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I Always Knew I Was Gifted: Latino Males and the Mestiz@ Theory of Intelligences (MTI)

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Abstract

Drawing on the work on “scholarship boys” (Carrillo, 2010; Hoggart, 1957/2006; Rodriguez, 1982), this qualitative study explores the schooling trajectories of working-class, Mexican-origin “ghetto nerds” (Diaz, 2007) in order to introduce Mestiz@ Theory of Intelligences (MTI). For the purpose of this study, “ghetto nerd” is a concept that captures the political, cultural, social, and aesthetic dimensions of three academically successful Mexican-origin males that were born and raised in low-income settings, urban communities in the U.S. This research expands on Howard Gardner’s (1985) Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory by conceptualizing a Mestiz@ Theory of Intelligences. As such, this study explores how working-class Latino males perform and embody “gifted identities” as forms of intelligence. Findings provide a critical contribution to current debates on the academic underperformance of Latino male students and notions of intelligence, and they offer the potential for cultivating and affirming gifted mestiz@ identities.

Keywords: Latino males, intelligences, urban education, gifted education, gender and education

Theorists-of-color are in the process of trying to formulate “marginal” theories that are partially outside and partially inside the Western frame of reference (if that is possible), theories that overlap many “worlds.” –Gloria Anzaldúa (1990)

No le tengas miedo a los gringos. Tu sabes mas que todos ellos. (Don’t be afraid of white people. You know more than all of them.) –Celida Angulo Carrillo (author’s mother)

It was a cold and gray January day in Cambridge, Massachusetts during my first year as an assistant professor. I entered the Harvard University campus to attend a lecture by Howard Gardner and was suddenly reminded of the surreal journey that had brought me to this point. As a high school student, I had been told, and reminded, by my teachers that nobody from my barrio would ever write a book. During my junior year of high school, a Los Angeles Police Department officer pulled me over while crossing the street on a busy Los Angeles boulevard and, at gun point, told me that one day I would grow up to be a drug addict and dealer. I had swallowed a burn and rage for much of life. I was fortunate that my mother provided me with advice that nurtured my resistance to arguments around

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my intellectual inferiority and hyper-criminality. Unfortunately, there are many working-class, Latin@² intellectual and cultural border-crossers who are marginalized by current definitions of achievement, cultural notions of intelligence, and deficit discourses germane to the Latin@ community. Moreover, psychometrics, a field of study that focuses on the measurement of human abilities, often dismisses us because it *can't see us* in our full complexity. Historically, this approach to measurement has led to the conception of the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and has been highly influential in the development of school assessments that ultimately have been used to label minority students as not particularly intelligent—or not as intelligent as Whites (Suzuki & Valencia, 1997; Valdés, 2003; Valencia, 2002). Kincheloe (2004) makes a similar critique when arguing that the unintelligent tend to be framed as “[T]hose people, who in terms of culture, race, sexual orientation, gender, or economic status, are different from the psychologists creating the classification system” (p. 15).

For working-class, Mexican-origin males, many of them interact with what Rios (2011) refers to as the *youth control complex*, a systemic apparatus of oppression and criminalization that comes from the way their identities are conceptualized by entities such as the police, the media, businesses, and schools. Notions of who gets to theorize and how intelligence is allowed to be performed are deeply imbedded in our social system and are profoundly hegemonic. In other words, it is the enactment of very specific behaviors, discourses, and styles, usually characteristics of white, middle-class dispositions, that are associated with being intelligent. As such, being male, of Mexican descent, working-class, and viewed as academically “successful” is, in many respects, rare. Historically, working-class Latino male bodies have not been associated with intelligence. In fact, there is nearly a double digit percentage gap between white male students enrolled in gifted and talented programs and Latino males (Torres & Fergus, 2012), only 49% of Latino males graduate from high school in the U.S. (Winters & Greene, 2006), and Latino males are overrepresented in low-wage labor (Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2012).

Dominant notions of intelligence and “common-sense” ideas of the social positions in which working-class Latin@s belong have continued the cycle of theoretical frameworks that fail to recognize and analyze the intelligences, knowledge, and sophisticated skills developed by those successfully straddling subjugated and hegemonic cultural worlds. It

² My use of “@” in Latin@ is an effort to be gender inclusive and to move away from the inherent sexism and assumptions of heterosexual normativity in the masculine term, “Latino.” In solidarity with Asencio & Acosta’s (2010) assessment concerning their use of the word, Latina/o, I use Latin@ to “acknowledge equally the experience of women and men in the construction of this diverse and heterogeneous community” (p. 4). Latin@ is also useful for disrupting binary notions of identity cultural production. Some scholars have used other terms to explore these issues. For instance, Rodríguez’s (2003) use of *queer Latinidad* also provides insight into “the process by which constructions of identity work to constitute one another, emphasizing ‘and’ over ‘is’ as a way to think about difference. So, *latinidad* is about the ‘dimensions’ or ‘the directions in motion’ of history and culture and geography and language and self-named identities” (p. 22). Similarly, Latin@ Critical Race theorists (Cantú & Fránquiz, 2010) use Latin@ over Latino to center the heterogeneity among those of Latin American heritage and to utilize gender inclusive language. I use Latin@ as an umbrella term which covers groups such as Mexican American/Chican@ males while still acknowledging the unique experiences of this group in comparison to other Latin@s.

is, thus, not surprising that very few studies have explored the identities and trajectories of high-achieving Mexican-origin males as scientifically valid sources to potentially inform conceptions of intelligence and giftedness.

This qualitative study of three Mexican-origin heterosexual male students that were born and raised in low-income urban settings and went on to earn graduate degrees introduces the *Mestiz@³ Theory of Intelligences* (MTI). This theory emphasizes the talents, improvisations, and intelligences used by some working-class Mexican-origin students in an effort to excel academically, spiritually, and culturally. Drawing upon extant research on *scholarship boys* (Carrillo, 2010; Hoggart, 1957/2006; Rodriguez, 1982), *critical mestizaje* (Pérez-Torres, 2006), and *mestiza consciousness* (Anzaldúa, 1987), I propose seven components of a Mestiz@ Theory of Intelligence. This research focuses on Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory as a reference point because it has had a significant impact on the intelligences debate. Further, MI provides fertile ground for exploration because it fails to account for certain intelligences that may come from living in the margins.

The work herein seeks to contribute to this research gap by introducing a Mestiz@ Theory of Intelligence (MTI) and providing a qualitative case study of how some working-class students demonstrate “intelligence.” To address these issues, the following questions guided this research: 1) How do Mexican-origin scholarship boys experience the tensions between their emerging, academic identities and their racial, ethnic, class, and gender origins?; and 2) What strategies enable Mexican-origin scholarship boys to cope with the micro-aggressions in higher education and their distance from home across time? These questions were informed by relevant studies such as Gándara’s (1995) important work on the schooling trajectories of low-income Chican@s.

Existing Theory: Subtractive Schooling and Intelligence

Growing up on welfare in south Los Angeles, California barrios immersed me in what are considered subtractive schooling (Valenzuela, 1999) contexts. Furthermore, I experienced the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, racial profiling by police, and a series of migratory experiences between Mexico, the U.S., and other linguistic and sociocultural contexts. Living a life through and in-between different cultures, languages, and social groups, with often conflicting values and expectations became commonplace. My life was about survival, cultural literacies, equity and justice, and being “at least twice as gifted” (Carrillo, 2010). I navigated multiple worlds and developed complex identities that addressed the needs of each. I never felt like I was “slow.” That is, I never saw myself as remedial. What I came to find out, nonetheless, was that I did not exist alone. I was positioned (in the U.S.) as part of a group that was not “smart enough” for traditional measurements. The social contract I was born into largely failed to account for the psychic, spiritual, cultural, and physical crossings of intellectual and cultural borders that often are a core piece of the identities of working-class Latin@ students. Many working-

³ While this work solely focuses on Latino males, I use the term “mestiz@” in order to leave the conversation open for those that may look into how MTI may or may not apply to women or those of non-conforming gender identities. I elaborate on some of these issues in the section of the paper that discusses limitations.

class Latin@ males are intellectual breakdancers⁴ who negotiate much more than bubbling in the correct answer on a test. In other words, they maneuver through multiple settings, ideologies, and identities.

Meeting Gardner and Unpacking the Multiple Intelligences Theory

In 2008, I was a Spencer dissertation fellow while pursuing a doctorate at the University of Texas at Austin. The Spencer Foundation provided me with the opportunity to have a discussion with Howard Gardner. I was interested in hearing how his views related to my thinking. While I was thankful for the time he gave me as an overzealous graduate student, I do not think I made much headway with my explanation about how intelligence may look when attending to subaltern communities. In my conversation with Gardner, I tried to hint at the fact that I examine “different” intelligences in ways that are not adequately captured by his framework. Minorities in the U.S. have long been framed as the non-intelligent sector of our population (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). There are deficit undercurrents in *No Child Left Behind*, and there exists a long history of using singular units like IQ scores to claim particular gifts that, for some reason, students of color do not seem to “have” in significant numbers. Additionally, teachers often use student performances of “smartness” to identify gifted pupils (Hatt, 2007; Suzuki & Valencia, 1997; Valdés, 2003). These teacher identifications are often based on the ability of a student to perform certain forms of middle-class cultural capital.⁵

Even under the theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1985), there is little that addresses the terms of how working-class Latin@ students are intellectually imagined. Hatt (2007) explains a relevant point:

[T]he ways smartness is constructed within schools is especially harmful for racially, ethnically, and economically marginalized youth. Smartness operates as a powerful factor in the education of marginalized students who are often wrongfully left feeling or labeled as incompetent or ‘slow.’ (p. 149)

MI theory is an important contribution and extension of previous thinking on intelligences. Gardner challenges the usefulness and validity of a single measure of intelligence (IQ scores). However, his theory remains bounded by the strengths and limitations of Western thought, Cartesian rationality, psychological scholarship, and claims of objectivity. As Kincheloe (2004) points out, MI theory is also “antidemocratic, supportive of an abstract individualism, epistemologically naïve, subversive of community, insensitive to race and socioeconomic class issues, patriarchal, Western colonialist, Eurocentric” (p. 7).

According to Gardner, there are eight core intelligences: (a) bodily-kinesthetic, (b) interpersonal, (c) linguistic, (d) logical-mathematical, (e) naturalistic, (f) intrapersonal, (g) spatial, and (h) musical. Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence pertains to the ability to

⁴ I use this term as a metaphor for the negotiation of multiple cultural worlds and identities.

⁵ For Bourdieu (1984), cultural capital refers to a set of dispositions and cultural knowledge largely informed by or associated with one’s social class. He contends that schools generally reflect and valorize the cultural capital of the middle and upper classes over those of the working and poor classes.

skillfully use one's body to achieve particular goals. Dancers, basketball players, and tennis players are among those who display this type of intelligence. Interpersonal intelligence reflects one's ability to understand (and perceive) other peoples' emotions, feelings, moods, etc. Politicians, parents, and teachers often fit into this category. Linguistic intelligence concerns the ability to use language to achieve particular goals, to be sensitive to language (both spoken and written), and to learn multiple languages. Gardner (2006) cites T.S. Eliot's ability to create the magazine *Fireside* (at age 10) and publish eight complete issues in a three-day period as example of someone having this intelligence (p. 13). Logical-mathematical intelligence consists of gifted abilities in terms of problem solving and working with logical systems. Gardner (2006) contends that this intelligence "has been thoroughly investigated by traditional psychologists" (p. 12). He also cites a long, documented history of the existence of this type of intelligence in children as a result of the work of Piaget (Gardner, 2006, p. 12).

Naturalistic intelligence refers to sensitivity to plants, animals, and other aspects of the natural world, including clouds and various topographical formations. Gardner suggests that this is an intelligence used by farmers and even by consumers when buying items such as shoes and clothes. Those with intrapersonal intelligence have a strong sensitivity and understanding of one's own emotions. Counselors and motivational speakers may possess this form of intelligence. Spatial intelligence emphasizes the ability to think in three dimensions. Among the capacities that make up this intelligence are spatial reasoning, mental imagery, image manipulation, and active imagination. Musical intelligence focuses on the ability to discern and create music. Key elements are also the abilities to reflect on, discern, and reproduce music. Composers and vocalists are among those that have this intelligence.

In sum, Gardner's MI theory, an example of a dominant discourse surrounding intelligence, provides a crucial step towards expanding our views on how intelligence looks and is performed by various individuals. Nonetheless, MI Theory's limitations leave ample room for reconceptualizing intelligences in more nuanced, contextual, critical, and inclusive ways. The theory remains decontextualized and not critical of various issues germane to, but not limited to, race, gender, power, class, and history. Given this, the goal of MTI is to build on and extend MI theory by taking into account the particularities of marginalized communities and individuals.

Theories From the Margins

The theoretical frame for my contribution to this work draws on ideas from *critical mestizaje* and *mestiza consciousness* and how it is utilized by *scholarship boys* in ways that demonstrate intelligences that are different from those in Gardner's MI framework.

Scholarship boys. In part, MTI draws from the work on scholarship boys. For Hoggart (1957/2006), his conceptualization of the scholarship boy pertains to the "uprooted and anxious" identities of working-class students who excel academically. Scholarship boys often experience intense "hidden injuries of class" (Sennett & Cobb, 1972) and nostalgia as it relates to their working-class roots. While an important contribution, Hoggart's notion of the scholarship boy did not take into account the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and class. It was not until Rodriguez (1975, 1982) wrote about his scholarship boy experiences that specific connections were made to

Latinos. His work has gathered both acclaim and significant backlash for some of his views related to bilingual education, multiculturalism, and assimilation. For Rodriguez, there was a necessary dichotomy between the public and private selves. In contrast, for the scholarship boys in this research, these worlds merge and are centered as primordial examples of complex, “authentic,” and multicultural ways of being, knowing, and surviving the subtractive aspects of schooling. Moreover, Rodriguez’s take on the scholarship boy is largely influenced by a more privileged elementary and secondary private-school experience. The present work differs significantly in that it focuses on the experiences of barrio boys who attended low socio-economic status (SES) public schools in urban settings.

In this research, I use “ghetto nerd” (Diaz, 2007) interchangeably with scholarship boy to center the “gifted” working-class identities of academically successful Mexican-origin male students.

Critical mestizaje. MTI also draws upon the concept of *critical mestizaje* (Pérez-Torres, 2006) to describe a form of intelligence whereby the cultural production of intelligence(s) centers the narratives and abilities drawn from the intersections of race, class, gender, and the migratory consciousness of the oppressed. Pérez-Torres (2006) explains critical mestizaje below:

Mestizaje embodies the idea of multiple subjectivities, opening up discussion of identity to greater complexity and nuance. Critical mestizaje locates how people live their lives in and through their bodies as well as in and through ideology. (p. xiii)

This critical form of mestizaje better accounts for the border-crossing intelligences of working-class students such as the Mexican-origin scholarship boys (Carrillo, 2010; Hoggart, 1957/2006; Rodriguez, 1982) in this research. Moreover, this definition captures how liminal identities interact with various forms of domination.

Mestiza consciousness. Additionally, Anzaldúa’s (1987) *mestiza consciousness* informed my conceptualization of the Mestiz@ Theory of Intelligences. According to Anzaldúa (1987), a mestiza consciousness is a form of critical consciousness that embodies the complexities, tensions, ambiguities, contradictions, and history of the U.S.-Mexican borderlands. This lens is useful for understanding how various border-crossers, such as scholarship boys, negotiate hybridity and the contradictions inherent to various sites of cultural and social difference. I do not claim that the scholarship boys in this study embody a mestiza consciousness, for such a claim would require a pro-feminist critique of patriarchy and an unpacking of male privilege. Instead, MTI draws from mestiza consciousness by making connections to specific aspects of this theory, such as the utilization of border crossing and liminal identities, negotiations of ambivalence and contradictions, as well as the use of a multiple consciousness for navigating multiple cultural worlds.

Thus, although my focus here is exclusively on heterosexual males, I contend that an analysis of subjugated knowledge requires a serious consideration of theories, such as those from Chicana feminists, which have paved the road in articulating and exposing the ways of knowing among marginalized groups (e.g., Delgado Bernal, 2001; Delgado Bernal, Elenes, Godinez, & Villenas, 2006; Latina Feminist Group, 2001; Zavella, 1991).

Moreover, in drawing on Chicana feminist theories to study men, I wish to break the boundaries of relying solely on male-centered scholarship. This, I believe, is in line with the spirit of Anzaldúa's notions of border crossing and social justice through scholarship, albeit with humility, transparency, and critical reflexivity.

Towards a Mestiz@ Theory of Intelligences (MTI)

Moving towards a Mestiz@ Theory of Intelligences encompasses a conceptual leap from a history and scientific tradition that resulted in marginalization and discrimination for many Latin@ students. The intelligences debate has a long and problematic history. In the early part of the 20th century, the hereditarianism movement gained popularity, contending that individual differences in human beings, including intelligence, altruism, and aggression, could be primarily attributed to genetics and thus racial and ethnic groups (Valencia, 2002).

Moreover, the Stanford-Binet Scale, a cognitive-based test that estimated the intellectual capacity of children by comparing them with that of "normal" children and adolescents of various ages, became widely adopted and accepted as a valid measure to classify children based on IQ scores despite its obvious limitations when used with children from diverse backgrounds (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). In the 1970s and 1980s, some of the psychometric measures related to testing were questioned, but the overall tracking of Latin@s into low academic tracks continues to this day (Carter & Segura, 1979). Intelligences and notions of "smartness" (Hatt, 2007) are often connected to positionalities that embody middle-class and whiteness-centric identities (Ford & Harris, 1994; Hatt, 2011). Therefore, whiteness serves as the ideological mirror by which the "other" (students of color) is measured. Along these lines, Hatt (2007) points out that "overwhelmingly, it is poor and/or students of color who are unjustly left feeling not smart in schools through practices such as tracking and teacher expectations" (p. 2). Interestingly, Latin@s who gain access to high performing academic tracks in K-12 schools often experience strong tensions due to deficit discourses. Thus, they are seen as engaging in "smartness trespassing" by academically excelling in ways that are not perceived as typical from their ethnic group (Carrillo, 2013).

There is a historical context that has triggered certain intelligences for survival and the pursuit of excellence in multiple domains for Mexican-origin students. In fact, since the annexation of Mexico's northern territories (in the mid-19th century) by the United States, Mexican-American/Chican@ populations have had to navigate liminal identities (Elenes, 2011). Hence, the history of Mexican-origin students is one of psychic, spiritual, and cultural hybridity. I attempt to hone in on this concept as a complex sense of being in multiplicity that serves to negotiate various aspects of schooling and every day life.

Extensive literature exists that offers prospects for understanding how one's social location (specifically as it relates to marginalized populations) can result in intelligences and "gifted" identities that are not adequately captured by MI theory or IQ tests. These gifts draw from border-crossing identities that illustrate flexible and elaborate cognitive acts that work in very hybrid ways. For instance, some Latin@ immigrant children serve as "gifted" cultural brokers (Valdés, 2003) from an early age when they assist their parents during various interactions within U.S. society. Many low-income Latin@ students negotiate streets smarts and book smarts (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Lopez, 2002)

and embody Latin@-centric *funds of knowledge* (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992), all while still attending to the needs of mainstream cultural capital found in K–12 schools. Further, there are Chican@ activist educators that “play the game”⁶ (versus selling out) by using strategies to work and succeed within the system so that they can assist in supporting issues that affect oppressed communities (Urrieta, 2009). Additionally, many low-SES Latin@ students often use a *nepantla* [in-between] *consciousness* (Anzaldúa, 1987) and a *differential consciousness* (Sandoval, 2000) to identify, address, and negotiate various contexts, situations, contradictions, and ambivalences in their everyday lives.

These creative and talented improvisations are often overlooked and not conceptualized as intelligences. This work looks at how MTI is utilized by scholarship boys in ways that demonstrate intelligences that are different from Gardner’s MI framework. I argue that dominant accounts of “intelligence” are situated within cultural productions informed by elements of power, ideology, politics, and the historical location of subjects. In other words, it is not an objective act to historically position students of color as not being among the most “intelligent.” I have not known Gardner to use examples of working-class racial minorities to exemplify MI theory. For Gardner, his search for “intelligences” often consists of identifying the knowledge and performances of cosmopolitan elites.

MTI is an elaborate navigation system. Examining the ontological straddling of scholarship boys within MTI is a particularly important area of inquiry, especially in light of scholarship that connects working-class masculinities with counter-school attitudes (Foley, 1990; Willis, 1977). MTI coincides with one of Gardner’s (2006) foundational definitions of what constitutes intelligence:

An intelligence entails the ability to solve problems or fashion products that are of consequence in a particular setting or community. The problem-solving skill allows one to approach a situation in which a goal is to be obtained and to locate the appropriate route to that goal. (p. 6)

Weaving together extant theory, I argue that MTI is made up of the following components or elements: (a) navigating/contesting oppression; (b) centering subaltern knowledge; (c) centering critical, hybrid identities; (d) straddling multiple forms of cultural capital; (e) decolonization; (f) struggling for psychic, cultural, emotional, and spiritual wholeness; and (g) remaining committed to social justice. In order to make a clear distinction from MI theory, I explain the various elements that make up MTI.

Navigating/contesting oppression. Various studies have examined the oppressive conditions faced by many Latino males who live in low-SES settings (Conchas & Vigil, 2012; Rios, 2011). This element of intelligence in MTI illustrates how success depends

⁶ Playing the game in this instance refers to how some Chican@ students position themselves as having to participate in the expectations, dogmas, and value systems of the mainstream academic world, which is embedded in Eurocentric, middle-class, individualistic, and Western values, in order to excel academically, without compromising (which would be seen as selling-out) socio-political and cultural values and commitments.

on how well individuals can navigate and contest oppression via creative and empowered strategies. This ongoing problem solving requires critical reflection, as well as mental, spiritual, and emotional endurance. Moreover, this intelligence helps to mediate feelings of hopelessness and despair.

Centering subaltern knowledge. Centering knowledge that comes from “below” or from the margin is another important component of MTI. As Cammarota (2008) points out in his own ethnographic work on Latin@ students:

[Linear assimilation into dominant culture and knowledge claims] will probably not be sufficient to mitigate tensions of severe oppressive forces that limit opportunities and well-being. To make the best of a bad situation, young Latin@s must creatively draw from a variety of cultural resources and strategies to maintain their dignity, positive sense of self, and hope for a better, more beneficial future. (p. 13)

In many ways, centering subaltern knowledge, by “keeping-it-real” and “not selling out,” is used as a political philosophy that strengthens a commitment to social justice and elevates the prospects for academic success. It is not a negative trait, but a more “authentic” positionality considering the hybrid lives and diverse cultural worlds that many low-SES Latin@ students inhabit. This claim/notion differs from the dichotomies inherent to research that suggests that fears germane to “acting white” and a working-class habitus can derail academic goals for minority students and working-class males (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Willis, 1977). Instead, it posits that centering subaltern knowledge is a form of intelligence that strengthens those who use it.

Centering critical, hybrid identities. In some ways overlapping with other components of MTI, this element emphasizes the intelligence derived from living in hybridity and from a critical orientation. As such, this idea draws heavily from Anzaldúa's (1987) notion that Mexican-origin people live in a borderland state that is engulfed in contradiction, ambiguity, and *nepantla* (in-between) states of consciousness.

Straddling multiple forms of cultural capital. A key piece of MTI pertains to how intelligences are not bounded and separate ways of knowing but are instead multifaceted positionalities that interact with the needs and situations across class, race, ethnicity, and gender. This aspect coincides with work done on African American students and the notion of “cultural straddlers” (Carter, 2005); the reconceptualization of cultural capital (Yosso, 2006), which emphasizes the community cultural wealth embedded within various communities of color; and “cultural organizing,” (Cammarota, 2008), whereby Latin@ youth “glean resources from a variety of sources—both dominant and subordinate—to organize the conditions and experiences of life to better suit the human drive for creativity and self-determination” (p. 10). The Mexican-origin ghetto nerds in this work exemplify this form of intelligence from a young age.

Decolonization. Excelling academically is in part driven by a search for decolonizing knowledge and a creative resistance strategy that aims at achieving a continuous and reflexive decolonization process. Here, I draw from Walter Mignolo's (2007) ideas:

De-coloniality, then, means working toward a vision of human life that is not dependent upon or structured by the forced imposition of one ideal of society

over those that differ, which is what modernity/coloniality does and, hence, where decolonization of the mind should begin. The struggle is for changing the terms in addition to the content of the conversation. (p. 459)

This stance produces sometimes painful but also empowered identities that aim at staying “true” to community and the historical self all while pursuing mainstream demands in school. This component also aligns well with the question that Cammarota (2008) suggests reflects a salient concern for young Latin@s: “[W]hat if he or she covets self-authenticity while simultaneously striving for academic success?” (p. 6). MTI posits that striving for decolonization is a form of intelligence that is successfully deployed by ghetto nerds.

Struggling for psychic, cultural, emotional, and spiritual wholeness. This element connects well with many of the other components that make up MTI. Carrillo (2010) and others (Urrieta, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999) have pointed out that achieving academic success within “whitestream” (Urrieta, 2009) schools often creates all sorts of tensions and identity struggles for many low-SES Latin@ students. Intelligence relates to emotional and spiritual wholeness, extending beyond traditional notions of education. Coming from marginalized spaces often illuminates knowledge about how schooling can be just an academic exercise that is devoid of holistic growth. This intelligence is also about contesting Cartesian notions of mind-body separation.

Remaining committed to social justice. This element posits that achieving high levels of formal schooling is an important way to achieve social justice goals. The knowledge, resources, and cultural and social capital that are attained by pursuing higher education are perceived as valuable tools for pushing for equity in communities of origin, schools, knowledge production, and in the larger society. As such, “success” is problematized and removed from bounded, linear, individualistic definitions. Further, a commitment to social justice complicates the notion that credentials (e.g., degrees, diplomas) and access to higher levels of consumption power equates with “making-it.”

Methodology

To explore how some Latino males perform gifted identities, I conducted a study of four Mexican-origin males who attended low-SES K–12 schools and went on to earn graduate degrees (Carrillo, 2010). This qualitative study draws from a desire to build on Rodriguez’s (1982) take on the scholarship boy by providing a critical perspective on how some Latino high achievers interpret social class mobility and how they strategize to “make-it” within overt and symbolically oppressive discourses and institutions. This article focuses on three portraits that provide particularly salient data.

Analytical Approach

Drawing from the work on scholarship boys (Carrillo, 2010; Hoggart, 1957/2006; Rodriguez, 1982), Anzaldúa’s (1987) *mestiza* consciousness, and critical *mestizaje* (Perez-Torres, 2006), this study explores the life histories of three scholarship boys.

Elements of *portraiture* (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) were also used to develop holistic portraits. To analyze each portrait, I used my *cultural intuition* (Delgado Bernal, 2001) as a self-identifying Mexican-origin scholarship boy to explore themes in

this research. Additionally, the portraits were analyzed from a critical orientation. As such, a focus on power was central to the way I developed arguments germane to the intelligences that the scholarship boys embodied and performed. In this same vein, this study rejected detached, objective claims to inquiry and instead drew from Harding's (1993) *situated theory* and Haraway's (1988) *situated knowledge*.

Coding occurred in two phases: open and focused (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). That is, I worked first through the data in ways that were open to various possible leads and lines of inquiry. Initially, coding consisted of open-ended reviews of the transcribed data. For example, I noted that the scholarship boys seemed to resist assimilating into some cookie-cutter box about what an educated Latin@ is, but they did not reject schooling completely. It was from this type of open coding that I began to notice how they used gifted identities to navigate many contradictions and tensions related to identity and academic success. As such, I utilized focused coding to move in the direction of a few significant themes. This process helped me to develop nuanced sketches that eventually became portraits geared towards addressing the key arguments of this work.

Data Collection

Snowball sampling (Weiss, 1994) was used to identify the participants. After reading an essay that I authored (Carrillo, 2007), in which I discussed my schooling trajectory, many students and faculty contacted me to share their connections to the "scholarship boy" type themes in the piece. From my communication with these students and professors, I gathered referrals that aided me in selecting three participants. I conducted and transcribed three interviews per participant, each lasting from one to one and one-half hours in length. Triangulation consisted of the use of documents, my own reflexive journal, and life-history interviews. I drew from Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993) to create a reflexive journal that explored logistical questions, provided initial interpretations after each interview, and unpacked critical reflections about the research process.

Participants

I selected scholarship boys who fit the following criteria: (a) were raised in working-class families, (b) are of Mexican-origin, (c) were raised in urban communities, (d) attended low-SES public schools, and (e) earned graduate degrees. They were all first-generation college graduates of universities located in the southwestern U.S.

Negotiating Multiple Worlds: MTI and Portraits of Mexican Ghetto Nerds

For it is a very different matter, and results in a very different intelligence, to grow up under the necessity of questioning everything-everything, from the question of one's identity to the literal, brutal question of how to save one's life in order to begin to live it. (Baldwin, 1985, p. 516)

When critically examining research on scholarship boys, I began to see how the intelligences of Mexican-origin ghetto nerds received minimal attention. Beyond class anxieties, there is an immense research gap that fails to account for the skilled border-crossing gifts of Mexican-origin scholarship boys. Here, I provide portraits of three

Mexican-origin scholarship boys—David, Carlos, and Mario⁷—by making direct connections to MTI in ways that illustrate specific components of this theory. I connect each case to two salient elements of MTI and I conclude by connecting all of the cases to how they remain committed to social justice. In order to offer context, I begin this section with brief biographies of each ghetto nerd.

David is a professor emeritus at a top-tier university located in the southwestern U.S. He is one of the pioneers of Chican@ studies and continues to engage in activist work. He grew up in two urban areas in the southwestern U.S., and he earned a PhD from a prestigious liberal arts university located on the West Coast.

Carlos is an assistant professor of human development at a university located in the southwestern U.S. He was raised, as he puts it, at the crossroads between “poverty and sin.” He attended public schools in a low-income neighborhood with mostly Latin@ and African-American students. Carlos now teaches at the university where he earned his undergraduate degree. His research, activism, and scholarly commitments are to the Latin@ migrant community.

Mario is working on a doctoral degree in Curriculum and Instruction at an elite university located in the Southwest. Like all of the scholarship boys in this work, he attended a public school that primarily served urban, low-SES students. He is a former public school teacher and is now an administrator at a middle school in his community where he grew up. Mario is a community activist and was inspired early in his life by the work of Saul Alinsky and Cesar Chavez as well as by the inequities that the Latin@ community experiences in his home state. Additionally, as stated earlier, each ghetto nerd examined in this study is a heterosexual Mexican-American/Chican@ male who is currently married with children.

David: Navigating/Contesting Oppression and Centering Subaltern Knowledge

It is important for you to be a scholar-activist, otherwise the colonized mind is alive and well. –David

David has a long history of contesting oppression and centering the knowledge of his Mexican-American/Chican@ community. He is a key figure of the Chican@ movement. His personal journey consists of contestations over his agency in the midst of hegemonic conditions. He reflected:

I graduated from a barrio school as an honor student, a smart Mexican, I thought. It was 1968. I did not know at the time I was victim of a vulgar tracking system. I got straight As but I did not get all the requirements for [the top-tier university system in his home state]. So I had to go to the community college.

Tracking, which has been a salient feature of the urban, low-SES schooling experience for many Latin@s, helped to develop David’s critical consciousness and assisted him in confirming his argument that Mexican-origin people live in an “internal

⁷ These are pseudonyms used to protect the privacy of participants.

colony” within the U.S. David has often had to deal with various forms of racism. He has been questioned for parking his car in the faculty area and has been categorized as a “foreigner” during faculty meetings where he has been sometimes asked, “What part of Spain are you from?” According to David, “Capitalism and white supremacy have nurtured sexism, racism, and homophobia.” He often mentioned his association with “revolutionary” thought and his various readings of Gramsci and other critical thinkers. His active involvement in the Chican@ movement had him on the front lines of the scholarly and protest side of politics and social change.

David wrote one of the classic, foundational books in Chican@ studies, even amidst immense roadblocks including various publishers that did not want to publish his work. Thus, his use of MTI consists of centering the knowledge of his Chican@ experience. Moreover, his source of inspiration, as an “intellectual warrior,” is a sense of being that is connected to the Chican@ community. In many ways, David remains committed to navigating oppression by speaking out against it at his university campus and in the community at large. Gardner fails to address these types of intelligences. This neglect occurs even as Gardner (1999) suggests that each intelligence evolves in an effort to deal with certain conditions in the everyday world (p. 95). David reflected on the complexity of his journey and his role in the academy:

I have long asked myself the big question, which is: what am I, an activist, doing in the academy anyhow? We did not have a critical mass within the structure, but I made it through, because I was present in a historic moment. Institutions serve the state. Their historic role is to produce intellectual elites. Their historic role is to perpetuate the myth of democracy and simultaneously reinforce the Eurocentric culture.

By committing to Chican@ causes and scholarship, he centers his subaltern positionality and finds a way to excel within mainstream institutions. He believes that many new Latin@ scholars are compromising their integrity by becoming part of certain cliques and publishing circles. His advice was:

Think about your contribution as a public intellectual that speaks truth to power. Be your own man and woman but have the audacity to speak truth to power. You have to publish within the realities of the institution in mainstream journals. But also publish in other places.

Being his “own man” seems to entail that he fights back against cliques and structures that reproduce white privilege and those that do not attend to the needs of marginalized populations in the U.S.

As a barrio boy from the streets of two urban southwestern cities, David also did not compromise a certain kind of “urban-barrio-cool aesthetic” as he navigated whitestream (Urrieta, 2009) universities. His notion of “keeping it real” and opposing the status quo, including opposing certain forms of authority, did not lead to anti-learning sentiments or stalled schooling achievements. His nuanced ghetto nerd male identity seeks to use power and privilege as a faculty member to speak his notion of “truth” to the hegemonic state. Knowledge is crucial for speaking out and molding arguments that reflect his views of

social justice. While he no longer has the knees to play basketball with students at the university gym, he remains young in spirit based on his ideals. He told me:

The love, you know, it conquers all. With the love you speak truth to power...I do not feel my age. The struggle keeps me strong. Keeps me young. People get burned out with the struggle. Life is struggle and struggle is life.

Additionally, David was moved by the power of marginalized knowledge that spoke to eliciting social change. He became part of that voice and was also inspired by other organic intellectuals.⁸ He reflected:

I was inspired, you know, by Antonio Gramsci. His *Prison Notebooks*. He wrote on toilet paper. I am going to prepare myself to do the same things, but I have to be a real smart Mexican. I wanted to be a real smart Mexican.

David is a “real smart Mexican” and remains committed to centering subaltern knowledge and fighting against oppression.

David’s own decision-making and reflexivity illustrate how MTI informs a life-management system that assists ghetto nerds with dealing with oppressive conditions. Moreover, David entered the academy as a barrio boy, and positioned himself in some ways like Rodriguez (1982) when he stated: “I have stolen their books. I will have some run of this isle” (p. 1). David’s run of the isle pertains to learning and creating a knowledge canon that takes him out of the margins. He makes a deal with himself by naming the pain and silences, committing to loving his people, and engaging in a revolutionary praxis.

Carlos: Straddling Multiple Forms of Cultural Capital and Centering Critical, Hybrid Identities

Within those measurements of intelligence there is an implicit theory of being. Shit you pick up in school. When it comes to one’s nature, these measurements would not understand that. –Carlos

Carlos grew up wondering if his smartness would ever be cultivated after his promising elementary school years. From middle school on, he was criminalized and silenced by an overt and hidden curriculum that failed to name his intelligences and as such, endorse his form of hybrid and embodied multifaceted humanity. He commented:

There are people who are truly different yet we are all put in one system. Not everyone fits the norm. It’s like crossing the border, going from one country to another. In that border-crossing exchange, we have the development of a new consciousness, where the order of things including dichotomies and linear truths

⁸ According to Gramsci (1971/2000), organic intellectuals are individuals that come from a particular class/community context. In his view, they have the potential to counter hegemonic structures and ideologies.

are reworked to respond to tense ambiguities and subtractive schooling conditions.

Carlos had an internal voice that told him that he was “smart,” but, often times, it was something that was silenced in public spaces. He addressed this issue:

So I go through the system knowing I am smart, but I am not recognized. Other people are recognized, but you know that is flawed. I stayed in school because I had some ideas, come on, I know I do, even though I did not get the respect. I was in palm-pilot mode for many years. I was told in some ways to not believe in myself.

Many Latino males are not recognized. That is, there are discontinuities and animated voices where our forms of smart may or may not be part of the teacher’s gaze. Even for the “winners” of the schooling sweepstakes, such as the scholarship boys in this research, there is a sense of being made peripheral.

Carlos had to force himself into intellectual existence. He explained that much of this came from his connection to the library:

But the book [Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*] is cool because it allows us to ‘not know.’ Shit, it even allows us to be stupid and circle words like rivulet and dissipated. That gets at the allied nature you allude to. Only an ally, a true ally in your self-development would allow you to stop mid-sentence and tag them-up. *Neta*, that’s the frame I see it through. The library as the ally.

In the library, like at the gym, he worked out and sought out critical forms of scholarship and literature. He also used his form of MTI to contest discourses related to his brilliance by seeking out books that reminded him that he “was smart again.”

The home knowledge, community knowledge, and the strategies that came from being ignored or deemed second rate were also key pillars for intellectual growth. Carlos explained his predicament:

I knew how to interpret, inform, hypothesize like any white student. Schools are not really good in general at tapping at resources we bring to the table. That shit my *abuelita* [grandma] taught me, I could never bring that to school.

Carlos knew he was intelligent, but he experienced the racial, class, and gendered aspects of marginalization. Schools and teachers positioned him as a Latino male body that was not intelligent. In some ways, this challenged his interest in schooling (but not learning). Nurturing a working-class, Mexican-origin notion of a reasonable man of letters required that Carlos seek out the library because in K–12 schools he experienced deficit thinking. In fact, the gender and racial script in most of his K–12 schools entailed that people who looked like him were considered “dumb” or “trouble-makers.” He told me once about how unexpected it was for someone like him, with his barrio posture and “look,” to sit on the floor in the library for hours, sometimes twice a day, putting in the “work of the mind.”

In this way, his positionality is about men getting power through building their intellect and developing resistance to school discourses that frame Latino men as dangerous and intellectually inferior to white people. This is different from some of the studies on working-class men that have found that they develop full-blown counter-school attitudes due to various gender and class discourses within schools (Rios, 2011; Willis, 1977). He consistently has had to negotiate these various forms of cultural capital, those that he brought with him to school as a barrio boy and the expectations of mainstream schools. He described his college experience to me: “I loved being in class and having the chance to serve them.” “Serving” is a term he used here to describe his ability to confront, critique, and inform the “misinformed,” among his college classmates.

For Carlos, centering his belief in being a smart student became an ongoing battle. He elaborated on the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and “smartness”:

I knew I was special. I felt special. I knew I was not slow. A lot of it was race and that we were not as well liked in middle school and high school compared to white peers. Things changed after elementary school. Being in a classroom you want your smartness cultivated, but later you are not invited to the party. So you develop all sorts of responses to address this mistreatment.

According to Kimmel (1996), men make themselves within a historical and social context. For Carlos, his critical, hybrid identity pushed him to create spaces in which he could “remember” that he was intelligent. MI theory fails to account for the intelligences that Mexican American scholarship boys possess as a consequence of their upbringing in a bicultural context and experiences of class mobility.

Carlos was never told he should apply for college while in high school. In fact, the journey that led to him to earn a PhD at a top-tier research university started in a very tragi-comedic and inspirational way. One day, not long after his high school graduation, he rode his bike from his barrio community to a little hill. From there, he saw a community college and became absorbed by the idea that he could attend this place of “higher learning.” Inspired, he bought a backpack and applied for financial aid. Initially, he thought his dream was shattered when he read that his expected family contribution was 90 dollars. He thought he had to come up with that money. After realizing that this was not going to be the case, he enrolled in college and went on to earn stellar grades. He explained at the doctoral level, “I did really well for myself. I was top of my class; nobody can take that away from me.” His current struggles with politics in the academy and his quest for, as he puts it, “doing meaningful work” keep him busy. He straddles his work with the migrant community, his notion of “barrio truth,” and various discourses and expectations from within the whitestream academy. In the midst of all this, he continues to excel in his own ghetto nerd way. He recently was awarded the most prestigious fellowship in his field.

In the end, Carlos embodies the positionality of a gifted border crosser. His use of MTI encompasses ongoing improvisation and mastery of multiple cultural worlds. His experiences demonstrate that “racially stigmatized masculinities” (Lopez, 2011) require that power and resistance be negotiated through culturally situated and flexible responses. Moreover, the “disadvantages” (Anyon, 1997) that are part of the journeys of those who attend “ghetto schools” are mediated by elastic and hybrid mobilization of cultural capital

and critical identities. He was able to maneuver and negotiate the expectations within different social-class contexts and network across class lines. This maneuvering is creative and often in opposition to the status quo.

As Carlos illustrates, mestizo bodies often draw creative and powerful forces. Pérez-Torres (2006) makes this point quite well: “Mestizo subjects carry their body through globalized circuits of exchange. As part of this process, new identities are forged, new relations founded, new epistemologies undertaken in an innovative and inventive process creating new knowledge” (p. 215). The knowledge that stems from hybridity helped Carlos to survive and accomplish his goals within school, community, and beyond. Moreover, this use of MTI pertains to knowing that the hegemonic politics of “smartness” (Hatt, 2011) requires a forceful battle in the name of the holistic, empowered, and “intelligent” self. One has to know what is going on to then navigate the myths and toxic effects of social constructions designed by whitestream institutions and dominant knowledge structures.

Mario: Decolonization and Struggling for Psychic, Cultural, Emotional, and Spiritual Wholeness

Being smart does not get you to graduation, being a puppet does. –Mario

According to Paulo Freire (1974), “Critical consciousness is integrated with reality; naïve consciousness superimposes itself on reality; and fanatical consciousness, whose pathological naïveté leads to the irrational, adapts to reality” (p. 39). For Mario, his journey started in a low-SES community, made up mostly of Latin@ and African American students. His critical perspective on schooling and sensemaking of “reality” resulted in intense battles with the expectations that he assimilate into the status quo. In his words, “many middle-class whites and High-spanics [sold-out Latin@s],” have an easier time “making-it” and graduating. He framed these students as puppets of the status quo.

In contrast, his negotiation was with a dominant class that he believed violently expected assimilation into its cultural expectations around individualism, competition, linear and Eurocentric notions of schooling, and middle-class tastes. Similarly, the scholarship boy, Richard Rodriguez (1982), reminded us that schooling is not a natural human endeavor:

Haunted by the knowledge that one chooses to become a student. (Education is not an inevitable or natural step in growing up.) Here is a child who cannot forget that his academic success distances him from a life he loved, even from his own memory of himself. (p. 48)

For Mario, like Rodriguez, education became the polemic site of rewards and significant separation from the life he lived as a kid. He engaged in strategic invisibility in an effort to seek wholeness on his terms. In this sense, he sometimes purposely did not meet deadlines, ignored emails from faculty, or failed to show up to graduate-student functions, in the name of seeking critical distance, reflexivity, and authenticity on his own terms.

Also, Mario has had to negotiate the tensions of “rising-up” according to dominant society’s notions of success while trying to hold on to “the past” and an initial working-class consciousness that groomed his resistance to the “norm.” Part of his intelligence work encompassed working through the dimensions of his identity that nurtured his understanding of how to perform the rituals of academic success, all while respecting his family, culture, and knowledge that came from his ghetto nerd experiences. For Mario, this is a psychological and spiritual fight that deals with ethics, love, and the aesthetics of seeing strength and beauty in those aspects that Middle America tells Latin@s to “leave behind.” He sees most people as co-opted by a false and dehumanizing vision.

In contradiction, Mario strives for those things that are sometimes ignored by schools: humility; a counter-efficiency identity; and an anti-competition ethos that includes intimacy, love, care, and community. This, according to Mario, is a painful, confusing, and ongoing internal dialogue. He exposes the dialectical structures that shaped his experiences all while decolonizing himself by challenging metaphors that he felt were subtractive. He also has had a long history of questioning his teachers. He told me:

I remember social studies with a coach as a teacher. He had biases. When he brought up Columbus, I was like: How does it make sense for me to come to your house and say I discovered you? He got offended. You know, white folk, they center themselves sometimes and tell us the history. When we shoot back, they get nervous. I began to think about why Latinos quit school. You cannot have an intelligent conversation in public schools, bro. I was suspended for insubordination.

In this context, where he identified minoritized populations as being exploited by Anglos, he began to see, as he often says, “the world as it is versus the world as it should be” (he draws from Saul Alinsky). He read all the ethnic studies literature he could get ahold of and also became trained in community organizing. He also saw the Southwest as a colonial space where “white men with rifles still make up the statues in our universities and neocons⁹ in the legislature are clueless about our needs.” In Mario’s analysis, his state of residence is tainted with policy decisions informed by white supremacy, deficit thinking by teachers, systemic racism, and a historical agenda informed by Manifest Destiny. Hence, his views about becoming an educated person are informed by a macro world that positions Latin@s as the other.

To seek wholeness, Mario sometimes ignored emails from faculty committee members or took semesters off. He sees this as a way to get a PhD his way, even if it means taking a little longer. Also, he is at odds with having to get approval for his writing. His struggle is intense:

⁹ Neoconservatives. Although not neatly aligned with various views on this term, Mario is mainly referring to the extreme right-wing political infrastructure whose policies and symbols still make-up a core part of his home state.

Oh man, I feel it on a daily basis. It's like this. If I do not finish my doctorate, this is the reason why: I have to make a choice. The choice is: How much of me will be left? It will not be because I cannot meet the academic standard or because of will. No! Nah, it has to do with the me of yesterday and the one they are trying to create today...seriously, when I write a paper, I have to fit into the norms of the middle class. If I do it all just to move up, it is not worth it...every time you lie to your heart, you erase yourself.

When thinking through this comment, Mario posed the complexity of intellectual masculinities facing issues of class, gender, and history. He mentioned to me that he did not want to be a “poser” or “whited-out” but that he also refused to stay away from mainstream institutions of higher learning. He constantly questioned where he should live, how he should pursue his life, and what goals were worthy for a Latino male that was seeking to be decolonized.

Mario lived in the same barrio community where he grew up and found this to be one cornerstone of his toolkit that made him feel like he was not selling out. Yet, he believed in the dream of getting a doctoral degree and having access to the power that may come with it. He drove many hours or got on an airplane just to attend class. He refused to be fully immersed in the college student role, but did not leave the process entirely. Mario stayed close to his community, always reflected in critical ways, and creatively found ways to not fully lose himself in the achievement discourse so that his notion of wholeness and dignity were kept in tact. His embodiment of MTI clearly illustrates how “[C]ompeting and compelling forces pull the mestizo body—and its sociocultural significance—in different directions. Or perhaps, more abruptly, the mestizo body moves in multiple directions as it enacts numerous, frequently contradictory, discourses of identity” (Pérez-Torres, 2006, p. 46). This pull of hybrid agency is deeply contextual, intersectional, painful, and often elicits new questions and possibilities.

Sometimes, Mario battled through depression for short periods of time and then was ready to get back into the “game” rather quickly. Other times, it was about resistance by way of ontological recluse. He isolated himself and broke down internally. He eventually designed strategies for seeking the justice that was not easily and openly available in the spaces where he attended school and in his own position as an administrator at an urban middle school. For instance, when schooling became problematic, he took semesters off or slowed down the process of his dissertation writing. He caught his breath and began to create a strategy for how to continue his studies without fully becoming hyper-immersed in the individualistic, competitive nature of academia.

Resisting hegemonic norms is part of the negotiations, but not the end of the story. Mario also had to work through some issues in his own community:

Looking back, I should have just got a GED. My high school was a war zone. I wore two masks. One mask to pass the class and another to watch my back. Crazy fools were watching you. You had to kick it with them, those hanging outside. I had to be in switch mode, to survive. I learned that then, how to switch, and navigate all this information. You can identify the lie, the punk, the rawness of it all.

Mario wore multiple masks as he engaged a border-crossing consciousness. His dedication to the “rawness” exemplified his commitment to an identity as a ghetto nerd who rejected linear assimilation and struggled through the ambivalence of being and becoming. In one of the interviews, Mario told me, “We come from a different experience from the middle class. You will never see me at a Starbucks playing Sudoku. I can’t get too comfortable, you know, I feel the pain and struggle every day.” He navigates the tensions of being forced to become a puppet all while working through the various cultural worlds in his school. Moreover, that role-playing and switching has become a permanent part of his scholarly ethos. He identifies with the graffiti-filled alleys of life, the underdog, the maladjusted, and the forbidden knowledge, all while attempting to make sense of the more sanitized spaces of higher education and challenges in K–12. For Hoggart (1957/2006), feelings of “homelessness” are core feelings of the restless scholarship boy. In many ways, the road seems never to reach a place of tranquil sanctuary. In the colonial context under which Mario was schooled, there was always a confrontation with the various demands of domination. He embodied an existential, survival positionality. For Mario, resistance hurt, but obedience hurt more. Finding fluidity was challenged by chronic irresolution.

Gardner’s (1985) MI theory fails to capture this complex dimension, one that is salient to many oppressed groups. It involves much more than mainstream notions of bodily and cognitive mastery. More is on the line, such as struggling for and having the opportunity to live a life of dignity. In this intellectually and spiritually demanding space, aims for wholeness and decolonization stir active and ongoing sets of intelligences that aim to critically examine and understand discourses, expectations, and knowledge claims surrounding the brown body within schools.

Mario utilizes MTI when he travels between different states of being. This is a clear example of how he embodies the Mestiz@ Theory of Intelligences. He crosses multiple worlds along race, ethnicity, and class. He assesses the needs in each context and makes critically conscious decisions. Part of the essence of working through MTI entails that there is psychic and spiritual unrest as he works through the violence of engaging Eurocentric ideas and norms in the larger society.

Being grounded in struggle was crucial to how Mario positioned himself as a critical thinker and graduate student. He worked through MTI as he negotiated contradictions, ambivalence, and forms of ambiguity that are inherent to pursuing graduate study at an elite university in the United States. He engaged in critical reflexivity as he reflected:

I know the norm is unjust in historical terms and has been oppressive to Latin@s and does not relate to us. We can attach ourselves to it. We do it unconsciously sometimes, we follow the flow, but, I catch it. I see when I go into the sell-out category. Moving up is defined by whom? Knowledge is defined by whom? The dominant culture defines it, you don’t move up until they give you the credentials and you follow their rules.

As outlined by this quote, Mario contended that oppression is the result of the pressure to uphold the values and expectations of the dominant society. He works through a borderlands identity that assists him in fighting through dichotomous and top-down metaphors that are expected for all those who are “rising-up.” In this space of struggle, he

navigates a complex set of historical and discursive arrangements in search of holistic wholeness and decolonization. As he continues to ascend the academic ladder, he remains committed to his mantra: “I don't want to lose that consciousness of coming back, of being real and making a true difference.”

Weaving the Portraits Together: A Commitment to Social Justice and Extending MI Theory

Similar to Urrieta's (2009) work on Chican@ activist educators, the ghetto nerds in this research “played the game” within whitestream schools with a “strategic understanding of power and critical exertion of activist agency” (p. 33). They used this ability to enact social justice initiatives within their communities, the schools they attended, and their scholarship. Moreover, social justice drove an identity that situated knowledge and power as interconnected resources for changing the world.

This dedication to social justice is a salient trait of MTI. All of the Mexican-origin ghetto nerds in this study positioned themselves as intellectual and pragmatic “fighters” for social change. In many ways, their dedication to being on the “outside” of middle-class white male student “looks” (and positionality) spoke to what Mario described as, “not becoming too white and then forgetting the purpose of all this and who you really are. I will never get comfortable.”

Extending MI Theory

Consistently, Gardner fails to see any threat from right wing power brokers who want to create Eurocentric schools that celebrate whiteness and patriarchy as the highest forms of civilization. (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 143)

I agree with Gardner's stance that human beings are intelligent in a plethora of ways. As MTI demonstrates, those “ways” extend far beyond MI theory. The portraits of the Mexican-origin ghetto nerds in this research demonstrate that intelligences “from below” can add a mestizaje element absent in Gardner's MI theory. Moreover, while I do infer from my conversations and reading of Gardner's work that his desire to add complexity and equity to the intelligences debate is genuine, there still remain some significant blind spots inherent to his work. The decontextualized and objective claims in his theory help to solidify white privilege and, as a consequence, disenfranchise many low-SES students of color. It is important to culturally situate intelligences and to be transparent about the role of power in identifying some students as smart and gifted and others as “dumb” or “not smart enough.” As Berry (2004) points out, MI theory “reproduces the dominant, mainstream social, institutional, and civilizational structures of Western culture” (p. 237). MTI emphasizes the intellectual wealth and agency of those at the margins and positions them as having important sources of knowledge. In theorizing MTI as an embodied state of being, which is highly influenced by emotion, pain, struggle, and critical reflexivity, I am claiming that many Mexican-American/Chican@ scholarship boys embody and perform holistic forms of intelligences that move away from Cartesian notions that claim that there is a mind-body split. MTI is, in part, the result of the “soul wounds” (Pizarro, 2005) of scholarship boys. Oppression, poverty, and segregated lives serve as a laboratory for the development of gifted identities.

When I attended Gardner's lecture on "Five Minds for the Future" at Harvard University on January, 12, 2012, I asked him if he had considered the connections between mestiza consciousness and intelligences among some marginalized populations. He was confused about what I meant by consciousness. As a psychologist, consciousness was really not his area of inquiry. In addition, Gardner explained that he had never heard of Gloria E. Anzaldúa's work. I bring this up only to suggest that critical mestizaje and the border-crossing identities of the Mexican-origin scholarship boys in this research are not "named" or recognized by an MI theory that was created without their historical, cultural, and sociopolitical experiences in mind. In fact, "in research about intelligence and genius, Caucasian males are the dominant sample" (Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Tippins, 1999, p. 113). As such, MI theory is an important yet incomplete outline of human intelligence.

There are arguably inherent contradictions and issues in determining intelligence given that framing some individuals as intelligent and others as less intelligent is based on an imposition of paradigms. I do not claim to be outside of this tension, but I do believe that since many scholars and school districts have made decisions that adversely affect many low-SES minority students in the world of intelligence politics and measurement, MTI could serve as one lens that may provide some alternative results. MTI has the potential to influence many teachers, administrators, and policymakers by providing a theoretical foundation to identify assets found in marginalized communities.

Limitations

While I do believe that MTI is a significant and important extension of MI theory, I am also conscious that this is an introductory analysis. I do not claim that this framework is free of limitations. The Latin@ population is a complex and heterogeneous group. Hence, I do believe that much work needs to be done within sub-groups of the Latin@ population, such as Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Guatemalans, and women, to see how this theory may or may not apply. As such, "the diversity of cultural styles, languages, and ethnic identities within the Latino-American population needs to be recognized" (Conchas & Vigil, 2012, p. 63) within an MTI analysis. These portraits focused specifically on heterosexual, Mexican-origin men who were born and raised in urban spaces within the southwestern U.S. Female and queer students are also missing from this analysis.

My initial interest in this work came from reflecting on my own scholarship-boy journey. I wanted answers pertaining to the conflicting feelings that I had about "making-it" within mainstream spaces and was interested in the cerebral and emotional work that it takes to cross so many literal and figurative borders. Hence, my decisions pertaining to the group I selected were largely influenced by my own experiences, passions, and evolving questions as a heterosexual scholarship boy of Mexican-origin who was raised in the barrios of southern Los Angeles. Moreover, I wanted to revisit the scholarship boy work done by Richard Rodriguez and apply this lens to urban males who attended low-SES public schools. In this view, all of the scholarship boys in this study were raised in low-income settings. In sum, these cases are important contributions to a discussion of how we can extend MI theory and point to the need for examining other regions and populations.

Implications for Schools

Boys of color are often characterized in society as deficient. That is, they are stereotyped in ways that are detrimental to youths' self esteem. Often black and Latino men are viewed as a menace to society—drug dealers, gang bangers, lazy, loud, and dangerous...school reform efforts and policy should work hard to characterize boys of color as untapped assets—vital to their communities and society. (Conchas & Vigil, 2012, p. 133)

For the Mexican-origin ghetto nerds in this study, doing well in school was highly contingent upon how MTI was utilized and recognized as a tool for self-definition and empowerment. These heterosexual men used hybrid, critical identities that continued to shape their responses to oppression and highlighted the immense energy and gifted abilities necessary to negotiate multiple, and often contradictory, cultural worlds. As such, the reproductive function of schools was mediated and contested through critical, cultural, and systemic awareness.

According to this study, MTI is an important tool for schools that aim to move away from deficit-oriented approaches related to how Latino males and other marginalized populations are imagined. Teachers, principals, and other vested stakeholders could utilize MTI as a philosophical and pragmatic approach to education by identifying gifted students “in-context.” Current uses of standardized tests, IQ exams, or “intelligent” performances that align with middle-class cultural capital remain insufficient. Professional development with honest and even painful discussions about MTI can assist in providing necessary ontological shifts and site-specific ways to frame curriculum, gifted-student identifications, policy, and ultimately contribute to the development of empowered identities among Latin@ students. In this way, interested stakeholders can begin to see Latin@s from an asset-based lens and invest in pedagogies, professional development, and policy models that are holistic and grounded in empowerment. Current ways of defining smart students has disenfranchised many Latin@s whose intelligence includes navigating through the educational system while seeking power and dignity in spaces outside of subtractive schooling environments.

While research suggests that Latino males are vanishing from U.S. higher education (Noguera, Hurtado, & Fergus, 2012; Saenz & Ponjuan, 2009), this work points to the importance of examining the schooling trajectories and identities of academically successful, low-income Latin@ students. In the end, schools (K–12 and higher education) should critically analyze the various dislocations with which Mexican-origin males grapple and begin to consider mestizaje, specifically MTI, as a potentially important toolkit that may help these students excel academically while maintaining strong cultural identities.

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