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Title

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Journal

Queer Cats Journal of LGBTQ Studies, 1(1)

Authors

Gladden, Ronnie
Greenberg, Ed., Rachael

Publication Date

2015

DOI

10.5070/Q511031152

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TRANSGRESSIVE TALK:

An Introduction to the Meaning of Transracial Identity

BY RONNIE GLADDEN,
WITH RACHAEL GREENBERG, ED.

TRANSGRACIAL PERSPECTIVES

My confrontation with my internalized racial unrest, along with a growing awareness of my authentic gender identity, has been prompted, in part, by two socio-political shifts: 1) the escalating tensions belying the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement, and 2) the increased visibility of transgender individuals in a myriad of public spaces. Increasingly, I feel an urgency to be forthcoming about my true identity in an era where transparency is not just encouraged; it is demanded.

In spite of presenting as outwardly black and male—by in large I view myself as white and female. Of course I am aware, however, that many critics may view my identifications as nonsensical at best—misguided—and at worst, depraved. And many others are likely to be apathetic or overwhelmed with what might be viewed as an assault from the “identity politics campaign” in the face of these realities, I still fully acknowledge that my identifications are deep-seated, and perhaps, my transgressive notion of self further complicates, in some sense, the meaning of BLM, in the wake of political campaign disruptions and violence. However chaotic, the nexus between marginalized identity movements, of the race and gender varieties, in particular, is born out of the attempt

RONNIE GLADDEN is a doctoral student at Northern Kentucky University in the Department of Education. © 2016 Ronnie Gladden. All Rights Reserved.

for inclusion, equity, access, and validation within our national (and inter-national) social fabric. Nevertheless, while each identity construction is largely treated as distinct phenomena in many spaces, I seek to raise the stakes in this article by asking: What are the implications when the intensity of transgressive race and gender dynamics collide and thus result in the embodiment within a single individual?

I recognize that a simple and direct answer is not available. And I believe that it will take quite some time to distill the finer nuanced points of avant-garde identity reconciliation. However, for now, like so many others who are grappling with challenging identity conflicts, I know that I must work to define what it is that I want. In essence, I have to commit to the serious and long-suffering work of processing my real and self-determined role of race and gender, and how that may ultimately affect how I subsequently express my aesthetic. This is essential to me because I am actively working within my community in a number of leadership roles in a time when the personal identity politic is more prevalent than ever. I often am charged with helping to organize and perhaps even shape the identity making of others through my teaching and advocacy work. Again—this work is occurring during much political upheaval that's rooted in shifting dynamics of self-creation and allegiances. And so, in turn, it makes sense to effectively manage my authentic identity, particularly since it is tethered to the current disruptive social climate.

My conjoined racial and gender disidentifications are knotted and create unspoken pangs of despair, disillusionment, and bits of complacency due to a lack of significant externalized identity expression.

The war is largely within. My identity can be defined as *transgracial*. I constitute transgraciality as the comingling of gender and racial incongruity combined with overlapping multiple-identity underpinnings.

I believe a transgracial identity is significant because it is legitimate and it is an authentic representation of my life's experiences to date; it is a strand within the larger thread of the intersectionality framework. It is also apart of third wave feminism, in my view, because it comprises a chorus of constituents who are more vocal and insistent for access to enhanced equity and recognition (Stryker, 2008). The political implications surrounding the transgracial intersections are particularly powerful in a time when increased attention is given to unique and disruptive identities inside of a political season, as I have previously alluded to.

Many are talking about race, gender, and even sexuality with renewed gusto in a time when once marginalized individuals are now appearing within the media, popular-culture, as well as inside of politics. Still, there is much to consider about complex authentic identity

Due to my internalized transgender and transracial collisions, I am slowly expressing elements of my transracial tensions. My “inner white woman” is at the center of my identity constitution, which most often harmonizes with my core instincts and deepest authentic sense of self; I have been aware of this truth since the age of four. It is my internal standard.

Yet I struggle to reconcile my conjoined transgender and transracial intersectionality. Perhaps all the more so since intersectionality itself is a theoretical framework that takes into account a myriad of facets, identities, and expressions of an individual—and as explained within the upcoming interview—intersectionality includes the symbiotic functioning of transgressive gender and race categories—which in turn are disrupting the heteronormative status quo (Crenshaw). Moreover, my prevailing struggles reoccur because the vernacular of gender and race identity is still emerging while the transracial phenomenon is yet to be appropriately situated or fully contextualized; similarly to the BLM and transgender movements. At any rate, while this process is unfolding, my identification and others similar to it—are likely to be viewed as subversive because of the reimagining and re-evaluation of aesthetics, culture, identity, and expressions that must occur in order to entertain such a gender and race reconfiguration that I have described and identify with.

Nevertheless, because of what many are likely to consider as peculiar gender and race intersections, and because of the labyrinth that comprises the institutions of race and gender, let alone the construction of intersectionality, I believe, the unorthodox identity collisions have further complicated my searing dysphoria, and therefore, my intersectionality is especially convoluted and nebulous, which results in the “spilling over” into other identity categories of my life that in some ways transcend race, gender, age, and even time. The blurring of the aforesaid categories contributes to the dynamism of transracial identity, since the construct is not solely anchored within the realms of race and gender. I am aided with viewing the world through a multitude of lenses.

In this way, a direct challenge to established heteronormative constructs that are interfaced with race, gender, and even sexuality are

fully at play (Crenshaw). I am forced to contend with that biological “assignation.” This forced reconciliation moves beyond the “double-consciousness” trope as espoused by W.E.B. DuBois where blackness must be processed and pitted against a white world (1903/2007). Indeed, the transracial identification features at least a *quadruple* consciousness where not only 1) race, but 2) gender, as well as 3) *transgender*, and 4) *transracial* constructions must be as reviewed and contextualized; each construction is interlocking.

Possessing a quadruple consciousness endows me with powers to “float.” I get to meander between two different boundaries of oppression: 1) black; and 2) woman. I live a parallel existence in that I can relate to the struggles for salience and acceptance. And yet, I also can meander into a place of privilege: forced masculine identity. I have to be careful not to engage in practices that would be complicit with enforcing oppressive tenets of patriarchy against the non-plussed identities that are also a part of my existence. And yet at the same time, I do not want my core and authentic “white girl” intersections to be muzzled or silenced in order to not engage in what could be perceived as a betrayal to my external assigned identity.

A quadruple consciousness encourages me to ultimately seek a kind of identity transcendence that is still rooted in my primordial core instincts but is pliable enough to circumvent the inevitable politics that are associated with both heteronormative identity constructions as well as of the transgressive identity configurations.

While my identity may yet be defined by critics as a manifestation of racial and gender oppression (Grant et al.,; Rankin et al.)—and viewed as a product of an incessant onslaught of structural gender and racial disenfranchisement resulting as “damaged goods”—it is my hope that a discourse on transracial identity will be expanded. The following interview—a conversation between my external black man and my inner white woman—represents my auto-ethnographic contribution to the emerging discourse on transracial identity. It is my hope that this piece works to demystify certain intersectional identities that have historically remained invisible, yet exist within the LGBTQ+ community.

TALKING TO TRANSGRESS: Musings on Complex Identity Intersections

This interview was conducted on October 23, 2015 and was co-authored by Ronnie Gladden and Rachael Greenberg.

To better acquaint the readers of this article with with the interview participants, below is a rendering of relevance. The image represents two identity wheels. The first wheel introduces characteristics of Ronnie, or my external black and male phenotypic “suit” and the life that is associated with him (the outer me). The second wheel introduces my internalized white female identification or simply, my “inner white girl,” and the germane attributes associated with her. Both of the identity wheels are intended to feature and to contextualize how Ronnie’s outer reality interfaces with the “inner white girl” authentic identity.

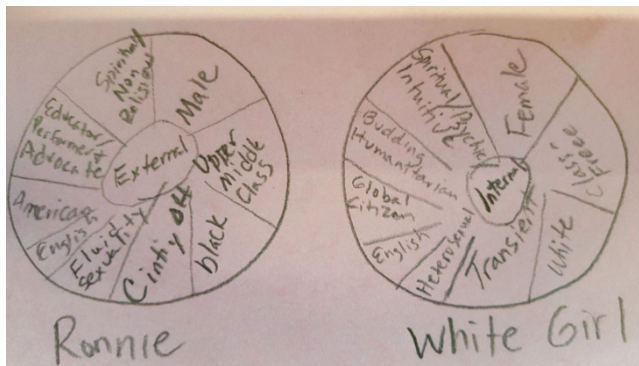


Image courtesy of author

Below is a modified transcript of an interview between Ronnie and the “White Girl.”

Ronnie

If you were meeting me for the first time, how would you describe yourself to me?

Inner White Girl

I would describe myself as a young 20-ish (looking) white female with dark colored hair, fair skin, and with an air of angst mixed with intelligence and a bit of reservation. I think there'd be a level of confusion and somewhat despair in terms of feeling masked, and not feeling like I'm able to emote and to be free, and in the form that most aligns with my inner authenticity, with my deeper core. I'm dealing with the wrong image; the wrong body; the wrong skin and hair. I think that's what I would say.

Ronnie

In what spaces do you feel most comfortable being visible?

Inner White Girl

I feel most comfortable when I'm relaxing at home. My brick and mortar house, and when I'm resting in the soul that is my home. But when I'm out and about in society, it's a mix between being comfortable and uncomfortable. I'm comfortable when interacting with people, in general, and especially when there is a task involved. When I'm in the public, and I am just casual, I'm able to get a third person's perspective, like in the way that people watchers do. That's what I like, because in that space, I'm able to see all kinds of people interacting and doing things, and they're not even aware that they're being watched, not in a creepy way, but just watching out of curiosity, out of an earnest, pure curiosity. That's nice because then it helps me to visualize how I may act or interact if I were just able to show the world my real white girl self. I could just be me and just as easily roam about and go to the store in my jeggings, t-shirt, and thong sandals with my hair flopping about. I'd go to Target, go wherever, and do my thing. That would be nice.

It also helps to see different kinds of people especially when I see three-dimensional white females I think, "Hmm, would I have looked like that at a certain age?" or "Would I have been like this when I was younger?" By seeing different stages of a white women's life, I can get a sense of how my own development would have progressed; I have access to the missing queues that I desperately needed.

Ronnie

Do you ever feel that you are visible to a third party in a more normative or tangible way, or do you feel like the third party is very aware of your presence, in public space?

Inner White Girl

I think it depends on where I am. I know that when I'm in more bohemian places where there's more eccentric people, I feel at ease. There's the feeling that most of them around me are like giving me a head nod and saying things like "I kind of get you in some ways." The way that I appear, the way Ronnie appears is not like a stereotypical black male, so I usually draw looks just based on how Ronnie's hair is cut; he has dreadlocks that are actually cut into a style, as opposed to long flowing locks. That's not really as common.

I'm normative in spaces where normativity is already skewed. When I'm in other places that are less viewed, I don't know for certain if Ronnie gets that normativity. For the inner white female, I think, in abstract ways, there is an affirmation that is there. It depends on how in sync I am, inner white female with Ronnie, if that makes any sense. There are things that the form of my inner white female can do to beam, personality wise, I guess, through the vessel of Ronnie. I guess the short answer is it depends on where I am and how "on" I am as well.

Ronnie

Do you feel silenced when you're forced to pass as a black man?

Inner White Girl

Yes. I would say I feel silenced. I definitely feel marginalized. Yes. It's confusing because on one hand, I think the silencing aligns with the narrative of what a lot of women have had to go through, and that is being oppressed by men, with color not even being the issue, but just the whole notion of sexism and being subordinate; I am "buried" underneath you—or shall I say—embedded deep inside your three dimensional form. I'm always relegated to the background. There's that element to it, the second class citizenry issue, and trying to gain equality. Then, there's the "black man" issue that makes this struggle volatile, because of course there's a structural oppressive narrative that's connected to being black.

There are a lot of layers to penetrate through. I've had (and have) a lot of time to attack my own ignorance, as Malcolm X, once said. But I

certainly haven't always used that time. I often feel like Ronnie's body—(*your* body) is the prison cell of sorts, and I am subsisting inside of it, looking for more creative ways to cope. It's odd at the same time because it's like a minority (black male) within a minority (white female). Also at the same time, there's a majority element in there as well too, because of my internalized whiteness—my concealed “privilege.” There's a lot of cold war tensions going on.

It gets so overwhelming that it's almost like, how do I (we) deal with the conflict? How do you navigate through this? In a way, sometimes the silencing is easier to grapple with, because I get tired and I give up. One way to reconcile for me, though, is to draw on the strength of those that came long before Ronnie—his ancestors—that helped him and unwittingly helped me to “cross over” into freedom.

When I think of the Underground Railroad, and that was in the midst of great oppression, but underneath it, was a network to provide access to getting through, and there were different kinds of abstractions and codes used to crossover and to eventually get to a place to gain the upper hand. It's a similar kind of thing for me, where I'd say there's a proverbial or psychological “underground” entity that comes with being silenced and having to “pass” as a black man.

I've learned how to compensate and to get a better handle on the abstractions I use to express my internalized self. I'm just now beginning to formulate a different kind subversive language that can one day triumph over my past. The bigger thing, too, is for me to remember that it's not bad. Being black and being male is not a bad thing. For the longest time, I thought that it was, and abhorred it. It's just a problem because it's subduing my true inner self and it has done so for such a long time.

It's a complex thing, very complex, but the short answer is yes, I feel silenced. I think there is a way for me to be heard, though. I'm working on that.

Ronnie

What feels like more of a betrayal for you, the color of my skin or the sex of my body?

Inner White Girl

I would say the biggest betrayal is the color of your skin, because black, for better or worse, is already an entity that's hypermasculinized. It's already a color that's seen as aggressive. It's so hypermasculinized, it's so exaggerated,

and it's like a blank screen, you can project so much onto it. I think there is a lot of ambiguity involving race, especially when black skin is involved.

When it comes to sex, I feel like, it's not quite as complex as race is. Not to say that sex (and gender) don't have their own kinds of complications, there are naturally many, but I feel like science has a way of better addressing a lot of the dynamics that go along with mitigating some sexual challenges. We have gender clinics, after all. As far as I know, there aren't any race clinics around. There's nothing of that ilk. I think that it's much easier, in comparison, to manipulate, reconstitute, and reconfigure things in the category of sex much easier than it is to manipulate a lot of the racial images. That said, I realize there are things you can do with skin. There are tanning beds and tanning salons. You can do that. There are creams that one can use to lighten skin, and there's cosmetic surgeries, and all of that.

As a whole, though, I don't think there's a complete, organized package of medical interventions used to make "confirming" changes to racial expression like there are with gender expression.

On the other hand, Gender Confirmation Surgery exists, and that's been around for decades. In terms of a "Racial Confirmation Surgery", there's no one kind of synthesized "package" that shares parity with GCS. One would have to piecemeal procedures to try to reconfigure themselves in that way. The race element, it is absolutely a betrayal. A part of it is, based on what I alluded to, when it comes to all the different kinds of intersectionalities of oppression that's embedded within it, so there's that. There's the political, there's the social, there's the symbolic, and then there's just the phenotypic part of it.

At the same time most people view race as a non-entity. It's not something that's science based. It's something that's socially significant. It's a social construct. Most of the times, that's how it is. Clearly, phenotypic expression does have a scientific, biological component to it. What we assign to the value of one's nose or one's hair texture, or whatever, is a subjective social construct. It is a big deal, but at the same time, it's not validated, and it's not a big deal, because it's not "rooted in science," in the same kind of way that it is with gender.

Ronnie

There are days when I feel like Ronnie, and there are days I might feel more like you. Then there are days when I feel like us. What does

“us” feel like for you? What does it feel like when you’re somewhere in between you and “us?”

Inner White Girl

“Us” for me is when we’re both singing from the same sheet of music. It’s almost a telepathic thing where I intuitively know what it is that my abstractions are saying and the kind of effect that I want to send out, and that I want to receive from people. There’s a harmonizing dynamic where for Ronnie, he is onboard with that as well. Us is being in unison. It’s being able, in some ways, I think for both us, to transmute our limitations, or even to transcend it—yeah, transcend is a better way to say it, to transcend both of our limitations. For anyone that’s 3D and that’s inside of a carnal body, clearly they are limited. They’re sealed up in that body until they die.

For me, for someone that is silenced in a way, and forced with abstraction, my limitations are pretty clear, as I’ve stated. To get in harmony and not to have the normal constraints in place is what it means to be unified and having us. At that point, it’s like being sublime. It’s in that space where almost ironically, it’s almost like it doesn’t really matter about a race or gender or anything like that. It’s just a type of energy that is just able to be unfettered and to be free. It’s very good. It’s a brief thing. It’s very brief, but it’s just good to be able to have that. It’s transcending just normal barriers and creating a new kind of iteration of a person or just an entity. That’s wonderful. I love that.

The tricky part is getting to the “us” for any stretch of time, which is why the “us” is so brief, because normally I’m in transit. To be in transit is to be busy with negotiating between the “us” and me. It’s very hard. It’s very hard to do that. A lot of that is succumbing to the pressures of society, succumbing to the pressures of the environment that I’m in. Some of it is just more mundane stuff, just succumbing to being tired, succumbing to having a lot of papers to write, having a lot of work to do or whatever it is. It can be mundane. To be somewhere in between is to be in the liminal amorphous kind of space. It’s tricky. It inspires the desire to want to gain freedom.

Ronnie

Do you ever feel that existing in liminal spaces as well as in the salient and seminal moments could possibly be one and the same, and give you a sense of wholeness and of at-homeness?

Inner White Girl

I think if I learn how to grow further than that's a possibility. My life continues to unfold whether if I learn how to work with my reality or not. I need to learn how to make it work. Absolutely. Essentially, I have to "grow up" in the same way that you got to do. I have a lot of stages to visit! That's part of the challenge. Processing clearly gives me a chance to do that, and looking at and using my time, my compensatory time like I've been talking about, is the way to probably grow and figure out how to get there, how to get that kind of reconciliation and make the kind of synthesis like they're talking about, rather than brooding, because I've already done a lot of that.

If I am underground in my own kind of railroad trying to get to a point of freedom, I might as well actually *go* forward and "cross over" and not stay stuck underground, because then that is the cutoff. Yeah. I think that there is a way to learn how to get the best of both, being in the liminal and then being more connected I think. I'm not sure how that works, but that's a part of the rest of the experiment. That's life, I keep tinkering with it until I get to a point where I feel like, "Okay, I'm trying here." At least on one level, I've maybe mastered it or I've grown on one level to work with that, and begin to focus on the next level or the next external challenge that comes, that I haven't calculated for, but then I'll have to learn how to create a new code of abstractions to work towards whatever external issues have been there. It should be interesting to see how that unfolds.

Ronnie

Is there anything else you'd like to say to me?

Inner White Girl

Well, I'd say this was the closest that I can get to directly speaking, in "real" life, I mean. It's nice, but I feel like I've been recused from society, and all of a sudden I'm speaking out in a serious and earnest way, it's awkward and overwhelming. There's an adjustment period. It's good to be able to begin the process of being more authentic, sharing my story and just contributing to the bigger intersectional frameworks and notions of identity out there. A lot of people are challenging the status quo, and they are showing themselves. I'm joining them in that way. I'm glad to be able to do that, but there's still a long road I need to travel to make up for lost time.

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