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Introspections from the Margins of Race and Gender

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Abstract: Race, as most social scientist would argue, is socially constructed, and from that premise there are those who would argue that since it is socially constructed, it isn't real and therefore why do we even talk about it. However rather than going with that premise, we would argue that given that it is socially constructed, the fact that we are social beings and that we have been socialized to recognize the color of another's skin, then it matters, and we need to talk about it.

As women scholars in the field of adult education - two African American women, one Asian American woman and one American woman (Colin, 1994) we have been engaged in conversations about how we teach and work with our colleagues and our students about the role of race and gender in our professional, social and personal lives. The metaphor, "all American apple pie or chocolate sundae" captures that paradox for us. The purpose of this paper and this session will be for us to engage in a dialogue, real conversation in real time (Flowers, 2005), giving voice (Sheared, 1994) to the ways that race and gender affect our roles as teachers/educators, and students/learners.

Doris I enter this dialogue and transformation of understanding with myself, that is with my racialized self at the center. I do so with extreme caution, apprehension, and trust for it is much like a freefall but I believe in my colleagues and that we are on this journey together. Although risky, it is a risk worth taking if it will propel us forward with a different approach and language to addressing how race and racism affects us all. As an African American woman who is in the academy, I am continuously challenged by a society whose beliefs, ideals and ideas are based in a hierarchical color system that was no doubt created to manage power dynamics between various racial groups. My experiences as are those of many African American women are based first on the color of my skin and second on my gender. And somewhere lurking in between is this nebulous category of being a "Black woman" which suggests she is bold, bitchy and bodacious. However, race and racism is much too serious for us to ignore or allow others to redirect our attention or focus. When racist actions are directed at me, it is most disconcerting to say the least. And to have 10 or more racialized experiences daily can be exhausting. The encounters are many and range from credibility issues to being ignored. In a more memorable experience in higher education, I was subjected to being invisible. I was interviewed at an institution where one of the people interviewing me never raised her head to look at me during her questioning. Another encounter was my first introduction to the department for which I was hired. It was an orientation meeting for students who were obviously upset over something. There was quite a heated discussion with the Dean about why the students' recommendation on who was selected for the position had not been taken. It took me a moment before I realized that the faculty decision in which they were displeased was me.

Colleen Awareness of my own whiteness and of white privilege has been key to my participation in dialogue with others across race and gender. I feel that you cannot participate authentically in the tough discussions that are necessary unless you understand the person, the you, that is talking. That understanding starts with myself and then extends to others. As I have

analyzed my own experiential history, I have realized that awareness does not happen all at once. It has unfolded in stages, from personal to cultural to spiritual to institutional to professional. Without this growing awareness regarding my race and gender, and the intersections of the two, I feel that I can't facilitate or make space for the difficult conversations that lead to deeper understanding and to new ways of knowing that can come to us from others and that we can create together. I want to emphasize that talking is only one small component of dialogue. Without listening, without reflection and silence, participants are only projecting themselves into space and are not allowing time and space for the new, the transformed, the co-created to emerge. In dialogue shared with my collaborators, our destination is never predictable and that experience opens doors to multiple potentials.

Ming-yeh. As a Chinese immigrant woman living my polyrhythmic realities (Sheared, 1994), who I am informs how I teach and construct knowledge. I feel a sense of pride, urgency and mission to dialogue about issues related to race and gender. Transformation and social change are often accompanied by feelings of frustration, disappointment and learners' resistance. Particularly, as a Chinese immigrant woman I am often questioned and feel discounted. My knowledge is often viewed as being only informed by my lived experience and hence lacks academic rigor. Students, particularly those who prefer lecture style classes often have difficulty with courses that rely upon the use of dialogue as a medium to examine racism and sexism because they tend to believe that this is a case of over-imposing or personalizing agendas. Therefore when one engages in a discussion on racism and sexism, it is important to examine these factors as it pertains to hegemony and white privilege. In so doing, people can begin to examine the effect of white privilege in racialized settings.

Vanessa Just what does it mean to engage in conversations about race, about gender, about differences that point to our racialized selves? How can we have a conversation about these matters when we know that the more we talk about it, the more we discover we don't know as much as we need to? These are just a few of the questions I ask myself when I think about my own racialization and whether I should engage in a discussion about it. Given that I am an African American woman, serving in the academy, in an administrative position, with what some might consider power and authority, do I really need to talk about my racialized identity? For me on a personal note, it matters even more now that I am living in the world of the academy, which some might argue comes with power and authority. As I walk into and through the hallowed halls of the academy, I walk knowing that the first thing one sees is the color of my skin, and then they note maybe, she is a faculty member or administrator. This was brought home quite clearly when I found myself during an interview for a Dean's position being ignored as the person being interviewed in favor of a young woman dressed in a rather casual (let's say like a college student) attire while I sat there in full business attire. And so yes, I believe we still need to talk about race, and hopefully this session will allow us to examine why race and racism – no matter how innocent – still needs to be discussed. We need to confront how this socially constructed notion has grown to affect how we speak, act and engage with one another in social contexts.