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Subject/Object-Oriented Identity: Considerations on the Multi-Ethnic Individual

How is identity uncertain, fluid, contested? What variables construct oftentimes competing, hypocritical and paradoxical racial and ethnic subjectivities within a given individual? I attempt to explore these questions through investigating the multi-ethnic individual. Today, the multi-ethnic person's identity frequently remains uncertain and filled with internal and external tension. Divergent groups often selectively encourage or resist the incorporation of the multi-ethnic individual, just as the individual will sometimes encourage or resist his/her incorporation into a specific community. How does this uncertainty play out?

I explore the fluidity and uncertainty of multi-ethnic identity through engaging Actor Network Theory and my experience as a Puerto Rican and Anglo multi-ethnic individual from the rural Midwest. Alternating between theoretical analysis and auto-ethnography, I integrate Murray (2008) and Latour's (2005) conception of networks, Clough and Willse' (2010) theorization of population racism, and Harold's (2009) discussion of aura and ritual to conceive of ethnic identity construction as a question of objects and subjects. I argue—and demonstrate—that circulated objects have the potential to be racially and ethnically “branded” in contradictory ways. Significantly, though, not only do people actively brand an individual, but so do courthouses, classrooms, languages, census statistics, and heritage houses. Consequently, different ethnic communities consciously and unconsciously engage these brands as markers of “authenticity.” To be sure, not all groups determine authenticity similarly. And, the individual can partially facilitate a particular branding. Yet, the multi-ethnic individual's identity largely remains uncertain, contingent upon how others formulate and interpret his/her branded “authenticity.”