels such as race and gender, shape and affect one another. According to Crenshaw, “dominant conceptions of discrimination condition us to think about subordination as disadvantage occurring along a single categorical axis,” which “creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon” (Crenshaw 140). For example, white women may rely on their whiteness because their privilege within the sphere of race is more beneficial than their reality in a sexist society while women of color are unable to, as Crenshaw describes “the narrow scope of antidiscrimination doctrine and its failure to embrace intersectionality, but also the centrality of white female experiences in the conceptualization of gender discrimination” (Crenshaw 144). Meanwhile, Border thinking is essentially one reclaiming the same identity previously linked to oppression as a source of pride. As Lugones states “Anzaldua recognizes here that the possibility of resistance depends on this creation of a new identity, a new world of sense, in the borders” (Lugones 33). Marginalized communities choose to repurpose aspects such as language, which has previously benefited systems of oppression, as powerful tools to empower them instead. It is important to note that proximity to privilege is not necessarily a wholly negative concept, as there is the possibility that these relatively privileged individuals are able to use their voices to uplift their marginalized peers who lack the platform to do so. Aspects of Border thinking can be used to express a more positive view on the hierarchical construction of privilege amongst any community as well as

the fluidity of the whole phenomena. However, for the most part the concept of privilege rewards individualistic mindsets and foster a culture in which individuals aim to align themselves with any form of privilege within reach. For example, now even members of marginalized communities can attain a more privileged and elevated status at the expense of their peers, which further stabilizes the systems of power in place.

As stated before, systems of power and proximity to privilege directly support one another in order to maintain the rampant inequality in our society. To provide more context to this parasitic relationship, it is important to acknowledge that hateful ideologies such as racism are able to thrive by actively working through institutions such as education, banking, and housing. For example, banks approve loans or mortgages according to one's external identity, as a rich, able bodied individual would receive a more favorable agreement in comparison to their less privileged peers. An important example of the ramifications these systems of power hold over our society is how housing is also interlinked with the quality of education one receives, as students from rich, white neighborhoods have more access to schools, which receive better funding and government approved resources. Thus, these more localized cases all stem from overarching ideologies represented in systems of power that then impact our livelihood. These consequences then drive those from marginalized backgrounds to obtain the social currency to elevate their status by aligning themselves with sort of privilege as a way to success within oppressive systems rather than dismantle them.

Another integral component of proximity to privilege is the idea of complacency and "respectability." It is a fact that marginalized identities are associated with harmful stereotypes, and there are indeed individuals who purposely play into these molds to gain approval by accepting microaggressions and the overall status quo. On the other hand, marginalized individuals who reject stereotypes and preconceived notions are seen as a threat for not upholding these systems of power in place. Essentially, while each of these

individuals come from a similar “standpoint” and identity, as it relates to intersectionality, their external behavior primarily define their worldview and true perspective in a way none of the three methodologies discussed in class could demonstrate. In fact, Harding points out that “The work of women of color has been especially important here in developing notions of ‘intersectional’ social locations where oppressive hierarchical structures of gender, class, race and other antidemocratic projects intersect in different ways for different groups” (Harding 8). For example, there are racist stereotypes that people of color are aggressive and less intelligent. Thus, a person of color, who enters predominantly white institutions in schooling or the workplace, can adopt mannerisms associated with whiteness in how they present themselves to appear more “acceptable” or “respectable” in the eyes of the majority. In a sense, the individual is forced to assimilate in order to retain a proximity to privilege, which as Lugones says, “is part of the Anglo imagination that we can keep our culture and assimilate, a position that would be contradictory if both cultures were understood as informing the ‘real’ fabric of everyday life” (Lugones 35). Essentially, there is a pathway for social mobility through external factors that one can technically change as seen in one’s mindset or presentability.

To offer a counterpoint to the social mobility one’s proximity to privilege provides, the reality is that this phenomenon exists in a sort of vacuum within marginalized communities rather than the already privileged classes. Though an individual can present themselves as more acceptable to the privileged gaze, they are only considered so compared to their marginalized peers. For example, a wealthy man of color in comparison to an equally affluent, white man, whose identity is unmistakably of a more privileged status based on race, is unable to transcend these already established effects of the systems of power at hand. To provide a more concrete example, we can take a look at a person of color, who is white passing possibly because they are biracial, and thus whose features align with Eurocentric

beauty standards such as pale skin, a thinner nose, and a slender body. As a result of colonization and white supremacist values, these features are associated with less aggression and a higher degree of likeability to a wider range of individuals. Respectively, the white passing individual is indeed of a closer proximity to privilege on the basis of how others would interpret their racial identity to be closer to white in comparison to other people of color. We can consider the white passing individual to be in a sort of “border,” as Lugones discusses in her article on Border thinking in which various paths are opened up on the basis of their passing privilege while their marginalized peers are unable to do so. However, we can compare the same individual, who is able to move between both white and marginalized communities because they can deemphasize their roots to their other racial identification, to an individual who has two white parents. The white individual never needed to undergo this crisis because they could walk through society never thinking about the concept of proximity to privilege as they have always been guaranteed this inherent advantage. Thus, the social mobility touted alongside one’s proximity of privilege is somewhat similar to an imaginative prize. One’s newly uplifted status will never truly be equivalent to “real” privilege because this competition exists solely within marginalized communities.

A common theme between all three of the previously mentioned methodologies: Standpoint, Intersectionality, and Border thinking is the question of one’s identity, which includes an external identity that is imposed on an individual as well as an internal one that can only be claimed by oneself. The difference between an externalized and internalized identity is directly related to one’s proximity to privilege and thus social mobility. Oppression through systems of power is a social construct, which is so deeply embedded in our own mindsets that the whole phenoma appears to be natural or brushed off as just the way things are. The usage of social mobility as a form of reward stabilizes these systems of power because the idea of proximity to privilege is used as a tool to disrupt coalitions and

movements within marginalized communities by offering some form of escape from the structured hierarchy. However, as stated above, one can reclaim their link to an identity, which is seen as lesser, and choose to uplift their peers instead of accepting the system in place by resisting this entire phenomenon.

Works Cited

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