

## New Scholarship on Race, Class, and Gender: Other Voices Challenging the Mainstream

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"You are told who you are, or you know who you are by the stories that are told."  
—Leslie Marmon Silko

### Introduction

From the margins, we find ourselves well positioned to tell "other stories"—life histories, traditions, and cultural myths which typically go unheard in dominant society.<sup>2</sup> As illustrated in the lead article, "A Pattern of Possibility: Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior*," by Thelma J. Shinn, such stories are "meronymic"—*mero* from the Greek meaning "part"—because our unique social location allows us to see beyond the dominant mythos and tell "other" parts of "the story." Telling these stories is not only empowering to those whom we name, but it also changes and transforms the official story line itself. Life stories of marginalized peoples demonstrate time and again that there is no one story, no one way of seeing, thinking, or feeling. Moreover, the core of these stories and identities reveal multiple parts of a more inclusive story, a more inclusive way of thinking. Further, meronymic stories unveil the complex operations of power and domination which have denied and suppressed other voices. This special issue of *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* on race, class, and gender is devoted to telling the other parts of "the story."

## **Explorations in Ethnic Studies**

Scholarship on race, class, and gender often tells the other story by beginning with the researcher him/herself as part of the problematic—we position ourselves as part of what Shinn highlights in the work of Maxine Hong Kingston—the "frog knot" which is untied, freeing us from the constraints of the dominant discourse. From here, we can begin to formulate and develop theory through conversation and "dialogue" with informants and/or sources in order to work towards the discovery and construction of communities. Communities are central to this approach since the problematic is configured as part of a larger communal and collective dimension that is only meaningful within a specific social and historical context.

The strength of the new scholarship on race, class, and gender lies in its ability to recognize and open up contradictions and to create new beginnings. Through such work, we attempt to break down mainstream story lines by questioning and transforming existing institutional arrangements. By bringing other parts of "the story" into view, we better enable ourselves as scholars and as activists to understand, grapple with, and disrupt the complex relations of power, domination and privilege. As we are reminded by Shinn when describing the significance of Maxine Hong Kingston's work:

With her complex knot-making ability, Kingston reveals that we too must follow the twists of our own lives through family, community, and social versions and know in our own selves the order we can achieve, the work of art we can create by constructing our own story from its many components.... When the novel is made new through fresh perspectives, when the story balances personal, historical, and mythic truths; then the 'storyline' can be spread out, un-knotted, or looped to reveal the simultaneous realities of many cultures, many times, and many places as they repeat the 'absolute truth' of myth in this culture, this time, this place.

Thus, we see the essays in this issue not only as important contributions to the recent scholarship on race, class, and gender, but as efforts to change and transform the "mainstream truths" within the academy.

### **Repositioning of Race, Class, and Gender in Social Institutions**

Mainstream scholarship that examines the role of race, class, and gender in relationship to social institutions seeks to develop ways of knowing in static and fixed categories for understanding the social world. Such a perspective typically highlights the role of institutions in molding and shaping our everyday lives. However, the role of subjective, histori-

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cal, and political actors in helping to shape our realities is at best, minimized, or, at worst, ignored. The introduction of race, class, and gender into mainstream scholarship promises to redefine this view from above by placing social actors at the center of analysis who, in turn, create structure through collective practices. The articles in the first section of our special issue by Gloria Cuádras and Jennifer Pierce, Heidi Howarth, and Mary E. Kelsey all examine the shifting, complex and, at times, contradictory relations between social actors and the institutions where they find themselves.

In "From Scholarship Girls to Scholarship Women,"<sup>3</sup> Gloria Cuádras and Jennifer Pierce develop "socio-biographies"<sup>4</sup> about the dilemmas graduate education poses for women of working-class origin. As they painfully learn, the academy as an institution not only validates the experiences of white men, but validates men from a particular class background. In Pierre Bourdieu's term, Cuádras and Pierce find they do not possess the requisite "cultural capital" to be heard, or even seen, in graduate seminars, by other graduate students, or by faculty members.<sup>5</sup> Their personal narratives powerfully illustrate not only their feelings of alienation in this environment, but reveal as well the commonalities and differences in their experiences as a woman of color and a white woman from working-class backgrounds. Both women struggle with the academic discourse, the scholarly norms for "objectivity" and "detachment," and their material needs for financial support. Further, their stories highlight the contradictions of race and class: for Cuádras, color renders her class background visible, whereas for Pierce, "whiteness" serves to obscure and mask her origins. Their collaborative essay—sometimes told in first person and, at others, with both voices—not only opens up their contradictory locations within graduate school, laying bare the operations of power and privilege, but also highlights their individual and collective acts of resistance. Today, as assistant professors within the academy, Cuádras and Pierce continue their efforts to think, write, and work collaboratively. Their essay concludes:

As working-class women from differing ethnic backgrounds, we have learned to recognize our similarities, to embrace our differences, and to grapple with one another's complexities. We know that unless we come together for the purpose of addressing and acting upon broader issues, we will not challenge the reproduction of inequality in the academy. Our ability to collaborate defies the racism and classism institutionalized in the American educational system. This process is never an easy one, yet we continue to take one another seriously and to move forward the process of institutional change.

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The work of Heidi Howarth, in her article, "The Creation of Education by Hispanic Women," offers yet another interesting and provocative perspective on race, class, and gender in education. By placing non-dominant women at the center of her analysis, and allowing them to tell "their stories," we learn and discover that "Hispanas" in junior high school have created an alternative space for themselves outside the educational system in response to a system that has failed to address their needs within the classroom setting. As women of color, they are left out of the mainstream educational process. However, "Hispanas" do not respond passively to this process, but rather actively seek their own kind of education and learning outside of the classroom. Howarth states:

It is my belief that Hispanas have created a private brand of survival skills. The absence of the appropriate kind of 'cultural capital' pushes the Hispana to develop ways in which to confront the institution's marginalization process and ways in which to educate themselves. Listed among these are anger, independence, separation, the recognition of school and parent ambivalence to their educational needs and desires, and the conscious search for education outside of the public school.

Another important discovery from this research is that patterns of assimilation among Latinas/os in American society vary by gender. Howarth is precise in her argument that making gender differences visible makes "...the assumed hypothesis of identical rates of assimilation for males and females [conspicuous, and]...exposes layers of damaging assumptions." This important discovery emerges **only** because the researcher herself is sensitive to gender, class and racial differences. It is a direct challenge to mainstream research that has dominated the social sciences since the 1950s, which focuses predominantly on the experiences of men of color.

The important article, "Welfare Politics and Racial Stereotypes: The Structural Contradictions of a Model Minority," by Mary E. Kelsey, provides us with another excellent critique of the race relations literature which relies on cultural values to explain the economic success of Asian Americans in the United States. Employing a solid ethnographic approach, Kelsey presents a poignant and theoretically sophisticated argument that the state, in the form of welfare, plays a significant role in the social mobility of Southeast Asian refugees, specifically Laotians, living in California. Unlike research that assumes an extreme structuralist position which denies human agency, Kelsey's work offers a balanced and thoughtful presentation examining the structures of opportunity in relation to individuals and their mobilization of these resources. An important policy implication of Kelsey's work is that with balanced

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structural opportunities, all poor communities of color can achieve social mobility in the United States. Her essay concludes:

A careful examination of welfare state policies reveal that different groups of poor people in America have forged strikingly different relations with the state. For most poor people, the hostile welfare state of the 1950s and early 1960s was modified by a series of reforms under the Great Society programs only to return to hostile state-client relations under the social policies of Reagan and Bush. The 1980s were an era in which Reagan cut material aid to the poor, abolished the successful CETA job training program, and reduced state resources for education. Despite these general cutbacks in social programs, political refugees were offered a comprehensive array of resources.... Hypotheses of social mobility based on errant assumptions of equal opportunity falsely elevate the role of culture in social mobility. Poor communities have not all had access to the same resources and therefore should not be judged as if the playing field were level.

### **Representations of Race, Class, and Gender in the Media**

The next section of our special issue focuses on the role media plays in American society. Media, whether print, television, or film, produces representations of race, class, and gender. Feminist scholar Michelle Fine argues that if we are to understand gender, and we would add race and class, as multiply positioned and relational, "we need to investigate not only what is represented...as gender, [race and class] but what is not represented..."<sup>6</sup> In other words, as academics and as activists, we must disrupt the prevailing notions of what is inevitable and "natural" about race, class and gender in newspapers and film by telling "other" parts of the "whole story." The articles by Carmen Manning-Miller, Clarence Spigner, and Marian Sciachitano all explore these issues.

Carmen Manning-Miller's excellent article, "Media Discourse and the Feminization of Poverty," effectively disrupts the media's prevailing notion of what is inevitable and "natural" about women and poverty. Through a carefully documented analysis of media discourse on poverty, Manning-Miller shows that journalistic stories and photo essays tend to depict the poor as women of color, neglecting the fact that overwhelming numbers of women in poverty are white: "Reports of welfare-reliant women of color without complimentary statistics of welfare-reliant white women mask the fact that so many poor women are white and make welfare a tool in the politics of race." Furthermore, she finds that a value

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laden distinction is made between "deserving men and women" and "undeserving women." The few references to men or elderly women in poverty are described as "without work," whereas most of the poverty coverage on women focuses on unemployed, welfare-reliant women of child-bearing age.

A *Washington Post* article in the first category, for example, described the impoverishment of elderly nuns "...in retirement binds because, unlike the male hierarchy who controlled the collection plate, the sisters put neither their trust in money, nor their money in trust...." On the other hand, Manning-Miller writes, the majority of the poverty coverage concerns unemployed, welfare-reliant women of child-bearing age. For example, in a *Wall Street Journal* article titled, "Good Girls Fare Better Standard of Living," a hospital nurse's statement of attribution charges: "He's [patient's baby boy] going to be another toy for her to play with... It's pointless to teach her about parenting...." Manning-Miller argues that newspaper representations are ideological: they shift our attention away from social and political processes and focus instead on matters of individual choice. In this way, the media, through its journalists, photographers, and editors' choices, carefully construct racialized and gender specific images of poverty, specifically unmarried Black mothers on welfare, images which do not capture the complexities of the actual lived experiences of poverty.

Clarence Spigner's fine essay, "Race, Gender, and the Status-Quo: Asian and African American Relations in a Hollywood Film," explores the role film plays in creating representations of inter-ethnic tensions between Asian Americans and African Americans in the United States. Spigner's analysis of director Michael Cimino's *The Year of the Dragon* (1985), a police action movie about a "ruthless" Chinese American subculture in New York, shows the white male characters depicted as savvy, street-smart romantic leads, whereas Asian Americans and Blacks are diminished to a degrading and secondary status. Further, Asian/Black relations in the movie are portrayed in a number of negative images: through "master/servant" relationships—Tai, the Chinese gangleader has a Black "buffoon" bodyguard and Tai admonishes his gang members not to allow themselves to be treated as "yellow niggers"—and through interracial competition—Chinese Americans compete with Blacks, not with whites, for scarce resources. On the other hand, Stanley White, the film's white protagonist, is the emblematic police officer/"urban cowboy" who rescues society from this dysfunctional subculture of intrigue, drugs, and violence. Spigner also finds that representations of inter-ethnic tensions also play out in male/female relationships in the film. Tzu, a Chinese American woman in the film is:

initially independent and assertive but remains cold and elitist particularly toward fellow Chinese Americans. Yet

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she is curiously acquiescent to white male authority. As the film's primary female protagonist, her romantic preference for a racist/sexist white policeman [Stanley White] reinforces race and gender domination as desirable and appropriate.

Spigner concludes that the race and gender-specific imagery in this film is functional: it promotes racialized and gendered stereotypes at the same time that it legitimates white male dominance through violence against people of color as rational and necessary for societal harmony.

Marian Sciachitano's essay, "Whose Crying Game," speaks directly to the meronymic story theme of this special issue. By presenting an "other" story about the film *The Crying Game*, Sciachitano raises serious questions about the entertainment industry's efforts to titillate audiences with a "shocking," "surprising," and "hush-hush" conclusion to the movie, specifically, that Dil, one of the main characters who appears to be a beautiful, light-skinned Black woman, is actually a gay Black transvestite. Beginning with her own contradictory location as a bi-racial Asian American woman, Sciachitano reflects that her own lived experiences of being racially ambiguous or "Other" in a culture which values "racial purity" have led her to see that she shares "a great deal in common with men of color and their struggles." Thus, rather than focusing on the film's "shocking" conclusion, Sciachitano asks us to consider instead, "How do men of color in this film get represented or positioned?" She argues that the film represents an exotic and fetishized image of Black gay men. It is through Fergis, the main character, and his white heterosexual gaze, that Dil becomes an object of desire as a woman: a site of both sexual and colonial domination. Sciachitano writes:

The film's focus shifts and ends up exoticizing Dil as well as Fergis' new fascination (and ours) with Dil. It is now Dil's Black body, which on one level is the body of a Black woman made "other" by race and gender, and on another, the body of a Black transvestite made "other" by race and sexuality... [T]he cinematic voyeurism of watching Fergis' attraction to an "image" of a seductive Black woman who turns out to be a transvestite cannot and should not be mistaken or dismissed....

The author concludes her powerful essay by urging us to become "critical citizens" who question these representations, these narratives, and perspectives. Doing so will enable us to "transform these images of men and women of color by how we look, how we think, how we talk, and hopefully, by how we feel.

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In addition to the articles, this special issue offers a list of current readings on race, class, and gender for those interested in learning more about this important and emerging area of study. The bibliography is organized categorically, by alphabetical order, into one of three sections: 1) Anthologies and Edited Volumes; 2) Books; and 3) Journal Articles and Book Chapters. The bibliography offers a fairly comprehensive listing of recent publications in the areas of Education, Gerontology, Ethnic Studies, History, Law, Literature, Media Studies, Sociology, and Women's Studies. We are indebted to Ms. Lisa Kammerlocher from the Fletcher Library, and Ms. Cynthia M. Rasmussen from the Department of American Studies, both at Arizona State University West, for their assistance in helping compile this bibliography.

We began our introductory essay with a quote from the author Leslie Marmon Silko, who in discussing her novel *Ceremony*, explains the important role and function of a story.<sup>7</sup> *Ceremony* is the story of Tayo and his transformative process. As a novel that recognizes and celebrates the oral traditions of Native people, this book is best described as a "word ceremony." It is a ceremony representative of a curative act, a healing process, that through the act of storytelling radiates power that comes from "word spirits."<sup>8</sup> For communities on the margins, there are many word ceremonies which have been ignored or forgotten by mainstream scholars. The time has come for all of us to recognize the importance of these contributions and incorporate them into our understanding of contemporary American society. In the process, we work to transform the academy, our communities, and ourselves. Our hope is that this special issue on race, class, and gender will play a part in fulfilling this vision.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The editors of this volume are **full co-authors** and have listed their names in alphabetic order.

<sup>2</sup>We have also produced a documentary, *Unheard Voices*, which attempts to tell stories from the margins in Utah Valley. It was co-produced by Jennifer Pierce, Alberto L. Pulido, and Kim Koch. *Unheard Voices* premiered at the National Association for Ethnic Studies Conference on Race, Class, and Gender in Salt Lake City, Utah, March 1993. Copies are available from KUED-TV, located on the campus of the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah.

<sup>3</sup>This article was sent out for an external blind review by *Explorations in Ethnic Studies* senior editor, Miguel A. Carranza.



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<sup>4</sup>C. Wright Mills, "The Promise," in his *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford Press, 1959): 3-24.

<sup>5</sup>Pierre Bourdieu, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction," in *Power and Ideology in Education*, eds. Jerome Karabel and A.H. Halsey (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977): 487-510.

<sup>6</sup>Michelle Fine, *Disruptive Voices: The Possibilities of Feminist Research* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1992): 22.

<sup>7</sup>Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Penguin, 1977); "Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko," in *Sun Tracks*, Vol. 3 (1976): 28-33.

<sup>8</sup>"Conversations with Leslie Marmon Silko."