Deconstructing RACE

Multicultural Education
Beyond the Color-Bind

JABARI **MAHIRI**

MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION SERIES   James A. Banks, Editor

"Jabari Mahiri's superb *Deconstructing Race* is the best modern book on multiculturalism in education. More than that, it can be the beginning of a vital transformation of the field and of our views about diversity."
— **James Paul Gee**, Mary Lou Fulton Presidential Professor of Literacy Studies, Regents' Professor, Arizona State University
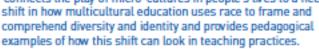
"Mahiri challenges the very concepts of race that perpetuate boundaries and myths of underachievement. *Deconstructing Race* is a seismic catalyst, providing a framework for a new American narrative on race based on irrefutable research and inspirational evidence."
— **Yvette Jackson**, chief executive officer of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education

"Brilliant and thought-provoking, *Deconstructing Race* makes a compelling case for addressing societal inequalities by changing how we think about race. This groundbreaking book is a must-read for scholars of race and education, and for those seeking to better support the learning and development of youth."
— **Dr. Na'ilah Suad Nasir**, Vice Chancellor of Equity & Inclusion, UC Berkeley

How do socially constructed concepts of race dominate and limit understandings and practices of multicultural education? Since race is socially constructed, how do we deconstruct it? In this important book Mahiri argues that multicultural education needs to move beyond racial categories defined and sustained by the ideological, social, political, and economic forces of white supremacy. Exploring contemporary and historical scholarship on race, the emergence of multiculturalism, and the rise of the digital age, the author investigates micro-cultural practices and provides a compelling framework for understanding the diversity of individuals and groups. Descriptions and analysis from ethnographic interviews reveal how people's continually evolving, highly distinctive, micro-cultural identities and affinities provide understandings of diversity not captured within assigned racial categories. Synthesizing the scholarship and interview findings, the final chapter connects the play of micro-cultures in people's lives to a needed shift in how multicultural education uses race to frame and comprehend diversity and identity and provides pedagogical examples of how this shift can look in teaching practices.

Jabari Mahiri is a professor of education and the William and Mary Jane Brinton Family Chair in Urban Teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, and a board member of the National Writing Project.

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> Ethnography offers all of us the chance to step outside our narrow cultural backgrounds, to set aside our socially inherited ethnocentrism, if only for a brief period, and to apprehend the world from the viewpoint of other human beings.
>
> – James Spradley (1979, v)

Kobié Jr. is caramel colored. He was 3 years old when this chapter was written. His family soon started calling him Santi, short for his middle name, Santiago. In the United States where he was born, he is seen as a black[1] boy. But his identity is more complex than that.

Santi's father was born and grew up in Chicago and identifies as African American. He majored in French and minored in math at Morehouse College. Santi's mother identifies as Latina and completed her bachelor's degree at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She was born in Popayá, a town in southwestern Colombia. At 5 she immigrated to the United States with her mother, who identifies as white and who was also born in Colombia. Santi's grandfather on his mother's side is indigenous Colombian and has lived his whole life in Colombia. Santi's mother and grandmother are fluent in Spanish and English, and he too is bilingual in these languages.

Hélio was 8 when this chapter was written. Like his first cousin Santi, he was born in the United States. His dad, like his dad's brother, grew up in Chicago; he graduated from Morehouse with a double major in physics and Spanish. Hélio's mother is a French citizen and defined in her country as Caucasian. Her mother is Polish and Italian and her father is German. She met Hélio's father while they were both completing doctorate

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[1] Lowercase letters are used for color-coded designations of racial categories throughout the book (except for the Series Foreword).

degrees at the University of California, Berkeley. Hélio is fluent in English and French, so his uncle can communicate with him in French and English, while his father can communicate with his cousin Santi in Spanish and English. Hélio has light complexion. When with his mother in the United States, he is seen as white; when with his father, he is seen as biracial. But his identity is more complex than that.

Hélio and Santi are not anomalies. Like every individual in the United States (and the world), they are physically, linguistically, geographically, historically, and personal-culturally *situated* in families; in communities and communities of practice; in social, affinity, and religious groups; and in educational and other institutions within society. Their identities are constituted by rich arrays and confluences of forces and factors stemming from how each is distinctively and fluidly situated. A core motive and focus for this book is writing the wrongs of hierarchy and hypocrisy perpetuated by how these children are socially constructed in U.S. society.

Research and writing of this book also occurred during the 2016 presidential campaign and election. Since the November 8 results, significant increases in hate crimes and harassment against Muslims, Latinos, Jews, African Americans, LGBTQ Americans, and other minority and vulnerable groups have been continually documented and reported. Trump's deliberate denigration of these groups leading up to and subsequent to the election reinvigorated and validated white supremacists' views that reject the value of multiculturalism and instead promote an imagined white, Christian European heritage. Clearly, his rhetoric and selection of people into leadership positions in his administration have emboldened white identity politics and increased discord and division in our society. One of the many painful examples is the incident at JFK Airport in New York shortly

after his inauguration, in which Robin Rhodes, a 57-year-old man from Worchester, Massachusetts, physically and verbally assaulted a female Delta Airlines employee who was wearing a hijab. He kicked her and ranted profanities about Islam and also said, "Trump is here now. He will get rid of all of you" (Bever, 2013). Significantly, Trump's election was predicated on the fact that 58% of people identified as white voted for him. Deconstructing race is particularly imperative in the corrosive post-election climate facilitated by his election, and the roles of multicultural education are all the more pivotal.

Race is a socially constructed idea that humans can be divided into distinct groups based on inborn traits that differentiate them from members of other groups. This conception is core to practices of racism. There is no scientific justification for race. All humans are mixed! And, scientists have demonstrated that there is no physical existence of races. Yet, race *is* a social fact with a violent history and hierarchy that has resulted in differential and disturbing experiences of racism predicated on beliefs that races do exist. My argument for deconstructing race is grounded in insights from scholars who have guided my thinking as well as extensive ethnographic interviews of people identified within the five most generally referenced racial categories in the United States – in essence, what I've learned from the literature joined with what I've learned from lives of others.

LEARN FROM THE LIVES OF OTHERS

What I've learned from literature and scholarship on race as well as prospects for deconstructing it are taken up in Chapters 2 and 3 and threaded through the subsequent chapters. This literature and scholarship provided compelling examples of writing the

wrongs of race by explicating myriad false premises and contradictions in racial ideologies and narratives past and present. Initially, this book was conceived exclusively as a discussion of scholarship on these issues. However, after conversations with Relene[2], who became the first of 20 interviewees, I decided to bring perspectives and stories from people's lives into dialogue with the literature and scholarship. I saw the book's focus being substantively illuminated by me consciously attempting to step outside my own cultural background and, as Spradley suggested in the quote that begins this chapter, "apprehend the world from the viewpoint of other human beings" (1979, v). Consequently, in-depth descriptions and stories of people's actual lives were joined with selected literature and scholarship as ways of writing the wrongs of race.

I was reminded of the critically acclaimed movie, *The Lives of Others* (2006), (Wiedermann, Berg, & von Donnersmarck, 2006), which won an Oscar for best foreign film. It was set before the collapse of the Berlin Wall when East Germany's population was closely monitored by the state secret police, the Stasi. Only a few citizens were permitted to lead private lives, among them a renowned pro-Socialist playwright. Eventually, he too was subjected to surveillance, and a Stasi policeman was ordered to secretly monitor the conversations in his apartment to discover any incriminating activities by the group of artists who frequently met there. However, what the policeman learned in listening in on their lives ended up changing *his* life and politics.

Of course, I received permission to interview the adults who volunteered for this project, but as with the "secret sharer" in *The Lives of Others,* my personal views and understandings were shaped and changed by what I learned. Wacquant (2008) also

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[2] Pseudonyms selected to reflect real names in terms of cultural connections like ethnic, linguistic, geographic, or religious origins are used for all interviewees.

argued for and demonstrated the significance of extending scholarship with ethnographic investigations. Spradley (1979), who provided a comprehensive framework for ethnographic interviewing, went so far as to say, "Perhaps the most important force behind the quiet ethnographic revolution is the widespread realization that cultural diversity is one of the great gifts bestowed on the human species" (p. v). Spradley (1979), Denzin and Lincoln (2003), Frank (2009), and Saldana (2009) oriented my approach to conducting the interviews and analyzing the transcripts and field note data. Coding across data sources was converged into larger descriptive categories and later merged into the major themes discussed in Chapter 3.

Because I feel that not only academics, but *all* readers should understand the approaches used to generate and document claims being made about people's lives, I discuss these methods as part of the introduction to this book. Ultimately, I would like readers to respond as Joseph Wood, one of many pre-publication "ghost" readers, did. He put himself in the shoes of the interviewees and mused over inaccuracies of his own racial identity. Indeed, how do we all construct identity in contrast to how it is socially constructed for us?

The qualitative work began when I interviewed Relene at Seoul International Airport in May of 2014. I completed the remaining 19 interviews, four adults identified in each of the categories of European, African, Asian, and Hispanic American and American Indian/Alaskan Native, over the next two years. They agreed to be audiotaped, so in addition to their voices, I captured facial expressions, gestures, and body language as they spoke, often passionately and painfully, about these issues.

I met Relene at the 2014 Korean Association of Multicultural Education

Conference (KAME). I co-presented a paper with Grace Kim where I introduced the concept of "micro-cultures" as a way of re-thinking identity beyond what I called "the color-bind." Kim provided illuminating examples from her research on participatory culture at a Korean website called *Dramacrazy* (Mahiri & Kim, 2016; Kim, 2016). As Relene and I discussed our research interests, I also learned that she had come to the United States with her family from the Caribbean Island of Dominica as an immigrant in late adolescence. This positioning had sharpened the focus of her "inner eyes" – an image from the "Prologue" of *Invisible Man* (Ellison, 1947) that I will discuss in Chapter 2. As we talked about the focus of this book project, I could see the significance of pre-interview conversations. I listened for information and ideas that, if she agreed to be interviewed, would inform my questions to help her deeply probe her experiences. For example, although she has dark brown skin, she talked about how her teenage experiences in Boston made her feel like she was "passing for black." This was more than a year before Rachel Dolezal was outed by her parents on June 15, 2015 as a white woman passing for black.

I will return to the controversy surrounding Ms. Dolezal in Chapter 5, but here I provide a glimpse of how Relene came to her own sense of "passing." Of African-Caribbean heritage, she identifies as a black woman who became a naturalized U.S. citizen. She noted, "U. S. society tends to identify me as an African American woman, meaning a U.S. born black." But her experiences in Boston not only revealed her marginalization from blacks born in the United States, they also reflected her being the victim of intense discrimination by them. Yet, she and other West Indian immigrants wanted to be accepted by the Boston black community. So she adopted cultural practices

– behaviors and styles of dress, music, food, and language – that eventually allowed her to pass for black. Essentially, she performed overt cultural components of being black, in part, to avoid "blacklash." Below the surface association with being black, however, Relene's life is much more complex – as is everyone's. Her truer self, her unique and dynamic positionality, practices, choices, and perspectives were not visible through the veil of race used to define her, whether by those who saw themselves as black or white.

After interviewing Relene, I realized that gathering information and ideas in pre-interview conversations allowed me to initially have to ask only two questions of each interviewee: *How do you feel U. S. society identifies you? And, how do you identify yourself?* Because I was interested in how the interviewee's identities and affinities were mediated by digital media and hip-hop culture, I closed each interview with two final questions: *In what ways did you previously and do you currently participate in digital culture? And, in what ways, if any, did you previously and do you currently participate in hip-hop culture?* Each interview involved following up on things interviewees revealed in response to these four questions in an open-ended, dialogical way. These four questions allowed me to explore if and how the interviewees' identities and affinities that were revealed through their positioning, practices, choices, and perspectives complicated or obviated assigned racial categories.

Each formal interview lasted from two to three hours, and I also had follow-up conversations with all the interviewees to explore additional questions. I didn't record or take notes during conversations prior to or subsequent to the formal interviews, but shortly afterwards, I wrote expansive descriptive and reflective field notes to capture what I had learned. These notes became part of the data for analysis. Every interview was

transcribed, read a number of times, and inductively coded to develop categories as well as identify any outlier considerations within and across racial, gender, sexual diversity, and generational designations.

Like Relene, the other 19 interviewees bravely intimated how they constructed, negotiated, rejected, erased, or deliberately distinguished key aspects of their identities. They also discussed how they saw their identities being invisibilized, homogenized, or boxed in rigid categories. They used and explained terms like "pigmentocracy," "blacxican," "Mexica," "racial indeterminacy," "gender ambiguity," "pretending to be white," "clapback," and "selective identities" that illuminated intricate aspects of their mercurial lives. Consequently, they revealed complexity, specificity, and fluidity of their personal-cultural identities and affinities that could not be contained within or explained by reductive conceptions of race.

All 20 are U.S. citizens. One criteria was that each interviewee self-identify in one of the five ascribed racial categories. One person discussed in the Chapter 5 who has an African American and a German parent did not affirm an African American identity, but indicated that she is often seen that way. Within these categories, I selected two women and two men with one of them being identified as lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ). This held for all groups except American Indian/Alaskan Natives in which no one identified in as LGBTQ. However, interviews with two of the American Indians spoke incisively to considerations of gender and sexual orientation. Another criterion was that interviewees be between the ages of 21 and 45 years old which was true for all except one who was 47 when interviewed. This age specification was to get perspectives of interviewees who were born and developed into adults since the rise of

the digital age and the birth of hip-hop in the early 1970's.

While honoring these selection criteria, I drew mainly on snowballing my personal, social, and professional relationships and networks to identify participants. Like the narrator in James McPherson's short story "Elbow Room" (1986), I was hunting for good stories. This may be seen as a limitation, but I feel the significance of the study is in what is revealed about its focus through the sustained, close exploration of the practices, choices, and perspectives of the interviewees. Though beginning in self-acknowledged racial categories, the questions and dialogues allowed the interviewees to reflect on how their identities have been shaped by personal and social experiences, histories, trajectories, choices, and views that don't fit easily into assigned categories or race.

KEY CONCEPTS

We are all born into a social position and with physical features that contribute to our sense of who we are. But social positioning and physical features are not (or should not be) determinative of identity. Against the grain of social constructions, this book reveals how people's identities are ultimately determined by a wide range of personal-cultural practices, choices, and perspectives. The practices engaged in throughout our lives are tied to major and minor life choices as well as perspectives we develop about ourselves and others at the intersection of personal, social, material, and spiritual worlds. The lives of the interviewees provided evidence for how the intersections and interactions of these components reflected the actual identities of individuals, rather than the essentialized racial categories that as Brodkin (1998) noted are "assigned" by white supremacy.

Micro-cultures (with a hyphen) is a key concept that captures the numerous components of positioning, practices, choices, and perspectives that make up the unique identities of each individual. This idea builds upon, but is distinguished from Banks' (2013) concepts of "microcultures" (without a hyphen) and "multiple group memberships" as discussed in Chapter 9. I describe micro-cultural identities and practices as being mediated by language, and like language being both acquired and learned. But they are also constituted and mediated through digital texts and tools that dramatically increase the range of how they can be engaged or enacted. At any moment, the vertical axis of these virtually limitless combinations of components – like fingerprints – reflect and define the ultimate uniqueness of individuals. On multiple horizontal axes, alignments of components also reflect similarities of individuals to specific others in shared or connected experiences within histories and geographies – within time and space. Unlike fingerprints, the combinations of micro-cultural components are dynamic and constantly changing (Mahiri, 2015; Mahiri & Kim, 2016; Mahiri & Ilten-Gee, 2017). From this perspective each life might be seen as a river fed by many distinct tributaries flowing into the sea of humanity.

The core argument of this book is that the continually emerging, rapidly changing micro-cultural identities and practices of individuals cannot be contained in static racial categories assigned by white supremacy. Although many scholars of multicultural education have complicated these categories to illustrate more nuance understandings of individual and group differences within them, and, although individuals and groups have struggled to construct identities of themselves within these assigned categories, *the lives and literature discussed in this book challenge the very use of these categories as viable*

ways to identify people. The scholarship reviewed and the people interviewed reveal the deceit of racial categories. As the multicultural paradigm continues to evolve, these categories themselves must be changed. A beginning step in this direction has already been taken in the 2010 Census by backing away from identifying Hispanics as a race as I discuss in Chapter 3. In Chapter 7, I build on the language used to identify Hispanics in the 2010 Census to offer a more accurate and viable way of defining people without resorting to race as a classification. Teaching and learning that directly acknowledges and decisively builds upon the micro-cultural identities and affinities of youth and adults will substantially contribute to deconstructing reductive, color-coded, racial categories and thus contribute to dismantling the hierarchies and binaries upon which white supremacy is based.

Of course, this challenge must go beyond mere recognition of micro-cultures. Mills (1997) along with many other scholars recognized that "racism [as manifested through white supremacy] is itself a political system, a particular power structure of formal and informal rule, socioeconomic privilege, and norms for the differential distribution of material wealth and opportunities, benefits and burdens, rights and duties" (3). Negating the effects of racism, power, and privilege wielded historically and contemporarily by groups that define themselves as white will take time and deliberate, strategic acts of deconstructing race. Some LGBTQ individuals and groups have demonstrated the viability resisting and transforming restrictive understandings of sexual diversity, particularly over the past 50 years. It may take another 50 years of conscious work to transform understandings of human diversity before we can right the wrongs of race that white supremacy has specified and reinforced both for its

proponents and those it oppresses and exploits. Facilitating this process in teaching and learning contexts within and beyond schools is a pivotal challenge of multicultural education.

In conjunction with micro-cultures, identity contingencies (Steele, 2010) is another key concept used to address how social constructions of identity can be predicated on physical characteristics and used as the basis for stereotypes and resulting stereotype responses. Steele and many other researchers building on his work have indicated how identity contingencies like skin color, facial features, hair type, and body size are linked to how people are socially constructed and treated in society as well as how they interact with the world. Stereotypes associated with identity contingencies can forcefully and problematically shape people's identities and development. Identity contingencies and associated stereotypes underlie how individual identities are constituted and responded to in U.S. society, and they factor in as components of an individual's micro-cultural positioning that must be understood.

Digital media is also integral to micro-cultural identities. Two of Gee's (2003) 36 Principles of learning with new media, the "Identity Principle" and "Affinity Principle" are additional concepts that clarify how individual identities move beyond racially defined categories. In defining the "Identity Principle" Gee noted that "Learning involves taking on and playing with identities in such a way that the learner has real choices and ample opportunity to mediate on the relationship between new identities and old ones. There is a tripartite play of identities as learners relate, and reflect on, their multiple real-world identities, their virtual identities, and a projective identity" (203, p. 208). Individual identities are also linked to affinities with other individuals and groups in both

real and virtual spaces. Regarding the "Affinity Principle," Gee (2003) noted that membership and participation in affinity groups or affinity spaces (the virtual sites of interaction) are defined primarily by shared endeavors, goals, and practices, rather than shared race, gender, nation, ethnicity, or culture (p. 212).

An additional concept from Gee (2013, 2015) that is important regarding micro-cultures is his delineation of the nature of activity-based identities. This concept focuses on the freely chosen practices of an individual that contribute to grounding a sense of self. Gee contrasted activity-based identities to relational identities. Relational identities are closely related to identities that are socially constructed and also connect to Steele's notion of identity contingencies. Gee noted that relational identities most often work to efface rather that reflect diversity, but when accepted and owned they can be like activity-based identities.

Activity-based and relational identities also were two of the 13 categories that surfaced in the interview data. These practices can reflect resident and emerging forms of social organization or what Gee (1991) earlier referred to as discourse communities. He described how discourse communities come with "identity kits" that include how to act, talk, and take on specific roles that others in the community recognize. Relene essentially was performing components of the identity kit needed to get recognized as black in Boston. Finally, Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality (that examines how various social, cultural, and biological categories of identity intersect) was another useful concept for seeing the complexity of numerous elements of identity that are simultaneously yet differentially impacted within oppressive systems. Again, all of these

intersecting and interacting components are multiplied through the use of digital texts and tools. .

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

Chapters 2 and 3 discuss literature and scholarship that explicate crucial prospects and imperatives of deconstructing race. Chapter 2 is *not* a traditional literature review. It discusses works primarily by literary writers who I feel were inherently "Deconstructing Race." The idea was to begin discussion of the book's focus with writers who are central to American literature and, therefore, generally familiar to readers throughout the United States and the world. Although authors in this group have written many novels, Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1947) is the only novel discussed. Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992) is a critique of how literature by white authors works to *make* race and difference invisible. Baldwin's *A Rap on Race* (1971) with Margaret Mead powerfully captures racial dynamics a half century ago and reminds us of how little things have changed. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is used to frame this dialogue on race among these four American writers. The chapter begins with ideas from Derrida (1981/1972) on deconstruction and also discusses multicultural education with respect race. It concludes with a discussion of why deconstructing race is imperative, particularly in light of the contemporary re-emergence of white identity politics.

Chapter 3 is a traditional review of scholarship. After discussing prospects and imperatives of "Deconstructing Race" in Chapter 2, this chapter begins with Du Bois' (1903) characterization that the problems of the 20$^{\text{th}}$ century is the problem of the color line. It then discusses scholarship that addresses how the problem of the 21$^{\text{st}}$ century is "The Color-Bind." Discussions of the color-bind in this chapter are not color-blind.

Rather than not seeing or denying the reality of difference, the color-bind reflects on-going attempts to contain people in fabricated racial categories, shackling minds and imaginations in divisions of difference. Scholarship in this chapter illuminates how and why this has occurred historically and contemporarily in sections on "Prisons of Identity" and "Prisms of Identity." It reveals how these constraints on human identity are sustained for each racial group though societal forces and institutions like the U.S. Census. This chapter argues that breaking out of the color-bind frees us to better appreciate and embrace our differences, but also to see vital commonalities in our human experiences beyond the blinders of race.

The next five chapters present stories and perspectives of the diverse group of interviewees whose lives, like all our lives in the U.S., are forcibly fixed primarily within five general categories of race. As the final section of Chapter 2 connects the issues of this book to the current controversy of re-emerging white identity politics, the chapter by chapter discussions and stories of the interviewees are also connected to current controversies. All but one of the titles of these chapters came from statements made by individual interviewees. These titles signal a conceptual and linguistic shift towards negating the color-codes that define racial categories: "Pretending to be White," "Passing for Black," "No Body's Yellow," "The Brown Box," and "Red Rum."

Chapter 4, "Pretending to be White" has a slightly different purpose and structure from the other four chapters on the interviewees. It begins by defining and discussing the 13 key categories that surfaced in the coding of data and how they connected under three major themes that variously distinguished and united the stories of all 20 interviewees. This chapter is used to demonstrate how each of the 13 categories reflected in the three

major themes of "hyper-diversity," "stereotyping," and "identity constructions" are specifically evidenced in the lives of all four interviewees discussed. The same level of evidence supports the discussions of the other 16 interviewees, but with this group, the categories from the data are embedded in the telling of their stories.

Chapter 5 that presents the stories of four African Americans is framed with a discussion of the Rachel Dolezal controversy, while Chapter 6 that presents the stories of four Asian Americans begins with the controversy surrounding the response to the 2017 Oscars by Korean rapper Johnathan Park who talked about knocking down racial walls. Chapter 7, that presents the stories of four Hispanic Americans, begins with a discussion of how identity is framed for Hispanics that is connected to the most recent U.S. Census. I suggest that this framing offers a way forward in thinking about the issue of identity for all people in the U.S. Chapter 8 on Native Americans is framed by the crisis at Standing Rock and the stories of those four interviewees reflect ways of thinking about our humanity that also suggests a way forward.

Chapter 9 brings findings from the five chapters on interviewees together within a framework of "Micro-cultures" that builds upon and is distinguished from Banks' (2013) concept of "microcultures" without a hyphen. The concept of micro-cultures with the hyphen is fully explicated as framework for understanding the significance of the findings from the interview data of the previous chapters. The final chapter synthesizes findings and discussions from the earlier chapters and suggests "Challenges of Multicultural Education" in moving beyond the color-bind. It portrays "Multicultural Education 2.0" through discussion and examples of teaching and learning in schools that work to more fully realize the prospects of our country's diversity and humanity.