

# **Negotiating the Gaze and Learning the Hidden Curriculum: A Critical Race Analysis of the Embodiment of Female Students of Color at a Predominantly White Institution**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the hidden curriculum within a predominantly White institution (PWI) of higher education, and examines how women of color encountered the curriculum. I used critical race theory to explore how race and gender influenced the manner in which women of color negotiated their roles and promoted a culture of femininity that helped shape campus life in many ways. Data collection included interviews and focus groups over a two year period. Results revealed that femininity was not performed on campus freed from power relations and different oppressions. The women of color who participated in the study noted that they felt their bodies stood out among the predominantly White bodies across campus. Because of their heightened visibility, the participants felt they had to confront the power of the gaze from White students and professors who read them through a stereotypical lens. According to the seven young women who participated in this study, race and gender are embodied phenomena that affected their lives, their images of self, and experiences within a predominantly White institution of higher education.

**Key Words:** Race, Gender, Critical Race Theory, Higher Education, Hidden Curriculum

Recognition that race structures our lives is ever more important in this historical moment. Since the election of President Barack Obama, this nation's first self-identified Black president, some have claimed that we are "post-racial". Believers of post-racial ideology espouse that racism is a thing of the past – that we have moved beyond racism and achieved equality. What this discourse ignores is that if we presume race does not exist, we effectively silence discourse about racial privilege and disadvantage (Esposito, 2009). As Leonardo (2009) suggests, "despite its unscientific status, race is a structural formation that maintains an interdependent, co-determining and heteronymous relation with the economy and other social relations" (p. 33). Race, thus, shapes life experiences. This is especially true within higher education as, this article illustrates, race is a determining factor in all aspects of college life including embodiment and curriculum.

College women of color construct and negotiate their racialized and gendered identities based on a variety of academic and social lessons. Through lessons learned from both official (explicit) and hidden (implicit) curriculum, college women of color are active producers and (re)producers of everyday practices of race and gender. The hidden curriculum of universities teaches students a certain way of life (Eisner, 1994). While official curriculum is present in the textbooks, lectures, and overall academics subject matter, the hidden curriculum is part of the social lessons students learn (Giroux & Penna, 1983). Students learn lessons about standard curricula and how

their bodies fit into larger political, social and cultural contexts (McLaren, 1995; Springgay & Freeman, 2007). The women in this study encountered their own racialized and feminized embodiments as they negotiated the hidden curriculum of their predominantly White institution (PWI).

### **Defining Gender, Race, Embodiment, and the Gaze**

Gender is socially constructed and performed (Butler, 1990; 1993). We therefore produce our own realities by engaging in day-to-day life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Furthermore, we construct gender through our collective action. We present ourselves in a particular way while simultaneously being interpreted by others. (Garfinkel, 1967; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Yet, gender is also performative and depends upon our repeated actions that over time help make gender appear “natural,” even as the very notion of gender becomes constructed through these repeated actions (Butler, 1990; 1993).

Race, like gender, may also be understood as performative. Race is a state of becoming and, like gender, it is a process we continually undertake (Ali, 2003). Yet, race may constrain the discourses people have available to them (Reay, 2001). We might be able to “perform” a particular racialized discourse, but that does not mean we will be interpreted by others or “read” as that race. While race has been discussed in a number of ways including biologically and sociologically, I used Omi and Winant’s (1994) definition for this study. They argue that “effort must be made to understand race as an unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meaning constantly being transformed by political struggle” (p. 55). Therefore, while there is no one meaning of race, it is nevertheless a critical factor in our experiences. Race structures and represents our world.

For the purposes of this study, I frame the power of racism and sexism in terms of the gaze because it significantly influences how women define and interpret their own bodies. According to Berger (1972), “Men act, women appear” (p. 47). Women are objects and men are observers. As such, women are reduced to their appearances and subject to the male heterosexist gaze. There is an imbalance in the act of looking for the male gaze is often the active gaze (Mulvey, 1975). While women can “look back” (Lewis & Pile, 1996), they nevertheless are the objects within a patriarchal and heteronormative campus space (Esposito, 2011).

Regardless of social context like a PWI, bodies are sites of struggle and power (Foucault, 1979); they speak social codes (Grosz, 1995); and these codes are continually contested and resignified. However, the body is never merely a text upon which meanings are inscribed. Bodies are not only products of culture (Bordo, 1993), but they also actively engage in the production of culture as well. Therefore, our everyday practices and bodily inscriptions not only reproduce gender and race, but they also help to produce what gender and race signify. The body routines employed in the production of racialized femininities must be understood as complex. They are as much sites for the inscription of hegemonic values as they are sites of critical agency, power, and pleasure. It is important that women of color be continually recognized as agents in their own lives so that researchers do not continue the tradition of deficit thinking regarding black female students.

### **Research on Gender, Race, Schooling, and the Hidden Curriculum**

Jackson (1968) observed elementary school classrooms and found that classroom life was punctuated by unspoken norms and rules – the hidden curriculum. Though these social expectations were not part of stated educational goals, mastery of

them was essential for success in school. In 1976, Bowles & Gintis examined how the hidden curriculum contributes to the reproduction of dominant interests such as capitalism. Upper and middle class students learned skills that prepared them for professional jobs while working-class students learned behaviors to prepare them for low-skilled cheap labor (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Apple (1993) and others (Anyon, 1980; McLaren, 1988) have argued that the hidden curriculum promotes social reproduction by producing different forms of schooling for students from different social classes. Apple further argued that the hidden curriculum is elusive, constantly being reshaped and restructured according to current structures of power. However, according to Apple, the hidden curriculum appears natural. Hidden curricula are often shaped by issues of race, class, and gender (Grant, 1992; Martin, 1994; Thorne, 1993; Weis & Fine, 1993). In addition to physical environments, hidden curricula can emerge through the use of bodies as instruments of and resistance to the unspoken norms and rules (Gair & Mullins, 2001). Thus, the body is a central text on which struggles over dominant meanings about race, class, and gender are lived out. With this in mind, my study adds to the literature by examining the intersection of the hidden curriculum and racialized femininities among college women of color. It is important to first examine literature regarding college women, especially college women of color.

### **Diversity and Higher Education**

According to Chang (2002), diversity provides a way for institutions to transform themselves towards goals of social justice. Researchers in higher education recognize a variety of types of diversity. For example, structural diversity is the numerical representation of diverse groups (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Peterson, & Allen, 1998) while informal interactional diversity represents informal interactions with racially diverse peers that occur inside or outside of the classroom (Chang, 1996). Structurally diverse campuses create varied educational experiences that better prepare students for participation in a diverse society (Chang 1999; Hurtado, 2001). Studies have shown that the potential of “diversity” does not depend on the mere presence of a structurally diverse student body. Instead, students of different backgrounds need to engage with each other in meaningful ways (Antonio, 2001; Chang 1999; Chang, Denson, Saenz, & Misa, 2006) through informal interactional diversity. Due in large part to defacto segregation patterns, students often do not have the opportunity to relate to diverse peers (Bonilla-Silva, 2009), thus, institutions must assist students in this endeavor. Additionally, institutions must strive to create and sustain positive race relations through curriculum and recruitment/retention efforts (Allen and Solorzano, 2001; Hurtado, Dey, Gurin, & Gurin, 2003).

Although researchers have explored campus climate and student experiences, they have not specifically focused on the hidden curriculum of diversity within a higher education setting. By this I mean, what students learn about race, class, and gender through the informal interactions they have with professors and students. Also, what do students learn about themselves and others from the dominant meanings of race, class, and gender that circulate on campus? I call this the hidden curriculum of diversity. The hidden curriculum of diversity is the informal interactions and lessons students learn regarding gender, race, difference, and power. I will investigate how the participants in this study learned from it.

## Critical Race Theory

Because race was a focus in every aspect of this project, critical race theory (CRT) provided a means through which we can see how female students of color negotiated the embodiment of their roles within a primarily White institution. Such an approach is useful and necessary in educational research (Author, 2009; Delgado, 1999; Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Parker & Lynn, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso 2002,) all the more so now as popular discourse claims we live in a post racial society. CRT emerged out of previous work in Critical Legal Studies (CLS) as a way to recognize race and racism within legal systems that legitimate and maintain oppressive structures (Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado, 1988; Yosso, 2005). CRT has evolved over time and is utilized in multiple disciplines. As such, six elements of CRT have been defined:

1. CRT recognizes that race and racism are central to life in the United States.
2. CRT is skeptical about dominant legal claims of neutrality and objectivity.
3. CRT insists on a contextual and historical analysis of the law.
4. CRT recognizes the experiential knowledge of people of color as central.
5. CRT is interdisciplinary.
6. CRT works toward the elimination of racial oppression with the goal of ending all forms of oppression. (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993, p.6)

Thus, CRT is a race based methodology which directly challenges traditional research paradigms (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2000). Instead of quantitative measures, in CRT researchers often rely on counterstorytelling through the collection of narratives. Such an approach recognizes the lived experiences of those marginalized by race whose stories have often been silenced by a dominant paradigm. Counterstories, then, are utilized to challenge dominant discourses (Delgado, 1999) and may reveal how particular locations simultaneously privilege and disempower people.

As CRT theorists, Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) argued for recognition that “race continues to be a significant factor in determining inequity in the United States” (p.48). Critical race theorists begin with the premise that race structures society. White supremacy has been constructed and accepted as an innate component of a hierarchal social system (Calmore, 1997). CRT theorists recognize white supremacy not as the violent acts of racism but, instead, “the operation of forces that saturate the everyday mundane actions and policies which shape the world in the interests of White people” (Gillborn, 2010, p. 84). CRT theorists recognize that education is one way the system of white supremacy perpetuates itself. The CRT framework in education attempts to foreground research on race while also challenging dominant conceptions about research (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). CRT theorists are committed to social justice and examine ways power and privilege structure and shape education. I utilize CRT with the recognition that oppression is relational. Because racism and other forms of oppression structure our lives, we cannot begin to understand experiences without understanding the ways these oppressions intersect and have material consequences on real bodies.

Early critiques of CRT by CLS scholars felt limited by CRT’s lack of attention to the intersectionality of oppression. Critical race theory was, thus, critiqued by feminists like Kimberle Williams Crenshaw who charged it with reiterating some of the omissions of the majoritarian status quo and called for attention to intersections of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation (Crenshaw, 1989; Valdes, 1996). CRT in education has, in many ways, responded to the critique and now focuses on the

racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Given that women of color, in particular, face interlocking oppressions (Collins, 1991) we must utilize a framework that highlights “the simultaneity of oppression and struggle” (Brewer, 1999, p.33). In this way, CRT is utilized as a means of examining how multiple forms of oppression structure access and experience within education. It is this characteristic of CRT that I utilize the most in this research.

### **Methodology/Methods**

I used qualitative methodology and methods because they were the most effective means to understand each participant’s frame of reference (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Contextual and local, qualitative research best represents the complexities of life experienced in particular historical and cultural moments. Our realities can be interpreted in multiple ways. The meanings we make are dependent upon our interactions with others, the context in which we live, and our subjectivities. Thus, our experiences and relationships create a way for us to look at the world (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997). With this in mind, I report participants’ interpretations of their own lives. What is important is not whether their interpretations are “truths” since all truths are partial and are created under specific cultural and historical constraints (Clifford, 1986) but that participants’ interpretations are central to how they negotiate their lives. This process is best articulated by Sleeter & Delgado Bernal (2003) who state, “At issue is the question of what counts as truth and who gets to decide” (p. 249). In the CRT tradition, I assert that the counterstorytelling completed by research participants in this study is valid and important knowledge that must be utilized to challenge dominant discourses about race and gender.

This IRB (Institutional Review Board) approved study was part of a large ethnographic research project which explored the ways undergraduate women made sense of their ideas about gender, learned through formal, informal, and hidden curricula. The study involved four faculty members, three graduate research assistants, and a diverse sample of over 50 undergraduate women. The inductive approach in grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was utilized throughout data collection. Each step of the research process was built upon the previous steps so that analysis and further data collection occurred concurrently. We constantly discussed data and figured out new leads to explore in subsequent interviews. In this way, we were able to follow through on particular themes that were developing because we were in constant dialogue with the data. Trustworthiness was ensured by prolonged engagement and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each participant, over a 2 year period, participated in either five open ended interviews or five focus groups. We asked questions regarding their high school and college experiences regarding issues such as relationships with friends, classroom experiences, struggles while also inquiring about how they understood race, class, and gender in relation to their own lives,

The research team conducted data analysis collaboratively. Initially, we coded transcripts individually. We met bi-weekly to discuss coding schemas that were emerging. These discussions involved sharing how each of us made sense of the data so that we were able to come to consensus about definitions of particular codes. We were thus able to come to consensus about definitions of particular codes. We organized the data according to the following codes: “academic and social life on campus” and “experiences growing up.” We organized the data by numerous codes ranging from “academic and social life on campus” to “experiences growing up.”

These meetings were also instrumental in allowing us to ask and answer generative questions about the data in order to develop larger themes.

Due to the sheer volume of data collected, not every participant is recognized here. Given that 3 researchers engaged in data collection, I chose to include data from women of color whom I personally interviewed, thus all data included here arose from individual interviews conducted by me. The six women in this sub-sample came from a variety of majors (areas of study) and were enrolled their third year of university at the beginning of the study. The research context, Upstate University, is a private institution located in a Northeastern city in the United States.<sup>44</sup> At the time of the study approximately 13,000 undergraduate students were enrolled. As a predominantly White institution, only about 15 percent of the student body came from under-represented groups.<sup>45</sup> There was a high degree of de-facto segregation on campus that the university implemented a new policy the year following the end of the study that required random assignment of dormitories. This policy intended to create more racially mixed living situations on campus.

My subject position as a researcher has obviously shaped the research. As Blair (1998) argues:

No matter what our good intentions, we cannot guarantee neutrality in our interpretations and analyses. This is because our histories and memories are shot through with gendered, classed, racialized, and other 'excluding' understandings which give us our particular perspectives on the world. (p. 13)

The process and outcome of research is shaped by the researcher (Harding, 1987). I identify as Latina. At times I was positioned by my informants as an "insider" due to the ways they perceived me as a woman of color (Collins, 1991; Minh-ha, 1990). Given my status as "researcher" however, I was also positioned as "outsider" with a college degree who did not have to submit to the same type of gaze at the university (Johnson-Bailey, 1999).

I was an empathetic listener as the participants told their stories. I attended a PWI as an undergraduate and, at the time of the research, was attending a PWI for graduate school. I shared some of their frustrations and admired their resilience. Their struggles with presentation of self resonated for me. I felt connected to these participants and knew that we were on a similar journey. Minh-ha (1990) explains it more eloquently, "She who knows she cannot speak of them without speaking of herself, of history without involving her story, also knows she cannot make a gesture without activating the to and fro movement of life" (p. 375). Of course, by highlighting our similarities, I do not intend to romanticize. In fact, there were many differences as well. Being Latina marked me as a woman of color. That demarcation, however, did not presume I could easily understand the experiences of all women of color or even other Latinas (hooks, 1999).

Race and ethnicity also complicates our talk with each other as well as our later analysis (Devault, 1999). In some of the data excerpts I have included, the concept of race is often not spoken about explicitly. It is alluded to, partially because of our different racial/ethnic backgrounds and partially because race is sometimes an

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<sup>44</sup>Upstate University is a pseudonym.

<sup>45</sup>Under-represented groups were defined as: African-American, Latino/a, Asian, Multi-racial, and Other.

absent present. It is a concept that, given the racial history within the United States, is often alluded to but never directly discussed (Castagno, 2008). The concepts of race and gender were troubled throughout by recognition that race and gender are but two of many components that shape knowledge production and experience. Such a gendered and raced framework allows us to analyze multiple identities without essentializing experiences (Delgado-Bernal, 1998).

### **Research Results: Power and the gaze**

Participants detailed the struggles they faced when dealing with their heightened visibility as females of color on a predominantly White campus. Because power is involved in the ways people's bodies are placed under a surveyor's gaze, some participants faced a tougher task. Kiesha, a Black chemistry major, relayed a story about a professor as an example of what it's like being a "minority" in chemistry classes:

Kiesha: There aren't too many people of color in my major. I don't know, sometimes, I just feel intimidated by him. I don't know (laughs). Like, he looks at me funny.

Jennifer (Researcher) : Is he a White guy?

Kiesha: Yeah. With these piercing blue eyes. Sometimes I'm scared he's looking at me funny.

The idea of his "piercing blue eyes" is important here. Regardless of what her professor was intending, Kiesha felt scrutinized by him. Her perceptions and the fact that she noted his "piercing blue eyes" come out of a cultural history of slavery, rape, and lynching which has contributed to a fear of the White gaze. Part of the importance of CRT in education is that it allows us to contextualize students' perceptions and understandings in particular historical moments. Kiesha's fear of her White male professor's gaze is rooted in powerful cultural memories. And while hate crimes against Black people are still perpetrated, part of Kiesha's fear of her White male professor's gaze may come from a fear of being misrecognized. Kiesha was not sure how the professor was "reading" her. Did he find her to be an incapable student? Did he wish he were not teaching chemistry to a young Black female? Kiesha wanted to be recognized as a smart and capable student, but she feared her professor was misrecognizing her. Bourdieu (1990) likened this process to *meconnaissance* whereby power relations are not understood necessarily for what they objectively are but instead in ways that allow dominant stakeholders to maintain power and privilege. In this example, Kiesha feared that her professor was relying on predominant notions of race and gender which structure cultural understandings of the "scientist" as a White male. Here, Kiesha was learning from the hidden curriculum of diversity, her interactions with a professor, about who (race/gender) was valued in her major.

Regardless of what the professor actually intended, Kiesha was suspicious and attributed his gaze to race. This data excerpt might raise questions for readers because Kiesha does not explicitly say that the professor is "looking at her funny" because of her race. I argue, however, that given that she was answering the question "What is it like being a minority in class?," Kiesha was coding her language to talk about race (Castagno, 2008). I asked Kiesha a question regarding her experience as a Black woman at a PWI and she responded with an example of a professor who looks at her in a strange manner. In an attempt to encourage her to explicitly name race or due to,

perhaps, my racialized assumption, I asked Kiesha if the professor to whom she referred was white. She affirmed and then detailed the color of his eyes (blue eyes are a racial attribute). As the interviewer, this was enough for me to connect her fear of his perceptions of her to his race. It does not matter, in this instance, what the professor really thought. What matters is that Kiesha had to, at the minimum, confront issues of race in all areas of her higher education experience. Also, the idea that Kiesha worried about how her professor saw her reflects other literature examining minority students in science majors. Hurtado et al (2007) found numerous social and academic factors that shaped whether a student becomes a scientist. Similar to Kiesha, students in this study felt stigma and stereotype threat as they faced skepticism regarding their intellectual abilities as science majors.

Kiesha also articulated other instances of racism in which she explicitly named it as such. In the following story, she explained how a White man in her class scored a higher grade on an exam even though he copied her answers:

I had an organic chemistry teacher and he was just scandalous. There was this one guy that cheated off me on one of my exams. And, he got a higher grade than me. We had the same answers. The boy got a B and I got a C. I went to the professor and I was like, "Well you gave such and such this grade". You know what I am saying? "We have the same answers." And, he was like, "Well, maybe you don't belong in this class." And, I'm just like, "Whatever."

We quickly moved into a discussion about ways she manages instances of racism because I was intrigued by what propelled her to continue in her degree program despite the instances she mentioned. Kiesha said she came to the university expecting racism and when she encountered it, she shrugged it off. Kiesha expected that her performance would be scrutinized which is consistent with the literature – underrepresentation in science majors creates more scrutiny of the performances of minority students (Hurtado et al, 2007). While listening to Kiesha's stories, I wondered what the psychic cost was of being subjected to so many gender and racial microaggressions (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978) that she chose to shrug off in order to survive. Kiesha's strategies for being resilient in the face of racism are important because, from a CRT standpoint, the margins are as much sites of oppression as they are sites of resistance and transformation (Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998).

Although the hidden curriculum of diversity illustrated to Kiesha she was not valued in her major, she persisted by creating alternative forms of support for herself – including the dismissal of her professor's skepticism of her intellectual capabilities. She also, like other participants, detailed the informal networks she created for support. The networks were comprised of mostly students of color and faculty of color who were sympathetic to microaggressions. Many of the participants believed people of color understood what they struggled with while white students and professors often acted as if racism was not a factor on campus. This is also consistent with current literature on post-racial and colorblind racism. Bonilla-Silva (2009) argued that the new colorblind racism students face in a post-civil rights era is actually a system of subtle and institutionalized practices that help perpetuate white supremacy. According to Bonilla-Silva, white college students have developed frames of color-blind racism due to residential segregation. They have been able to pretend that race does not matter because in many ways they did not have to confront



institutionalized racism. As a result, it becomes difficult for them to understand structural racism and they are able to deny that inequalities exist.

In another example of how a student of color deals with instances of racism, Maya, an Asian American education major, said:

I get angry alone or usually when I'm talking to people I'm comfortable with. There are ways to optimize anger and using it as an initial backlash against something that's been said about me is probably not the most effective. If a little kid comes to me and puts his hands together and bows in front of me and he's like, "It's because you're Chinese" and he sings a Chinese song, I'm angry it happened. But, I'm not going to say "Hey Kid!!!" and shake him around and tell him it's racist because he is not ready for that. He's just a kid. He doesn't know. But, I can tell him, "I don't appreciate that. I'm not Chinese. I don't think that is a very wise thing to do when there's something you see on television to try it on someone." I mean there's just a more constructive way of resolving or working through that situation.

Maya shared that she stayed silent in particular education classes because "the professors spend so much time building a community. I try not to get angry and confront other students because of that." Maya learned from the hidden curriculum that a "community" of learners means she should not be angry about injustices that occur in the classroom in order to keep the "community" intact. Like Kiesha, she did not detail the psychic cost of her strategy for survival. However, for Kiesha and Maya, negotiation of their racialized femininities meant knowing how to handle particular situations of oppression while still remaining resilient. These stories of survival and resilience are important to document from a CRT standpoint since they illustrate the ways oppression shapes students' experiences in education. In these instances, it is clear how powerful the curriculum of diversity is. Both Maya and Kiesha chose to remain silent about instances of racism.

Rashanna, a Black chemistry major, shared a similar perception about negotiating oppression. Given that she was in a male-dominated major, I asked Rashanna what it was like to be a female in her particular major. She responded:

A lot of the professors [will] listen to you, but it's kind of, like, they are looking at you in an odd way because you're a girl in their office. And they're very few girls that come in their office and talk science to them. . . my first year, the professor would just look. He was like, "Do you understand why this is reactive?" I was like, "Yes, but this is what I don't [understand]." I would try to explain to him why I didn't understand, but he just thought that I was picking up on one little thing, and I wasn't understanding the whole picture. I understood everything except for how he got from point B to point C, and he didn't want to explain it to me. He thought that I needed the whole thing re-explained to me because I wasn't getting it. And they, it's not a common feeling [that they have experienced before]. You get kind of an astonishing look, like, "Oh you're in my class and oh, there's mostly guys in that class." And you feel odd.

Here Rashanna said that her chemistry professors do not feel the same way towards her as they do for the other mostly White and male majors with whom they teach. Indeed, in the first year of this study, of the 90 chemistry majors at Upstate, only 6 were female and 3 of the 6 were Black women. This created a White male dominated culture in the department. Rashanna believed, for good reason, that the norm in the chemistry major was White male and that when a "girl" sat in her professors' offices,

particularly a Black “girl,” they were not really sure how to interact with her. Part of the hidden curriculum of diversity for her was learning that it was White men who get taken seriously by chemistry professors. She inferred this based on her “readings” of her interactions with professors. It is important to note that her “reading” was informed by the fact that less than 10 percent of chemistry majors were women and less than 15 percent of the students at Upstate were of color. This marginalization unquestionably informed how she perceived her interactions. It also reflects how racial/ethnic minority students perceive the same campus climate differently than White students (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), again an example of how campuses remain raced instead of post-racial.

Rashanna recognized that her body was “different” from the White male students the professors were used to encountering. Her body was marked as feminine (because the male body is considered the norm and, therefore, unmarked), and she was also marked by race (because the White body is considered the norm and, therefore, unmarked). These markers of difference, Rashanna’s narrative indicates, shaped how her professors looked at her. She could not control how her professors “read” these markers of difference. She expressed:

Because they are older professors and [the presence of] women in science, it’s just, it’s not their best idea. I think that’s what some of them think. One of my professors had to tell us girls that, “You know, you girls are, like, the downfall of most labs.”<sup>46</sup> And I’m like, “Okay. We’re the downfall?”. . . He was like, “Yeah, you girls come in and you concentrate more on making sure your apparatuses are clean than doing the experiment.”

In this instance, she believed her professor equated her gendered and raced embodiment with a preoccupation with cleaning procedures instead of performing the experiment. Like Maya and Kiesha, Rashanna did not allow her professors’ skepticism (or racism and sexism) to deter her. Instead, she remained in the major and found ways of creating support for herself.

Because Rashanna lived her identities intersectionally, it was difficult for her to bifurcate her identities and talk about being oppressed by gender versus race. Given the male dominated culture of the department, Rashanna was often one of a few women in classes. I asked her why she liked having other women in class. She stated:

It lets you know you’re not the only one sometimes. Because sometime you can go to class and you’re the only girl. Like, “Okay, I’m the only girl, again. So, I’m just going to sit here.” And when guys don’t know you and they don’t know your work habits, they kind of talk down to you, almost like they have to take you like you’re a little baby- step by step. And you’re like, “No, I just need to know what chemical. I wasn’t paying attention completely and I missed a chemical. You don’t have to explain everything to me. I just need the chemical.” They’re like, “Well, you have your goggles, you have your gloves.” I’m like, “okay. Whatever.” They will treat you like that and then after awhile they get used to girls being in there and then they act like we are guys.

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<sup>46</sup> Rashanna’s use of the term “girl” was consistent with other participants in the study who, despite being in their 20’s, referred to themselves as girls. The term was common on the campus and was used by males and females.

One of the strategies Rashanna developed for successfully navigating her major was to get to know other females in her classes. If that was not a possibility as in the above excerpt, she would work toward proving to the men that she was just as capable as them until they treated her like “one of the guys.”

After discussing what it’s like to be in a male dominated major, Rashanna expressed what her experiences were like being the only person of color in a classroom:

I’m used to it. I walk in and sit down. I have so many people I have met from science classes so I usually know half the students anyway. So, it’s no problem talking to people or anything because I already know them. So you just come in and sit down and it’s a lot easier because at least there will be girl there. Some girls. If it was no girls and I was the only female and I was the only minority, then it would be a lot. But, since there are some girls there, it doesn’t bother me at all.

Like Kiesha and Maya, Rashanna had found strategies for dealing with marginalization that enabled her to successfully navigate the academic setting.

### **Raced and gendered embodiment and students of color**

Feeling “looked at” or “stared at” because of either gender or race (or both) was a predominant issue the participants faced with which they often felt uncomfortable. The feeling of being uncomfortable manifested itself when participants felt looked at by others and when they themselves looked around. When asked what it was like to be a woman of color on campus, participants responded with metaphors involving color: “I look around and see a sea of White,” and “I see little specks of color here and there.” In classes that were predominantly White, participants felt hyper-visible. Their bodies were marked with a color that looked different from the majority of the students. Like other minority students at PWI’s, participants in this study felt their presence on campus was scrutinized (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2001). In these instances, race is obviously a prominent factor in the lives of female students of color – more evidence that this is NOT a post racial society. Race demarcates, race structures, and race must be negotiated.

Apart from the many instances of racism informants faced, they also had to come to terms with feeling like outsiders because of their bodies. Angie, a Puerto Rican theatre major, explained:

It’s pretty obvious that I am a female of color. So, I’ve had issues with my department because my department is predominantly White, and there’s a handful of minorities there. It’s difficult being the only minority in your class. You know? And it’s hard. It’s hard because you feel like you can relate to some people. But at the same time you also feel like you are by yourself. You know what I mean? [It’s] like you are just alone because you look like the one who sticks out the most. Basically everyone learns that you are the one who sticks out.

When asked to talk specifically about her experiences as the only woman of color in a class, Angie responded, “At first it’s intimidating because there is a bunch of people that look the same, and you don’t.” Kiesha spoke of this hyper-visibility in terms of invisibility. “You feel like an outsider. Like, just because we’re so small in comparison to the amount of other White people that go here, at first you feel like sometimes they forget that we even exist.” This was part of the hidden curriculum about race that Kiesha and Angie learned. Regardless of what the people of Upstate

intended, Kiesha felt marginalized. The small number of students of color (structural diversity) was an indication of who was actually more valued by the institution. Upstate might have had many programs aimed at recruiting and retaining students of color to make the institution more diverse, but what seemed relevant to Kiesha and Angie was that they felt like outsiders.” It is this perception that informed what they learned about race, racism, and higher education; the hidden curriculum of diversity.

Most of the participants shared stories of being placed in the position of having to speak for the entire race. Joya, a Black psychology major, elaborates:

In the classroom, more is expected of you. Your presence in class is definitely felt and it’s definitely known. And, people are expecting you to come out with a revolutionary attitude or something like, “The time is now. Bring down the White people. Kill all the White people.” And, it’s not like that. Or, they expect you to speak a certain way, too, like the stereotypes perpetuated in the media. They expect certain things like that and when you don’t live up to the stereotypes, they’re just like, “Wow, that’s different.” And, it kind of takes people back for a minute. So, once again you’re a smaller group within a larger group on campus.

From Terri, a Black women’s studies major:

People look for me to answer questions or give input on Black topics in classroom situations and I felt like that was just terrifying. And, I didn’t want to feel like I was in a museum or something and people were just staring at me as someone reading information. Do you know what I mean? I didn’t want to be viewed as the expert on Black people just because I was Black. Cause you’d be surprised. I barely knew a lot about Black people and stuff like that, barely did. But, I just didn’t like that at all. But then again, I learned a lot about White people being in those situations. Sometimes I just want to put a box in a room and put “Questions for the Black person. Put ‘em in here.”

Joya and Terri both discussed what it was like being the person who stands out because she is one of the few Black women in class. Terri continued, “I am usually one of the only Black women in class and too many White people ask me questions about my hair, or weave, and they end up making me feel so different because they focus on how Black hair is so different from theirs.” Terri and Joya have learned from the hidden curriculum of diversity that they will be put in the position of 1) educating White people about difference and 2) representing the race in an empowering way. Many of the participants perceived their bodies as marked because their bodies looked “different” from the predominantly White bodies on campus. Many felt on display for White students. White students learned how to understand difference by utilizing the bodies of women of color as sites for education.

## **Discussion**

The women in this study constructed racialized femininities after careful consideration and thought. Always aware of the gaze exerted by men and other women, they made choices in relation to this that minimized the effects of being looked at and evaluated. Though all participants negotiated the ways they presented themselves, race particularly impacted these negotiations. Femininity was not performed on campus freed from power relations and different oppressions. The women of color at this predominantly White university often felt their bodies stood out among the White bodies that populated the classrooms and other campus areas. Because of their heightened visibilities, they had to face the formidable task of

confronting the power that was connected to the gaze of the White students and professors who they believed often read them through a stereotypical lens.

In addition to learning a school-sanctioned curriculum, the women had to become astute learners of their own social worlds. The Upstate campus had a hidden curriculum about diversity that the students had to face. The hidden curriculum was different from the curriculum of their majors and was not directly conveyed through professors or textbooks. Instead, the hidden curriculum was conveyed through interaction between the students and professors and between the students themselves. Through conversations the women majoring in chemistry, for example, had with their professors, it became evident to them that the professors were trying to uphold chemistry as a male dominated field and were subtly discouraging the women to continue. They spoke of many female friends who had dropped the major during the two years of the study. This cycle is perpetuated, as Eisner (1994) reminds us, universities teach more than they advertise, and this curriculum stems from the larger society. Schools do not operate in a social vacuum. Ideological beliefs of the dominant culture work their way into the explicit and implicit curricula of universities.

This hidden curriculum about diversity existed throughout campus life. Lessons about race, gender, and equity were communicated subtly to the students through interactions. These lessons did nothing to deconstruct notions of power and privilege that circulated on the campus and, instead, reified dominant conceptions about these social structures. Many of the women of color were aware of their privileges and lack of privilege (all part of the hidden curriculum) because they did not have a choice. Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth (2007) examined gender and race identity negotiation and found that, of diverse participants, Black working class girls “were most aware of their social locations because they lacked the privilege to be able to ignore these interweaving inequalities” (p. 559). The women of color interviewed for the study were also unable to ignore the ways race and gender intersected to shape their access to and knowledge of the hidden curriculum of diversity. Because their bodies were often used to instruct White students about difference, they did not have the privilege of being able to pretend that race and gender do not matter. Instead, their identities became part of the informal curriculum as they met up against dominant meanings of race and gender. CRT recognizes the ways identities are relational; this study illustrates how female college students of color negotiated multiple identities as women of color and as students. What was important here is how they learned what they needed to know in order to successfully negotiate the university. Though the hidden curriculum was never immediately available to them, the women in this study learned to seek what they needed to know about their majors, professors, other students, and the university in general. Some examples of this include Rashanna networking with other females in chemistry or Kiesha speaking with her professor about a contested grade.

While their resistance and resilience was not the focus of this study, it was clear that the female students of color who participated in this study developed the skills and knowledge necessary for successful educational navigation as evidenced by the examples above. They also learned how to successfully negotiate the double bind of racism and sexism, through lessons about equal educational opportunity, fairness, and difference. Joya and Terri, for example, learned quickly how to represent Black women in ways with which they felt comfortable. The participants were resilient in their quest to understand ways to successfully negotiate life on a predominantly White campus.

It is important to recognize the hidden curriculum about diversity because it is often hidden to researchers when they work with college students. Because the hidden curriculum is unmarked and invisible, it is often neglected in research on the experiences of college students, particularly college students of color. However, as shown by this study, the hidden curriculum is central to the experiences of college women. These young women were not just studying for exams and writing papers; they were also taking stock of competing definitions about race and gender on a campus that privileged particular constructions. Understanding how women constructed a femininity that was crosscut by race is important to understanding their experiences as college women. They had to learn school-sanctioned curricula and then negotiate an embodiment that shaped their social and academic lives. Researchers must uncover the hidden curriculum to expose how it works against perceived institutional interests such as retaining women of color. This study demonstrates that, regardless of the institution's intent, many women of color perceived the climate to be less than inviting. The study also illustrated that race still matters on campus. It is not safe to say we are post-racial because race structured the young women's lives in many ways – from subtle microaggressions to more blatant instances of discrimination – race had to be negotiated because of the clear system of power and privilege on Upstate's campus.

### **Policy Recommendations:**

If institutions of higher education want women of color to be successful, then open discussions about their roles and visibility on campus need to occur. “Diversity” and “difference” (in all its forms) must be included in the regular curriculum. The hidden curriculum of diversity (which is different on every campus) must be made explicit so that female students of color are not negotiating extra burdens that they must invest time in figuring out. Women of color in male-dominated fields (Chemistry) should be given extra support because they face the double bind of gender and race discrimination. Although all the women confronted multiple oppressions, the two participants studying Chemistry experienced particularly brutal circumstances; each was often the only person of color and one of a very few women in their classes.

I agree with Banks (2009) that there is no cookie-cutter approach to addressing “diversity” on college campuses. What works for Rashanna, for example, might not work for Kiesha (even if they share the same major, race, and gender). However, the following are my recommendations towards the elimination of multiple oppressions in higher education. Making visible a hidden curriculum which exists to privilege some and disenfranchise others is no easy task. Institutions of higher learning must address the following:

1. Women of color may benefit from supportive networks. Formal and informal mentoring must occur. Faculty should be made aware of how critical support is to female students of color and should be instructed in ways they could reach out.
2. Institutions should continue efforts to increase the recruitment and retention of students of color. Dialogue should be fostered in ways that encourage students of color to speak. Campuses must address why women of color feel scrutinized on campus. Honest dialogue should occur in the form of talks/teach-ins about racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression.
3. Friendships across racial boundaries should be fostered through social events and curriculum.

The participants in this study were forced to engage in work that required them to be astute learners of their social and academic worlds. They worked tirelessly to collect knowledge about how best to successfully navigate the institution. While it may take time to undo dominant meanings about race and gender, we can in the meantime equip students with the skills they need to negotiate racism and sexism. For example, naming oppression as such would be the first step. Even some of the participants in this study were hesitant to discuss racism or gender and, instead, remained silent. The campus climate, for them, did not seem safe enough to address their fears. This is something we can address by providing women of color with mentors who understand the struggle and can listen and help problem solve. Kiesha, for example, should have had someone to problematize the situation where a White male student copied her answers but was given a higher grade.

The examination of the ways hidden curriculum shapes feminine and racial embodiment is an important contribution to educational research and, in particular, to diversity and social justice issues within higher education. The students at Upstate were located within networks of power. What is important is how they functioned in relation to these networks. It is important to understand these networks and how they are negotiated if we want students, particularly students of color, to succeed. CRT seeks to eradicate all forms of oppression by addressing and confronting racism and sexism. To do this, we must continue to collect narratives about female students of color and how they successfully navigate educational institutions.

Table of Informant Demographics

Name	Year in University	Major/Area of Study	Race
Angie	Junior	Theatre	Puerto Rican
Joya	Junior	Psychology	Black
Kiesha	Junior	Chemistry	Black
Maya	Junior	Education	Asian
Rashanna	Junior	Chemistry	Black
Terri	Junior	Women's Studies	Black

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