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Am I Black or White? A Lifelong Quest to Define Myself in the Binary of Race

Aliandra Burgos

In this paper, I utilize the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) form to explore the relationship between race as a binary and anti-Blackness. I intend to specifically share my narrative with experiences of race and highlight the emerging themes that are prevalent such as whiteness as property, anti-Blackness in the Latinx community, and the Black and white binary of race. The ways in which I define my racial identity are constantly shifting throughout my higher education journey. I have received mixed messages about what it means to identify as Black or white, but these messages have never fully defined my racial identity. In this paper, I interrogate my identities and experiences while utilizing critical race theory (CRT) as a framework- and the tenets of CRT to make meaning of the themes that emerge from my narrative.

Keywords: race, Black, white, Latinx, anti-Blackness

Who decided that race determines one's identity, and why does it matter? Race is a socially constructed concept created to distinguish racial groups and reinforce one group's superiority through the domination of a subordinated group (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Eurocentrism posits that European history and values are superior to others and justifies Europe's dominance in the global capitalist system (Frankzi, 2012). The idea of race was used to codify the biologically structural, mental, and cultural differences between the dominating and dominated populations (Quijano, 2000). Thus, racial identities classify populations in a hierarchical structure. As such, whiteness has become the default norm. In a white supremacist society where implicit messages deem whiteness as "good" and Blackness as "bad," the binaries of race perpetuate anti-Blackness. These implicit messages tell people that race defines who they are. Surveys and job applications always ask people about their race. The questions always read, "Please check one or more of the following: white, Black, Native American, Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or two or more races." What about people whose identities do not fit in a box? Where do they fit in this arbitrary racial classification? By not creating a box for those who do not "fit," the implicit messages are that they must negotiate

I've been involved in the UVM community in various capacities. Living & learning at a PWI has required me to unpack my interpretations of my race and identity. I share my narrative because personal narrative is not widely shared in academia, and connecting personal experiences to scholarship can only enrich our learning and humanize our collective struggles.

aspects of their identity to conform to these racial classifications. They must only choose parts of themselves so that they can fit into these boxes.

This paper serves as a wake-up call that white supremacy and anti-Blackness impact all individuals. My intended audiences for this paper are Latinx people and Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) groups who are complicit in white supremacy systems. I am referring to students in both the secondary and post-secondary education sectors, educators, practitioners, faculty members, and staff persons across all fields. White supremacy does not only exist in social systems. White supremacy is prevalent among family and friends, it exists at jobs and in classrooms. It even exists within yourself, for everyone is impacted by white supremacy and has learned to internalize anti-Blackness. I hope that the audience reads this personal reflection and is inspired to interrogate their own identities, unlearn oppressive behaviors, relearn how their identities are influenced by power, privilege, and oppression, and commit to anti-racism. Black people deserve so much more honor, respect, and protection.

When you are neither Black or white and the closest thing to defining your identity is Hispanic/Latino, the in-between is confusing and taxing. I am a Latina woman. One half of my family's skin is white, the other half of my family's skin is brown, and I was born a mix between the two; some sort of beige. The racelessness of the Latinx community is strenuous. When you neither identify as Black or white, what are you? Who are you? If not defined by the binaries of race, then what? Despite being the fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States (Fry & Gonzalez, 2008), there is a tendency to treat Latinx people as a monolithic group (Haywood, 2017). The Black and white binary is not sufficient to describe the racial and ethnic realities of this group.

Latinx people must acknowledge the legacies of anti-Blackness prevalent within Latin American communities as these countries were built on systems of white supremacy, exploitation, and anti-Blackness (Minster, 2020). Latin American colonizers embarked on a mission of upholding white supremacy through racial mixing- most notably known as *mestizaje* (Haywood, 2017). The mixing of Black Africans, Indigenous groups, and European whites were celebrated and encouraged because this meant that Black and Indigenous people would assimilate into a *mestizo* nation that sought to be closer to whiteness (Wade, 2008). The racial caste system is deeply ingrained in the Latinx community and has infiltrated every aspect of how I have come to know myself.

I cannot think about categorizing myself in the binaries of race without unpacking the implicit messages that I have internalized about race along the way. The way that Latinx identity is structured is an ambiguous box designated for people with Brown skin who speak Spanish to check off if they identify with this design-

nation. This notion is exceptionally problematic. In this paper, I seek to explore the relationship between race as a binary and anti-Blackness in non-Black Latinx communities. This issue is vital because Latinx people's treatment as a monolithic group perpetuates anti-Blackness and promotes the erasure of narratives that have been historically excluded. As I unpack myself and my experiences, I can understand how I arrived at my world views. The more individuals explore and unpack their beliefs, we as a community can understand how other people have attained their views. Anti-Blackness is an accumulated issue. I am undergoing a decolonization process, because the messages of race that I have known are rooted in anti-Blackness. I am writing to uplift my Latinx peers' experiences who are struggling to define their racial identity in these exclusionary binaries of race and to explore how anti-Blackness has impacted my development.

Theoretical Framework

I frame this article using Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN; Nash, 2004) and centering a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015) to examine my racial identity. The SPN method relies on storytelling as a means of scholarly exploration and meaning-making. Whereas, CRT is a framework used to examine and challenge the ways race and racism, both implicitly and explicitly impact social structures, practices, and discourse (Yosso, 2005). In education, CRT negates dominant ideology and white privilege and centers the experiences of People of Color. This framework has emerged as a form of legal scholarship that seeks to understand how white supremacy and its oppression of BIPOC groups has been perpetuated (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). I use CRT to further unpack the messages I have internalized about race. This framework comprises seven tenets, but I will only focus on two: the permanence of racism and whiteness as property. These tenets are directly applicable to my life experiences, from internalizing messages about race to unlearning and relearning throughout college, and now on my path toward decolonizing and actively engaging in anti-racism. The use of CRT and SPN together is a way of counter-storytelling, for these experiences are not widely discussed. In a historically white realm of academia, I find it imperative to reclaim my narrative and experiences to challenge what constitutes sound scholarship. The following section will provide a brief overview of CRT's tenets that I use to make meaning of my experiences.

The Permanence of Racism and Whiteness as Property

The first tenet in the CRT framework that I use in this paper is the permanence of racism. Critical race theorists acknowledge that racism is prevalent in all systemic and social institutions and is an impactful aspect of BIPOC people's experiences (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015). This tenet asserts that racism controls all realms of U.S. society and is not random or isolated (Ladson-Billings, 2013). Racism is so

ingrained in our nation that it is often unrecognizable or invisible to most people (Taylor, 2009). When racism is believed to no longer exist, then incidents of racism are deemed as specific isolated events. DeCuir and Dixson (2004) articulated that, “Racist hierarchical structures govern all political, economic, and social domains. Such structures allocate the privileging of whites and the subsequent Othering of [P]eople of [C]olor in all arenas, including education” (p. 27). One of the most prevalent examples of the permanence of racism in the U.S. is the existence of Jim Crow laws of the South. Beyond its existence, Jim Crow laws has had a long-lasting impact on institutionally marginalizing Black people. As of right now, Jim Crow has modernized and has never truly ended. This is witnessed through mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010), voter suppression (Epperly et al., 2019), and much more. Unfortunately, racism is a normal and daily component in the lives of BIPOC individuals (Taylor, 2009). To move past racism, first, it must be exposed, disrupted, and eliminated in its totality (Lynn & Parker, 2002).

As discussed in the CRT framework, the tenet whiteness as property asserts that identifying as white comes with valuable assets- like privileges and benefits that white people seek to protect (Harris, 1993). In this context, property includes but is not limited to the rights of possession, use, transfer, disposition, and exclusion, in which these rights have allowed white people to establish exclusive memberships. Whiteness (as a privilege) can be exchanged for other forms of property or capital and could be exchanged for access to higher-paying careers, better neighborhoods, and higher quality schools (Manning, 2013). The intersectionality of race and property has contributed to establishing racial and economic subordination (Harris, 1993). For example, the enslavement of Africans through 1865 is a period of U.S. history that has led to whiteness as a racial identity serving as validation for property rights and ownership. Whiteness is a source of privilege and protection, in which white people are free from enslavement and never considered property (Harris, 1993). In the U.S., social systems protect whiteness because property value has been historically (and still presently) dominated by white people. In this capitalistic society, whiteness makes money, so whiteness is legally protected at all costs.

Who Am I Supposed to Be? Telling the Story of Where I Was

Unpacking my narrative as it fits in with this article, my identities and I are in a constant tango as I circle around the questions I frequently ask myself. What is my race? Who am I? What does it mean for me to identify as Black or white? Whereas most people rely on phenotypes for their racial categorization, my phenotypes provide no answers for me. My beige skin is somewhere between the Black and white binary, never fully allowed to be on either side. My Latinx parents, culture, and ethnicity allow me to embrace my ancestral connection to the African diaspora, but my physical appearance defines that I am not Black. My skin tone suggests that I am closer to whiteness, yet my experiences counter a white woman’s experience.

The tension of negotiating my identity has been a lifelong struggle for me to fit into a box because of the mixed messages I have received about what it means to identify on either side of this binary. In my experience, phenotype does not equate identification with race; instead, it adds more confusion.

Memories

‘What are you?’ is a simple conversation starter meant to invoke an informal dialogue exchange from people who presumably do not know one another. The answers to that arbitrary question can reveal commonalities amongst strangers or differences. What intends to be a simple conversation about one’s racial identity is not simple at all. This is the one question I never know the answer to and the question I dread the most. What exactly is asked of me? Is it my race, ethnicity, cultural background, or nationality? My disdain for this question began during my teenage years. As I became old enough to work, I also began to think about my racial identity when asked within job applications. Turning to my mother, I hoped she would provide clarity in her response. Unfortunately for me, her response provided no clarity and instead prompted this quest to define my racial identity. When I asked about my race, I recall my mother telling me, “check white because you look white.” How is it possible that I could be white? The reflection in the mirror of long dark curly hair, big brown eyes, and beige skin did not reflect whiteness, but as mothers know best, I listened to her and claimed whiteness. When I became a college student, I remember feeling dissociated from this identity she claimed me to be. Being a college student in a predominantly white institution was the first time in my life that I felt othered. The differences between my classmates and me were not about racial identity only; there were class differences, physical appearance differences, and a lack of respect for the pronunciation of my name. The microaggressions that I experienced solidified that I was not white and would never be granted access to that exclusive membership. The cognitive dissonance I experienced was overwhelming. My experiences with race as a college student did not align with the messages about race that I had internalized as a teenager.

The CRT tenet whiteness as property (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015) posits that being white comes with assets and privileges that white people should seek to protect. Manning (2013) postulates that whiteness as a privilege can be exchanged for access to high paying careers. Growing up in a single-parent household, whiteness for my mom has been about maintaining financial security. When asked for her race on job applications, selecting white was the closest thing that could define her racial identity. As a Latina woman, whiteness has been the asset and tool used to prevent discrimination from employment opportunities that she is qualified for. Systems protect and value whiteness, so her livelihood and that of her children depended on the opportunities that whiteness could offer her. By claiming whiteness, she sought to have better employment opportunities because she is white-

passing. Latinx people are a mosaic of skin tones, and that her financial security relied on this arbitrary classification of race speaks to the larger systemic issues of anti-Blackness in this society. From her experiences, I internalized that I too had to code-switch and claim whiteness otherwise, I would also be overlooked for opportunities. These implicit notions perpetuated stereotypes within me that Latinx people must look, think, and act in specific ways to be successful, and the only way to achieve success is to be closer to whiteness. In this context, claiming whiteness was my tool to also be successful. However, by claiming whiteness, I acted anti-Black as I contributed to a system that overtly excludes Black people. I learned what it meant to identify as white from my mom, but by the time I got to college, I no longer agreed with it. The dissonance I experienced stemmed from inconsistent external perceptions of my racial identity. My mother told me I could claim whiteness to be successful, but white people enforced that whiteness was not an identity for me. The interrogation of my identity is more profound than the Black and white binary; it was a paradigmatic shift that needed to be decolonized.

Some years earlier, before the conversations about race with my mom, I remember having a conversation with my dad about the boys I had crushes on. In this conversation he told me, “You better not bring a Black boy home.” His statement confused me because what stood in front of me was not a white man, but a man who could have easily been mistaken for Black or Indigenous, for he was anything but white. Horizontal oppression draws upon themes of internalized oppression (when the oppressed internalize the oppressor’s notions) and is a manifestation of the internalized oppression that occurs between members of similar social identities (Patel, 2011). Unfortunately, as displayed by my father’s expression, horizontal oppression frequently shows up in BIPOC communities in general. From this experience with my dad, I internalized that I was not Black, and based on his expression, Blackness was bad. Yet, that still left the question unanswered: Am I Black or white?

The CRT tenet the permanence of racism (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015) asserts that racism controls all aspects of U.S. society and is often unrecognizable. The way my father demanded that I not be in relation with a Black person speaks to the issues of anti-Blackness and internalized racism in the Latinx community. I try to make sense of this memory, but I can offer no other explanation except that my father has internalized anti-Blackness. His expression adheres to issues of colorism within the Latinx community. Telling me not to bring a Black boy home was grooming me to *mejorar la raza*, a common Caribbean phrase meant to ‘improve the race’ by encouraging Black or Brown people to bare children with white people to lighten the skin of the next generation of their family (Cruz-Janzen, 2007). To *mejorar la raza* confers positive attributes to whiteness and negative characteristics to Blackness (Dache et al., 2019).

There are complications with identifying on either side of this binary of race because I do not fit into any of these classifications. In college, I learned about the term Afro-Latinx and hoped this would provide clarity for me. Afro-Latinx is defined as “people of African descent in Mexico, Central and South America, the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, and by extension those of African descent in the U.S. whose origins are in Latin America and the Caribbean” (Róman & Flores, 2010, p.1). This identity acknowledges one’s African roots. Although I am unsure who my ancestors are, I know that my ethnicities are a part of the African diaspora; thus, I embraced this identity. Still, I was conflicted in this identity because most people I know use this term interchangeably with identifying as Black. Since I do not have the phenotypes of a Black person, the same question persisted. Am I Black or white? I often think about my dad and if he might embrace an Afro-Latinx identity? How would my perspectives about race be shaped differently if my parents actively engaged in anti-racism? Parents are not perfect, and mine are certainly not an exception. Although these messages that I have received about race are confusing, contradicting, and inherently problematic, I am grateful to have been exposed to and learn from these perspectives. I may not ever be able to identify with either side of this binary, but that is okay.

Unlearning Anti-Blackness

Explicit anti-Blackness in the Latinx community dates back to *mestizaje* (Haywood, 2017) and *mejorando la raza* (Cruz-Janzen, 2007), where whiteness is preferred, and negative attributes are bestowed unto Blackness. These ideologies emerged from the legacies of European colonialism (Minster, 2020) and cater to white dominance and social hierarchy. To all non-Black Latinx and People of Color, it is long overdue that these groups speak up and act against anti-Blackness in their communities. For Black people in this country, there is no epiphany or awakening in the realization of anti-Blackness; they have lived and continue to encounter these racist and harmful experiences.

To unlearn anti-Blackness, one must commit to changing harmful behaviors and be actively anti-racist. First, people must stop avoiding conversations about race and racism. By not discussing the issues that Black people face and interrupting racism, people remain complicit in systems of white supremacy. Everyone must educate themselves to understand how systemic racism and oppression against Black people have awarded non-Black Latinx and People of Color privileges that would cease to exist without the Black community (Park, n.d.). Educating oneself might look like attending workshops that deconstruct anti-Blackness (Mota, 2020). However, Black people are not responsible for educating non-Black groups about anti-blackness and racism. Non-Black Latinx and People of Color must engage with individual reflection and commit to the labor of unlearning and relearning without seeking validation from their Black peers in their decolonization process.

Secondly, people must recognize their anti-Blackness and where it stems from. Park (n.d.) recommends starting with an implicit bias test; afterward, individuals may begin to recognize how anti-Blackness perpetuates among their family members, friends, at school, and in the workplace. In addition, Muniz (2019) discusses several ways in which non-Black People of Color perpetuate anti-Blackness, and I will highlight two behaviors that I have witnessed the most contention within my communities: showing resentment towards the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and saying the n-word. With the resurgence of the BLM protests last June, Latinx networks like Telemundo and Univision contributed to anti-Blackness and erasure of Afro-Latinx experiences by focusing on depicting protestors in negative ways. Reporters failed to cover the systematic roots of anti-Black police violence and made no effort to center the voices of Black people in their coverage. White supremacy and anti-Blackness continue to dehumanize and further oppress Black people. The BLM movement is not only about police brutality, but also about the reality in which many societal institutions perpetuate racism and inequities for People of Color, but most notably Black people. Therefore, Black Lives Matter, period. Non-Black groups must stand in solidarity, support BLM, and actively work against racist structures to provide equitable and safe environments for Black people. Subsequently, the use of the n-word by non-Black people is completely unacceptable. The term has been used as a racist insult since the mid-1800s (Allan & Burrige, 2006) to degrade and discriminate against Black people for centuries. In recent years, the term has been reclaimed by the Black community, and the contemporary use of the n-word is used as a term of self-reference or endearment among members in the Black community (Rahman, 2012) but should not be used by anyone else. To continue to use this offensive term, as a non-Black person, operates as a complete disregard for its offensive significance, and further perpetuates the oppression of Black people.

The examples previously discussed are not an exhaustive list of behaviors to change. Though I have provided these recommendations, I cannot understand the struggles of all Black people as Blackness is also a multifaceted and diverse identity. It is impossible to understand all the prejudice that occurs in the Latinx community, but it is not impossible to disrupt racism and unlearn anti-Blackness. I make the conscious effort to engage with anti-racism and use this platform to encourage all to do the same.

Who I Am

I still do not know what my race is, but it does not matter anymore. I am Latina, and proud, and that is enough. I liberate myself from the shackles of the binary of race and embrace the multifaceted truth that identifying as a Latinx person is a nuanced, complex, and diverse identity. This acceptance alone, however, is not enough. There is no final step in undoing anti-Blackness and internalized op-

pression. Regardless of racial and ethnic identity, skin tone, and phenotypes, we are all responsible for decolonizing ourselves and committing to anti-racist work. Unlearning anti-Blackness is a liberating decolonizing shift, but it does not end here. There are systems of oppression that we need to undo, and this journey of undoing is a lifelong nonlinear process.

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