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Race and Historiography: Advancing a Critical-Realist Approach*

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Abstract

This scholarly essay interrogates the seemingly necessary engagement of normative and essentialist characterizations of identity in the historical study of race in U.S. higher education. The author's study of the experiences of Black collegians in private, liberal arts colleges in the Midwestern Great Lakes region between 1945 and 1965 grounds this discussion. Although engaging racial essentialism is necessary, the author presents alternative treatments of historicizing race to illustrate the benefits of a critical-realist approach to producing a synthetic cultural educational history.

Keywords: race; higher education history; critical race theory; racial realism; historical inquiry

RACE AND HISTORIOGRAPHY: ADVANCING A CRITICAL-REALIST APPROACH

The purpose of this inquiry is to interrogate normative, essentialist approaches to the study of race provoked by the historian's quest for authentic and credible (some might say *objective*) experiences of marginalized groups in higher education. Peter Novick (1998) wrote that "the idea and ideal of 'objectivity' [is] at the very center of the professional historical venture" (p. 1). A central assumption of objectivity relies on the idea that the past has a reality that is true (Novick, 1998); that it is fixed, discernable, and consistently knowable. Yet, as understood within the synthetic cultural history approach (Goodchild & Huk, 1990), "a narrator can never re-present the event" but rather, constructs the meaning of historical events to promote understanding by the reader and the interaction between society and institutional actors.

As Novick would acknowledge, universalism also was central to historical objectivity and U.S. historians especially sought to detach themselves from "particularist commitments" to nation, region, ethnicity, religion, or ideology in their work (p. 469). As such, it is important to consider the role that researchers play in both documenting and producing history, and in particular, the racial categories that are sometimes used with the intention to "document the lives of those omitted or overlooked in . . . conventional histories" (Scott, 2008, p. 272). Black and feminist historians from the 1960s onward engaged in such work, presaging later Foucauldian analyses of the relationship between power and knowledge, and seeking to legitimize and elevate "insider" epistemological analyses (Novick, 1998).

An historical inquiry of race in the U.S., and in U.S. higher education, must confront the social construction of race and racial identity – both of the subjects of that history and of the historian – as not only less than real and not quite true, but also as consequentially real and true

in its impact. The experiences of Black collegians educated in northern, predominantly White colleges prior to federally legislated desegregation has received scant attention relative to that paid to the experiences of Black collegians in southern institutions, particularly at HBCUs, and Black collegians enrolled in northern institutions after 1965.¹ Instead, the canonical histories of higher education that document the period from 1945 to 1965 (regarded as U.S. higher education's "golden age" [Thelin, 2011]) have focused mainly on the advent of coeducational instruction and the increases in college matriculation among (White) women, as well as on the education of Blacks mostly by HBCUs (Thelin, 2004).

The documentation of race as a historical characteristic only relevant to HBCUs, while holding race invisible as a moderating factor of the collegiate experience in predominantly White colleges, inhibits the study of the production of racial categories within historical inquiry. As Helms (2007) pointed out, race is not inherent to only certain subjects and racism is endemic to U.S. society (Bell, 1992). What then should we do with racial categories as a historical feature in the narrative of U.S. higher education? What philosophies have been used to understand race and its effects by historians? What alternatives exist to not only "expose the existence of

¹ There are some key pieces worth mentioning here, however. Anderson (1993) discussed attempts to integrate college faculties in the North in the 1930s and 1940s. Concerning Black collegians at the turn of the 20th century, Perkins (1993) reviewed the shift in attention away from advocating for the higher education of Black women in the aftermath of the passage of the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, enfranchising Black men. Although Plaut (1954) and Zimbardo (1966) provide the only primary source scholarly reviews of the (often stunted) progress of racial integration in northern universities, more recently scholars have documented histories that highlight Black student social segregation within officially desegregated predominantly White colleges (Evans, 2007; Waite, 2001). Anderson (1988) is the seminal text for the history of Black education in the South, but his focus ends in 1935, prior to the second World War which saw more vigorous action on the part of Black civil rights groups, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and White philanthropic organizations, like the Ford Foundation, to bolster educational quality for southern Blacks (Donohue, Heckman, & Todd, 2002). The history, present, and future of HBCUs has been richly reviewed by scholars (see Brown & Davis, 2001; Allen & Jewell, 2002) and the differences between Black collegians' experiences in predominantly White and historically Black colleges has also received attention (Allen, 1992; Fleming, 1985). The literature on Black collegians since 1965 is voluminous (see Willie & Cunnigen, 1981 for a review of the first 15 years of research); a Google Scholar search of articles containing the term "Black college students" between 1965 and 2014 in November 2014 returned approximately 1,330,000 hits.

repressive mechanisms [but also] their inner workings and logics” (Scott, 2008, p. 273). How can educational researchers studying the past document both subjective experiences, as well as the production of those experiences as social and cultural artifacts? This is the focus of this inquiry. As I explore these issues, I begin with a synopsis of my own historical study of Black collegians at a particular set of institutions that introduced these questions to me. Next, I discuss the national context of Black enrollment in U.S. higher education. From there I present historical literature regarding the treatment of race by historians. Then I engage questions related to the treatment of race raised by my own research and finally conclude with recommendations for educational researchers exploring our racialized past.

Black Collegians at GLCA Colleges, 1945—1965

A historical study of racial integration and the experiences of Black collegians among a voluntary association of 13 private, liberal arts colleges founded in the nineteenth century, collectively called the Great Lakes Colleges Association (GLCA) between 1945 and 1965 informs this paper.² Data collection included both archival materials and interviews with Black men and women who attended these institutions during this time period. From the archives of the 13 GLCA colleges, I studied yearbooks, student newspapers and other student-produced publications, as well as files from college presidents, faculty, and other administrators pertinent to issues of race and racial integration at the colleges. Alumni office staff were then solicited to assist with locating and recruiting Black alumni identified through the archival sources. Sixty-

² The 13 colleges of the GLCA are as follows (ordered by state location): DePauw University (Greencastle, IN); Earlham College (Richmond, IN); Wabash College (Crawfordsville, IN); Albion College (Albion, MI); Hope College (Holland, MI); Kalamazoo College (Kalamazoo, MI); The College of Wooster (Wooster, OH); Denison University (Granville, OH); Kenyon College (Gambier, OH); Oberlin College (Oberlin, OH); Ohio Wesleyan University (Delaware, OH); Antioch College (Yellow Springs, OH); and, Allegheny College (Meadville, PA).

eight Black men and women from 10 of the 13 colleges participated in life history interviews.³ Interviews lasted an hour and a half on average. Institutional histories focused on Black collegians and personal biographies of notable Black alumni also supplemented the archival and interview data and provided helpful institutional context. The synthetic cultural history approach grounded the research.

Though racial segregation and discrimination was documented throughout the North prior to the Civil Rights Movement (Grover, 1994; Harding, 1981; Wilkerson, 2010), the archival record from these institutions produced no evidence that race was formally used to prevent the admission of non-White people. Black students and graduates were documented at each institution prior to the twentieth century and, in the case of Oberlin College, even prior to the Civil War. Nevertheless, the GLCA colleges typically matriculated very few Black collegians, comprising no more than one percent of the total student enrollment in any given year during this period. Indeed, the majority of Blacks enrolled in college between World War II and the 1964 passage of the Civil Rights Act attended one of the nation's historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the South (Clotfelter, 2004; Plaut, 1954; Williamson, 1999).

Black Enrollment in U.S. Higher Education, 1945—1965

My study of the enrollment and experiences of Black collegians in the GLCA colleges between 1945 and 1965 should be placed within the broader context of Black enrollment in U.S. higher education during that same era. Described as a “golden age” of U.S. higher education by Thelin (2011), characterized by significant gains in enrollment across institutions and increased access to higher education by women, African Americans and other ethnic minorities, religious

³ Although three individuals who had studied at Denison University responded to my recruitment letter and desired to participate, none followed through with scheduling an interview. The alumni office at Antioch College was unable to assist with contacting their Black alumni; while the alumni office at The College of Wooster ultimately declined to assist with recruiting their Black alumni into the study.

minorities, and for students with disabilities as well as those from middle-class and working class families. Federal legislative and judicial actions would be the engine that spurred much of this enrollment growth and expansion, particularly the G.I. Bill of 1944, the *Brown* decision by the Supreme Court in 1954, the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, and 1965 Higher Education Act. This massification of higher education (Gumport, Iannozzi, Shaman, & Zemsky, 1997), was not uniformly experienced, however. Geographic segregation patterns and entrenched systemic discrimination distributed expansion unevenly with disparate effects accrued to Black collegians.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly referred to as the G.I. Bill, became law as the country prepared for the eventual end of World War II and the need to reintegrate returning veterans into the nation's economy. Although higher education institutions were not intended to be the primary beneficiaries of this legislation, the portable tuition and fee scholarships that the G.I. Bill offered to returning veterans significantly transformed the nation's colleges and universities (Thelin, 2011). According to Serow (2004), 2.2 million veterans used the educational benefits of Title II of the G.I. Bill to pay for undergraduate or graduate education; far exceeding legislators' expectations. This would include two of the men who I interviewed as participants in my study of Black collegians at the GLCA colleges in the postwar period. However, Black veterans' ability to take advantage of this entitlement and its impact therefore on growing Black enrollment in colleges and universities has been debated (Katznelson & Mettler, 2008; Serow, 2004) with some scholars contesting that the bill actually widened the educational attainment gap for Black Americans (Onkst, 1998; Turner & Bound, 2003).

This disputed impact is due in part to some overestimation of who the bill benefited. As documented by Serow (2004), men who served in World War II were more often better educated

than other men in the general population and those who used G.I. Bill benefits often already stronger educational profiles than most other veterans. In addition, surveys of veteran collegians during the late 1940s found that only 20% of those veterans would not have enrolled in college without the subsidy provided by the G.I. Bill (Serow, 2004). Particular to Black veterans though, ability to use their Title II educational benefits were limited by other factors. Elite institutions, contrary to being motivated toward more egalitarian and meritocratic admissions policies, generally admitted veterans who were already similar to non-veteran students (Serow, 2004) and most Black collegians remained barred from admission to southern universities where the vast majority of the U.S. Black population resided due to racial segregation (Katznelson & Mettler, 2008; Onkst, 1998; Serow, 2004; Turner & Bounds, 2003). The postwar demand for seats at the historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) across the South could not be met by these severely underfinanced institutions; an estimated 20,000 veterans were turned away (Serow, 2004) having no other access to higher education due to institutionalized racism in college admissions.

The next decade brought to fruition more than two decades of persistent activism on the part of the NAACP to bring about educational desegregation through legal action (Ogletree, 2004). Led by Charles Houston and a young lawyer, Thurgood Marshall, limited victories had already been won in undergraduate and graduate education to show the inherent disparities of segregated education. Backed by educational research by psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark on the harmful effects of segregation on childhood development, the U.S. Supreme Court would finally overturn the precedent set by the high court's decision in 1896 in *Plessy v. Ferguson* which legitimated racial segregation codes already being enforced across all areas of public life, including all levels of public education (Ogletree, 2004).

Although the Supreme Court's 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka* began the process of educational desegregation in some municipalities, the Court's ambiguous mandate that progress toward full desegregation commence with "all deliberate speed" did not provoke widespread reforms in educational practice relative to the school placements of African American and other students subjected to educational racial segregation in the U.S. (Ogletree, 2004). Rather, as discussed by Clotfelter (2004), the more than 100 southern officeholders who signed the "Southern Manifesto" remained committed to racial segregation and resisted demands to desegregate the schools under their governance, including public colleges and universities. Enforcement of the order to desegregate in compliance with the Supreme Court's ruling was uneven and required the support of U.S. Marshals and the National Guard (Clotfelter, 2004; Ogletree, 2004).

Later in the 1950s, the federal government would again turn to legislative action to broaden economic access to higher education. Although Congress did not fund any of the recommendations that emerged out of the Truman Commission Report in 1947, the passage of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 would realize part of the commission's suggestions for national scholarships for college attendance based on financial need (Long, 2013). However, the NDEA only supported students pursuing degrees in science, math, and foreign languages related to the country's military interests (Long, 2013). Nevertheless, the National Defense Student Loan Program that was created by the NDEA helped to augment the private philanthropic support that some Black students were receiving via the Ford Foundation's endowment of the National Scholarship Service and the Fund for Negro Students (NSSFNS) begun in the 1950s (Rooks, 2006). Indeed, several of the participants in my study attended their

GLCA college by virtue of aid provided by the NSSFNS, though none shared taking out a loan through the National Defense Student Loan Program.

It was not until the U.S. Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act along with other Supreme Court rulings (e.g., *Green v. County School Board*, *Alexander v. Holmes*) that local school districts and higher education institutions began to cooperate with federally legislated desegregation mandates (Clotfelter, 2004). The passage of the Civil Rights Act thus enabled the fuller realization of the democratic effects of the G. I. Bill and the National Defense Education Act discussed above, and would relieve implementation of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the Higher Education Act of 1965, which became the foundation for federal financial aid (Long, 2013) from being so hampered by overtly discriminatory college admission policies. Consequently, the greatest gains in college enrollment for Blacks in the U.S. were realized after 1965.

Race in U.S. Historical Inquiry

The national reversal of de jure and de facto racial discrimination in US higher education was introduced by the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* and codified by the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Both the practice of discrimination and the evidence of its discontinuance prompted the much broader use of racial typologies and their institutionalization in academic organizational structures. As a result of the 1964 legislation, colleges showed were required to show proof that they were providing equal access to educational opportunities by taking a census of their student populations, identifying each student's racial classification, and updating those data annually. Consequently, for example, the college archivists at the GLCA colleges shared that demographic data identifying students' racial classifications prior to 1965 did not exist or had been reconstructed much later. At these

colleges, the now ubiquitous racial classification check box on college applications did not yet exist.⁴

Race and racial classifications, therefore, reflect the imposed construction of social groups (Appiah, 1992; Renn, 2004; Young, 1990), not a naturalistic one. Historians have also come to assert that race is an ideological construction, albeit with material effects (Campbell & Oakes, 1993; Davis 1997; Fields, 1982; Holt, 1998). Yet, the bureaucratic evidence of non-discrimination requires engagement with an ideology that becomes naturalized in its use. As Fields (1982) argued, the persistence and ubiquity of race makes it tempting to see race as “transhistorical” (p. 144), as inherently existing across time and space. Processes to ensure bureaucratic compliance further that temptation. Studying the lived experiences of those who have been classified by such an ideological construction as Blackness (or Whiteness, Asian-ness, Latino-ness, or indigeneity) in US higher education, consequently involves the use of these same constructed categories. However, how historians document the consequences of these categories and resultant social groupings can either “naturalize those experiences” as though they were unmediated (Scott, 2008, p. 279) or provoke an analysis of that knowledge itself.

The “origin debates” of the 1960s and 1970s regarding race and racism considered whether race, racism, or structural systems like slavery came first. Jordan’s seminal work in 1968, *White Over Black*, is said in Campbell and Oakes’ (1993) re-reading of the text to have concluded that phenotype, particularly skin color, was the rationale for enslaving Africans “after the fact” (p. 177). As both Fields (1982) and Holt (1998) have written, despite the apparent

⁴ My discussions with several college archivists revealed that at some of these colleges (Oberlin, DePauw, and Antioch in particular), notes were made on the admissions cards of Black students, referred to as *Negro*, until sometime in the 1920s when the practice was ended fearing that it encouraged racial discrimination against Black applicants. Ironically, some forty years later, colleges were required to ask about and keep records regarding the race of all their students in order to discourage racial discrimination.

claim to recognition of the social construction of race, “our notions of racism—in historical literature as well as in lay thought—remain . . . stubbornly naturalized” (Holt, 1998, p. 107) and even were contradicted in Jordan’s text (Campbell & Oakes, 1993). Nevertheless, there seems to be modern consensus that *ideology* (knowledge), *culture* (production), and *discourse* (communication), as so named by Holt, collaboratively and interdependently produce race. Race is an invention of the particular history and society in which it is lived (Brown, 1998; Campbell & Oakes, 1993; Davis, 1997; Fields, 1982; Holt, 1998). Race is not “transhistorical” (Fields, 1982, p. 144), but bound by history. Inasmuch as this is the case, however, the studying of racial subjects is not a proxy for studying racism (Holt, 1998) and neither is it a proxy for an investigation of the subjectivity and agency of those with lived experiences within racial classifications (Brown, 1998), as the present study of Black collegians at the GLCA colleges between 1945 and 1965 has sought to take up. When the topic is not focused on the system itself, but rather the lived experiences of individuals defined within the system, different yet related issues about how to engage race as a concept and material reality emerge. I now turn to discussing these five issues.

From Classification Scheme to Identity Group: Black Collegians in the GLCA Colleges

Other scholars, beyond historians, have engaged issues of classification and identity in educational institutions, specifically. These approaches each rely on different assumptions about the relationship between categories and identity, as mediated or unmediated by processes of production. These five approaches are categorical empiricism, dismantling race, using race as a tool, engaging multiple marginalities, and advancing a critical-realist theory of identity.

Categorical Empiricism

Categorical empiricism essentializes race as inherent or biologically determined. Macdonald and Sanchez-Casal (2009) described this approach as one that considers identity categories to be empirical fact. Educational historians do not seem to have interrogated how students became members of racial groups within their institutions, as illustrated in the historical analyses of the G.I. Bill and other postwar federal legislation discussed earlier (Katznelson & Mettler, 2008; Onkst, 1998; Turner & Bound, 2003; Serow, 2004). Instead, they treat race and its related subcategories (e.g., Black) as pre-existing data to be found; that the existence of racial groups is inherent and value-neutral. I also engaged in this as I determined that I would “find” Black students and needed to devise a means to identify them at the GLCA colleges in the absence of alumni census data from the postwar era.

Yet, institutions also adopted a categorical empiricist approach. It was not uncommon for colleges to request applicants send in a picture with their application materials.⁵ At a few of the GLCA colleges, applicants’ pictures were then used to note the racial classifications of those considered to be “Negro” so that care could be taken to specially attend to the quality of their experience at the college. At one college, notes on such a card from the 1920s supposed that an applicant was Negro despite his fair complexion because of the coarseness of his hair as presumed from the photo submitted with the application. As Fields (1982) asserted about skin color and determinations of race, “. . . an ideological context . . . has long since taught them which details to consider significant in classifying people” (p. 146).

Several other colleges which reconstructed the racial profile of their pre-1965 alumni sent out demographic questionnaires in relatively recent years, whose data were then added to their

⁵ Stories about the collection of applicant photographs were shared with me by both college archivists and several of the alumni from whom I collected life histories about their college experiences at the GLCA institutions.

alumni databases. The racial classification schemes used by these colleges were the same as the categories used currently by the admissions offices to capture applicant demographic data, allowing for consistent record-keeping and identity group-based targeted communication.⁶ Whatever efficiencies are gained by such practices, however, they also reflect a discursive practice (Holt, 1998) among these college administrators that race was “transhistorical” (Fields, 1982), a reality that was pre-existing, biologically determined, capable of measurement and codification, static, and stable over time. For the historian seeking to document the presence of Black collegians at these colleges, the ready availability of such data would be very seductive. An approach to race informed by categorical empiricism would collect such information without questioning how they were produced and what those processes of production revealed about the nature of race at these institutions during this time period. Although racial categories do not create differences in phenotype among humans, neither do phenotypical differences create racial categories. Rather, the relationship between phenotype and racial classification was mediated by ideology and culture (Campbell & Oakes, 1993; Fields, 1982; Holt, 1998).

Resisting these forms of categorical empiricism required some other method to document the the presence of Blackness in these White spaces, the physical manifestation of racialization that had been enforced in the U.S. since the Revolutionary War (Campbell & Oakes, 1993). As a result, I combed through yearbooks looking for Black students based on pictures and employing logic not dissimilar to that admissions officer and noted by Fields (1982), deducing racial classifications from such phenotypical features as hair texture and lip shape and size, as well as relying on the shading of black-and-white photography to reveal those whose complexions appeared darker than most others. These gross suppositions were cross-referenced with other

⁶ The college archivists at Earlham, Oberlin, Ohio Wesleyan, Kalamazoo, and Wabash were the sources of this information.

institutional records, when available, and otherwise confirmed through participant recruitment and interviews. The task of locating Blackness both required reliance on empiricizing race, while rejecting race as ultimately biologically determined or inherent.

In order to advance a critical race consciousness about the construction of race and to defy simplistic renderings of Blackness as found property, an alternative philosophy of racial categories must be employed that acknowledges its categorical complexity. As Brown (1997) has written, categories of identity are “not simply oppressed but produced through these discourses, a production that is historically complex” (p. 87). Individuals experience the functional reality of identity categories (Bell, 1992) in multiple ways, as both systemically disempowered and as conduits for structural kinship. The next four approaches each offer possibilities for maintaining such a critical consciousness, but they are not equally viable.

Dismantling Race

The first alternative is the rejection of identity categories. This approach deconstructs identity categories, seeing them as “too irreducibly complex” (McCall, 2005, p. 1773) for use in any way other than as reductionist. Identity categories cannot be imbued with meaning or significance because by their very nature they restrict liberty instead of grant it and, therefore, cannot be used to dismantle the effects of systematic oppression. Darder and Torres (2004), citing work by scholars such as Anthony Appiah and Paul Gilroy, have advocated specifically for the dismantling of notions of “race.”⁷ These authors argue that the ideology of “race” has served to only essentialize the responses of groups to racism (Darder & Torres, 2004).

Moreover, class interests, which would otherwise support effective coalitions against racism’s effects, have been “obscured and disguised” (p. 1) by the prioritization of essentialist racial

⁷ When discussing Darder and Torres (2004), I have adopted their choice to put race in quotes, signaling their belief in its illegitimacy.

identities (Darder & Torres, 2004). Critiquing Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its use in educational-policy debates and the viability of concepts such as “political race” (Guinier & Torres, 2002), these authors aim to situate racism in such a way to allow for “a systematic discussion of class and . . . a substantive critique of capitalism” (Darder & Torres, 2004, p. 99), which they assert is missing from CRT because of its focus on the centrality of “race.” Holt’s (1998) description of the economic paradigm seeks to advance a similar argument, which he critiqued as inadequate as does Fields (1982).

Setting the stage for their argument, Darder and Torres (2004) noted that the emerging research in evolutionary biology during the nineteenth century linked the idea of race to “genetic predispositions of social behavior” (p. 5). Further they asserted,

The concept of “race” has always been linked to either social or genetic constructions of inferiority or superiority assigned to particular populations . . . The ideology of “race” and its use, whether as a construct in the interest of genocide and colonialism or in the interest of political resistance, has always engendered seeds of essentialism. So, if “race” is “real,” it is only “because we have acted as if certain people, at certain points in time, were inferior based on innate or essentialized characteristics” (Lee, Mountain, & Koenig, 2001, p. 40). Hence the circularity of “race” logic leaves little possibility outside the realm of determinism. (Darder & Torres, 2004, p. 5)

Thus, for Darder and Torres, “race” only exists to affix inferiority and mythologize racial kinship based on experiences thought to be endemic to various population groups. In their analysis, racism produces this inferiority and varying social class locations within groups expose the fallacy of racial kinship.

Despite its recognition that identity categories are socially constructed and mediated by several factors, a deconstructionist view of identity is not positioned to engage the reality of the specific effect of racial identities operationalized as empirical fact by legislation and institutional policy and practice. Moreover, as Darder and Torres (2004) acknowledged, individuals have committed to these identity categories. Scholars cannot reach back to a time before race or turn race inside-out in any way that would pragmatically correspond to the social realities of national or global discourses that acknowledge the systematic stratification of peoples based on skin color. With very few exceptions, the GLCA alumni with whom I spoke understood themselves to be Black and my study's focus on Black collegians was legible as relevant to and inclusive of them. Although race itself is not an *a priori* deterministic reality, this commitment to race certainly is pre-existing for a racialized historical inquiry, in that it is there before the researcher's analysis begins. Darder and Torres are correct that racial essentialism is problematic and a capitalist critique is necessary. However, as Fields (1982) and Holt (1998) asserted, other strategies are more intelligible to those beyond the academy and useful for informing educational history. As discussed by Davis (1997) in his reflection on constructing race, awareness of the assumption and effects of inferiority based on assigned membership to a shared racial category as Black tied my participants to a history, present reality, and future potential that was meaningful and directed their reflections.

Using Race as a Tool

A second alternative is to adopt categories as analytical tools, using them as socially constructed and non-essentialist, but still politically meaningful. McCall (2005) described this approach as provisionally adopting existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups. This alternative engages the operationalization of identity

categories and recognizes the experiential effects of those categories in people's lives (McCall, 2005). However, identity categories have no social meaning beyond that. Shared cultures and deterministic group identities are debunked as essentialist.

Guinier and Torres' (2002) concept of "political race" seeks to undo the hegemonic power relationships embedded in race. To be "politically Black" is to adopt an identity that aligns oneself with collective action against racism. Blackness is not a container for deterministic characteristics, but rather stands in ideological opposition to the embedded racism of Whiteness. In this way, racial classification becomes an identity that can serve as a location for political advocacy. Moreover, membership in this racial identity does not rely on everyone having to perform the identity in the same way in order to claim access to a collective identity. Thus, individuals are able to perceive each other as viable collaborators against the recognizable effects of shared oppressive practices.

For the educational historian, however, this presents an additional challenge suggested by Scott's (2008) analysis of experience. Using race as a tool in this way assumes that the experience of inequality is unmediated by factors other than the one that is the focus of inquiry. It would fail to account, therefore, for the multiple social locations that individuals occupy within any particular social space. Black collegians are historicized as marginalized due to racist institutional policies and individual attitudes, but economic class, sexuality, gender, and nationality are rendered secondary to the primary experience of racism, if considered at all. Other mediating factors of Black collegians' experiences of social isolation and segregation are not subject to analysis.

That inequality is produced by more than the mere deficit-valuing of difference is also not considered in this approach. Despite reports in the participants' life histories of isolated

faculty who presumed Black students inherently came to college with deficits, there were no policies that institutionalized a deficit-perspective of Black people through mandated remedial coursework, special orientation programs, or required participation in culturally-based support groups. The structure of labor also did not employ a concept of racialized jobs. Although it was revealed that many of the Black alumni in my study held work-study jobs as dining hall servers, this was not a racialized position as these Black alumni documented that White students also routinely served in these roles.

Finally, approaching a history of Black collegians presuming the existence of a collective political consciousness would be anachronistic. The dangers of this are broached by several historical scholars (Brown, 1998; Campbell & Oakes, 1993; Fields, 1982; Holt, 1998; Novick, 1998). As Moya (2009) argued in agreement, “identities are indexed to a historical time, place, and situation. . . . the same identity evokes very different associations in different places” (p. 48), including chronological locations. Collective political consciousness begins with shared experiences in oppression. Within-group differences wrought by gender, social class, previous experience with racial integration, as well as athletic and fraternal participation significantly diversified the experiences of Black collegians at GLCA colleges between 1945 and 1965. The development of a uniform political racial identity would be unlikely. In fact, when asked about collective action or social kinship with other Black students on campus, most GLCA Black alumni before 1960 adamantly rejected such behavior as self-defeating for the goal of integration, learning about how to live and work among White people.

Engaging Multiple Marginalities

The third approach is one which McCall (2005) has said characterizes most of the work done under the umbrella of intersectionality. Intersectionality, developed mainly by women of

color, sought to theorize the interaction of multiple systems of oppression on people (Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality scholars reject theories of identity that are singular, additive, or as possessing salience; instead, identity is understood to be multiple and intersubjectively constituted, incapable of being separated into distinctive categories with distinctive effects (Bowleg, 2008).

Coined as *intracategorical complexity* by McCall (2005), this approach acknowledges that identity categories reflect stable and durable relationships, while remaining critical of them (Dill, 2002). This approach seeks to focus on individuals at “neglected points of intersection” (McCall, 2005, p. 1774) highlighting the multiplicity of oppressions, particularly as experienced by Black women or queer people of color. These relationships are stable and durable both in relation to individuals and systems of power, as well as among individuals. However, intersectionality scholars recognize the mediating effect of possessing multiple marginalities on those lived experiences to fracture communities based on singular facets of identity. In her article, Brown (1998) also called for more historical scholarship focused on African American and indigenous women, recognizing the particular ways that race and gender intersect to produce qualitatively different realities.

Intracategorical complexity is valuable and important for historical inquiry. It allows for the deliberate analysis of historical actors across multiple identities, otherwise rendered invisible, as they interact with and were impacted by multiple oppressive systems. However, this approach also presents a challenge for scholars seeking to interpret past interactions between institutions and society. A synthetic cultural history that would focus only on those who sit at the intersection of multiple oppressions, would likely miss the effect of privileged locations to amplify or mitigate experiences of inequality among racially minoritized groups. For example,

an intracategorical approach to the study of racial integration and the experiences of Black collegians in GLCA colleges may focus on Black women as a double-minoritized group, for example. This is valuable and necessary, but should not be done without acknowledgement that social class privilege did exist within racially minoritized categories (Stewart, in press). Individuals are neither wholly marginalized nor wholly privileged, and those locations of privilege, even for those with multiple marginalities, also are epistemically meaningful.

Advancing Critical-Realism

This leads to the final approach based on realist theories of identity (Macdonald & Sanchez-Casal, 2009) and racial realism (Bell, 1992). A realist theory of identity sees identity categories, like race, as both real and constructed. However, realist theories also recognize that racial categories, for example, are epistemically salient (Sanchez-Casal & Macdonald, 2009). For example, being Black informs and is informed by internal processes of meaning making regarding self, others, and one's interactions with institutions. Yet the same is true for a person's experience of gender, class, sexuality, disAbility, etc. Therefore, this approach mobilizes communities of meaning within and across identity categories.

As Moya (2009) asserted, "identities are highly salient for students' experiences in school; they make the classroom a different place for different students" (p. 45) because, citing Claude Steele, students face different sets of "identity contingencies" (p. 45). These contingencies represent "the specific set of responses that a person with a given identity has to cope with in specific settings" (p. 45). Who a student is understood to be by others, and who they understand themselves to be, has significant consequences for both opportunities and outcomes (Moya, 2009). By treating identities as "indexical," referring externally to social structures and infused with social relations, they equip bearers to make sense of their social

worlds (Moya, 2009). Even when it is unconscious, Moya stated that individuals' conceptual frameworks cannot be separated from how they make meaning of themselves in terms of their identity locations. Moreover, the inclusion of intragroup differences is seen by a realist approach as a "moral principle of racial democracy" (Sanchez-Casal & Macdonald, 2009, p. 38), expanding access to participation.

Realist theories of identity dismantle essentialism by empowering individuals to hold membership in multiple identity groups. From these locations, individuals can seek to make meaning of their experiences. By encoding intersectionality as a functional reality, realist notions of identity make it possible to speak to both modest economic privilege among Black collegians at GLCA colleges and to social isolation as arbiters of their collegiate experiences.

Considering other realist theories, particularly Derrick Bell's (1992) *racial realism* that undergirds CRT, permits the extension of these implications beyond constructs of individual meaning making to the outcomes of historical inquiry. Despite the persistence of racial discrimination in the face of continual efforts to eliminate it, traditional civil rights law has maintained a belief that the US Constitution was ultimately "intended . . . to guarantee equal rights to Blacks" (Bell, 1992, p. 376). Rejecting such idealism, Bell (1992) argued that racial realism perceives racism to be the natural condition of social systems. From this position, he argued, advocates are "less likely to worsen conditions for those we are trying to help" (Bell, 1992, p. 378). Idealistic assumptions that essentialize the "formal rules" of objectivity and racial equality as the fulfillment of US democracy allow oppression to continue unfettered (Bell, 1992, p. 376). The epistemic salience of race combined with "a hard-eyed view of racism" (Bell, 1992, p. 378) is fundamentally necessary. Such a position enables educational researchers to both engage historical actors in the construction of what it meant to be Black in higher education

institutions without resorting to essentialist assumptions and while documenting the effects of racist structures simultaneously.

For researchers using a synthetic cultural approach, realism resolves the challenges raised by the previous approaches to work appropriately with the embedded categorical empiricism unavoidable in the historical study of the participation of racially marginalized groups in U.S. higher education. By using a realist approach to identity categories, the educational researcher is able to document and interpret the ways in which the social production of racial categories created opportunities for members of those categories to create (or not) communities of meaning within and beyond the primary identity category under study. Acknowledging racial realism (instead of an essentialized idealism) also challenges the researcher to consider the factors that are producing the experiences that are being shared or documented, as Scott (2008) advocated. This approach invites researchers to actively present their own identity as having epistemic salience (Moya, 2009), contributing to the construction of meaning with historical actors.

Conclusion

Due to the social construction of racial categories and their codification in governmental legislation and institutional policy and practice, researchers grounding historical inquiry in Goodchild and Huk's (1990) synthetic cultural history approach cannot avoid relying on empiricized categories. As Scott (2008) asserted relative to the construct of experience, identity categories are neither natural nor unmediated, but are produced by the legal and practical codification of difference and efforts to either enact or dismantle racial inequality. Therefore, the experiences presumably attached to those identities are also neither natural nor unmediated. Through realist approaches, higher education historians can be equipped to document the ways

that the production of categories and institutional environments mediate the construction of social identity groups as characterized by Young (1990).

Identity categories are unavoidable in historical inquiry if we are to take a “hard-eyed” (Bell, 1992) look at systems of exclusion in higher education. Black students, faculty, and staff were systemically denied access because Blackness had been defined as inferior and they were then categorized as Black. However, that production of Blackness does not wholly explain the social isolation and segregation that has been documented by scholars over time (Clotfelter, 2004; Evans, 2007; Stewart, 2015; Stewart, in press; Waite, 2001; Zimbardo, 1966). To narrate the experiences of Black collegians historically requires an analysis of how Black students understood the role of their racial identity – its epistemic salience – in these predominantly White GLCA colleges, as well as how categories of class also moderated their experiences and the meaning they made of them (Stewart, in press). An intersectional understanding of the interaction of racism with other systems of oppression, one of the tenets of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), answers Holt’s (1998) economistic paradigm and addresses Darder and Torres’ (2004) demand to critique capitalism as an oppressive tool. Asking how social class mitigated or amplified the effects of social isolation among Black collegians will give a more nuanced picture of those students’ historical experiences. Failing to apply such an approach can be used to support monolithic treatments of Black collegians in the present day, denying the group’s heterogeneity.

Further, researchers interested in historical inquiry would do well to focus their inquiry on the formation of social groups on college campuses based on social identities. As noted previously, social groups are not pre-existing but are produced by persistent conditions in the campus climate over time. Those conditions, how students became sensitized to them, and how

they became sensitized to each other as viable partners in communities of meaning are worthy processes to document. To do so, researchers must see the thing as it became but resist presuming that it had always been, so that they may then trace its development as a historical product.

Writing history is not a value-neutral activity. On the contrary, researchers have the power to shape and inform how society understands the present. One option is to present current categories of race (and other identities) as self-evident and transhistorical by approaching race through an essentialist frame. Another option, which fully engages the historian's interpretive task, is to enter studies of marginalized populations with conscious recognition of the production of identities through oppressive systems and of the meaning of those identities for the subjects of history. Failing to engage racial historiography in this way renders such histories as purveyors of the socially unjust outcomes referenced above. However, through blending racial realism with realist theories of identity, critical-realist histories of higher education can become relevant educational tools in projects to advance social justice.

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