

Intersectionality, Identity, and Positionality

Engaging in intercultural communication can be a transformative experience, not only because we learn about different cultures but also because it pushes us to learn about ourselves. When we encounter “differences,” we are compelled to examine how our perspectives are informed by particular experiences and situated social locations. Engaging in intercultural communication requires self-reflexivity to understand how we have become who we are as a result of historical and social forces and how we enact and perform our identities within shifting historical contexts and geographical locations. This chapter provides analytical perspectives and concrete examples of how we can understand, analyze, and transform communicative practices in intercultural contexts by focusing primarily on intersectionality and positionality. Intersectionality is a concept that illustrates the multiplicity of social forces that shape our situated experiences and identities, whereas positionality points to the fact that our identities are always relationally shaped within hierarchies of power.

Gust A. Yep problematizes “the race/class/gender/sexuality mantra” that underscores the way intersectionality is used as a theoretical concept. Yep cautions against a formulaic and superficial treatment of identities as a set of intersecting categories and instead proposes “thick intersectionalities” as an alternative approach that accounts for the lived nuances and embodied specificities of situated subjectivities that resist a neatly organized conceptual modeling. In her personal narrative, Eddah M. Mutua provides autobiographical vignettes to illustrate her shifting intersectional identities and ways of knowing as she moved from her home country, Kenya, to the United Kingdom and, finally, to the United States. In each cultural location, she encounters various ways in which post/colonial histories shape intercultural relations and intergroup dynamics. She takes a critical, self-reflexive approach as a way of decolonizing and cultivating ways of knowing that are at once historically informed, culturally situated, and transformative.

Toward Thick(er) Intersectionalities: Theorizing, Researching, and Activating the Complexities of Communication and Identities

Gust A. Yep¹

San Francisco State University

The concept of intersectionality is in a strange transitional phase between emergence and ubiquity. The former commands attention but risks suspicion; the latter confers a legitimacy but risks loss of specificity. It both explodes into a proliferation of identity categories and implodes into a distillation of such categories into a simplistic model.

—Levine-Rasky (2011, p. 239)

Since its emergence in black feminist thought several decades ago (Combahee River Collective, 1977/2003), **intersectionality** has become a critical concept and analytical tool for the examination and understanding of identities in the sociocultural domain in an era of neoliberal globalization (Anthias, 2005; Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Levine-Rasky, 2011; McCall, 2005). Facilitated by policies of massive government deregulation, privatization, and economic advantages given to private enterprise at the expense of social services, community development, and the public good, neoliberal globalization refers to the rapid increase of uneven cultural flow, including ideas, connectivities, and products, from one nation-state to another, mostly fueled by large transnational corporations driven by market expansion and profit (Elia & Yep, 2012). Intersectionality, according to McCall (2005), refers to “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations” (p. 1771). Put more simply, intersectionality refers to how race, class, gender, sexuality, the body, and nation, among other vectors of difference, come together simultaneously to produce social identities and experiences in the social world, from privilege to oppression.

Recognizing the importance of intersectionality, communication scholars—particularly those in critical intercultural communication, feminism and womanism, and performance studies—have incorporated it in their work in recent years (e.g., Chávez, 2009; Fisher, 2003; Houston, 2012; Johnson, 2001, 2013; Lee, 2003; Yep, Olzman, & Conkle, 2012). However, as intersectional research continues to proliferate in communication and elsewhere, a number of theoretical and methodological issues have emerged (Levine-Rasky, 2011; Yep, 2010, 2013b). In this essay, I explore some of these issues by elaborating on my earlier conceptualization of “**thick intersectionalities**” (Yep, 2010, p. 173). To do so, the essay is divided into three sections. First, I discuss some of my concerns with current work on intersectionality in communication. Next, I explore ways, by using the notion of “thick(er) intersectionalities,”² to produce more nuanced and complex examinations of identity in communication in an era of neoliberal globalization. I conclude by discussing some of the methodological and political implications of using thick intersectionalities in our work.

SOME (OF MY) CONCERNS WITH CURRENT INTERSECTIONALITY WORK

Since intersectionality focuses on the simultaneous interplay and collision of major social categories, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, the body, and nation, among others, in the production and constitution of who people are and how they experience the social world, it is not surprising that social identity is a key site of intersectional work. As a social construction, identity gives people a sense of “being” (i.e., who they are in a group or community), a lens through which they perceive and experience the social world (i.e., what they see and feel in their daily interactions), and a prescription for ways of “acting” (i.e., how they are expected to behave in a group or community) (Yep, 2002).

Identity, from an intersectional perspective, can be characterized as political, historical, fluid, subjective, and nonsummative (Brah & Phoenix, 2004; Levine-Rasky, 2011; Yep, 2002). First, social identity is political because it is contingent on power and ideology. Second, social identity is historical—that is, influenced by social, economic, and political conditions at a particular time. Third, social identity is fluid, which suggests that it is ever changing and in an ongoing process of becoming. Fourth, social identity is subjective—that is, dependent on people’s experiences and interactions. Finally, social identity is nonsummative—a gestalt that cannot be reduced to discrete parts, such as simply race or simply gender, without understanding how such parts interact to form a whole that is greater than its individual components. In short, social identity is full of complexities and contradictions. For example, how people navigate the demands and expectations of being a student, a relational partner, a coworker, a family member, and so on, in San Francisco, California, or San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, in the 21st century neoliberal global world is riddled with intricate negotiations. In an attempt to make sense of such complexities and contradictions, much of current intersectional work, in my view, tends to adhere to what José Esteban Muñoz (1999, p. 166) calls “the race, class, and gender mantra,” which, in more recent years, might have expanded to race, class, gender, and sexuality. This mantra raises a number of issues, which I discuss next.

The **race/class/gender/sexuality mantra** produces a flat, formulaic, superficial, and “roster-like approach” to intersectionality by simply listing such categories as components of an individual’s identity (Yep, 2010, p. 173). In the process, it tends to homogenize people inhabiting similar intersections. For example, working-class, heterosexually identified, able-bodied people from India participating in the global neoliberal economy are imbued with similarities based on seemingly identical identity categories, irrespective of their own life experiences, journeys and personal trajectories, and individual and collective politics. Such homogenization contributes to the erasure of their subjectivities and experiences. In addition, it ignores and hides how power is intricately involved in the production of social categories and identities; as Muñoz (1999) reminds us, the mantra “smoothly positions minority identity designations within a syntax of equivocations that defer the work of theorizing relations of power” (p. 167). In other words, it does not examine the “how” (i.e., the ways nodes of difference, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, the body, nation, and others, relate to—in fact, constitute—one another to produce a specific identity) and the “now” (i.e., the ways such identities are created in time and space, such as the identity of a “terrorist” in a post-9/11 United States and global world, for particular political and ideological reasons; Muñoz, 1999).

The mantra tends to focus more on marked (e.g., poor, U.S. African American trans women who are lesbian identified) rather than unmarked identities (e.g., white, middle- to upper-class, heterosexually identified, able-bodied men who are U.S. citizens). In the process, whiteness, middle- to upper-classness, heterosexuality, ability, and U.S. citizenship, among other characteristics, are reinforced as normal—that is, the invisible standard against which “other” identities are measured and from which they are declared to deviate (Yep, 2002). Although this is partly connected to the genealogy of intersectionality, which was conceived as a perspective to focus on the structures of inequality and oppression and the experiences of individuals who have been marginalized and oppressed in society, such tendency ends up ignoring the coexisting relationship between domination and oppression (Levine-Rasky, 2011). To put it differently, domination and oppression are two sides of the same coin; for example, no border exists without a center, and no oppression exists without privilege (Yep, 2013a). Focusing on the “‘other side’ of power relations,” Levine-Rasky (2011) urges us to examine “the intersections of whiteness and middle-classness (and the complications arising from ethnicity)” to explore “power in relation to the enduring inequities between groups” (p. 239). In sum, there is a need to examine both marked and unmarked intersections so more nuanced operations of power in society can be revealed.

The mantra leaves out certain significant aspects of identity—nation and the body, for example—in the current global neoliberal social world. As “an imagined political community,” a nation provides people with a sense of affiliation, belonging, and comradeship (Anderson, 1991, p. 6). Such a sense of belonging is so powerful that individuals are willing to sacrifice, fight, and even die in the name of community and national identity (e.g., fighting in a war to defend one’s nation). As a “text,” the body is a site of complex signifiers that are rendered legible and meaningful in a sociocultural domain (Chávez, 2009, p. 23). Signifiers such as body type (e.g., endomorph, ectomorph), body size (e.g., thin, fat), bodily functionality (e.g., able body), and bodily productivity (e.g., disabled body that can work) are all significant aspects of identity in a neoliberal world economy. For example, the marketing of different products and services for different types of bodies and the imperative for bodies to be economically productive so they are not considered a “drain” on a society suggest that the body is an important vector of identity. To the extent that nation and the body are not fully incorporated into intersectional work, we risk reinforcing U.S.-centrism and a host of body normativities, respectively (Shome, 2010; Yep, 2013b). For example, thin, U.S. bodies—intersecting with whiteness, femaleness, middle-classness, and heterosexuality—might continue to be perpetuated as the standard for “beautiful women” in the neoliberal global world.

Finally, the mantra tends to ignore the role of space in the production and constitution of identity (Sekimoto, 2012; Shome, 2003). Space involves more than physical attributes, such as topographical characteristics of a nation-state. Indeed, space involves multiple relations, such as political and economic relationships between nation-states, operating along with the temporal, such as historical relationships between nation-states (Chávez, 2010). In short, space and time mutually influence each other in the production of identity. For example, a brown, able, adult male body is perceived and read differently, at this historical moment, on the U.S.–Mexico border—where his ascribed identity might be of an “illegal” border crosser, regardless of citizenship—and on the streets of a white, affluent,

gay male neighborhood in Sydney, Australia—where his ascribed identity might be of an “exotic” sexual being, regardless of his sexual orientation. In other words, by simply focusing on vectors of difference, such as race, class, gender, and so forth, without attention to “spatial relations of power” (Shome, 2003, p. 44) in a neoliberal global world, our understandings of identity might be incomplete, inaccurate, and misleading.

TOWARD THICK(ER) INTERSECTIONALITIES

Inspired by the work of Clifford Geertz (1973) about the importance of contextual and cultural specificities of our descriptions, I use the concept of “thick intersectionalities” (henceforth TI) to highlight more complex and embodied ways of thinking about intersectionality (Yep, 2010, p. 173). Recognizing that power is always already in all social relations, this concept refers to a deeper

exploration of the complex particularities of individuals’ lives and identities associated with their race, class, gender, sexuality, and national locations by understanding their history and personhood in concrete time and space, and the interplay between individual subjectivity, personal agency, systemic arrangements, and structural forces. (p. 173)

As such, this concept suggests that we need to attend to the lived experiences and biographies of the persons occupying a particular intersection, including how they inhabit and make sense of their own bodies and relate to the social world (Yep, 2013b).

TI features four defining characteristics associated with social identity in a neoliberal global world. First, it struggles against coherence and premature closure of identity. Second, it embraces the messiness of everyday experiences in the social world. Third, it focuses on the affective investments that people make in their identity performances. Fourth, it attempts to understand identities as embodied and lived by people within specific geopolitical and historical contexts.

To highlight and illustrate these features, I draw on a critical ethnography of Filipina trans women in San Francisco (Magat, 2013).³ As is the case with any population, it is important to note that there is no singular or monolithic Filipina/o trans community in the San Francisco Bay Area. Indeed, there are multiple intersecting communities based on immigration status, social class, body type, gender performance, and sexual expression, among others. For example, Manalansan (2003) explores these complexities based on ethnographic work with Filipino gay men in New York City. Magat’s (2013) study focuses on the racialization, gendering, and sexualization of the bodies of Filipina trans women who work as hostesses, servers, and cabaret-style entertainers at Asia SF, a famous San Francisco restaurant/bar with an international clientele. Such processes produce spectacular, desirable, and commodifiable Filipina trans bodies (e.g., exotic, beautiful, and hypersexualized) in the space while rendering “other” trans bodies invisible, undesirable, and abject (e.g., trans women who do not or cannot conform to the rules of exotic beauty and their accompanying hypersexualization). The study focuses on the performances of identity, among

other things, of several women: Jasmine, who has worked at the restaurant since its opening; Aliyah, Darna, and Amber, three of the restaurant's servers/performers; and Tita Aida, an Asia SF host and transgender activist. In this essay, however, I mostly highlight the identity performances of Jasmine and Tita Aida, which simultaneously defy a number of U.S. cultural binaries, such as man/woman and heterosexual/homosexual, and reify a range of U.S. cultural normativities, such as physical beauty and femininity. In other words, their identity performances are complex and "thick."

Struggling Against Coherence and Premature Identity Closure

TI struggles against coherence and premature closure of identity through the exploration of consistencies, contradictions, and tensions in context-specific ways. This feature of TI emphasizes that identity is an ongoing process, one that is more about "becoming" than "being" (Yep, 2002). Given the processual, fluid, and ever-changing nature of becoming, identity, in this sense, is always already incomplete and full of possibilities. Acknowledging the incompleteness of identity, TI attempts to narrate these possibilities by understanding the microcontexts (e.g., communication setting and interpersonal dynamics) and macro-contexts (e.g., larger social and structural forces) in a neoliberal global world.

In his ethnography, Magat (2013) focuses on how the trans women enact their identities as racialized, gendered, and sexualized individuals at three key moments: in the dressing room when they transform themselves into "the ladies of Asia SF" by putting on makeup, wigs, clothes, and accessories, and shifting their energies to start work for the evening; in the restaurant when they serve and interact with patrons and, of course, perform various musical numbers and acts; and in their everyday lives when they navigate the social world outside of Asia SF and fulfill the duties and obligations of their "day jobs." In the process, their identities shift and change and cannot be prematurely closed and fixed as they navigate the microcontexts of interactions and relationships (e.g., employer, coworkers, patrons) that are always already infused with larger structural forces and cultural discourses (e.g., legal, political, and employment discrimination against trans bodies; cultural prejudice; racial and gender exoticification; sexual objectification). Although such identities appear to be local, they are already infused with global meanings. For example, how we read and relate to Filipina trans women in San Francisco is influenced by global meanings of the "Third World woman" as a powerless victim of her own native culture (Mohanty, 2003, p. 19).

Embracing the Messiness of Everyday Lived Experiences

TI embraces the messiness of everyday experiences and interactions by narrating the emerging, fragmented, contradictory, improvisational, and creative ways identities are constituted, expressed, and deployed in a neoliberal global world. In this sense, TI calls attention to the performative and creative aspects of identity that include a mixture of socially scripted behaviors, and creativity and improvisation through the process of enactment. In other words, how an individual inhabits an identity—say, that of a poor, educated, U.S. Latina domestic worker—is a complex interplay between social scripts (e.g., a docile, agreeable, and subservient woman who performs various duties as

demanding by her employer with gratitude and without hesitation or complaint) and creative enactment (e.g., a unique woman who demonstrates her intelligence and educational levels and displays greater emotional sensitivity to the children than perhaps their own parents do). Such interplay of the messiness of everyday experiences and interactions is recognized and embraced rather than ignored and discarded in explorations of identity using TI.

Tita Aida serves as an illustration in Magat's (2013) study. She inhabits many identities—a service provider for trans-identified people at a local health services and HIV/AIDS nonprofit organization (her “day job”), a host at Asia SF (her “night job”), and a local public figure and community activist (one of her “everyday” personas), among others—that play with and against one another as she navigates her social world. For example, she notes that “Tita Aida”—the identity she embodies in the local San Francisco social scene—is a mixture of script and improvisation. As a loving, caring, and humorous “aunt,” imagined and modeled as an amalgamation of the campy Filipina character Doña Buding and the advice-giving U.S. columnist Dear Abby, Tita Aida adheres to the script of the health counselor provided by the HIV/AIDS medical establishment while creating the simultaneously funny and concerned woman that many San Franciscans, particularly those in queer communities, have come to know.

Focusing on the Affective Investments of Identity Performances

TI focuses on the affective investments individuals make in their identity performances. As such, TI calls attention to the affective charges and intensities of identity, including processes of identification, counteridentification, and disidentification (Muñoz, 1999). Identification refers to the process of adherence and subscription to the dominant discursive and ideological (e.g., racism, xenophobia, heteropatriarchy) forms and structures in a culture, a process that produces “good subjects” (e.g., a docile and conforming cultural citizen who maintains and perpetuates dominant cultural discourses and ideologies). Counteridentification refers to the process of rejection of and rebellion against dominant cultural ideologies and structures, a process that produces “bad subjects” (e.g., a resistant and rebellious cultural citizen who refuses to participate in racist, xenophobic, and heteropatriarchal practices of a given society). Disidentification refers to the process that neither completely assimilates nor strictly opposes dominant cultural ideology. Muñoz (1999) further explains, “This ‘working on and against’ is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance” (pp. 11–12). Disidentification produces a politically conscious subject that recycles and reworks dominant cultural meanings to include, and potentially empower, marginalized identities in a cultural system. The performance of identity by a disidentifying subject carries many affective investments (e.g., rage, delight, fear, equanimity), which TI attempts to articulate in their fragmented and contradictory ways.

In Magat's (2013) ethnography, Jasmine, who has worked at Asia SF from the beginning, describes her own affective journey—one full of sadness and excitement, fear and strength,

rejection and popularity—as she transitioned to become a beautiful trans woman who has a “proper” education (e.g., she went to nursing school), holds “proper” jobs (e.g., she is a server and entertainer at Asia SF and an HIV counselor and health educator at a community health care agency), and lives a “proper” life (e.g., she is a productive cultural citizen in a neoliberal world economy) in spite of U.S. cultural hostilities toward and limited life chances available to trans people, particularly trans women of color. Jasmine’s joy and pride associated with her own life successes are examples of the affective investments she makes in her daily identity performances as a trans woman whose circulation in the social world is a powerful political statement about surviving—in fact, thriving—in a cultural climate that denies trans people the right to exist. In addition, her performances of femininity and womanhood, for example, seem to give Jasmine a powerful affective charge of satisfaction, pride, and empowerment.

Understanding Identities as Embodied

Finally, TI attempts to understand identities as embodied and lived by people within particular geopolitical and historical contexts. In other words, identities cannot be understood simply as abstract social categories (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and the body; Sekimoto, 2012). Rather, TI focuses on the complex interaction between such abstractions and how individuals make sense of, enact, and contest these categories as they are simultaneously enabled and constrained by them in various ways and to different degrees (e.g., how a trans woman of color might be objectified and hypersexualized by her beauty within the perimeters of Asia SF, which simultaneously enables her to earn a living and limits her as a gendered person with many aspirations, talents, wishes, and dreams). In addition, TI recognizes that this process of embodiment takes place within spatial and historical relations of power.

To illustrate such relations, let me return to Magat’s (2013) ethnography—and, more specifically, Jasmine—one more time. After the ladies of Asia SF conclude their staged performances, they return with a tray carrying a single shot glass containing Bailey’s Irish cream and Amaretto almond liqueur topped with whipped cream, known as the “blow job.” Jasmine, who had just performed a popular musical number for her audience, was now the central character of the “blow job,” an act that invited a restaurant patron to drink the contents of the shot glass, placed in Jasmine’s crotch, without the use of hands. The act resulted in a series of bodily contortions as the patron—a straight, older, white male tourist from Texas, in this case—attempted to consume the messy drink between Jasmine’s legs. As he wiped the whipped cream from his face, the embodiment of his identity was thrown into a state of temporary crisis: He was infantilized and forced to twist his body and imitate a “gay” sex act under the direction and supervision of Filipina trans women. Through the process of embodiment, TI provides a lens to understand such a crisis within spatial (e.g., the restaurant, the larger social spaces that privilege straight white men) and historical relations of power (e.g., the colonial and imperial relations between the United States and the Philippines). For Jasmine, on the other hand, her embodiment enables new relational possibilities (e.g., opening up different ways of relating to U.S. American, straight, white men) as well as

limits articulations of her identity (e.g., perpetuating the accessibility of trans bodies for voyeuristic gaze and public consumption).

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In this essay, I noted the increasing scholarly attention to intersectionality in communication and related disciplines. Although it represents an important move in current research, a number of concerns have, in my view, emerged. Such concerns are associated with how the race/class/gender/sexuality mantra is conceived and treated in this research. More specifically, the mantra produces a flat and superficial treatment of intersectionality, focuses primarily on marked identities, leaves out nation and the body as significant aspects of social identity, and tends to ignore spatial relations in the production and constitution of identity in a neoliberal global world. To remedy some of these concerns and to produce deeper and more nuanced understandings of identity, I proposed the concept of thick intersectionalities. TI has four major features: struggle against coherence and premature closure of identity; incorporation of ways to understand identity through its messiness, fragmentation, contradictions, improvisation, and creativity; focus on the affective charges and investments associated with identity performances; and exploration of identity as embodied and inhabited by people in particular geopolitical and historical contexts. I used Magat's (2013) critical ethnography to illustrate how these features can be put into motion in research. I conclude by discussing some of the methodological and political implications of TI.

As McCall (2005) accurately reminds us, "there has been little discussion of *how* to study intersectionality, that is, of its methodology" (p. 1771; emphasis in original). She goes on to identify three broad methodological approaches—anticategorical, intercategorical, and intracategorical—to the examination of intersectionality. Anticategorical complexity is a methodological perspective that deconstructs social categories (e.g., how and why certain intersectional identities, such as whiteness, middle-classness, maleness, heterosexuality, U.S. citizenship, and so on, are unmarked in U.S. culture and appear unremarkable while other intersections are marked and regularly scrutinized). Intercategorical complexity is a methodological approach that is used to examine relations of power and inequality among groups by provisionally affirming existing social categories (e.g., how and why economic disparities and political power exist between various groups—say, Native American working-class women and their European American counterparts in the United States). Intracategorical complexity is a methodological perspective that attempts to reveal the intricacies of lived experiences of individuals in a social group by simultaneously holding a critical stance toward categories and provisionally maintaining them to analyze relations of power in a social system (e.g., how individuals within a social group—say, middle-class, able-bodied, Jewish Americans—inhabit their identities in Beijing, China, in the 21st century). Research using TI is more concordant with methodologies that highlight anticategorical and intracategorical complexities. In Magat's (2013) ethnography, for example, the focus is on intracategorical complexity as he examines the nuances and intricacies of the lives of Filipina trans women in his study.

A starting point for methodological choices in TI work might begin with the person initiating this exploration asking a seemingly simple question—“How do I inhabit my own intersectional identity?”—before proceeding to study the intersectional identities of others. Such a question encourages what Jones and Calafell (2012, p. 963) call “intersectional reflexivity,” which refers to the acknowledgment of and reflection on one’s own intersectional identity (whether marked or unmarked in a particular space and time) and one’s own self-implication in systems of privilege and marginalization. To put it more simply, before rushing to understand someone else’s identity, TI encourages people to reflect on, and deeply understand, their own intersectionalities and to see how they are implicated in maintaining systems of privilege and oppression in society. For example, men in the United States are generally unaware of their own male privilege (Deutsch, 2010; Woods, 2013). By becoming more aware of such privilege, U.S. men can become more conscious of how their gender privilege is complicated by race, class, sexuality, and the body to produce their own intersectional identities and subjectivities. Although this reflexive practice is not necessarily comfortable, it can be enlightening—and ultimately empowering—to examine relations of power in the flesh through understanding Muñoz’s (1999) “how” and “now” of intersectional identities, discussed earlier.

Finally, TI has several political implications. First, with its emphasis on how people live and interact with social categories in the flesh, TI avoids the erasure of individual subjectivities and experiences. Second, with its emphasis on fragmentation, contradiction, and improvisation of identities, TI provides a more complete view of how individuals negotiate meanings and operate in the social world. Third, with its emphasis on the affective investments associated with identity performances, TI recognizes and can potentially deploy affect, such as anger, rage, and devotion, for political change. Last, with its emphasis on spatial and historical relations of power, TI effectively reminds us, in Levine-Rasky’s (2011) words, “power is ‘always already’ involved in intersectionality” (p. 244). The exploration of the complexities of the identities of Jasmine and Tita Aida in Magat’s (2013) ethnography can hopefully help people, from those who are completely unfamiliar to those who are deeply familiar with the lives of Filipina trans women in San Francisco, increase their understanding of the everyday experiences of individuals who are deemed unintelligible in U.S. culture. Such understanding can also increase people’s awareness of the daily violence perpetrated against trans people in society and illuminate the processes of commodification of certain trans bodies for consumption and profit in a neoliberal global economy. Awareness of the symbolic and material violence against trans individuals can encourage people to use disidentification as a strategy to promote social change, such as normatively gendered people’s subverting gender norms and combating gender violence. With understanding, people can develop more empathy and sensitivity in their everyday encounters with difference. With empathy, other affective changes and intensities, such as deep appreciation of the courage and resilience of trans people as well as anger and rage against individuals and systems that perpetuate and normalize transgender violence in society, can become more salient and can be deployed instrumentally to transform culture by changing hearts, minds, laws, and other unjust social structures.

How I Came to Know: Moving Through Spaces of Post/Colonial Encounters

Eddah M. Mutua
St. Cloud State University

In 2007, I began to reflect on my lived experiences after many years of living outside of my country of birth, Kenya. The impulse to critically examine my being—past, present, and future—was to help me better understand my personal growth in different locations and, notably, in the place I currently reside, the United States of America. I bear multiple identities based on my culture, history, geographical origin, nationality, ethnicity, race, and gender. I am African, Kenyan, Kamba by ethnic group, female, educated, born after Kenyan independence from British colonial rule, and an American citizen by naturalization. Some of the labels that identify me are sources of my marginalization and liberation. I have been subjected to prejudice in the West based on my geographical/national identity and race. My education has served as a tool to understand my own marginalization and seek ways to reach out into new spaces and experiences. It has given me the privilege to travel the world and interact with different people who have stirred me to raise questions and gain knowledge about identities in global contexts. As such, writing this narrative allows me to learn more about myself in the context of these multiple factors shaping my identity and embodied experiences.

The value of theorizing my experiences lies in contributing to knowledge about intercultural engagement in global contexts. This understanding is relevant in the global context characterized by an increasingly dynamic, mobile world facilitated by communication and transportation technologies, intensified interactions, and exchange among people from different cultures across geographical, cultural, and national boundaries (Sorrells, 2013). My narrative interrogates the complexity of identity and brings into conversation factors that draw attention to critical awareness about difficult historical experiences, diverse cultural values, intercultural alliances, and decolonization efforts. These factors reveal ways that “identity is variously construed, claimed, and contested” (Nyamnjoh, 2007, p. 73).

In this personal narrative, I reflect on my embodied experience of movement across and within geographical, cultural, and racial boundaries, using autobiographical vignettes that include growing up in Kenya, schooling in the United Kingdom, and living and working in the United States. In different ways, each location reveals factors that ease and/or complicate my interactions with those I come into contact with. I explore themes illustrating lessons learned from experiences of moving through spaces of post/colonial encounters. Such themes include cultural traditions of community, resistance against acts that reproduce the hegemony of **neo/colonialism**, and using insider–outsider/outsider–insider **positionality** as an epistemological tool for self-decolonization and education.

In addressing each of the themes, I discuss experiences that enable me to assume a critical interrogative positionality to engage with others different from me. I go back and forth recalling, connecting, and disconnecting what I have come to learn, relearn, and unlearn from my experiences in diverse locations. These experiences define my journey

to self-discovery and the reasons that impel me to yearn for more than having my body bounded by history, geography, and birthplace. My critical engagement with myself and the world is to make sense of my body, birthplace, and the politics of identity, culture, and knowledge (Mutua, 2012). Overall, this narrative demonstrates enactment of intercultural praxis and the possibilities of intercultural alliance building.

Theoretical framing of the themes discussed draws from vast literature in postcolonial theory, transnational studies, critical intercultural communication, global feminism, and black feminist theory to make meaning of my experiences in a global context. Specifically, I draw from epistemological concerns raised about knowledge production, representation, and circulation (Mutua & Swadener, 2004; Smith, 1999; wa Thiong'o, 1993, 1994; Wane, Kempf, & Simmonds, 2011). Questions about what I know, how I know, and why, and about what I do not know and why allow me to deconstruct the way difference has been positioned through colonial processes. As such, my actions are geared toward reeducating myself and finding possibilities of building solidarity and humanizing the other.

POSITIONALITY AND EPISTEMIC CONCERNS

In relating my experiences, I begin by showing how my cultural upbringing problematizes my lived experiences and calls for a critical reflective response to diverse intercultural encounters. Sorrells (2013) observes that “different experiences, understanding, and knowledge of oneself and the world are gained, accessed, and produced based on one’s positionality” (12). My positionality/positionalities are formed by the limits of cultural and historical contexts that define, undefine, and redefine me. By mapping how this has happened over the years, I am then able to make sense of my interactions in global contexts.

Patricia Hill Collins’s (1986) notion of dual vision of marginalized people situates how I enter this conversation. First, my “alienated positionality” (Murillo, 2004, as cited in Alvarez, 2013, p. 51) positions me as an outsider/the other. Second, I am an “outsider-within” (Collins, 1986), as well as an **insider-outsider**. The multiple positionalities become the vantage point of constructing resistance, allowing me to consciously make decisions about how I respond to critical questions about who I am and also about how my identity and belonging in different spaces are constructed, construed, or misconstrued. Tensions about identity and what I know/do not know allow me to critique power relations and political, economic, cultural, and educational systems that produce hegemonic worldviews impacting my interactions in global contexts. In keeping up with changes in my being, I am constantly making sense of my journey from one point to the next.

My experiences vary as I am culturally and geographically placed and removed from inside and outside of the culture of my birthplace. Thus, subjectivities that influence my identity have been challenged by the urge to interrogate what I know, how I know, what I do not know, and what I seek to know about myself and others. Diverse cultural contexts and new experiences mean I desist from the “That’s what we do (or do not do) where I come from” attitude. Instead, I choose to question colonial naming and representation of the other. My goal is to gain knowledge about different ways of knowing that “promote modes of being that lessen the threat of our differences by pushing us to understand and

embody the world from new and different positions” (Rodriguez & Chawla, 2010, p. xiii). Writing this narrative is an act of resistance and courage to ask critical reflective questions about “what it means to be particular kinds of people, in particular places and at particular times” (Adams & Jones, 2013, pp. 2–3).

Kenya: Cultural Traditions and Start of Decolonizing Journey

Growing up in rural Kenya, I was socialized into cultural traditions of collectivism that shaped the performance of my everyday life. This pattern of cultural life prioritized values about community, friendships, responsibility, visiting, hospitality, interactions, unity, patience, problem solving, gender roles, religious obligations, and, in general, attributes that ensure maintenance of social order and sense of community. In addition, communication forms such as proverbs, folktales, and songs served as important sources of cultural knowledge. The socialization of shared cultural interpretations from my childhood continued into my adult life. My grandfather often cited a Swahili proverb as I prepared to travel to different parts of Kenya and the world—“*Milima haikutani, bali binadamu hukutana*” (“Mountains do not meet, but people meet”). The application of this proverb defines ways Africans view interactions, friendships, personal relationships, and hospitality toward whomever they come into contact with. It is also a warning against bad deeds to others. It speaks to African people’s investment in human interactions. In essence, my grandfather’s intention paralleled “excessive attention to traditions” (Gyekye, 1996, p. 165) that helped me learn standards of well-intended interactions with people different from me. My decolonizing journey has been enriched by these community values instilled in me and by what I have learned about the possibilities of building solidarity among people of African descent.

Schooling in different regions in Kenya enabled me to interact with students from diverse ethnic groups (including non-African Kenyans), religious affiliations (Christians, Muslims, Buddhists), and social statuses. The multicultural setting that my secondary education provided was instrumental toward my intercultural growth beyond the limits of my ethnic identity. However, as Shome (2012) opines, this multicultural setting is not to be understood through the conceptual logic and framework of Western engagement with multiculturalism in scholarship or discourse. In Kenya, as in other former British colonies, multiculturalism is “a kind of negotiated **accommodationism** that is part of the neighborliness and hospitality of many postcolonial societies” (Bhabha, 2002, as cited in Shome, 2012, p. 159). The history of British colonialism and ethnicity in Kenya explains the complexity of identity and belonging. The tensions between ethnic identity vis-à-vis multicultural/national identity popularized after Kenya’s independence in 1963 point to contested notions about Kenyan identities. In an effort to reconcile internal ethnic and racial divisions, the postcolonial state had to negotiate ways to “accommodate” Kenyans of all racial and class backgrounds. Examples include deracialization of residential areas and schools, and officialization of Kiswahili as the national language. In hindsight, these efforts can be viewed as fostering, in the words of Shome (2012), “officialized” diversity and serving as accommodations needed to counter ethnic and racial divisions.

My efforts to understand identity and belonging continued at the University of Nairobi (UoN), where I learned about **Pan-Africanism** as resistance. Nairobi is a modern urban city where

people from all over Kenya and other parts of the world reside. In describing my experiences at the university, I use *we* several times to acknowledge that what I learned and unlearned was based on collective experiences that were not all about *I/me* but often about *us/we*.

The faculty and student body at the university comprised diverse Kenyans (including Kenyans of British and Asian descent) and exchange students from Ghana, Japan, the United States, and Europe. Studying African literature, religious studies, and sociology deconstructed my assumptive views about identity of self and the other. This academic experience introduced me to scholarly works of renowned postcolonial theorists, including Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Taban Lo Liyong, and Walter Rodney, among others. I joined the UoN Free Traveling Theatre, where I was introduced to political activism through performance of African plays, dances, and poetry. Our activities drew inspiration from the Kamirithu theatre project started by wa Thiong'o in the 1970s, which had become a voice of protest against the status quo. We engaged our bodies in political discourses of justice, freedom, and knowledge. We learned to relearn our knowledge, reclaim our solidarity, and value borderlessness of our identities. In particular, Rodney's (1984) *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* was instrumental in revealing effects of African colonial and neocolonial history resulting in destruction of African social solidarity and responsibility.

Getting to know refugee students from South Africa, Rwanda, and Uganda who were defined by the political narrative of the day as "foreigners" (a term used to refer to non-Kenyans) helped me gain a better understanding of Pan-Africanism. The National Theatre located across the UoN main campus provided space for Pan-Africanism renaissance. South African performers who generously shared their artistic talents and experiences in apartheid South Africa were not foreigners but a valuable source of knowledge about resistance to apartheid. Many cross-national interactions and transnational experiences evoked the spirit of Pan-Africanism among us. Popular music by Bob Marley and Miriam Makeba and the lasting memory of Angela Davis's visit to UoN during the 1985 UN Women's Conference energized us to continue with postcolonial struggles. We chose to identify with transnational experiences, for example, by wearing our hair in Afros and dreadlocks, in support of the global struggles of women and people of African descent all over the world. For me, the experiences at UoN raised critical awareness about self, history, culture, and solidarity, and enabled me to continue with discourses of resistance inside and outside of Kenya.

United Kingdom: Resisting Hegemony of Neo/Colonialism

My experience living in London defined how I developed a global identity beyond my ethnic, national, African, and Pan-African identities. The experience expanded my views about resistance against acts that reproduce the hegemony of neo/colonialism. I interacted mainly with transnational communities from Africa, Asia, Brazil, and the Caribbean. Our interactions were eased by the fact that we shared a common historical identity of colonization. This identity allowed us to engage with the "politics of **postcoloniality**" (Shome & Hegde, 2002). Occasionally, I would engage in conversations at The Africa Centre and Bush House (former home of the BBC World Service) about British **neo/colonialism** and decolonization efforts. These conversations strongly resisted colonial imposition and sought strategies to decolonize structures altered by imperialism. In particular, concerns were

expressed about institutionalized economic structures that created dependency of the colonized on the colonizer through institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Department of International Development, formerly known as the Overseas Development Agency. Revisiting colonial relations in the colonial capital, London, begot solidarity among colonized people to denounce common neo/colonial experiences and imagine freedom at “home.”

My friendship with international students in my graduate program was transformative in educating me about global identity and social justice. This group of students from Kenya, Israel, Greece, Nigeria, Zambia, Tanzania, Brazil, Pakistan, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia was united by its diversity and quest for a peaceful world. We shared diverse experiences that solidified the desire to maintain valuable intercultural relationships and alliances amongst us. Lessons learned from our interactions became the basis of a commitment to have one another’s “backs” and build “intercultural bridges” (Sorrells, 2013) to carry us across painful and difficult encounters. Sorrells observes that engaging in “**intercultural bridgework**” means developing sensitivity, understanding, and empathy, and extending vulnerability to transverse multiple positions, creating points of contact, negotiation, and pathways of connection (p. 168).

I recall the day my two classmates from Israel and Palestine responded to a bomb attack in Tel Aviv and an air strike in the Gaza Strip in a manner atypical of what we were used to as far as media coverage of the intractable conflict was concerned. Media images and rhetoric of the conflict often suggest the impossibility of cordial conversation; however, my classmates, in pain from a conflict endured throughout their lifetimes, were still able to find possibilities of peace by educating us about their lived experiences with honor and integrity.

We used our intercultural friendships to build a safe community for ourselves. Sharing our best and worst experiences with compassion helped me learn about the value of intercultural relationships in global contexts. I felt comfortable and safe with my classmates. The time we spent together cooking and eating, enjoying cultural music and dance, and working in study groups not only expanded my worldview but also shielded me from prejudice. I did not feel exposed to prejudiced and racist encounters so long as I was with my friends. In hindsight, this “exclusion” might have been a naïve practice, but it was necessary at the time. Looking back, I can now understand why I was petrified when a white man demanded that my Kenyan friend vacate a seat for him on a train from Birmingham to Aberystwyth. I did not know how to respond to such an act of blunt disrespect. However, my friend’s refusal to concede to bigotry stands out as a brave act of resistance against colonial encounters. At the time, we did not know about Rosa Park’s story, but I believe we were driven by her quest for justice to resist injustice. In retrospect, I can no longer assume it is possible to be “shielded” from the intrusiveness of racism and prejudice as a person of color in the West.

United States: Critical Self-Education and Possibilities of Solidarity

My experiences in the United States reveal struggles to claim knowledge about self and the other in a racialized and transnationalized location. Questions about **epistemology**, identity, and belonging burgeoned within me. The intent was to deconstruct the basis of

epistemic structures that had barred me from knowing the U.S. and African Americans with whom I share a common ancestry. For example, why was I educated about geographical features such as the Great Plains, the Prairies, the Great Lakes, the Bay Bridge, and the coal mines in Pittsburgh? Why did I read John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* in my high school literature class and not, say, Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*? Why in the 21st century are African Americans still treated in condescending ways? The need to address these epistemic concerns, coupled with a personal commitment to Pan-Africanism, enabled me to seek connection with the history of African Americans.

An anticolonial approach to knowing was crucial in enhancing my understanding of self and my relationship to the place I now call "home"—the United States. Additionally, I wanted to understand the hegemony and greed that "forced material seizure and confiscation of indigenous lands and resultant displacement that entailed a total reconfiguration of the social systems, of relations between land and its people and among people" (Catungal, 2011, p. 27).

Linda Smith's (1999) concept of "researching back" was relevant in reclaiming knowledge about the marginalized history of African Americans. Hence, my priority in my new "home" was to acquire African American historical and cultural knowledge, rather than focus solely on the process of acculturation/assimilation expected of new immigrants. For me, resisting this norm was an epistemological tool to seek knowledge that transcends differences and acknowledges interconnectedness among people (Kim, 2015).

Critical self-education was my avenue to get to the "center" of discourses about difference, silenced voices, and history. It became a "remedy for survival" (Outerbridge, 2011, p. 116) powered by stories of people's struggles and triumphs. These are stories not told in vain. Wa Thiong'o (1993) opines that they are voices coming from the center to free culture and knowledge from Eurocentrism.

My journey began in Sacramento, California, the first place I called "home" in the United States. Living in a transnational community of African immigrants gave me comfort and familiarity but not answers to my epistemic concerns. Visits to Oakland and Berkeley educated me about the civil rights movement and Vietnam antiwar protests. Learning about Stokely Carmichael's political and social justice activism with his wife Miriam Makeba and University of California, Berkeley's history of activism offered possibilities of connections to the history of antiracism that I yearned to learn about. I felt the same sense of connection after attending talks by renowned African Americans and Africans such as Spike Lee, Ed Gordon, Angela Davis, Cornel West, and the Reverend Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Attending an African American church allowed me to experience those "voices from the center" speaking about struggle for freedom, dignity, faith, and justice. The church gave meaning to key historical events that symbolize the sweat, tears, and blood of African Americans as the price paid for my freedom. This consciousness validated my position as an ally of the antiracist struggle in the African American community.

Uncovering the painful history that has pitted Africans and African Americans against each other was troubling. The claim that Africans sold African Americans into slavery, resentment, lack of knowledge, and stereotypes about each other remain problematic and polarizing. In learning more about the conditions of this estrangement, it became clear to me the inaccuracy of grouping all "black" people together without paying attention to specific

historical experiences. African immigrants are Africans who are also identifiable by their country of origin and not as African Americans or black. This is a historical fact many African Americans are aware of and are ready to let Africans know: “You are not us.” For example, in early 2000 to 2005, racial tensions in my community in Minnesota between African American and Somali students were caused by contestations over the complexity of identities of people of African descent. Somali students’ efforts to “fit in” with their African American peers did not work. Nonetheless, the tension evoked in me a need to revisit efforts by Marcus Garvey, Walter Rodney, and Kwame Nkrumah to promote solidarity and alliances among all people of African descent. Hope for reconnection is evident in the work of transnational groups such as TransAfrica, a Washington, D.C.–based group working to free Africa from HIV/AIDS, poverty, genocide, and apartheid. Additionally, the National Communication Association’s Black Caucus and African American Culture and Communication Division provide space to engage in conversations about the possibilities for connection among people of African descent who have been fragmented by history and racism.

CONCLUSION

In this narrative, I have addressed issues of identity/belonging; diversity and solidarity; colonization and decolonization; intercultural friendship, community, and prejudice; epistemic concerns; and intercultural praxis. In different cultural contexts, I tried to capture the essence of critical self-reflection and education in understanding the complexities of my epistemic journey and intercultural growth. Even though my epistemic journey is not over, I believe that what I have shared will motivate readers to consider their own epistemic journeys. As bell hooks (1989) observed, longing for self-recovery is not simply about the description of one’s woundedness, one’s victimization, or repeated discussion of problems but also about experiencing a new and different relationship to the world that was lacking. The journey of self-recovery fosters a sense of dignity and respect for people marginalized by history, culture, and geography. I have come to know that my identity and what I know reflects a convergence of multiple factors. I now have a better awareness about how my understanding of self continues to shift and expand as I uncover, reclaim, and resonate with my own and others’ experiences.

KEY TERMS

accommodationism	97	intersectionality	86	postcoloniality	98
epistemology	99	neo/colonialism	95	race/class/gender/sexuality mantra	87
insider–outsider	96	outsider-within	96	thick intersectionalities	86
intercultural bridgework	99	Pan-Africanism	97	positionality	89

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The notion of intersectionality became popular because it allows researchers to account for multiple dimensions of identities—specifically, race, gender, class, and sexuality—without privileging or diminishing one or the other. In what ways could this approach be problematic? Are there situations where intersectional analysis can end up neutralizing or diluting identity politics?
2. According to Yep, what is intersectionality, and what are its conceptual strengths and limitations? What are the major differences between the traditional use of intersectionality and Yep's conceptualization of "thick intersectionalities"? What insights are gained by applying Yep's concept of thick intersectionalities to analyze your own identities?
3. In Mutua's personal narrative, how does the condition of postcoloniality inform her intercultural encounters in three different countries? How does her critical interrogative positionality of "insider-outsider" help her navigate across, and connect with, various issues underscored by histories of colonialism?
4. Discuss how Mutua's personal narrative demonstrates enactment of intercultural praxis (see Chapter 1) and the possibilities of intercultural alliance building.

NOTES

1. Portions of this essay were presented at the panel "Celebrating Three Decades of Community: Pioneers and Emerging Scholars of Identity Theory—Past, Present, and Future" at the 98th Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association, Orlando, FL, November 2012. I dedicate this essay to my canine friends Yogi ("the Yogster"), a sweet and faithful Pomeranian who keeps me company while I work; Sparky ("Sweet Face"), a smart miniature schnauzer who could do demonstrations on the obedience ring; Ace ("Fresh Face"), an active springer spaniel who enjoys vigorous play; and Rocky ("Fat Mosca"), an exuberant Pomeranian/sheltie mix who knows ways to resist our city walks. Together, we demonstrate intersectional affinity and bonding across species.

2. I am using the term in the plural to denote the multiplicity and complexities of identity as they are produced, constituted, and inhabited in the context of historical and spatial relations of power. I thank Dr. Wenshu Lee and Dr. John Elia for our ongoing discussions about intersectionality in our research and pedagogy. The chapter is, in many ways, a product of those conversations.

3. Jonathan Magat is a former student of mine. His project reflects a thoughtful engagement with thick intersectionalities in research.