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Yasmine Romero

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DEVELOPING AN INTERSECTIONAL FRAMEWORK: ENGAGING *THE DECENTER* IN LANGUAGE STUDIES

YASMINE ROMERO

University of Hawai'i – West O'ahu

The author explores how current scholarship has investigated diversified identities and identification practices using a variable-by-variable approach. This kind of approach focuses on developing in-depth understandings of particular variables of identity, such as race and gender. However, this kind of approach has also limited language studies engagement with diversified identities and identification practices. The author argues for a variable-with-variable or intersectional approach to develop more complex, nuanced ways of understanding these identities and identification practices within the nexus of language studies. The approach attempts to retheorize K. W. Crenshaw's (1993) intersectionality for the language classroom by proposing the concept of the decenter, or the potentially productive spaces in which forgotten and unintelligible experiences can be perceived. The author discusses how this concept encourages us to investigate identity and identification practices in innovative ways through a careful, multilayered analysis of classroom and focus group interactions from her 200-level composition course for multilingual learners.

Introduction

I begin this article by describing a moment that took place during my 200-level composition course for multilingual language learners (Matsuda & Jablonski, 2000). In this course, my students and I investigated topics of gender, race, and sexuality in an effort to explore the concept of identity and community in narratives. Our third week focused on the visual representations of race found in language learning textbooks. Students worked in small groups following an adapted version of Taylor-Mendes's (2009) activity and guiding questions. Each small group focused on images in various

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Yasmine Romero, Assistant Professor, Humanities Division, English Concentration, 91-1001 Farrington Highway, Kapolei, HI, 96707. E-mail: yromer@hawaii.edu.

English-language textbooks. During this in-class activity, one small group discussed the hair color of those represented in the English-language textbook of their choice.

- 01 LONG: he has blonde hair/you can tell/xxx
 02 HUNTER: <laughs>can't tell blonde hair
 03 LONG: yeah you can yea:h/it's pretty obvious/like //like he said
 if they're Asian they
 04 should have black hair/

This conversation between Long, a Vietnamese-identifying woman, and Hunter, a Chinese-identifying man, could be examined in various ways. We could use Kubota and Lin's (2009) concept of racialization, or the perception that racial differences are inherently biological, to investigate how Long constructs Asians as being born only with black hair. We could also consider the impact of gendered identities upon Long and Hunter, such as investigating how "gendered agency, gendered access, and gendered interaction" (Norton & Pavlenko, 2004, p. 3) impact the language learning practices in our classrooms. These kinds of inquiries have led to engaging discussions on how teaching practices shape and are shaped by identity, community, pedagogical practice, and educational policy. Peirce's (1995) concept of investment, for instance, changed how we view our students' involvement in the classroom—our students choose to learn another language in an effort to gain "a wider range of symbolic and material resources" (p. 17). These inquiries have also led to new, alternative theories of identity to be incorporated, such as Nelson's (2009) pioneering work that argues sexual diversity should be considered a pedagogical resource; she shows how queer inquiry facilitates creative and critical engagement with heteronormative assumptions in the language classroom. As a result of these inquiries, we have been able to build in-depth understandings of particular variables of identification. However, these focused inquiries may have "overshadowed" (Milani, 2015, p. 17) other theories and approaches, such as intersectionality, which asks us to investigate how variables of identification interrelate or work with one another.

In the present article I challenge this focused approach to social difference or what I call a variable-*by*-variable approach. I

argue that by focusing each variable, or centering, we fail to acknowledge other ways of knowing, or understanding, identities and identification practices within the language classroom. Furthermore, this kind of approach can lead to supporting essentialist notions of identity. What if we decided to shift our attention onto the relationships between variables of identity and identification practices? That is to say, what would happen if we investigated more than one variable of identity or identification practice, and how that variable interacts with others? What knowledge, theoretical shifts, and alternative perspectives could be innovated if we explored the interrelation of these intersections? In what ways would our research methodologies transform as a result? These questions illustrate the exigency of mapping intersectionality onto language studies, so as to expand our understanding of how language and identity interact within and across pedagogical contexts.

Mapping Intersectionality onto Language Studies

Crenshaw (1993) developed intersectionality in response to feminist work that failed to incorporate race into the politics of gender, consequently encouraging the “oppositionaliz[ation of] race and gender” (p. 113). Crenshaw argued that the experiences of women of color could not be fully accounted for in research that considers race or gender from a mutually exclusive perspective. Intersectionality has since moved across disciplinary fields and foci, such as sociocultural linguistics. As seen in Levon (2015), Milani (2015), and Baker and Levon (2016), intersectionality allows us to move beyond a focus on gender and sexuality; the approach has the potential to be more “holistic” (Baker & Levon, 2016, p. 107) in that all linguistic features and their associated social systems “are recruited in the [investigation of] construction and perception of different sexual and gendered positionings” (Levon, 2015, pp. 301–302). This move to invigorate a concept from the 1990s may seem questionable, as the concept seems to counter how queer theory destabilizes identity categories; however, Carbado et al. (2013) contended that “the theory [of intersectionality] is never done, nor exhausted by its prior articulations or movements; it is always already an analysis-in-progress” (p. 304). To put their statement

in another way, intersectionality is a concept that is dynamic and interdisciplinary—it asks us, as researchers, to consider a wider range of potential interpretations. Therefore, intersectionality should be reconsidered and reconceptualized in ways that incorporate what we know *now* to interrogate what we do not know *yet*. For example, in the present article, I bring together queer theory and intersectionality. These theories, although competing, can work to destabilize, re-evaluate, and challenge what we know about identities and identification practices. Intersectionality enables us to understand how identities and identification practices interrelate, while queer theory challenges how we interpret those relationships, the identities and identification practices, as well as our own interpretation of each. It is for this reason that the present article moves away from intersectionality within legal studies, and extends the intersectional mappings in sociocultural linguistics to language studies.

Liggett (2014), Levon (2015), and Nelson (2016) have made the call for intersectionality to be incorporated into language studies; however, only a few scholars, such as Motha and Lin (2013) and Takahashi (2013), have begun to grapple with the possibilities for mapping intersectionality onto the field. This demand for intersectionality, as well as the limited amount of engagement in language studies, motivates my argument for retheorizing how we engage variables of identification and identification practices: if we wish to comprehensively account for the complexity of social difference in language studies, we must consider a variable-*with*-variable framework that investigates the relationships between variables of identification.

A Variable-With-Variable Approach

When we consider variables of identification in in-depth ways, we are examining diversified expression from a variable-by-variable approach. There are two major limitations of this approach. First, we limit our understanding of identities and identification processes in the language classroom by “remain[ing] invested in the normative identifications, stereotypes, and fantasies that maintain the dominant social order” (Eng, 2001, p. 4). In this way, normative identifications or intelligible identifications remain at the center, or focus, of language research, which marginalizes non-normative

identifications. Second, by focusing on variables separately, intragroup differences are conflated, so that only one variable of identity makes a speaker's identity intelligible. As a result, the voices and narratives of speakers that fail to fit within these particular boundaries are silenced and forgotten.

A variable-with-variable approach responds to these limitations by focusing on how variables of identification interrelate. Moreover, these interrelations and their impacts on various contexts should be analyzed and critiqued using multiple perspectives. This approach accomplishes these goals by incorporating intersectionality in two major ways: intersectionality as a theory of identity and intersectionality as a mechanism.

Intersectionality as a Theory of Identity

Intersectionality as a theory of identity is “the belief that no one category [...] is sufficient to account for individual experience or behavior” (Levon, 2015, p. 295). Levon's description highlights important components of interpreting intersectionality as a theory of identity: category, individual, and experience or behavior. To restate Levon's description, one category or form of diversified expression is not enough. We need to seriously consider other ways of engaging identity/identification so as to meet the challenge of intersectionality “[because] one is not just one thing,” (Spivak, 1994, pp. 194–195). Furthermore, we should shift our focus toward intragroup differences in an effort to develop more complex, nuanced ways to approach both individual and community identities. Identity is already considered multiple, processual, and dynamic in language studies (see Darwin & Norton, 2015; Norton & Toohey, 2011). However, that multiplicity needs to be retheorized in ways attuned to intersectionality: this theory of identity allows this attunement to happen. The question that remains is, how can we map this theory onto the language classroom?

One way that I have found to speak to this theory of identity is critical race theory's (CRT) concept of counterstories. Counterstories are “a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 138). Majoritarian stories are narratives informed by racial and social privilege. Solorzano and Yosso (2009) described these stories as unquestionably “natural” (p. 135). Counterstories challenge the legitimacy

and intelligibility of majoritarian stories by giving voice to silenced perspectives. These stories, they argued, can be found in the experiences of students of color.

Counterstories imply that a meaningful connection exists between one's lived experiences and one's identity. In narrative studies, this connection can be interrogated by examining how speakers retell that lived experience. Nair (2002) said, "[narration] is this ability to crystallize experience, re-form it, so that it allows us to reform, or at least review, *ourselves*" (p. 11). In Nair's sense, when we narrate our experiences, we choose how that experience is presented to others, and those linguistic and rhetorical choices have an impact on our sense of self. Gergen (2001) discussed how this impact cannot be confined to the self, but to others: social relationships are created through the storying process. If we read Nair, Gergen, and Solorzano and Yosso together, then we can see that stories are central to our social and cultural lives. We need stories to connect with our selves and others. We need stories to understand why certain voices are present and others are silenced.

When bringing counterstories, narrative studies, and intersectionality together, the need for a concept that extends counterstories beyond matters of race emerges. The concept that I propose is the decenter. The decenter is a term for the experiences and discourses that are not at the center of our classrooms. These experiences can be silenced and erased at the expense of focusing on variables separately. When we take into account the convergence of multiple variables, we allow ourselves to consider what could have been said, discussed, and named; we can then attempt to locate what could have been discussed further or what was forgotten within what Dhamoon (2011) called the matrix of meaning making. This matrix attempts to "capture the ways in which processes of differentiation and systems of domination interrelate [...] it entails movement among multiple interactions and across time, dimensions, and levels" (p. 238). In this way, identity, power, and experience converge in messy, unbounded ways. We must wade through this messiness to not only find what discourses and experiences are centered, or acknowledged, in our classrooms, but also those discourses and experiences that make up the decenter. The decenter may be found by interrogating whose identities and identification practices are left unacknowledged or fail to uptake

in conversation and narration. For language studies, the decenter is important for encountering diversity in the classroom. The concept demands that we ask ourselves: Whose diversity is acknowledged, whose is not, and why?

Intersectionality as a Mechanism

Intersectionality as a mechanism enables us as researchers to interrogate the conflation of intragroup differences. I say *mechanism* as opposed to *methodology* because it is a practice or process that enables us to open up alternative ways of seeing the relationships between language and identity across contexts. This mechanism allows us to challenge how we interpret multiple variables interacting with one another, as opposed to assuming that they are interacting in a specific way. These interactions, or the relationships between variables, become the focus of work using intersectionality: Do these variables overlap, contradict, and/or nullify one another? What are the consequences of these relationships?

To answer these questions, multiple perspectives, even those that contradict one another, must be brought into conversation. Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, and Shuart-Faris's (2005) microethnographic approach provides one possible way to foster this dialogic. They explore the relationships among identity, language, and literacy using theories and techniques from a myriad of approaches, such as ethnography of communication and literary studies. They laminate, or layer, these various perspectives to interrogate how literacy events impact student identities and identification practices. Their kaleidoscopic methodology makes it possible to put perspectives that are seemingly incompatible, such as conversation analysis (CA) and critical discourse analysis, into conversation. In this way, there is no singular interpretation; instead, multiple interpretations, whether they contradict, complement, null, and even parallel one another, lead to an intricate understanding of how our students' lives are impacted by pedagogical practices.

For intersectionality as a mechanism, Bloome et al.'s (2005) lamination of various perspectives is translated into decentering practices within the variable-with-variable approach being proposed here. Decentering practices are multiperspectival, dialogic, and self-reflexive. These practices are multiperspectival by bringing complementary

and even contradictory tools and perspectives into conversation. This conversation, or dialogic practice, allows researchers to layer various methods and techniques in an effort to explore the relationships between variables. Furthermore, these processes of exploring multiple perspectives and examining the relationships between them involve self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity asks researchers to consider why we find what we find in data. Bloome et al. (2005) used the concept of research imagination to explore self-reflexivity. Decentering similarly demands a self-reflexive practice: we must be aware of the assumptions we bring to our data, as well as the assumptions we reproduce when making connections and conclusions. In short, we can, potentially, locate the decenter through multiperspectival, dialogic, and self-reflexive research practices. Although the tools, perspectives and interpretations involved in these practices will vary depending upon the researcher, it is these decentering practices that can enable us to move from what forms of expression are at the center of classroom discourse toward what forms of expression are absent, forgotten, or overlooked.

Intersectionality as a theory and mechanism involves various concepts and theories. Furthermore, methods and techniques from a wide range of disciplines should be employed in an effort to decenter data, that is, to engage in decentering practices that are multiperspectival, dialogic and self-reflexive. In the section that follows, I describe how I map intersectionality as a theory and mechanism onto two pedagogical contexts using a variable-with-variable approach. Three questions guide my exploration of the decenter. For each question, the methods and techniques that I use to decenter my findings are explained. The contexts for the data collected, including the setting, participants, and processes involved, are described before exploring how my variable-with-variable approach engages the decenter in an instance of classroom interaction and a student focus group's conversation.

Decentering Interactions in Pedagogical Contexts

Three guiding questions were influential when building my variable-with-variable approach. These questions attempted to take into account the relationship between language, identity, and pedagogy to decenter classroom discourses:

1. In what ways are forms of diversified expression, or diversified identities and identification practices, discursively constructed through the linguistic and rhetorical choices of multilingual students?
2. How do multilingual students orient (or not) toward these constructions?
3. How do these practices impact the relationship between language and identity within the classroom context?

The first question can be split into two parts: what and how. The first part focuses on what diversified identities and identification practices are made visible through talk. The second part focuses on how these diversified identities and identification practices are discursively constructed. To put the first question in another way, what diversified forms of expression are invoked and how are these diversified forms of expression used in conversation? This process of invoking and using identities and identified practices can be examined using a variety of methods and tools; for the intersectional approach presented here, techniques and methods from CA are used to capture how diversified forms of expression emerge and are ratified through talk. For example, when Long says in lines 3 and 4, “like he said if they’re **Asian** they **should have black hair** [bold, my emphasis],” the relationship between Asian and black hair is created; this relationship is oriented to by most of the participants, with the exception of Hunter. By teasing apart how Asians are cast as having black hair, that is, how Asians are associated with having black hair, we can identify what diversified forms of expression are centered, or occasioned to, and what diversified forms of expression are decentered, or not occasioned to. In other words, Asians having black hair is a centered discourse, whereas Asians who do not have black hair are overlooked or relegated to the decenter.

The second question investigates the conversational moves that center or decenter diversified identities and identification practices. Researchers should observe how certain conversational moves center, or make visible, particular forms of diversified expression; in addition, what conversational moves decenter, or make invisible, forms of diversified expression? For my intersectional approach, how uptake “interactionally establishes” (Svennevig, 1999, p. 167) diversified identities and identification practices in CA proves useful when answering

questions of (in)visibility. What turn-taking, silences, casting, repair and alignment (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008; Svennevig, 1999) techniques are employed when my students orient to a diversified identities and identification practice? In the case of Long and Hunter's excerpted conversation, we see repair and alignment play an integral role in negotiating the discursive construction of Asian. Both Long and Hunter attempt to align their perspectives of Asian by strategically correcting one another on what the category should index. This attempt to align demonstrates how some forms of diversified expression are oriented to, or centered, whereas others are not, or decentered.

CA techniques and tools are limited to that particular instance of interaction as opposed to macro-level impacts and consequences. Another perspective needs to be layered, or laminated, to explore the possible impacts and consequences of these interactions on speakers' social worlds—and this layer should be critical. The third, final question asks researchers to be critical in Pennycook's (2001) sense, that is, problematizing of the discursive constructions, the relationships between these constructions and the conversational moves, and the symbolic and material implications of these interactions. In other words, this question asks us to reconsider how discursive constructions within the classroom "are deeply intertwined with other social practices" (Pennycook, 2001, p. 26). Decentering practices enable us to bring our findings into critical conversation. We can ask the following questions: what are the consequences of orienting or not to particular diversified forms of expression? What happens to the decenter during this process of orienting (making [in]visible) and how may what happens to the decenter shape the conversation? More precisely, in what ways does the center and the decenter shape pedagogical contexts, such as, particular student experiences are silenced as a result of the decenter being made invisible or forgotten.

For the present intersectional approach, by employing decentering practices that laminate (Bloome et al., 2005) multiple perspectives together, we can open up various interpretive pathways. These interpretive pathways should not be linear, but dynamic; further, these interpretations are found by laminating various theories and research findings. These pathways lead us to see the convergences of variables, their relations, and the

implications of those relationships on language learning contexts in diverse ways.

To answer these questions, I attempt to locate those unintelligible spaces in which multiple variables of identification converge—the decenter—in the context of my 200-level composition course for multilingual learners. I examine recordings from two pedagogical contexts. First, the full version of the conversation excerpted at the beginning of this article, which took place during one of our class meetings, is analyzed and interpreted by laminating perspectives of CRT and queer theory. Second, one exchange that occurred during a post-course student focus group is interrogated by layering theories of desire and othering. These examples demonstrate that a variable-with-variable approach can be applied across various contexts, and they speak to the need to innovate new ways of knowing identity and identification in language studies.

Pedagogical Contexts

Our composition course was dedicated to interrogating the link between language and identity through narrative. We became familiar with scholarly work on language and identity informed by power relationships by reading Cameron (1999), Foucault (1990), and Kubota and Lin (2009) during the first five weeks of our course. Students were assigned a concept paper that required them to engage with a theoretical concept they found compelling in our readings, such as racialization. The second part of the course introduced students to narrative analysis. Their final assignment asked them to explore a particular community's stories through a combination of narrative analysis and the theoretical concept they had examined prior. We concluded our course with group panel presentations that were a venue for students to exchange their research findings and experiences. The first selection is from small group work that took place during the third week of our course. The second selection is from a focus group that was held after our course's completion.

Participants

Small Group Work

Three students actively participate in the small group conversation under investigation for this article. One unidentified student comments on the group's conversation as well. According to a voluntary survey, the three students identified fall within the 18–25-years-old age range. Long is the only student in the group who identifies as a heterosexual woman. She speaks Vietnamese, English, and some Mandarin Chinese. Hunter identifies as a heterosexual man, and speaks Mandarin Chinese and English. Rider identifies as a man, but chose not to disclose his sexuality in the survey. He speaks Korean, English, and some French. He was the only student in our course who had taken a gender and women studies course.

Focus Group

Students were asked after our course's completion if they wished to participate in a focus group the following fall quarter. Three students of 19 volunteered to attend the focus group: Eun, Hunter, and Emma. Although Hunter and Emma come from Chinese International backgrounds, Eun comes from a Korean International background. Eun and Hunter are on student visas, and Emma lives and works in the United States. All three participants are proficient in their home languages, Mandarin Chinese and/or Korean, and English; however, Emma is also proficient in the Taiwanese dialect of Chinese. As stated previously, Hunter identified as a heterosexual man, and Eun and Emma identified as heterosexual women on voluntary self-identification forms. At the time of the focus group, Eun and Hunter were still attending college. Emma was an employee for a large, well-known corporation. Eun, Emma, and Hunter had not been in contact with one another since taking our course.

Process

For in-class recordings, one class was audio-recorded using Olympus VN-702PC (Olympus Imaging America, Inc., Center

Valley, PA, USA) recorders every week. Student volunteers were responsible for starting and stopping the recorders. In student-teacher conferences, one-on-one follow-up interviews, and focus groups students were asked about their experiences to corroborate findings. These were audio-recorded by me using an Olympus VN-702PC recorder. After recordings were complete, I transcribed and coded using a recursive process that revolved around three strategies. The first strategy was to examine the macrolevel aspects of the conversation, such as major topics or themes, summarizing actions, and marking notable moments that may engage the decenter. These topics or themes included variables of identity (e.g., race, gender, sexuality) and identification practices (e.g., narrative). My second strategy was to explore the microlevel aspects of the conversation. I examined the structure of the conversation (e.g., turn taking) and the linguistic and rhetorical strategies used in the conversation to discursively construct particular topics or themes. My third strategy was to laminate how these topics or themes are oriented to by my students and by current literature.

“Cause you can just kind of tell.”

The following selection is from our in-class group activity in which six different groups were assigned English language learning textbooks that target a wide range of English proficiency levels. Students were asked to answer a list of questions from Taylor-Mendes (2009) that encourage a critical reflection of the visual representation of race. These questions include the following: “Which pictures do you think represent American or British cultures?”; “Do the images help you learn English?”; and “Who has the power in the pictures? Who has status?” (Taylor-Mendes, 2009, p. 71). I purposefully left it open for groups to engage with the questions of their choice, and although some chose to work through the questions in a linear order, others chose to focus on their general impressions of the representations and the implications of those impressions.

In the following conversation, Rider, Long, and Hunter discuss the visual representations of race in an English language learning textbook. The exchange at the beginning of this article is located within the excerpt below. Rider, Long, and Hunter’s group discuss

what racial identities are represented in their textbook. Another student (unidentified due to no video recording) outside of their group also comments on their conversation. Their actual conversation consists of Rider and Long claiming that only White identities are represented in the textbook, whereas Hunter challenges their perception.

Excerpt 1

- 01 RIDER: they're all White=
 02 LONG: =see!
 03 HUNTER: how do you know they're all White?
 04 RIDER: because . they're all White/
 05 LONG: White? well maybe xxx
 06 HUNTER: it's black and whi:te/
 07 LONG: well you can // [cause you can just kind of tell/
 08 S?: [xxx

Students keep talking in the group.

- 09 S?: Asians don't look like that/
 10 RIDER: I mean if they're trying to portray people with color then they might have color
 11 LONG: exactly <quiet> okay so this is de:finitely White/

There still seems to be some disagreement within the group.

- 12 LONG: he has blonde hair/ you can tell/ xxx
 13 HUNTER: <laughs> can't tell blonde hair
 14 LONG: yeah you can yea:h/ it's pretty obvious/ like // like he said if they're Asian they
 15 should have black hair/
 16 RIDER: yeah see [now they're trying to portray like [xxx
 17 HUNTER: [but [in comics people never have
 the same 18 like the normal hair color/ if they have green yellow xxx

They continue to debate the images they are looking at.

- 19 RIDER: oh see this is like a . male and female/ there's no like homosexual xxx
 20 HUNTER: none

As seen in the excerpt, both Rider and Long contend that the representations are “all White.” Hunter provides counters to their consensus in two different ways: through (a) question, “how do you know they’re all White?” and (b) a comment in which he identifies the textbook as being printed in “black and whi:te/.” In response, Long counters with “well you can // [cause you can just

kind of tell/.” Hunter does not reply. Their exchange raises some questions about how gender and race intersect; more specifically, what enables Long (female), Hunter (male), and Rider (male) to make certain statements and not others? For example, Rider states his overall perception, and Long supports his statement. When Hunter challenges that perception, Rider answers Hunter’s question and Long returns with a question of “White?” In addition, Long does not stop engaging with Hunter’s counter. She states that Whiteness can be inferred based upon the pictures, “you can just kind of tell/.” If we wish to interrogate access and agency in this exchange, we could ask in what ways gendered identities enable or constrain Long, Hunter, and Rider’s holding of the floor? What of cultural and racial identities? What of the educational context and how that may influence and/or shape these identities within conversation?

Instead of attempting to answer these questions at this point, it is necessary to see how the conversation pans out. Beginning with line 9, the unidentifiable student joins Long and Rider in their consensus. Most likely this student is responding to a picture that either Long, Rider, or Hunter have open or is readily seen. This picture is further described in line 12 by Long, who articulates that one of the people in the picture has “blonde hair.” Hunter counters Long’s statement that a person in the image they are looking at has “blonde hair” by arguing that one “can’t tell blonde hair” in line 13. Long challenges Hunter by making the following claim: “if they’re Asian they should have black hair/.” Although Long does not explicitly support her claim later in the conversation, instead choosing to rely on the declarative that “it’s pretty obvious,” it is interesting in this sense that Asian is defined by hair color. The importance of hair color then for Long is to identify a particular physical characteristic as indicative of racial identity, which discursively constructs race as biological. For Hunter, however, there are more possible hair colors for Asian identities as seen in lines 17–18. Hunter may even be suggesting Japanese animated characters’ hair colors (e.g., green and yellow) to bolster his point when he says, “in comics.”

What we see in this exchange are particular identities being centered, or noticed, through talk: Asian and White. The negotiation of what these identities mean both to the speakers and in relation to the text being explored draws upon the notion that

race is a particular set of physical traits. For example, Long considers blonde hair as a visual representation of Whiteness in line 12. If we were to navigate from the center out, so as to locate and articulate those spaces, the decenter, in which unintelligible voices and experiences inhabit, what pathways or combination of methods, techniques, and concepts could get us to these spaces? For Long, Hunter, and Rider's conversation, two pathways, out of many, may enable us to locate and engage the decenter: the social imagination of race and heteronormative sexuality deadens race, gender, and sexuality.

Social Imagination of Race

Discourses of race as a physical set of traits or a particular appearance were often drawn upon to support a claim. For example, the unknown student in the discussion above says, "Asians don't look like that." If we wish to navigate toward the decenter, we need to consider what other discourses of race are apparent in the conversation. In other words, what do the speakers suggest or challenge that may draw us away from the Asian and White focus? Hunter attempts to do so in lines 6 and 13. His statements challenge the centered discourse of race as physical, suggesting that what physical traits are associated with a particular racial identity may not be enough. To put this another way, what other discourses of race could lead us to engage the decenter of the conversation above, with Hunter's comments in mind? How Kubota and Lin (2009) brought together CRT and the concept of imagined communities, or how groups of people connect to those who are not physically present but imagined to engage in their community's set of practices, ideologies, and hegemonies (Kanno & Norton, 2003), can provide a potential pathway.

Although Anderson (1991) originally developed the concept of imagined communities in response to nationalism, applied linguists and sociolinguists have since translated this concept into communities of practice. Kanno and Norton (2003) examined the relationship between communities of practice and identities by examining how "the desire to belong to such an inaccessible community shapes a person's agency as she constructs her identity" (p. 167). Critical race theorists add to this conversation by articulating the concept of aspirational capital

(Yosso, 2006). Because race “is socially and historically constructed and shaped by discourses that give specific meanings to the ways we see the world” (Kubota & Lin, 2009, p. 474), how people create and participate in imagined communities allows us to see the intersection of race in the process of racialization through constructions of race itself as a category, the communities within those categories, as well as the stories that either challenge or reconfirm that category’s existence across time and space.

For the previous conversation, we can see a myriad of questions that allow us to locate the decenter as a space for those who identify as Asian but do not have “black hair” to inhabit. Does blonde hair necessarily mean Whiteness or do blonde Asians exist? What about vice-versa? Possibilities of mixed race are neither addressed nor acknowledged, which points to how communities can be bounded to particular traits, which mutually exclude those within the same community who do not share those traits. In other words, these students seem to rely on interrogating intergroup relations over intragroup relations: the discourse of race as physical encourages this preference (Long and Rider), whereas the social imagination of race encourages the opposite (Hunter).

Deadness as a Source of Meaning

There is another pathway toward the decenter in line 19. Rider and Hunter agree that whereas gendered identities are visually represented, recognizable sexual diversified identities are not. One way to interpret or engage this pathway is to consider Berlant and Warner’s (2002) queer counterpublics, and how these counterpublics, or spaces, allow us to forget who we are to imagine other possible ways of being in our social worlds. These spaces are possible by imagining sex(uality) in ways that do not conform to the “heterosexual life narrative” (Berlant & Warner, 2002, p. 198). According to Berlant and Warner, engaging sex(uality) allows us to challenge, or wedge, heterosexual cultural norms and its practices that limit the intelligibility of sex, sexuality, and sexual identities through its essentializing “ideologies and institutions of intimacy” (p. 192). Halberstam (1997) argued that without investigating sex(uality) beyond the

abstract and theoretical, “we necessarily fail to engage with the body, pleasures, and their complex webs of association” (p. 266). In other words, the relationship between sexuality and materiality must be addressed so as “to bring [a queer] world into being” (Berlant & Warner, 2002, p. 198). This world is defined as “a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies” (Berlant & Warner, 2002, p. 198). To put this another way, entering, exiting, being, and becoming within a queer world involves opening up alternative kinds of spaces that may or may not provide definite answers, but allow us to practice critical engagement and reflection.

For the previous conversation, Rider’s statement, “this is like a . male and female/there’s no like homosexual,” seems to presuppose that because there are opposite sexes present in the image, there is only one possibility: heterosexuality. Hunter confirms this assumption in line 20. If we take the interpretive pathway of queer counterpublics, that is, reimagining how we engage sexuality, then we can see Rider and Hunter’s reliance on a deadened “source of meaning” (Berlant & Warner, 2002, p. 198). Deadened here means “static intelligibility” (Berlant & Warner, 2002, p. 198) or what we find easily recognizable or conforming to normative stereotypes. This “deadness” (Berlant & Warner, 2002, p. 198) disallows Rider and Hunter from wedging open queer worlds to interact with gendered ones. In other words, alternate routes and incommensurate geographies are made available to the small group, but Rider and Hunter fail to engage these routes and geographies by depending far too much on normative understandings of sexuality; the group then does not address the decenter, or the spaces in which multiple intersections—race, gender, and sexuality in particular—converge. For these students at this particular time and context, this failure to explore the decenter suggests that a focus on static and deadened notions of sexuality makes other ways of being unintelligible (Berlant & Warner, 2002).

“[C]ause sometimes you want to do something that’s not ... stereotypical”

As shown in the previous section, discussing stereotypes was a focal point in our class, specifically representations in textbooks and television. We also saw previously that the kinds of stereotypes that students engaged with were racial, which mutually excluded other stereotypes, such as gendered and sexual from being engaged. This separation happens again in the focus group when Emma responds to the focus group question, “[d]o you feel you were able to apply what you learned/discussed in [our English course] in other classes and/or beyond the university setting? Why or why not?” As seen in Excerpt 2, Emma describes her racial and professional identities while working for a large corporation.

Excerpt 2

- 01 EMMA: it's like // cause I'm the only Asian in the department/ so sometimes I feel
like . uhm
- 02 EUN: you're the only Asian in that whole xxx [department?
- 03 EMMA: [in my department/
- 04 EUN: in your department/
- 05 EMMA: well actually the whole floor/ they're there aren't a lot of Asians there/
- 06 HUNTER: how'd you find it?
- 07 EMMA: just through like a family friend/
- 08 EUN: so is it like that in xxx city? [or ... oh
- 09 EMMA: [no/ maybe it's just uh the company/ or my
depart
[ment/
- 10 EUN: [okay/ that's interesting/
- 11 EMMA: yeah/
- 12 EUN: cause usually if I uhm . go to the customer service section of the department
store
- 13 there is at least like . I don't know/ like one Asian and xxx [older Asian ladies
- 14 <laughs>
- 15 HUNTER: [<laughs>

Emma begins by identifying herself as “the only Asian in the department.” Eun and Hunter follow up with clarification questions. Eun reconfirms that the rest of Emma’s department is non-Asian, whereas Hunter asks how Emma found her job. Their moves indicate that narrative is a collaborative effort; furthermore, accountability and personal experience inform the ways that stories take shape between speakers (Nair, 2002; Peterson & Langellier, 2006). These elements are important to investigate

when exploring how narrativization can name or unname the decenter—who is not identified, what experiences are supported or challenged, what moves (and their implications) discursively construct intersections of gender, race, and sexuality?

In Excerpt 2, intersections of race, gender, and age become salient. Emma focuses on her own experience, particularly how her department or company has little to no Asian-identifying population. Eun, however, brings into the conversation the decenter through naming “older Asian ladies” as a counter to Emma’s statement. In lines 12–13, we see Eun’s personal experience account for the existence of these intersections (Liggett, 2013). However, just as quickly as this experience is named—it, and its implications—are forgotten with laughter from both Emma and Hunter. What could have happened if further discussion, instead of laughter, opened up the decenter? This question remains unanswered as Eun continues the conversation by asking Emma to expand upon her experience below in Excerpt 3.

Excerpt 3

- 16 EUN: so you feel like what?
 17 EMMA: uhm cause sometimes you want to do something that's not ... stereotypical/
 18 EUN: mmhmm
 19 EMMA: I don't know how to describe it/
 20 HUNTER: so xxx don't want to be racist anymore?
 21 EMMA: no/ you don't want to fit into the stereotype/ like even though that's what
 you do:/
 22 EUN: o:h
 23 EMMA: sometimes cause we like bring lunch too . [to work/
 24 EUN: [o:h I okay/
 25 EMMA: and everyday you bring rice/
 26 EUN: uh huh
 27 EMMA: and then you just feel like people oh think that I'm Asian/ I eat rice/
 28 HUNTER: mmhmm
 29 EUN: uh huh
 30 EMMA: something like that ...
 31 EUN: so you feel weird if you [xxx
 32 EMMA: [sometimes
 33 EUN: have you ever uh uhm brought like . breads? bread and potato or something?
 34 EMMA: cause we have like a like a employee . restaurant over there/ so sometimes I
 just
 35 don't bring lunch and eat over there/
 36 EUN: but when you bring you bring= [<laughs> oh that's funny!
 37 EMMA: =rice [<laughs>

In Excerpt 3, Emma states that “sometimes you want to do something that’s not ... stereotypical/[...] even though that’s what you do” (lines 17 and 21). Emma proceeds to argue how the cultural practice of lunch, whether it is bringing something from home or eating at the company’s restaurant, is a form of racialization (Kubota & Lin, 2009). We see Emma, Eun, and Hunter continue to center on race in Excerpt 4, demonstrating that the very act of centering may inhibit the decenter from being named and critically examined.

Excerpt 4

- 38 HUNTER: I don't think that's stereotypical/ that's just . [how we live [like Asian eat
rice/xxx
39 what's [up?
40 EMMA: [that's yeah [I know but ...
41 EUN: [<laughs> that's true!
42 EMMA: cause sometimes you just don't want to uh stand out that much/ especially
you're
43 like in a . all White group/
43 EUN: so like why do they // what do they // what do the other people bring? usually?
like
44 sandwiches or ...
45 EMMA: yeah something like that/
46 HUNTER: so xxx you want to perform a White identity instead of Asian?
47 EUN: <laughs>
48 EMMA: sometimes if you want to put it [that way/ yeah/
49 HUNTER: [peer pressure <laughs>/

Emma and Eun seemingly hold the conversational floor throughout Excerpts 1–3, which may be attributed to the numerical dominance of two women and one man (Govindasamy & David, 2004). However, when Hunter accesses the conversational floor at the end of Excerpt 3, this dominance seems to be relevant only when counting turns, for it is the moves that Hunter makes throughout that seem to determine the direction of the conversation. For example, Hunter challenges Emma’s desire to disassociate with the practice of having rice for lunch in line 38. This critical question focuses the group’s discussion on Emma wishing not to stand out, and food being a seemingly essential part of that practice. The range of conversational moves being made throughout the excerpts and the implications of those moves on race, power, and professionalism brings us to

the decenter: how can we interpret the interaction between Eun, Emma, and Hunter from an intersectional approach? I consider two possible pathways: intersections affecting our desires and intersections as erasure.

Desire

If we read their exchange with desire, race, and professional intersections in mind, then we may be able to support Motha and Lin's (2013) argument that "at the [de]center of every English language learning moment lies desire: desire for the language; for the identities represented by particular accents and varieties of English" (p. 2). Takahashi (2013) extended this desire to include gender and professional intersections as well: not centering on language identity per se, intersections come into contact within the decenter, and desire is one important way in which to understand how overlaps of race and language ability may be impacted or shaped by assumptions of what is desirable. Motha and Lin argued that theories of desire should be incorporated into our work if we wish to encourage agency and foster critical reflexive practices within our classrooms, especially in relation to identity and identification.

Emma, Hunter, and Eun's exchanges in Excerpts 2–4 are a concrete example of a student-oriented counterstory or practice that acknowledges the complexity of desire on intersections of racial and professional identities, which inadvertently answers Motha and Lin's (2013) question of how language learners take up, negotiate, subvert or discount these desires. Giving our students, such as Emma, Hunter, and Eun, spaces in which to encounter these desires, these racial identities, and their professional implications creates opportunities to "develo[p] an explicit consciousness of sources of desire [...] because it can help [students] question the degree to which [student] desires are attainable or rational, potentially reducing their allure and power" (Motha & Lin, 2013, p. 22). This "explicit consciousness" (Motha & Lin, 2013, p. 22) is shown previously in how all three speakers within the focus group are able to not only explore the intersections of race, desire, and professional identities, but also challenge them. Similar to Takahashi's (2013) study of Japanese women on *ryugaku*, Whiteness for Emma, Hunter, and Eun was a contested category—it was both something to desire

and something to reject. Although Emma wishes to not “fit into the stereotype” of Asians, Hunter seems to find that desire absurd; instead, he challenges how Emma views rice as a stereotype. He argues that eating rice is a cultural practice with history: “how we live” and “Asian eat rice.” His move could be seen either as a rejection of Emma’s desire or an argument for a different perspective; a perspective that moves past “all things White” (Takahashi, 2013, p. 39). This perspective has the potential to destabilize the dialectical relationship between Whiteness, Asianness, and power. In this regard, then, Hunter is bringing the decenter into being—albeit, without addressing Emma’s own gendered and sexual positioning as a working heterosexual woman, when he, in fact, identifies as a heterosexual man.

Erasure

Another pathway is to consider their conversation as an act of erasure—erasing both the experience’s significance to Emma and Eun as well as erasing the experience of inhabiting the decenter itself. Hunter, who had been quiet for the majority of the conversation, challenges Emma’s claims by inquiring why “how we live [like Asian eat rice]” is undesirable (see line 38). Previously, Emma and Eun had established reasons why: this lunch practice makes Emma feel “weird” so much so that her wish is not to “stand out” (lines 31 and 45). Hunter’s questions, then, potentially nullify Emma’s experience by centering on his stance in Excerpt 3; by talking over Emma’s counters as seen in lines 38–40 (and not addressing them later); and by ending the conversation with his interpretation of Emma’s lived experience. Therefore, a consequence of Hunter centering on his interpretation silences the decenter; its naming—that of Emma’s lived experience—is left unexplored, inhibited from being further delved into, and, consequently, ceases to exist.

Challenges and Implications

What I found when mapping intersectionality onto the language classroom was students avoided engaging with the decenter. Focusing, or centering, on particular identities or

identification practices was preferred, rather than looking to the margins, or decentering, where the relationship between identities and identification practices converge was largely, if not altogether avoided. This pattern alerted me to the need for creating teaching and learning practices that facilitate engagement with these relationships; the process of developing these practices is only possible through further research and experimentation with what we do not know, that is, investigating those unseen, unheard, unintelligible spaces—the decenter.

Although the context investigated in this article—multilingual learners, undergraduate 200-level composition class, and a curriculum that incorporates critical inquiry—may be unusual because it is a part of a dissertation project, the findings suggest, along with other studies such as Motha (2014), Takahashi (2013), and Baker and Levon (2016), that there is a need to reconsider how we define variables, how we look at variables, and the meanings of those variables if we wish to extend and challenge our understandings of language and identity. In this article, I suggest moving toward the decenter, navigating our way through the linguistic and rhetorical movements that discursively construct particular identities and identification practices; this navigation requires using intersectionality as a mechanism for opening up the complex, interrelated meanings of multiple forms of diversified expression broadly, and race, gender, and sexuality specifically. This navigation also involves drawing on sometimes overlapping, other times divergent areas of knowledge.

With a focus on what is not at the center of classroom discourse, or what voices and experiences are unacknowledged, ignored, or erased, we must consider intersectionality as a theory of identity, and the voices and experiences caught within these underrepresented spaces should be heard: my research has accomplished this by focusing on student perspectives examined previously. Their conversations are part of a larger conversation that spanned 10 weeks of our course in spring and two terms of follow-up interviews, analysis of written (assignments, journals, and discussion board posts) and spoken data (classroom talk). As we continue to interrogate the relationship between identity and language in our classrooms, research, and writing, I propose to start where our focus is not. We should look where we may have forgotten. We should attempt to uncover what was, what is,

and what could have been in an effort to bring the decenter into being “[because] one is not just one thing” (Spivak, 1994, pp. 194–195).

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