Race, the Multiple Self, & Intersectionality: Implications for Law and Social Justice

Excerpted from *Racing to Justice* 2012, by john a. powell, Chapter 7, p. 163-188

I frequently have difficulty sorting out how to think about a number of issues in my life. The problem is not so much that I do not know what I think and feel. Instead, it is that I think and feel many different and conflicting things. Sometimes I let the different voices engage one another in dialogue and find intra-subjective solutions. At other times I simply allow the discord to exist. ...

The dominant narrative of Western society would find what I have just written problematic, perhaps unintelligible. This dominant narrative--purporting to be a meta-narrative--denies that we are or can be multiple and fractured and still remain "normal." It makes many claims upon us regarding the nature of the individual. It is an ideology in the sense that Iris Young defines the word: a set of ideals that "helps reproduce relations of domination or oppression by justifying them or by obscuring possible more emancipatory social relations."

At the base of criticisms made by Grillo and other feminists is the reformulation of the self as a site constituted and fragmented, at least partially, by the intersections of social categories such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. Thus, far from being a unitary and static phenomenon untainted by experience, one's core identity is made up of various discourses and structures that shape society and one's experience within it. Many feminists and postmodernists have taken this argument one step further and asserted that the self is by its very nature fragmented: an illusory form commonly seen as static and unitary, but in reality completely fluid. Note that while much of the literature speaks of a fragmented self, "multi-self" might be a more appropriate term. Fragmented could suggest that there was once a unitary self that subsequently became fragmented, but there never was such a self. I will continue to use the term fragmented here, but not to suggest a prior unity.

Voices of Dissent

As the modern essentialist conception of individuals informed governmental and jurisprudential theory, a need arose to construct an ideology to justify certain practices, such as slavery and colonialism, that clearly violated norms emanating from the equal and essential self. Yet the very manner in which modernists defined the self justified those practices. By construing the essence of the human self as individual and autonomous, European thinkers deliberately excluded from selfhood members of non-white societies that were organized around non-individualistic norms. Similarly, the adherence of modernists to Christian beliefs justified the conquest and subjugation of non-Christian (that is, non-white) "infidels." Other complementary ideologies have been employed as needed to provide scientific (for instance, eugenics and polygenic effects) and, more recently, cultural (as in the "culture of poverty") explanations for the inequalities of Western society.

Given the exclusively defined "essence" of identity, it is unsurprising that criticisms of the Western self have arisen mainly from the groups that Western society has marginalized. Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, W.E.B. Du Bois articulated his anguish as an African American trying to attain a sense of self-unity in a society that defined him in ways that contradicted his own sense of identity:

> The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world---a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others… One ever feels his two-ness… The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, ---this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.

Du Bois's reflections suggest the postmodern, intersectional self, the self of "others" fragmented by society's dominant discourse. Importantly, Du Bois demonstrates that those whom society has marginalized and dehumanized experience the unitary self not as an essence, but as an aspiration--a "longing" for coherence and self-satisfaction. As I will argue later, it is an unattainable ideal, not just for the marginalized, but for all. The unitary self is an illusion that the dominant white male is able to maintain because of his centrality in modern discourse, which operates to make incoherent any other claims.

Zora Neale Hurston also challenged the idea of a unitary and static self, recounting how her experience of possessing a racialized identity was not an essential one, but rather largely a product of her placement within a societal framework:

> I remember the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida… [Then] I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders, as Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville she was no more… I was now a little colored girl.

This reflection portrays Hurston's experience of herself as both "Zora" and a nameless "little colored girl." Experience created her identity, which changed as her context changed. Concerning her sense of racial identity, Hurston wrote, "I feel most colored when I am thrown up against a sharp white background."

In such a white context, we can envision either Du Bois or Hurston struggling to reconcile an internal sense of self with the foreign, even subhuman notion offered by society. Frantz Fanon, writing about the colonizer and the colonized, articulates this conundrum that the modern self creates for marginalized groups: "Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: 'In reality, who am I?'"

Hurston's metaphor of the white background also illustrates how it is that white males may not have a similar experience of fragmented identity. Despite the normalcy of whiteness, however, white males are fragmented as well. Against a white background---within a theoretical framework that defines them as coherent and human--individual whites are free to choose the manner in which they distinguish themselves. Confident that those aspects they find most central to their identity are legitimate, white males are free to cultivate their "arbitrary contingencies" with little fear of loss of humanity. There is no dissonance between societal definitions of humanity and whites' personal experiences of humanity. Thus the smooth fit between societal norms of whiteness and the constructed identity of whites creates an illusion of coherence and racial invisibility or neutrality---of "normality." By attaining this sense of racial neutrality, white males are thus able to adhere to notions of the essentialized modern self without problematizing their own sense of identity. Or so it would seem.

The false unity and transparency of whiteness and maleness leave those who are not white males futilely seeking the sense of unity they perceive in a white male self that is in reality neither unitary nor transparent. Like Du Bois, Fanon expresses the view that it is the experience of racial subjugation that fractures the self of the colonized: "I am being dissected under white eyes [that] objectively cut away slices of my reality." Thus the pull to be an individual, especially by blacks and other others, is an effort to claim a humanity not marked by race, gender, or other considerations. It is an effort to become, or pass for, the white male. In a subtle way this error of normalizing the unstated marker for the dominant discourse shadows some of the language of intersectionality.

The Intersectional Self

As noted in the discussion of white privilege, contemporary feminist theorists have made a significant contribution to the rejection of the modern unitary self by asserting that if such a separate and autonomous self exists, it is certainly not the female self. Indeed, they propose an alternative description. Early attempts at creating a separate theory of the self, by white feminists in particular, fell prey to the same essentialist problems inherent in the modern self. As critical race theorists noted, common concepts of male and female could more accurately be described as white male and white female. By accepting the prevailing concept of the unitary, autonomous self as applied to white males, and supplementing it with an essentialist female foil, early white feminists replicated the exclusionary tendencies of the modern self. Put another way, they offered a very modern conception of the female self by acceding to Western society's demand for total, not partial, explanations. Some white feminists were aware of the problem but misunderstood its nature. They assumed that they could delineate the effects of sexism by looking at the experiences of white women "unmodified" by race. They failed to see that white is as much of a racial modifier as black and further assumed that black women's experiences and ontological space could be captured by adding the "race" and "gender" categories together. As Angela Harris notes, this new framework "reduced the lives of people who experience multiple forms of oppression to addition problems: 'racism + sexism = straight black woman's experience,' or 'racism + sexism + homophobia = black lesbian experience.'"

To extend the mathematical metaphor, these early white feminists believed that, in their experience, they could "isolate" the variable of sexism from the variable of racism, and so better understand it. Similarly, the paradigmatic racial experience became that of the minority male, in whom experiences of racism were isolated from sexism. Using this theoretical framework, it was possible to construct the experience of minority women without even considering them. Hence, this conceptualization of the female self functioned to exclude, rather than

include, all but the "typical" white female. This essentialized conception of discrimination also informed the manner in which the law addressed racism and sexism.

Feminist women of color developed the theory of the intersectional self in reaction to this flawed analysis, proposing that "women of color stand at the intersection of the categories of race and gender, and that their experiences are not simply that of racial oppression plus gender oppression." Kimberlé Crenshaw provides an explicit account of the unique difficulties and contradictions experienced by women of color in the legal and political spheres. These systems of oppression combine in synergistic ways. Furthermore, because all categories exist in relation to other categories, the intersectional self is descriptive of all individuals, not only those victimized by multiple systems of oppression. In this way, intersectionality subverts the notion of the modern self. As Angela Harris describes it, "we are not born with a 'self,' but rather are composed of a welter of partial, sometimes contradictory, or even antithetical 'selves.'" The significance of each of these fragmented selves for one's sense of identity shifts as a result of both external and internal stimuli and experience. Thus, race's role in Zora Neale Hurston's sense of identity depended on her environment.

The Multiracial Self

One insight of postmodernism that has valuable implications for how we confront oppression is the notion of the self defined in relation to both its context and its relation to other selves. William V. Dunning advances a "new concept of identity, one which is never fixed or determined, but is forever shifting because it is generated by the individual's perception of the difference between himself or herself and others within a particular system." Given this fluidity and relationality, one's own sense of identity is inextricably entwined with, and dependent upon, the identity of "others." This recognition has led to a new way of understanding racial identity: the multiracial self.

The power of this modern discourse has had fundamental ramifications for the construction of selves. Crenshaw describes how "racist ideology" arranges "oppositional categories in a hierarchical order; historically, whites represent… the dominant antimony while blacks came to be seen as separate and subordinate… Each traditional negative image of blacks correlates with a counter-image of whites." Harris notes that for "othered" groups the "experience of multiplicity is also a sense of self-contradiction, of containing the oppressor within oneself." James Baldwin takes this insight a step further and asserts that the experience of the white male is similarly contradictory, if not similarly problematic: the white male self contains the oppressed within it. Ruth Frankenberg points out that "White/European self-constitution is… fundamentally tied to the process of the discursive production of others, rather than preexisting that process."

In addition to its effects on self-perception, the multiracial self also has vast implications for how we understand racism and how the law should analyze and address it. Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, explores the ways in which the construction and invocation of the "Africanist" identity in white American literature has been central to the development of an American ethos. Morrison chronicles how the creation of the "New World" depended upon the overcoming of the ills of the "Old World" by Americans. She observes that "the desire for freedom is preceded by oppression; a yearning for God's law is born of the detestation of human license and corruption; the glamour of riches is in thrall to poverty, hunger, and debt." Morrison contends that European Americans constructed the racialized and polarized identity of blacks as concrete proof of their own transcending of this oppression, corruption, and destitution, for "nothing highlighted freedom---if it did not in fact create it---like slavery." For white American writers, this oppositional identity became a convenient and vital literary device: "Through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence--one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness" ---that is, to their sense of whiteness.

The Intersectional Thesis Reconsidered

The theory of the intersectional self presumes that identity is marked by many intersecting traits and that the implications of this cannot be understood by simply adding these traits together. As discussed earlier, an African American female's experience is not adequately captured by adding the traits of a (white) female with that of a black (male). Thus, in terms of the law, rules that prohibit racial and gender discrimination by addressing them as discrete phenomena do not adequately extend protection to a person marked by both subordinate gender and racial status. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, for example, treats sources of discrimination as theoretically distinct by declaring: "It shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer… to discriminate against any

individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin."

The intersectionality thesis, however, can be understood to describe not just the sites of discrimination, but also the nature of the self at these same intersections. That is, the intersectional self can be construed as multiple because it is defined by the intersections of oppression. One of the possible implications of this notion of intersectionality is that a self not marked by systems of oppression (white, male, heterosexual, etc.) is not necessarily multiple.

This conclusion, however, is a serious conceptual error that post-modernism and feminism have rejected, even if somewhat ambivalently. Such an understanding of the intersectional self leaves the "longing for coherence" seen in the experiences of oppressed groups uncritically situated in the dominant and dominating narrative. And if race and gender always mark the self, then the white male also is marked. He is no more a unitary, cohesive individual than is the black female, in spite of whatever lack of symmetry exists between them.

We might help expose this asymmetry by focusing on the marks of privilege as well as the marks of oppression. Marks of privilege will vary at different sites, times, and cultures, but once we develop a working list, we can consider what should be added or modified at given sites. A preliminary list might start with male, white, Christian, able-bodied, heterosexual, and middle class. If an individual possesses all the possible markings of privilege at a site, that person holds the maximum privilege available. The advantage to this method of analysis is that it marks the unmarked and helps to expose the interdependency of privilege and oppression. It also makes it clear that all selves are at least partially constituted and multiple. But a problem remains in thinking about intersectionality in this way. The approach I have just suggested implies that each of the marking categories is unitary; it implies that while gender and race may create an intersection, gender and race are unitary concepts. This is clearly wrong. Just as categories intersect to create a composite, each category itself is a composite.

As I have posited in previous chapters, when we look at whiteness, we see that it is made up in part of what it excludes, especially with respect to blackness. The excluded other does not function only externally, as in exclusion from a particular neighborhood; it also functions internally. The self is fractured by the part of the self – whiteness – that must deny the part that is equally present, yet loathed: blackness. In a non-mutual way, blackness necessarily carries whiteness with it, externally and internally. It is not enough, therefore, to look at how categories intersect to create a sense of self; we also must examine how the categories are created and maintained. There may be times and places where it is pragmatically important to talk about these categories as more or less unitary, because we may need the broad concepts in order to communicate. They can and should be contested, though, especially when they implicate privilege and subordination. This approach affects how we think about intersectionality in two ways: it marks the privileged individual, and it exposes the multiple and relational nature of categories without trying to do away with the categories themselves.