CHAPTER 3

Globalizing Body Politics

Embodied Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

Why are categories based on physical differences so important? What do differences communicate and why?

Intercultural communication is an embodied experience. Much of our knowledge and understanding, as well as many of our misconceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices about other cultures are exchanged through our physical bodies—in face-to-face interactions or through media images. Similarities and differences in language use, communication styles, and nonverbal communication such as the use of space, gestures, eye contact, and clothes are all conveyed and performed through our bodies. Categories used historically and today to distinguish “us” from “them” and to establish hierarchies of difference are often based on how our bodies appear to be similar to or different from others. Take a look at the photos at the beginning of the chapter. What comes to mind as you look at each picture? Did you consciously or unconsciously place each person into categories based on race, gender, or nationality? Why are these categories so important in our everyday lives and communication? What assumptions, relations of power, and histories of intercultural interaction underlie our processes of categorization?

From a very early age, we are taught implicitly and explicitly how to read, interpret, and assign meanings to our own and others’ bodies based on our culturally informed codes. Skin
color, hairstyles, facial features, and expressions, as well as gestures and clothing, all convey meanings within complex cultural systems of signification, shaping our thoughts, actions, and experiences. Our communication with others is inevitably mediated through our bodies. "Reading" and making sense of the body politics—in other words, how power is written and performed symbolically on and through the body—requires that we understand how socially constructed categories such as race, gender, and culture have been encoded on our bodies historically, how these signification systems are linked to power, and how these categories are recoded in the context of global power structures (Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1978; Winant, 2001).

This chapter starts with our bodies as sites where categories of social difference are constructed. Body politics, as used here, refers to the practices and policies through which power is marked, regulated, and negotiated on and through the body. We begin by looking at how “difference” in terms of gender and race is marked and normalized on the body. The concept of social construction and the semiotic approach to understanding difference provide a foundation for examining the history of race, how racial hierarchies were “invented” and imposed on the body in the colonial context, and how these racial codes persist and have changed in the global context. Hip hop culture is introduced as a site where old racial regimes are contested and where alternative spaces for intercultural communication emerge in the context of globalization. Throughout, we point to the ways our everyday communication constructs, reinforces, and sometimes challenges categories of difference.

HIP HOP CULTURE

Yo! Whaz up? What does hip hop culture have to do with intercultural communication? Well, for one thing, hip hop culture is global. You can find hip hop culture around the world—from Japan to Israel, South Africa to Germany; from Chile to Iran, Honduras, Australia, Pakistan, Senegal; and of course, from the urban to suburban and rural settings of the United States. It’s a global phenomenon driven not only by corporate interests, commodification, and capitalism but by unique values, norms, behaviors, and beliefs. Hip hop culture also has a complex language, nonverbal codes, and a history born of struggle, creative resistance, and contestation (Chang, 2005; Kitwana, 2003).

For those of you who are suspicious about calling hip hop a “culture,” think of hip hop as only a type of music, assume it is a passing “fad” or “phase” of youth culture or perhaps you are so thoroughly disgusted by the violence, misogyny, and homophobia of some of the leading spokespeople and lyricists of hip hop, just hang on. The intercultural space of hip hop culture is, indeed, sometimes messy, sometimes oppressive and exploitative, and sometimes violent—just like the broader global culture, nations, cities, and neighborhoods we all live in. A key entry point into intercultural praxis is the ability to suspend judgment, be curious, and learn from what is different from our own culture, a standpoint or cultural viewpoint that challenges our position, life experience, or point of view. For some of you, this will be relatively easy because you already experience yourself as part of hip hop culture and identify with it. For others, you may be curious and have some exposure to artists or various aspects of the culture. Yet, for others, it will be tremendously difficult to go beyond the stereotypes that you have formed and the
assumptions and judgments you hold about hip hop culture. These positions regarding hip hop culture are not so different from attitudes people hold about national, racial, ethnic, and religious cultures. For now, engage in intercultural praxis. Stay open to thinking about the past, present, and future in ways that may challenge your assumed or received knowledge. We’re going to “break it down” here—the social constructs of gender and race—and get back to hip hop a little bit later.

**MARKING DIFFERENCE THROUGH COMMUNICATION**

**Gender Difference**

Among other things, physical differences in human bodies are used to construct two mutually exclusive gender categories: (1) women and (2) men. A conversation with parents or grandparents, a quick review of films from 50 years ago, or engagement with different cultural groups informs us that what it means to be a woman or a man has changed throughout history and is different across cultural, racial, religious, and class groups. Sociologists Judith Lorber and Susan Farrell (1991) noted that biological differences are not what distinguish the categories of feminine and masculine. Rather, gender differences are constructed through communication and imposed on our bodies. The social construction of gender refers to the use of physical differences in human bodies to construct two mutually exclusive gender categories: (1) women/men and (2) femininity/masculinity.

Differences between masculinity and femininity are symbolically embodied, performed, and communicated within our specific cultural contexts through the way we walk; through our gestures, speech, touch, and eye contact patterns; through the way we use physical space and the gendered activities we participate in; through our hairstyles, clothing, the use of makeup or not; and through colors, smells, and adornments (Butler, 1990; Stewart, Cooper, & Stewart, 2003; Wood, 2005).

Within and across cultures, meanings are constructed and assigned through communication to these categories of difference—man/women, masculine/feminine—often as polar opposites or dichotomies of strong/weak, rational/emotional, and significant/insignificant. While the meanings have been “normalized” and “naturalized” historically, they have also been challenged, contested, and changed through communication over time. The notion of what it means to be a woman has changed and is challenged today in societies around the world as a result of women’s and feminist social movements. In addition, the “reading” and “marking” of two gender categories based on physical differences is contested by third gender people, or people who live across, between, or outside of the socially constructed two-gender system of categorization. Transgender, or trans, refers to people whose gender identities differ from the social norms and expectations associated with their biological sex. Misconception and stereotypes about transgender or gender-crossing people abound today, including a common mistaken belief that transgender people have appeared recently on the human stage and only in modern or postmodern societies. Quite to the contrary, gender-crossing people have existed historically and exist today in societies around the world, such as hijras in India and Pakistan, fa’afafine in Samoa, and two-spirits in indigenous North American cultures to mention only a few.
“Normalized” meanings that construct the two-gender system and the differences between men and women reflect and embody relationships of power. Consider how the verbal and nonverbal communication of men and women—language use, who is speaking and who is silent, body positions, gestures, degrees of activity, and so on—in popular cultural forms such as hip hop music videos, video games, and TV soap operas construct gender “difference.” These gendered performances, where women generally embody subordinated power positions and men embody dominance, also structure and impact intercultural communication dynamics in the global context. Assumptions about feminine passivity, submissiveness, and subservience allow for and “normalize” the global exploitation of women in the workplace, sex trade, and “marriage” markets. A Chinese woman on a visiting professor program was stopped when walking across a U.S. university campus by a European American man who was a student. After chatting briefly, he said he wanted to marry an Asian woman because Asian women showed more respect toward men than American women. When she asked him what he meant by “respect,” he responded, “You know, less assertive and more willing to do what you want.”

Communication scholar Julia Wood (2005) noted that while biological differences between men and women exist, there are far more similarities between the two groups than there are differences. Why, then, do cultures around the world persist in marking and performing gender difference and constructing rigid divisions between the categories of men and women? Why are third gender people so demonized and erased? What social, political, and economic purposes are served by constructing and performing differences between men and women and reinforcing a two-gender system? Lorber and Farrell (1991) stated the following:

The reason for gender categories and the constant construction and reconstruction of differences between them is that gender is an integral part of any social group’s structure of domination and subordination and division of labor in the family and the economy. (p. 2)

In societies where gender inequity exists (almost everywhere), women and their social, economic, and political roles are inevitably devalued. Who benefits from the gendered construction and performance of unequal power relations? How does the rigid construction of differences between men and women through communication exclude and erase third gender? The intercultural encounter between the Chinese scholar and the White American student that was just mentioned, leads us to ask this question: How are the social categories of gender, sexuality, and race connected?

**Racial Difference**

Our bodies and the physical characteristics of our bodies such as skin color, facial features, hair, and body type have been used and are used today to separate people into categories that are customarily referred to as race or racial groups. Yet the majority of scientists and social scientists today agree that race is a social construct (Cohen, 1998; Montagu, 1997). Evolutionary biologist Joseph L. Graves (2005) stated, “The traditional concept of race as a biological concept is a myth” (p. xxv). In other words, the categorization of people into
groups based on physical characteristics has no biological basis; the association of physical, mental, emotional, or attitudinal qualities with these socially constructed groups also has no biological basis. Rather, science has been used to normalize, naturalize, and validate a system that was historically and socially constructed and that was and still is linked closely to power in today’s global context. If you’re thinking this is crazy and you know race exists because you can see it, you’re not alone. Most college students in the United States, Graves (2005) reported, think that biological race exists.

There is no question that human differences are visible and physically embodied. Human beings differ in a wide variety of ways including height, weight, eye color, and a preference for using the right or left hand, to mention only a few. Imagine if we grouped people into categories based on these physical differences and attributed innate characteristics to members of these groups. Tall people are smarter than short people. Brown-eyed people are more industrious than green-eyed people. Right-handers are better at sports than left-handers. It sounds absurd, right? Well, the concept of race as it operates today would sound equally absurd to us if it were not for the systematic construction of race and the reinforcement of racial hierarchies through laws, science, medicine, economics, education, literature, and forms of media for the past 500 years. While physical differences of all sorts do, of course, exist, it is the grouping or categorization of people based on these characteristics and the creation of racial hierarchies through the attribution of value-laden qualities (industrious, smart, athletic, lazy, violent, etc.) that is socially constructed through communication. Race is socially constructed within historical, political, and economic contexts, resulting in social inequities that continue to impact us today in the context of globalization.

**CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL WORLDS THROUGH COMMUNICATION**

A **social construct**, or a **social construction**, is an idea or phenomenon that has been “created,” “invented” or “constructed” by people in a particular society or culture through communication. Social constructs exist only because people agree to act like and think like they exist and agree to follow certain conventions and rules associated with the construct (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Searle, 1995). For example, languages are social constructs. Languages are developed by the people who use them and carry meaning because the people who use them agree to the meanings and follow certain rules of the language. Money is another fairly easy example to understand. Think of a note or coin of any national currency—a yen, a peso, a deutschmark (which has been replaced by the euro), a dollar, a pound, or a yuan. The value and meaning of the currency is not in the note itself but rather is constructed by people through their conventional social usage within an economic system that places value on the note as currency. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) introduced their sociological theory of knowledge in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*. The core idea of their theory is that human beings participate in the creation of our own realities. Our knowledge about ourselves, the world, and everyday reality is created through communication about our ongoing, dynamic social interactions. In other words, knowledge about the world does not exist “out there” in the external world waiting to be found or discovered. Rather, knowledge about ourselves and the world around us is created or constructed through our social interaction and communication with others.
Semiotic Approach to Difference

In the late 1800s, Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure introduced an approach to understanding how things—objects, words, ideas, and actions—come to mean what they do. Saussure contributed the groundwork for the field of study called semiotics, or the study of the use of signs in cultures, which provides a useful way to understand how meaning is socially constructed. Signs—a stoplight, clothes, or more complicated social phenomenon such as race—are composed of a signifier and signified. The body, things, actions, images, or words are understood as signifiers and what they represent—the idea or concept—as the signified. Saussure noted several key features about signs. First, the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary. In a stoplight, for example, the fact that the red light means “stop” and the green light means “go” is arbitrary, right? These meanings have been assigned, fixed, and normalized by convention and use. Signs do not have permanent or essential meanings. Second, signs belong to systems, and their meaning comes from their relationship to other signs within the system. The red and green lights are part of a traffic control system, and their meaning—go or stop—is derived from their relationship to each other. Third, the meaning of signs is created through the marking of difference. What signifies or has meaning is the difference between green and red (Saussure, 1960). Cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall (1997) summarized, “Meaning does not inhere in things, in the world. It is constructed, produced. It is a result of a signifying practice—a practice that produces meaning, that makes thing mean” (p. 24).

Therefore, in order to understand social constructs like race, we have to examine how difference is marked and how meaning is associated with differences through communication within the racial signification system. To do this, we need to examine the historical construction of race as a sign; study how different meanings have been associated with racial categories through communication over time and place; and explore how preferred meanings regarding race have been constructed, negotiated, contested, and changed. It is also imperative to look at how the preferred meanings of social constructs are linked to power; how groups who benefit from a preferred meaning and hegemony work hard to maintain these meanings; and how people and groups who are negatively impacted may work even harder to resist, challenge, and change the social construction of our realities (Barthes, 1972; Foucault, 1975; Hall, 1997). One of the implications of analyzing signs and making apparent the social construction of reality is that if our perceived reality is created through social interaction and communication, we, as human beings, are powerful agents who can alter and change our worlds. Let’s take a look at how race has become a sign with tremendous impact on people’s lives over the past 500 years.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE: FROM COLONIZATION TO GLOBALIZATION

Race has been fundamental in global politics and culture for half a millennium. It continues to signify and structure social life not only experientially and locally, but national and globally. Race is present everywhere: it is evident in the distribution of resources and power, and in the desires and fears of individuals
from Alberta to Zimbabwe. Race has shaped the modern economy and nation-state. It has permeated all available social identities, cultural forms, and systems of signification. Infinitely incarnated in institution and personality, etched on the human body, racial phenomena affect the thought, experience, and accomplishments of human individuals and collectives in many familiar ways, and in a host of unconscious patterns as well. (Winant, 2001, p. xv)

As with all social constructs, what “race” means and what it signifies have changed during different historic periods and across geographic areas of the world. Certainly groups of people throughout human existence have distinguished themselves from others based on a wide range of differences including linguistic, regional, religious, and in some cases, physical differences. Precursors also exist for the idea of a hierarchy of human beings that place one group in a position of superiority in relation to others as articulated by Plato’s concept of the natural scale. Yet the systematic categorization of people into a relatively small number of groups or “races” based on physical qualities and the ascription of qualities—intelligence, character, physical, as well as emotional and spiritual capacities—was not developed until the colonial era of the past 500 years (Todorov, 1984; Winant, 2001). How is it that into the 21st century a system of racial/cultural hierarchy still exists that assumes the natural or cultural superiority of people who are light-skinned or “White” and the inferiority or lack of cultural development of people with darker skin? How is it that some nonverbal practices—giving a firm handshake, wearing a shirt and tie, and using direct eye contact, for example—have come to signify “professionalism” and “the right way to do business” in the global workplace? As you read the following sections, consider how systems of meaning regarding race and racial superiority, rooted in colonization, are communicated and persist in the global era.

Inventing Race and Constructing the “Other”

Conquest, colonization, and the rise of capitalism were the terrain upon which race, racial identities, and racial hierarchies were forged. As Europeans expanded their reach around the globe in the 15th to 19th centuries, intercultural contact on a scale previously unknown occurred. In these “encounters,” “difference” and most especially differences as they were marked or represented through the body were constructed as significant and were infused with meaning through a hierarchical racial system that justified and promoted domination and exploitation.

Undoubtedly, the physical bodies, as well as the cultural, linguistic, and nonverbal practices of people were different, for example, when the indigenous peoples of the Americas came in contact with the Portuguese, Spanish, and British and when Africans and Asians first came in contact with the Dutch, French, and Germans. However, the meanings that were given over time to these differences—in other words, what, how, and why these physical differences and communication practices came to signify what they did—are what we want to understand as we deconstruct race and racial hierarchies.

Just as the notion of “race” differs from place to place today—for example, a student is considered White in Costa Rica and a person of color in the United States—the process of inscribing the body with racial signification varied in different parts of the colonial world.
The Spanish colonizers of the Americans, assisted by the Catholic Church, developed a highly complex hierarchical racial scale or system—starting with the Spanish at the top and descending to Criollo, mestizo, castizo, mulatto, morisco, coyote, lobo, and so on—that linked “racial purity” with socioeconomic class. To maintain social order and control and to protect the economic and political interests and supremacy of the ruling Spanish “pure-blood” class, the signification system promoted “racial whitening” or blanqueamiento, a process by which racial mixing would produce lighter-skinned children and improve social status (Garcia Saiz, 1989). In North America, European Americans or Whites instituted the “one-drop” rule that legalized the racial signification system such that anyone with even one drop of non-White blood was not White (Lopez, 1996). In South Africa, a four-tiered “racial” system was constructed: Whites, Coloreds, Asians, and Blacks (Davis, 1991). While variation exists, what is the one aspect of the racial hierarchies that was consistent across continents and time?

Yes, the people primarily responsible for narrating the story, developing the discourse, and constructing the text about race—the colonizers, people of European descent—placed themselves at the top of the racial hierarchy and relegated the “Other,” those designated as non-White to lower and inferior positions in the hierarchy. The marking of difference establishes lines of inclusion within the group through the exclusion of others. Sociologist Howard Winant noted (2001) the following:

“Othering” came not from national, but from supranational distinctions, nascent regional distinctions between Europe and the rest of the world, between “us” broadly conceived, and the non-Christian, “uncivilized,” and soon enough non-white “others,” whose subordination and subjugation was justified on numerous grounds—religious and philosophical as much as political and economic. (p. 22)

*Constructing the “Other”* is a process by which differences marked on or represented through the body are constructed as significant and are infused with meaning through a hierarchical racial system that justify and promote domination and exploitation. With variations across continents, these socially constructed racial systems were based in an advanced a system of White supremacy. *White supremacy* is a historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and people of color by people and nations of European descent for the purpose of establishing and maintaining wealth, privilege, and power (Martinez, 1998).

Las Casas, a Catholic priest from Spain, witnessing the atrocious treatment of indigenous peoples in the Americas at the hands of the colonizers in the 16th century, initiated a serious debate regarding the native “Indians.” The question of the day was as follows: Do Indians have souls? The discussion among the conquistadors, the Spanish Crown, and the Church represented a rigorous debate about whether Indians were humans or not. Could they be saved? Was it acceptable to work them to death and treat them like animals (Las Casas, 1542/1992; Todorov, 1984)? While the nature of this debate sounds archaic, we need to ask ourselves whose humanity—whose inclusion in the human species—is in question today?

Note that the social construction of race is not only a question of “difference” but the relationship between signs of difference in a system of power. The hierarchical relationship
between the signs—bodies that are constructed as White or red, White or Black, civilized or uncivilized, Western or Other, for example—is where meaning is produced. Marking the body by “race” in the colonial era not only served to demarcate group membership—who was in the dominant group and who was “Other”—but also constructed a stratified labor system that justified and normalized the exploitation of laborers, which was integral to the development of capitalism during the colonial era (Macedo & Gounari, 2006; Winant, 2001). Racial differences came to mark and signify labor relations of owner/slave. Slavery—the selling and purchasing of people as commodities—was the first global business on a grand scale, the prototype of multinational capitalism (Walvin, 1986).

The Power of Texts

By the end of the 1700s, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a German anatomist, physician, and anthropologist, extended Linnaeus’s system of categorizing all living things by formulating a hierarchy of difference, a system of classification of people predicated on the socially constructed idea of superior and inferior races. Based on his analysis of human skulls, Blumenbach (1775/1969) divided the human species into five races as follows: (1) the Caucasians or White race (people of European descent) were placed at the top of the hierarchy; in the middle were (2) the Malay or the brown race (people of Malaysian descent) and (3) the Americans or the red race (people of the Americas); and at the bottom of the hierarchy were (4) the Mongolian or yellow race (people of Asian descent) and (5) the Ethiopian or Black race (people of African descent). The color-coded schema Blumenbach worked out reflected the White supremacist ideologies of his time and was instrumental in legitimizing, codifying, and promoting a system of domination. His “scientific” explanation resonated with popularly constructed beliefs and practices that justified and normalized inequitable social, political, and economic systems.

As European colonial explorers, priests, chroniclers, scientists, and anthropologists scrutinized, studied, labeled, named, and categorized the “Other,” they created elaborate texts attesting to the inferiority of non-White groups while implicitly and explicitly inscribing their own White European superiority (Winant, 2001). The process that constructed the “Other” through religious, “scientific,” scholarly, and popular texts, as well as through art, law, and philosophy, also created or constructed the colonizers (Said, 1978). As authors in control of the production of written texts in the colonial world, European colonizers and their descendants narrated, consolidated, and legitimized their versions of history, knowledge, and “truth.” During the colonial era and well into the 20th century in many parts of the world, access to writing, reading, printing, publishing, and distributing texts or narratives was curtailed or severely limited for the majority of people who were not White. Considering who has control over the production of texts, whose version of history is authorized and preferred, and what perspectives, experiences, and stories are left out draws attention to the power of texts in constructing, maintaining, and legitimizing systems of inequity and domination. Control over and access to the production of “official” written texts structured, enforced, and reinforced inequitable relations of power. Yet people from cultures and societies who were colonized did pass along their own histories and create versions of their stories in oral and written forms.
While the Las Casas debate ended with the determination that the indigenous people of the Americas were, indeed, humans with souls, this “fact” was incorporated into the colonial project as a rationale to “civilize” and “save” them. Regardless of how indigenous peoples of the Americas were constructed, over 100 million died from genocide, exposure to disease, and the disruption of their sociocultural systems as a result of conquest (Smith, 2005). In *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World*, David Stannard (1992) wrote, “The destruction of the Indians of the Americas was, far and away, the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world” (p. x). The devastating genocide of indigenous peoples of the Americas is one of many silenced histories. The phrase *silenced histories* refers to the hidden or absent accounts of history that are suppressed or omitted from official or mainstream versions of history. How can such conspicuous destruction, devastation, and genocide be hidden? Further, what is the impact of silenced histories on intercultural communication and sensitivity to various cultural experiences and perspectives today? Imagine, for example, if Germany celebrated its Holocaust with a “Hitler Day” as the United States does with Columbus Day? While the events of history cannot be reduced to stories, the way we receive and understand history is through stories codified into texts—or better stated, versions of stories that reveal and privilege certain perspectives while concealing others. Understanding how power operates to highlight and hide, reveal and distort certain “truths” about history, as well as current events, is critical to intercultural communication. Lack of knowledge about the historical realities that have created current conditions of inequity perpetuates misunderstanding, stereotypes, and prejudices that fuel and reproduce social, economic, and political injustice.

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**Intercultural Praxis: The Power of Texts**

In *Exemplar of Liberty: Native America and the Evolution of Democracy*, Donald Grinde and Bruce Johansen (1991) illustrated how Native American societies, particularly the Iroquois, have influenced the development of American democracy, freedom, and political system since the late 18th century. The publication of their book resulted in heated debates among historians and scholars. Some welcomed this revision of history that shed light on the silenced histories of Native American people and their contribution to U.S. society. Others rejected the authors’ thesis arguing that their use of “evidence” was inadequate.

The power of texts, evident in this controversy, is foundational to the way we understand history. The lives of people who are considered unimportant or periphery to the history of a nation are excluded from official historical records. Without documented records, critics who are invested in tracing American democracy to its European origin can easily dismiss alternative accounts.

The plight of Native Americans is not solely a tragedy of the past. Today, Native American tribes struggle and fight for economic independence and self-determination as the long history of contestation over federal control of their land, natural resources, and culture continues.
RESIGNIFYING RACE IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

Clearly, the social construction of race, racist ideology, and White supremacy has had a devastatating and demoralizing impact on non-White people around the globe through genocide, exploitation, and sociocultural destruction. Yet powerful collective identities and social movements for liberation and justice emerged in the late 19th century and continue today to resist the systematic dehumanization, exploitation, and subordination of people of color through economic, political, and social means. The anticolonial and anti-imperialist struggles of the peoples of Latin America since the 19th century, the anticolonial movements in Africa and Asia that culminated in independence from colonial rule in the middle part of the 20th century, the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s in the United States, and the long-awaited dismantling of the apartheid system in South Africa in 1994 challenged the myth of race and the global ideology of White supremacy. Struggle and resistance to oppressive conditions forged collective race-based and nation-based identities for mobilization and empowerment. Anticolonial, national independence and civil rights movements were monumental collective actions where colonized, oppressed, and disenfranchised people demanded the rights of democratic participation, self-governance, and self-determination around the globe (see Figure 3.2). These movements, coalescing in the post–WWII era, forced a major rupture in the world racial order (Winant, 2001). Race has been resignified in the context of globalization in complex, shifting, and contradictory ways (see Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Civil rights march on Washington, D.C., 1963

In the early 21st century, the notion of race as a biological concept has been scientifically debunked, yet race as it was constructed in the colonial era and marked on the body continues to have real consequences for people around the globe today. No biological or genetic difference exists between so-called “races” that determines intelligence, sexual appetite, reproduction, or athletic abilities. Yet these common myths about race persist with weighty consequences (Graves, 2005). At the same time, claims circulate that we now live in a raceless society and have reached “the end of racism”; however, stratification, discrimination, profiling, and exclusion based on racial categories persist in our society. Discourses of a color-blind society collide with representations of diversity that depict images of one person from each “racial” group. How can we make sense of these competing claims, discourses, and realities?

**From Race to Culture: Constructing a Raceless, Color-Blind Society**

David Theo Goldberg (2006) delineated two dominant ideologies that inform our understanding of race today. He argued that **racial naturalism**, or the claim that White people of European descent are “naturally” or biologically superior to non-White people, lingers today. However, in the post–WWII era, this ideology was challenged as a premodern relic from an earlier period and gave way in many parts of the world to racial historicism. **Racial historicism**, as a dominant ideology, shifts the focus from biological deficiencies to cultural ones, claiming the lack of “cultural development” or “progress” in non-White peoples and nations. In the worldwide pursuit of modernization, progress, and development, the rationale of racial historicism goes something like this: Through education, the less advanced, less modern, and backward cultures are capable of developing civilizing behaviors, democratic values, and self-determination, which will, over time, allow them to be absorbed into society.

Racial historicism insists upon and constructs a “racelessness” and “color-blind” society. How frequently we hear people say things like the following: I’m not racist. I don’t see color. I’m color-blind. Racial historicism, where “race” is recoded as “culture,” challenges the old racial signification system and at least on the surface, appears to go beyond race, leading to claims of “the end of racism.” But let’s take a closer look. Read the italicized sentence (at the end of the previous paragraph) again. What are the underlying assumptions behind this statement? Who is the invisible narrator? Whose cultural (racial) standards are used to determine and judge this hierarchy of development? We know that the construction of “race” structured, justified, and normalized stratified and exploitative economic, social, and political conditions during the colonial era. What does the construction of “racelessness” and a “color-blind” society do today?

The claims of a raceless and color-blind society erase or neutralize the centuries of historical injustice, exploitation, and asymmetrical relations of power during the colonial era that have produced current conditions of race-based inequity. Authors of the book *The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide*, wrote this in 2006:

For every dollar owned by the average white family in the United States, the average family of color has less than one dime.” Why do people of color have so little
wealth? Because for centuries they were barred by law, by discrimination, and by violence from participating in government wealth-building programs that benefited white Americans. (Lui, Robles, Leondar-Wright, Brewer, & Adamson, 2006, p. 1)

The notion of racelessness also serves to mask the unmarked elevation of Whiteness—White norms and ways of thinking, knowing, being, and doing—as the standard for all (Goldberg, 2006). Whiteness is difficult to define because it is a default category, the category of the invisible narrator. Whiteness is a category that people who are White do not need to name given that it is the dominant norm. Part of the privilege of being White is the position to define, describe, and evaluate others based on a dominant White norm or standard that is invisibilized, a position of power that extends from the colonial era forward. Feminist sociologist Ruth Frankenberg (1993) outlined three interlocking dimensions of Whiteness: **Whiteness** is as a location of structural advantage, a standpoint, and a set of core values, practices, and norms.

A location of structural advantage means that the systems in place within society—political, economic, and social systems that take on concrete forms in education, laws, law enforcement, medicine, employment, and many others—benefit or advantage people who are White. Of course, not all White people have equal advantage or privilege. Whiteness is mediated by class, gender, and sexuality among other things. Yet the point is that the systems that are in place within U.S. society were constructed historically and continue to perpetuate advantage and privilege for the dominant White group today. Erasing or at least masking the existence of these privileges and advantages perpetuates the power conferred through locations of advantage.

Another dimension linked to locations of structural advantage that defines Whiteness is a particular standpoint or point of view from which to see the world and oneself. While great diversity exists within and across the group of people who are categorized as White, White people in the United States often espouse similar perspectives and are often blind to other perceptions. For example, a poll taken just before the court decision showed that 77% of White Americans thought that O. J. Simpson was guilty of murder. Nearly 72% of Black Americans thought he was innocent. The American public watched the same trial, so how can we explain this difference in perspective? A standpoint informed by life experiences where the institutions in place—schools, police, courts, and media—treat you and those around you fairly, equitably, and justly constructs a very different standpoint from life experiences where these same institutions treat you and those around you unfairly, inequitably, and unjustly. The motto of the police “to protect and to serve” is understood and experienced quite differently for Whites than for Blacks (and other minorities) in the United States. Whiteness and the power it gives to the dominant group are maintained by not marking a particular standpoint that is linked to locations of structural advantage.

The third dimension of Whiteness outlined by Frankenberg is a set of core symbols, norms, and labels. Due to the location of structural advantage of Whites and White culture, many of these core values, behaviors, and symbols are hard to identify simply because they are seen and accepted as the norm, just the way things are. A strong adherence to individualism, an emphasis on doing and accomplishing tasks, and an orientation to thinking and to time that is linear are just a few of the core values associated with
White American culture. These values are often seen by those who share and practice them as universal human values, as the “right way” or the “best way,” and are used subtly as standards to measure other cultures. In this way, White American cultural norms are invisibly elevated to universal human norms and standards to which all should strive and by which all are judged. A position of structural advantage enables the dominant group, Whites in the United States, to label, generalize, and make claims about others while remaining in a position that is unnamed, individually unique, and outside of generalization and categorization. Delineating the concept of Whiteness is one step toward describing and disrupting a system that creates and sustains inequity. The three dimensions of Whiteness—(1) a location of structural advantage, (2) a standpoint, and (3) a set of core symbols and labels—interlock to invisibilize, mask, and normalize the maintenance and promotion of White American hegemony. The ways in which Whiteness and White hegemony function in the global context are discussed in depth in later chapters. It is critical to note that Whiteness can be practiced by non-White people and is not inevitably attached to White bodies. In a supposedly “raceless” society, Whiteness is an ideological perspective or position to which people who are not White can and do ascribe. Whiteness is also an ideological perspective that people who are White can confront and attempt to change (Carrillo Rowe & Malhotra, 2006).

From Race to Class: Rearticulating Race in the Neoliberal Context

We often hear comments like this: “Race doesn’t matter anymore. All that matters is money.” In societies like the United States that are ideologically constructed as raceless and color-blind, race is rearticulated in the neoliberal context in terms of class. In other words, it’s all about the color of money! Yet Goldberg (2006) argued that there is an invisibilized process of Whitening that is required as people of color rise to the middle and upper classes. Membership in these classes is predicated upon assimilation and allegiance to Whiteness. People of color who accept these conditions benefit from the privileges and advantages of Whiteness, often espouse standpoints that support Whiteness and associate with values, practices, and norms of the dominant White culture. We might understand this as modern or postmodern “cultural whitening” based on accepting, performing, and supporting the dominant White culture. The “absorption” into society is complete as people of color achieve highly visible positions of power in the government, military, on the Supreme Court and in multinational corporations, serving, in rather contradictory ways, as icons for diversity in a raceless society.

Intersectionality

Yet, class does not provide complete protection against racism, sexism, and other forms of exclusion, even in or perhaps especially in, a supposedly raceless society. Socioeconomic class assists, limits, and denies access to everything from basic human needs of food, water, safety, and housing to health care, education, and property ownership to the ability to accumulate luxury items and wealth. But class alone does not determine access. Socioeconomic class intersects with race, as well as with gender, sexuality, and culture to create complex
forms and degrees of exclusion and inclusion. **Intersectionality**, introduced by feminist theorists (Collins, 1990; Moraga, Anzaldúa, & Bambara, 1984), is an approach to understanding how socially constructed categories of difference—race, gender, class, and sexuality—operate in relationship to each other. These markers of difference do not function separately or independently in society but rather interrelate and intersect with each other magnifying and complicating positions of disadvantage and privilege.

### Cultural Identity

#### Intersection of Race and Class

The intersection of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other socially constructed categories of difference shape our cultural identities and impact our access to employment, decent wages, and wealth. Racism and classism, the historical legacy as well as current discriminatory practices and policies, result in continued economic disparities and social inequalities today. Consider the following facts:

- As of December 2009, 16.2% of African Americans and 12.9% of Latinos/Latinas are unemployed, compared to 9% of Whites.
- Blacks earn 62 cents for every dollar of income earned by Whites, and Latinos earn 68 cents for every dollar earned by Whites.
- The average hourly wage of newly hired White workers in jobs that did not require a college education was $13.08. Newly hired Black workers in the same jobs averaged only $10.23, while newly hired Latino/Latina workers averaged $11.46 an hour.
- Blacks and Latinos/Latinas are 2.9 and 2.7 times as likely, respectively, to live in poverty as Whites.

*Source: Adapted from Dillahunt, Miller, Prokosch, Huezo, & Muhammad (2010).*

These statistics clearly show how race and class intersect to shape people’s social location, positionality, and experience in the United States today.

In the context of globalization, resignifying “race” as “culture” allows for the invention of a raceless and color-blind society that masks how race, as it is written on the body, persists as a marker for social, economic, and political stratification. It also invisibilizes Whiteness as the universal standard and norm. Rearticulating “race” as “class” in the global context hides the way that race and gender intersect with class and how the intersectionality of these social categories continues to structure the lives, material conditions and access to opportunities of people around the world today. In an article entitled “Of Race and Risk,” Patricia J. Williams (2004) recounted her experience of buying a house.
After talking with a mortgage broker on the phone, she was quoted a mortgage interest rate. When she received the forms, she saw that the racial category of White was marked and that the broker must have assumed, apparently based on her use of Received Standard English, that she was White. When she changed it to Black and returned the form, suddenly the bank wanted more money, more points, and a higher interest rate. In her negotiations to contest this, the justification used by the bank was that she represented a financial “risk.” Patricia Williams was made aware through this process that she, as a Black woman, is the “risk” not in terms of her financial ability to follow through with the loan (that had not changed when she shifted from White to Black). Rather, she is the risk as her homeownership as a Black woman in the neighborhood diminishes the value of the property owned by White residents. Historically, when a Black person or family moves in, Whites flee and take funding and social resources with them. Race, in an ideologically constructed “race-less” society, is rearticulated as “financial risk,” masking through economic language a system that perpetuates racism and hiding a system that sustains Whiteness.

Intercultural interactions in the context of globalization are deeply embedded in the legacy of colonization, intersecting systems of oppression, and inequitable relations of power. Yet struggles against racism and White supremacy also continue. While mass media representations draw attention to and exacerbate the violent, criminal, and destructive aspects of hip hop culture, many people around the world experience hip hop culture as offering possibilities for disrupting the hegemonic racial order and providing spaces for new forms of coalition building across racial lines. We turn now to the contested cultural space of hip hop culture.

**HIP HOP CULTURE: ALTERNATIVE PERFORMANCES OF DIFFERENCE**

**Figure 3.2** Hip hop culture offers an alternative to the existing racial order.

Source: © Kathryn Sorrells.
Meet Darren Dickerson, who identifies as Black (not pictured); Sun Yu Young, who is Korean American (left); Jani (Janithri) Gunaesekera (second from left), whose parents immigrated to the United States from Sri Lanka; Izzy (Israel) Pérez (second from right), whose mother is Mexican American and father is Puerto Rican American; and Sheh (Venoosheh) Khaksar (right), who identifies as Iranian American. These folks were presented at the beginning of the chapter (see chapter opening photo). Each one of them acknowledges that the gender and racial codes marked, performed, and constructed on and through their bodies impact their lives every day. Each also identifies as being part of hip hop culture and experiences hip hop culture as an alternative to the existing racial order. Let’s see what they had to say when asked this question: What does hip hop culture mean to you?

**Darren Dickerson:** I was born into hip hop culture. I am hip hop culture. Hip hop culture is speaking out and expressing what’s real. The values of hip hop culture? Honesty, truth, respect, courage, and credibility. Hip hop culture comes out of a history of struggle, a history of having been denied and forgotten. It’s fundamentally about the struggle—the struggle against powerful forces that have marginalized all sorts of people. But at the end of the day, it’s about keeping it real.

**Sun Yu Young:** Hip hop to me isn’t just a genre of music. It truly is an entire culture in every sense of the word, with its own individual language, music, fashion, and most important, history. I don’t just “listen” to hip hop—I feel like I really live it. I also don’t consider myself just a casual listener. I’m pretty good about knowing about and enjoying an artist’s or producer’s entire body of work, not just the songs that are released on the radio. Sometimes I think that my life is like one huge soundtrack—hip hop culture has truly influenced every aspect of my life. I don’t think I would be the same person I am today without it. It’s helped me understand different viewpoints and cultures other than my own, and it’s helped me come together with people of different cultures, solely based on the fact that we both are a part of hip hop culture. So answering the question “what hip hop means to me,” I guess can be summed up in a word: life.

**Jani (Janithri) Gunaesekera:** Since I am Sri Lankan, it is very hard for me to identify with a certain group. I want to say I can relate to the American side of me, but sometimes I feel it is limited. Then when I try to relate to my Sri Lankan side, I feel there is a big gap. When I was introduced to hip hop, I felt there was finally something that doesn’t see me as a race or ethnicity. I felt like it took me in and gave me an identity that I could deal with . . . being different and not having a certain group to be part of was hard.

**Izzy (Israel) Pérez:** Hip hop culture is so many things—like all cultures it’s pretty hard to define. Hip hop brings people together—some who normally wouldn’t get along can share a common interest. It connects people from all over the globe. Because it’s different every place, you can learn about different experiences from others—it’s a collaboration and expression from all over the world. But then there’s the whole masculine side of hip hop with the “beefs” and rivalries. The whole point is to emasculate the other person, character assassination, “dis” and embarrass the other person. A lot of this is about setting the record
straight about false accusations. It’s also pretty homophobic. But what so many people can relate to is that it’s about constant struggle, the ability to rise up, and overcome. It creates solidarity between people and groups who can relate—the poor, immigrants, and other struggling people.

Sheh (Venoosheh) Khaksar: As an Iranian, it wasn’t easy being different growing up in a small town in Washington—I call it Pleasantville. An Asian American girl and a few Hispanic students and I were the only ones who were not like the rest. When I first heard Tupac, I thought, yeah, he’s saying something to me and about me. He’s talking about things I feel and putting them into word—expressing them so well. He’s talking about the experience of minorities. It may not be exactly what I experienced, but I can relate. Hip hop culture is about struggle and overcoming obstacles. Hip hop is the voice of a people—a voice that speaks in various ways.

As you can see from these statements, hip hop culture clearly offers an alternative to the old racial signification system. The folks here do not seem to buy into the myth of a race-less society. They see and experience race as it is written on their bodies every day. Yet, in the context of a racialized society, they experience hip hop as a cultural space where, as Darren says, people can speak out and “struggle against powerful forces that have marginalized all sorts of people.” Darren and Sheh see hip hop as the voice of the people—people who have been forgotten, disenfranchised, and oppressed by interlocking systems of exclusion based on race, class, and gender. Izzy notes that hip hop culture is fundamentally about “the ability to rise up and overcome” the challenges and obstacles that people face. Hip hop culture is a site where meanings about race, class, gender, sexuality, love, hate, violence, history, the government, family, and many other things are challenged, negotiated, and transformed. Hip hop tells the stories of resistance and resilience—stories of how people live their lives and how they challenge and survive powerful forces that work to silence their voices and diminish their lives. In 1989, Public Enemy’s Chuck D said, “Rap is the Black CNN,” offering an alternative interpretation of current events as well as history. Jay Woodson (2006) from Z-Net noted that “hip hop articulated something so universal and revelatory that White kids wanted (to listen) in. Some even began to question the skin privilege into which they had been born.”

Sun finds that hip hop culture is a place where racial hierarchies break down and connection and coalition across socially constructed lines of race are made possible to provide a source of learning and pleasure, as well as political and economic empowerment. Hip hop culture offers hope for coalition-building across historically divided and stratified groups. In rural Washington, Sheh discovered that hip hop spoke to and about her and offered her a place of connection and identification. Jani articulates the ways in which she is caught between various racial and ethnic identifications—American and Sri Lankan—not feeling like she fits in either. For her, hip hop culture is a site where colonial constructions of race and racial hierarchies are contested and new body politics based on inclusion rather than exclusion are created. Jani states, “Hip hop did something to me that made me feel like it was okay to be different and that no matter what race I was I could be part of that world.” Darren argues, “That’s why so many people around the world connect with it—it’s about creating a new system, an alternative system.” Bakari Kitwana (2005), former editor
of *The Source* and author of several books, agrees that hip hop culture has the potential to challenge and disrupt the old racial politics. As a powerful tool for social, economic, and political change, hip hop is doing just that. He stated the following:

As young people worldwide gravitate to hip-hop and adapt it to their local needs, responding to the crises of our time, they are becoming equipped with a culture that corporate and political elites can’t control. It’s a youth-centered culture that is self-motivating and only requires its participants to have a mouth, the ability to listen and frustration with business as usual. This cultural movement is currently making way for hip-hop’s emerging political movement. Given the way the culture is being absorbed by young people around the globe, these movements may be the catalysts necessary to jump-start an international human rights movement in this generation, a movement with the potential to parallel if not surpass yesterday’s civil rights successes. (pp. 10–11)

The goal here is not to uncritically valorize hip hop culture. As Izzy noted, hip hop culture is troubled by a hypermasculinity that often denigrates, objectifies, and violates women, sexual minorities, and men. Hip hop culture often idealizes and glamorizes violence, drugs, and rampant consumerism. Aspects of the culture play off of and reinforce centuries-old racial stereotypes, promoting deeply ingrained patterns of domination and subordination. In these ways, hip hop culture reflects, normalizes, and advances the racist, patriarchal, homophobic, and capitalist ideologies of our larger society. Tricia Rose (1994) stated that hip hop “brings together a tangle of some of the most complex, social, cultural, and political issues in contemporary American society” (p. 2). So the point here is not to gloss over the difficult, ugly, controversial, or contested nature of hip hop culture. After all, at the core, hip hop culture is about keeping it real. Intercultural communication in the context of globalization situates us in the midst of complex and messy tensions. We need to learn how to hold contradictions and address the muddled, chaotic, and difficult challenges that arise in the nexus of oppositional realities. For example, we need to see how hip hop culture is both a site of inclusion across racial and cultural groups and a site where exclusion based on gender and sexuality occurs. Hip hop is both a space of empowerment and a space where oppressive and exploitative conditions are enacted and performed. Taking a both/and approach guards against essentializing, stereotyping, and enacting closure and allows us to step into rather than away from the complex, confusing, and untidy terrain of intercultural communication today.

**SUMMARY**

Our goal in this chapter was to introduce the process and practice of “reading” body politics in the age of globalization. We began with the assumption that intercultural communication is an embodied experience. Since our engagement with others is through our bodies, we looked at how differences are marked on the body—how our bodies are signs that communicate—in the socially constructed systems of race, gender, and class that impact global and local intercultural interactions. We provided an overview of the historical
construction of race to show how social constructs are linked to power—social, political, and economic power. Since social constructs are invented, used, and institutionalized by people through communication, they can and have changed over time, yet we note how the preferred meanings of deeply engrained signification systems that benefit those in power are difficult to disrupt and change. The social constructions of race and racial hierarchies through communication, which are linked historically to colonization, capitalism, and national/regional identities, have been resignified in the global context. In a supposedly raceless society, race is rearticulated as culture and class; however, in these barely masked forms, race as it intersects with class, gender, and culture continues to impact the lives of people around the globe today. As we take on the project of analyzing our intercultural encounters and understanding the global context of intercultural relations, the semiotic approach and the concept of intersectionality are useful tools for critical analysis. Voices and visions born out of hip hop culture suggest that alternative spaces exist that resist and transform the old, colonial regime of racial naturalism and the more recently constructed racial regime of a raceless society. Yet hip hop culture also points to the complex and contradictory nature of intercultural communication today where sites that resist and contest hierarchies of difference can also reinscribe and reproduce racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia.

**KEY TERMS**

body politics  
constructing the “Other”  
social construction of gender  
White supremacy  
third gender  
social construction of race  
transgender  
hierarchy of difference  
social construct  
the power of texts  
social construction  
silenced histories  
semiotics  
racial naturalism  
signs  
racial historicism  
signifiers  
Whiteness  
signified  
intersectionality  
racial hierarchy  
both/and approach

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES**

**Discussion Questions**

1. How is your body a site where your identity, in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and so on, is constructed and communicated? Provide specific examples.

2. Why is there a rigid binary gender system? Why are gender and sexual identities outside of heterosexuality demonized and erased from mainstream society?
3. What does it mean when we say that race is a social construct? Aren’t our skin color, hair texture, and facial features all biological? Why is race not biological?

4. Race, gender, and sexuality are all socially constructed and communicated through the body. How do race, gender, and sexuality interrelate in terms of the body? How do differences marked on the body intersect?

5. Why is the color-blind ideology problematic? Why can’t we ignore “color” and create a raceless society?

6. How does Whiteness influence the process of intercultural communication? How does Whiteness operate in different cultures and countries through the process of globalization?

Activities

1. “Reading” the Body Politics
   a. Find visual images of the body (photographs, advertisements, paintings, movie posters, etc.).
   b. Address the following questions using the semiotic approach:
      i. In the particular visual image of the body, what signifiers can you identify? Pay close attention to gesture, eye contact, posture, clothing, physical type, size, colors, and so forth.
      ii. What do the signifiers mean? In other words, what is signified?
      iii. How are racial and gender differences constructed on and through the body?
      iv. How is “hierarchy of difference” constructed through the visual image?

2. Unpacking the Everyday Performance of Race and Gender—Group Activity
   a. Think about specific examples in which you perform your race and gender in everyday practices—consciously or unconsciously.
   b. Enact the performance in front of the class.
   c. Now think about specific examples in which you violate the expected norms of gender/race performances.
   d. Enact the performance in front of the class.
   e. After the performance from each group, discuss the following questions:
      i. How does it feel to enact your everyday performance of race and gender?
      ii. How does it feel to violate the norms of race/gender performance?
      iii. What happens when you violate the norms of gender/race performance?
      iv. How does the body communicate? How does the body set the context for intercultural encounter?

3. Unpacking Whiteness—Group Activity
   a. Whiteness is defined as “a location of structural advantage, a standpoint and a set of core values, practices and norms in which White ways of thinking, knowing, being and doing are normalized as the standard.”
b. Write down a scenario in which Whiteness may manifest in intercultural communication.
c. Enact the scenario in front of the class.
d. Address the following questions:
   i. How does Whiteness shape intercultural interactions?
   ii. Can people of color enact Whiteness?
   iii. Can we disengage from and challenge Whiteness?

REFERENCES