

CCS 235

Exploring Racial Identity through Comics

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Pre-lecture Questions

- Who are we? What influences the way we identify ourselves?
- When were we able to identify ourselves?
- What does it mean to think of Race & our identities as *verbs*?



Positionality & Racial Identity

In this country American means White. Everybody else has to hyphenate.

~Toni Morrison

■ Positionality:

- The active acknowledgement of your relative status and position in society as a whole, as it is influenced and constructed by varying degrees of POWER and PRIVILEGE afforded as a result of factors from one's culture, race, sexuality, gender, and/or other diverse influences.
- Recognizing positionality involves awareness that due to histories of power, oppression, & marginalization, we occupy a social identity position in relation to 'cultural norms/normalcy,' that are defined largely by Whiteness.
- To recognize your positionality is to recognize that you, and everyone else has a racial identity, & the reality that our racial/ethnic background might shape how we SEE, ARE SEEN, & EXPERIENCE the world in important & meaningful ways.

Defining Race

Our social, cultural, and political lives are indelibly shaped by the impacts of phenotypical human variation, what we often refer to as 'race'. But what really IS race? What are we talking about?

Phenotype refers to observable variation in skin pigmentation (melanin concentration) and superficial features, not genetic diversity. Our DNA remains the same...

Race is...

"a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies [which]... becomes 'common-sense' – a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world,"

(Omi & Winant, 55, 60)

Simply put, race is a socially constructed system of unequal human categorization that produces both social and material consequences that are very real, & very significant.

So What is race?



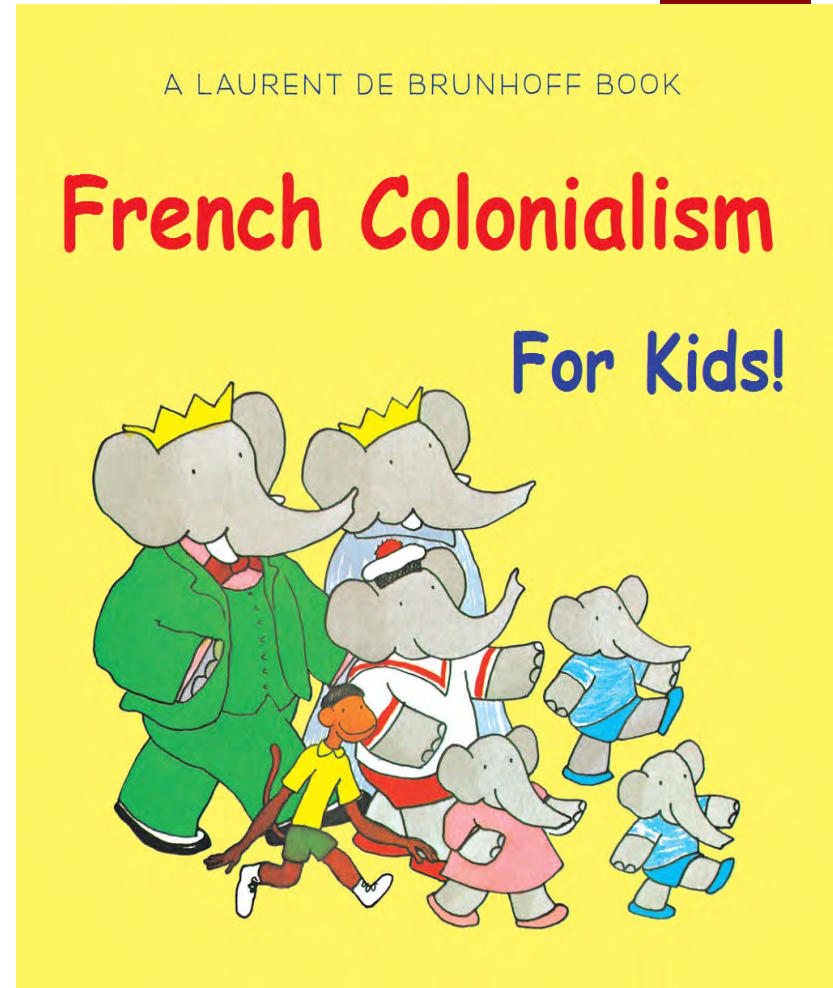
- Race is a socially constructed system of unequal human categorization—rooted in history, and based on phenotypical, and often ethnic, difference—that produces both social and material consequences that are very real, & very significant.

- It is an ideology* that has been used to make sense of human difference, & justify inequality.

- *An ideology is our belief-based framework for understanding how the world is, should, and can work

Racial Messaging, Socialization, & Identity

- We are constantly immersed in racial & colonial messages, whether we realize it or not
- This messaging is subtle – the view from the White Racial Frame encourages us to ignore the nature of these messages, & cast them as non-racial
 - The less these messages relate to/impact us, & our positionality (identity) the less likely we are to see them, or appreciate the magnitude of their impacts
- Whether we see them or not, the impacts of this messaging on our lived identities are **VERY REAL**, operating in insidious, harmful, impactful, & lasting ways
- This process of exposure shaping our identity is called **SOCIALIZATION**.
 - We are socialized to certain messages, values, & perspectives about race, culture, & what is normal that flow from a White Racial Frame & Coloniality



Identity Development, Generally

- We all have an identity, that develops (or has developed) during our lifetimes:
 - Diffuse
 - Not actively exploring or particularly concerned about identity
 - Foreclosed
 - Accepting ideas & commitments based on our elders & immediate influences, w/o critical consideration
 - Moratorium
 - Actively exploring different identity questions, w/o making commitments to any—trying on different sorts of identities
 - Achieved
 - A stable & clear identity after having considered alternatives & arrived at central, personal commitments
- These aren't necessarily a linear trajectory—we move through these in different ways at different points in our life.

REC Development for Folks of Color

- Each and every one of us has a Racial, Ethnic, & Cultural identity (REC) (that means White folks, too) as well:

REC identify refers to how one understands one's racial affiliation & belonging based on factors both internal, and external.

- Essentially, racial identity is both a function of how we see ourselves, AND how society sees us (based on Phenotype, etc.)
- For BIPOC, REC develops through...
 - Pre-Awareness
 - ~ Ages 0-11
 - Absorbing societal messages, but not yet conscious of racial, ethnic, & cultural difference
 - Encounter
 - ~Ages 10-13
 - Gradually, or in a stunning instance, the reality of racial difference occurs, along with realization of stereotype pressures
 - Coping
 - ~ Ages 13-18
 - REC crystalizes, as Individuals make choices around how to adapt to inequity & stereotypes that allow them to feel safe, secure, & stable
- The play out with slight variation for different people, depending on context, etc.

Racial Identity Development, cont.

- For White folks, Racial, Ethnic, & Cultural identity develops through....

- Contact/ Acceptance
 - ~ Ages 0-11
 - Absorbing societal messages, reflecting systemic racist ideas, but not yet conscious of their significance or substance; a state of “colorblind” conceptual ignorance to the impacts of racism

- Disruption/ Disintegration
 - ~Ages 9-13
 - Gradually, or in a stunning instance, the reality of racial difference occurs, along with the realization of their own position in racial inequity; Often marked by extreme feelings of guilt, confusion, & shame, as personal sensations



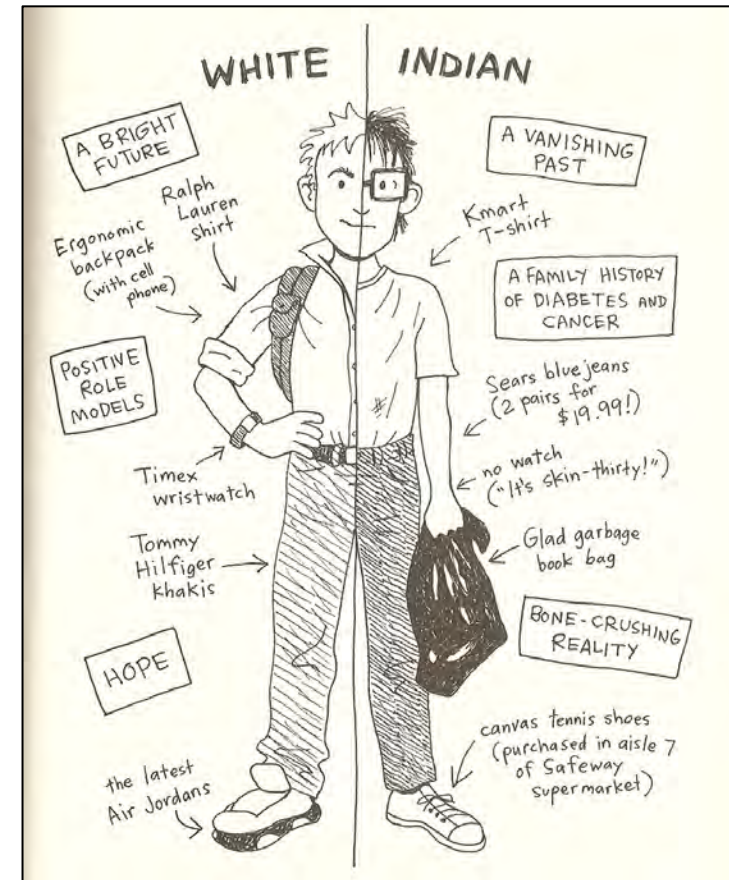
- Reintegration
 - ~ Ages 13-?
 - Guilt & shame crystalize into resistance, & a “blame-the-victim” mentality, as Individuals make choices around how to justify inequity that allow them to feel safe, secure, & stable

- Retreat / Emergence / Awareness
 - ~ Ages 13-?
 - A positive White REC identity develops gradually, as individuals retreat from toxic beliefs; Grapple with next steps, their role in systems, etc.; & eventually what action they can take to actively be Antiracist. This process can take a lifetime, stall out as incomplete, & is extremely tenuous

- These, too, play out with slight variation for different individuals, depending on context, etc.

Racial/Ethnic/Cultural Identity & Cultural Normativity

- Our RACIAL IDENTITY positions us in relation to CULTURAL NORMATIVITY, or the idea of what is normal, & what is 'Other':
 - Whites are conditioned to see their cultural practices, desires, proclivities, etc. as 'normal,' superior, & mainstream rather than being a function of their relationship to their participation in Whiteness/White culture.
 - BIPoC are conditioned to see their cultural practices, etc. AS racial, different, Other, and counter to the mainstream.
 - Non-White culture is hyphenated: e.g. Selena is 'Latin-American' music; whereas pop/country/rock/etc. (even as it appropriates) is simply 'American' music.



Mic Check

- What is “White people stuff” in terms of behavior, interest, etc.?
- What are the valued behaviors in school & society? What are the penalized behaviors & ways of being?
- How do these questions all relate to our memoirs & identity on display in comics?



Mexikid

- What does Mexikid tell us about racial identity?
- How do borders impact identity? What does it mean to be 'somewhat' of a REC identity group?
- What is 'Mexican' & 'Latinx' as positionalities? Racial? Ethnic? Both?
- How are racial positionalities (& identity experiences) created?



Racialization



- We talk about this process of 'race/ethnicity/identity as a verb / a thing that happens' as RACIALIZATION, or Racial Formation:

"The sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed."

(Omi & Winant)

- Racialization reflects the way that racial identities & societal dynamics are understood, interpreted, represented, explained, organized, questioned, etc., both on individual & group levels; with the lived experience of race always caught between the tensions of individual experience, current socio-political realities, & the impacts of systemic power/structures

The Best We Could Do

- What does *The Best We Could Do* tell us about racial identity?
- How do the politics of belonging, & dynamic (i.e. shifting based on current events & socio-political happenings) impact identities?
 - How could they shake out intergenerationally? (i.e. how would it look different from generation to generation)
- In politically charged spaces, who gets to articulate identity—you or society?

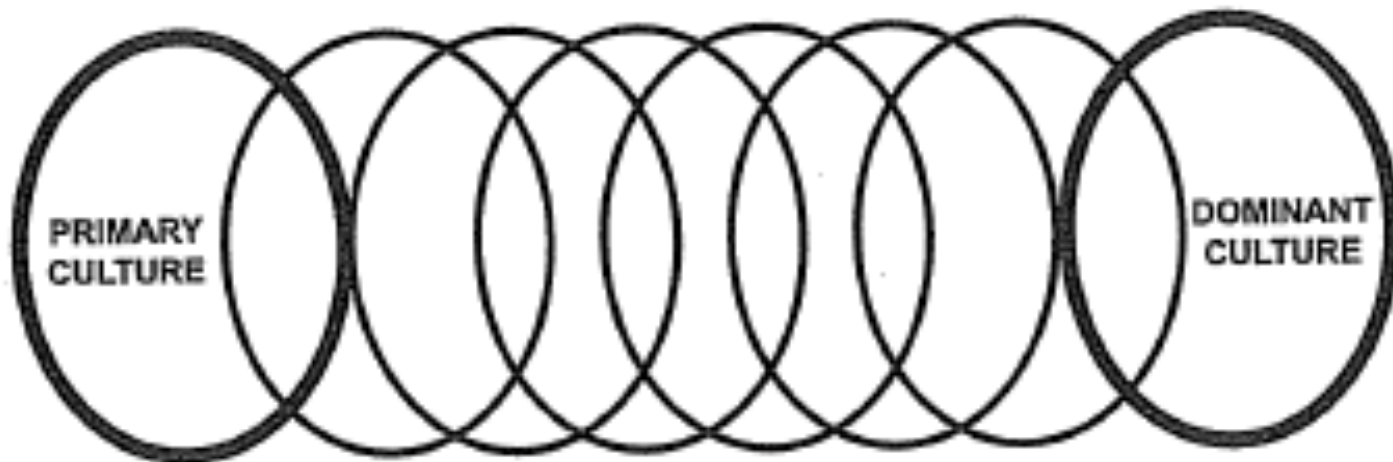


Negotiating Identity



- Essentially, BIPOC are confronted with & absorb the cultural messages, covering demands, etc. that reinforce a **NORMATIVITY** of Whiteness/White culture, & that has a psychological impact.
- As a result, BIPOC must **NEGOTIATE** an identity that will allow them to navigate a world framed by Whiteness/White Culture/ White Supremacy, living across a *continuum of biculturalism*:

Figure 3.1 The Biculturation Process Represented along a Dialectical Continuum



American-Born Chinese

- What does American-Born Chinese tell us about racial identity?
- How do opportunities/pressures for inter-ethnic (i.e. clustering together) socializing & community building shape, empower, & limit identity experiences in White Dominant spaces?
- What are we supposed to do with Chin-Kee? Why would Leung Yang include this grotesquely stereotypical character? How does that imagery function for the reader, & the text?



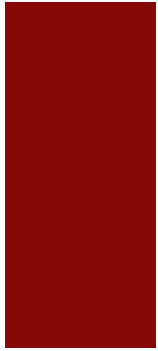
The Result of Racial Pressure: Stereotype Threat

- Racial messaging & Socialization SHAPES OUR IDENTITIES – particularly through a dynamic known as STEREOTYPE THREAT

Stereotype: a widely held, but fixed and overly simplified, image or idea of a thing or group of people

- Stereotype Threat involves:
 - Messaging through which stereotypes become THREATS to identity....
 - Different racial groups are positioned through stereotypes as having different qualities: e.g. stereotypes of Asians as intelligent, Blacks as good athletes, Latina/o/xs as Spanish speaking, etc. which impact internalized choice, as well as external opportunity and expectation.
 - Operating under these looming pressures & stereotype expectations can cause a sort of 'stage fright' in performance that ends up REINFORCING the stereotype.
 - As individuals sort through their relationship to stereotypes that are projected onto them, Stereotype threat shapes behavior & identity

High Desert



- What does *High Desert* tell us about racial identity?
- What does it have to say about the diversity of Black identity & cultural/identity experiences?
- How do our expectations of who someone should be, & their interests/cultural choices/chosen identities impact our perceptions, & others' experiences?
- How do tensions within identity groups to conform--as resistance, affirmation, etc.—shape the identities available to us? What are the consequences of divergence?
- What does racial “authenticity” mean?



Identity & Tensions of “Authenticity”



- Two common identity positions BIPOC are pressured to assume in this Continuum include:

Oppositional Identity

Creating an identity resistant to White normativity (e.g. “If I’m going to be punished for being ____, then I’m going to be as ____ as you can possibly imagine because F*** you.”)

- Emphasizing the most extreme aspects/practices of one’s race/culture/ethnicity
- Resisting & being confrontational with institutions
- Pushing on boundaries & rules that feel constraining
- Refusing to conform to general institutional policies.

These aren’t
Either/Or.
Somewhere in
the middle is the
‘code-
switching’,
balancing act
identity most
BIPOC folks have
to figure out –
what W.E.B.
DuBois called
‘Double
Consciousness’

Acting White / Mimicry

Creating an identity in the image of White normativity (e.g. “If I follow all the covering demands, reject my race/ethnicity/culture, & only spend time in White spaces, maybe I can stop being racialized.”)

- ‘Acting White’ & trying to pass in behavior, mannerisms, dress, & speech
- Participating in colorblind rhetoric, & validating institutions & systems
- Following rules & covering demands overenthusiastically, & criticizing those who don’t
- Minimizing or apologizing for racial/ethnic slights, & systemic racism (against oneself & others)
- Acting as the PoC spokesperson for Cultural racist/ covert racist groups & policies



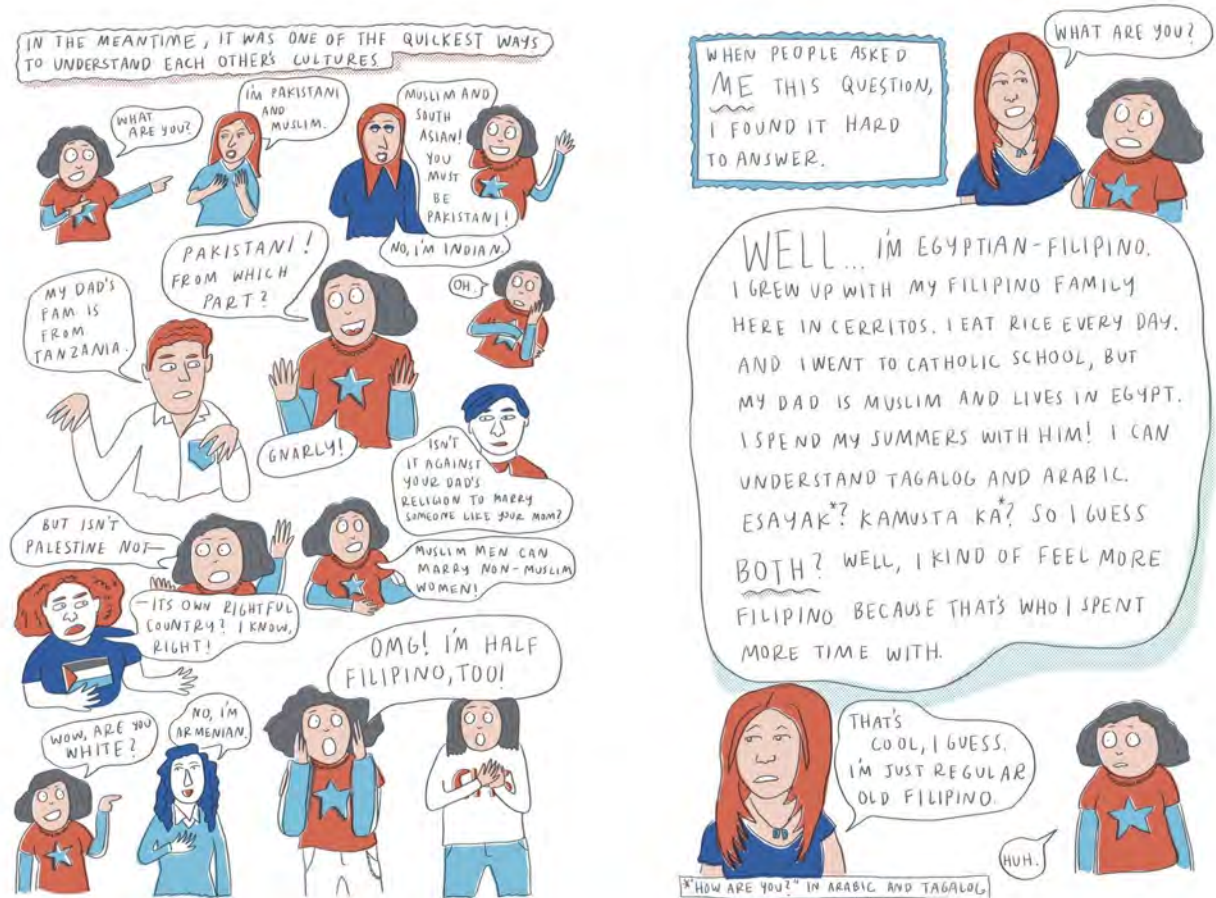
I Was Their American Dream

- What does *I Was Their American Dream* tell us about racial identity?
- How does popular culture shape our perceptions of our own & others REC identity?
- How much of REC is being a thing, & how much of REC is doing certain things?



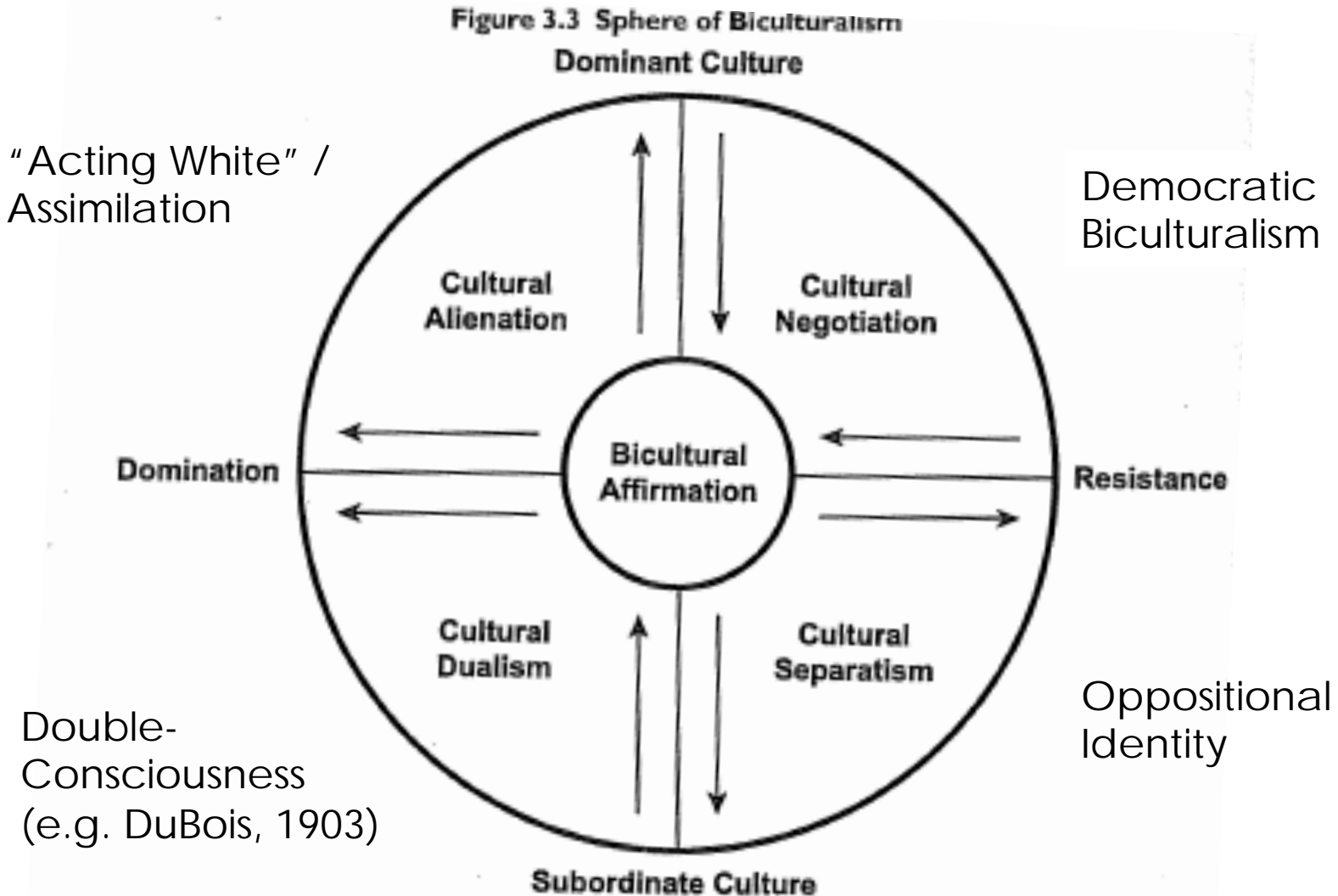
I Was Their American Dream

- How do you articulate your own REC identity?
- How does REC identity change contextually, & among different people with whom identity categories might be shared?
- Why do REC identities & identity experiences matter? In other words, why is colorblindness (i.e. not seeing race) not a viable solution to equity & belonging in a multicultural world?



Negotiating Identity

- A more complex picture looks like this:



Reflection Questions

- Revisit: What does it mean to think of Race & our identities as *verbs*?
 - Why is seeing REC as dynamic important?
- Why are REC identities significant? How are they positive aspects of modern social/socio-cultural/socio-political life?
- How do comics help expand & play with REC representation & identity construction?

