In order to reflect on my pedagogical orientation and scholarly interests I will begin and conclude with my book, *Black, Jewish and Interracial: Its Not the Color of Your Skin but the Race of Your Kin and Other Myths of Identity* (1997). This work represents the culmination of a forty-three year work in progress which divide into two formative periods: childhood and adolescence in the United States and adulthood in Israel. I write this essay from a third moment—an unfolding set of middles: middle-age in the middle of Iowa in the middle of the U.S. In *Black, Jewish and Interracial*, I worked against voyeuristic expectations of an introspective narrative as well as against adding to the exhausted topic of relations between Blacks and Jews in the United States. My specific objective, which I now consider a guiding principle in my pedagogy, was to unveil and theorize the abstract notion of *identity* as a practice and a performance whose multiple meanings are derived in the context of social interactions, themselves shaped by historical and political conditions. While I was interested in considering some of the existential and political meanings of racial identities in general and being both Black and Jewish in particular, the genesis of the book originated in a dissatisfaction about premises and habits of scholarly thinking about identities which, it seemed to me, overemphasized individual narratives at the expense of historical and political contexts.

Some autobiographical details may serve as a point of departure: two months after graduating from The Brearley School in New York, I made aliyah to Israel. Twenty one years later, I moved back to the US with my three children and (now ex-) husband to pursue a doctorate at Duke University in Cultural Anthropology. Intended as a temporary sojourn, almost a decade later, a feeling of transience remains—a sentiment familiar to those who cannot give a brief response to the question “where are you from?” I definitely did not anticipate that ten years later I would reside in the heartland of America. It is from within this site that reflections on the vocabulary of place and space offer a semantic refuge in which to comprehend this stage of my life. Iowa is foreign territory among people with whom I have little in common; our points of reference and departure are radically different. As a first generation American who emigrated to Israel at the age of 18, I am neither and yet always both immigrant and
native. In Iowa, unlike cosmopolitan New York City or Jerusalem, this has felt particularly anomalous. It is a relief to find this cognitive feel of difference articulated by scholars whose global perspective is defined by their multilingual, multicultural backgrounds rather than merely acquired and cultivated through education. The distinction between these two ways of comprehending multiplicity lies in the roots of consciousness; as Ahiwa Ong usefully describes it, “multiply inscribed subjects” are characterized by an “in-between consciousness of difference” (352). This is the consciousness I bring to the classroom.

I was born and raised in Manhattan to a Jewish refugee from Nazi Austria and a Black Jamaican. My parents and grandparents did not come to America with a desire or interest in assimilating or shedding the past. Perhaps this accounts for the comfortable synthesis of my own multiple identities which incorporate a politicized notion of Blackness, Jewishness as well as motherhood, among others. These identities shape perspectives which invoke memory and history and provide a context for understanding relations of power and politics. Increasingly, I have come to realize that my presence (and not just my persona) is often (however subtly) perceived as an obstinate interruption precisely because it signifies a refusal to comply with or submit to accepted protocol and disciplinary procedures.

The question “where are you from?” is not a neutral one. In my case, it signals, on the one hand, involuntary migrations before my birth (which made my birth possible) and, on the other hand, my children who evidence the contingency of reading bodies as texts: two of my children appear “white” while my middle child is “brown.” Practically, this means that although I teach at a predominantly white liberal arts college, on the first day of a semester I never assume that the white-skinned young people in my classroom are necessarily White² or privileged. The in-between consciousness of difference conditions the kind of introductory information I seek from students whom I ask, “where are your people from?” (instead of “where are you from”). This is a strategy for immediately making salient the contextual and relational factors which define diverse identities and knowledge students bring into the classroom even where it might appear, visually, as if they were a homogeneous group of people. This strategy also serves to demonstrate a theory: identity originates in and is manifested through social interactions which, in turn, are shaped and influenced by legal, economic, political and religious institutions.

The act of identifying one’s people in the public forum of a class requires the ability to cite genealogies and geographies as well as to ponder gaps in family histories. A few students, who rarely have the opportunity to reveal their histories on their own terms, are visibly pleased that they can present their background without being perceived as antagonistic. They are usually students
of color who have either resigned themselves to silence in order to avoid being the resident authority on people of color in a predominantly white classroom or invoke their background in order to refute stereotypes about people of color. Once in a while, a student whose physical appearance belies assumptions of classmates, seems to relish the opportunity to forestall misidentification. Most of my students are Euro-American of English, German and Dutch background; they find the exercise curious and more than a few are perplexed. For the first time they are confronted with family histories whose origins have vanished into obscurity and their bewilderment sometimes leads them back to the stories their grandparents had forgotten about. My primary purpose is not to act as an intermediary between the generations: I am interested in motivating students to think beyond themselves and to grasp the connections between the past, the present and the future. In addition, working consciously against the prevalent trend to teach race, class and gender as separate units of study, I organize my syllabi to reflect their constant intersection which, hopefully, broadens and sharpens the way in which they engage with current political events outside the classroom.

Beginning a semester with family histories opens the door to a broad range of topics and cautions against universalizing from personal experience. For example, the process through which “undesirable” European immigrants from the nineteenth century became generic white Americans in the twentieth century is reflected in the different ways in which white students of English and Scot heritage relate to the notion of assimilation than those whose ancestors are of Eastern and Southern European ancestry. Using Mathew Frye Jacobson’s book *Whiteness of a Different Color* in a course titled Anthropology of American Culture, students learn, usually for the first time, that from 1840 and until 1924, Europeans were also classified by race which included Saxons, Teutons, Slavs, Semites and Celts (Jacobson 1998). In general, American history classes do not overemphasize the significant “fact” that the presumption of an inherently Anglo-Saxon character reflects the successful colonization ambitions of 17th century English settlers. In 1790, fourteen years after they won their independence, the new Americans restricted U.S. citizenship to “free white persons” but never imagined that this would invite a mass influx of European immigrants very different from themselves.

Students are amazed to read about “white-on-white” racism culminating in the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, which closed the door on immigration, articulated by prominent eugenicist Harry Laughlin, who testified on behalf of the legislation to the US Congress, “Racially, the American people, if they are to remain American, are to purge their existing family stock of degeneracy, and are to encourage a high rate of reproduction by the best endowed portions of their
population, can successfully assimilate in the future many thousands of Northwestern European immigrants . . . But we can assimilate only a small fraction of this number of other white races; and of the colored races practically none” (qtd. in Jacobson 82; italics added). The majority of my students have not been taught that the term “ethnicity” was introduced as a move away from biologizing differences between Europeans and marks the rapid consolidation of a white identity or that the melting pot registered a belief in the biological fusion of different European races into one white race – a process Jacobson terms “the alchemy of race.” Introducing them to Jacobson’s formidable study, directing them to the footnotes and the bibliography is a conscious effort to heighten their awareness of the enormous amount of documented history that has been edited out from their education. Jacobson, like a number of other scholars who have gone into the archives to retrieve highly charged political debates from the past, serves as a model for good scholarship that is politically engaged without being polemical.

Pan-white supremacy reigned in relation to Blacks, American Indians and Chinese. Yet precisely because my students are overwhelming white and have been socialized in predominantly white environments, I believe it is critical to accentuate how the descendants of immigrant groups from Eastern and Southern Europe moved from the margins of whiteness to its center. Monolithic whiteness – in its invisibility and normativity, which is quite different from the self-consciousness of white supremacy which continues to accentuate purity—was facilitated, particularly in the North, by government sanctioned affirmative action. With the return of soldiers from World War Two and the baby boom, government subsidies, low-cost mortgages, tax breaks and finally the 1956 Federal Highways Act with its expansion of freeways, enabled the construction industry to embark on a building spree and the phenomenal growth of suburbs from which Blacks were deliberately and carefully excluded (Hannigan 1998). The combination of social engineering and racial exclusion in housing can be mapped out in the labor sector, in education and healthcare to explain persistent patterns of racial inequality despite the abolition of legal discrimination (Barrett and Roedgier 1997).

Matthew Frye Jacobson’s text serves as a prelude to Ian Lopez’s White By Law which provides an analysis of the racial prerequisites to naturalization (rescinded only in 1952) entitling the inclusion of all white-skinned European immigrants but excluding Asians and most Middle Eastern applicants regardless of skin color or anthropological taxonomies (Lopez 1996). The laborious efforts defining race are marvelously accented by the exclusionary effect of the combined 1790 naturalization act and its 1870 amendment which extended citizenship rights—by law, but not in practice—to “aliens of African nativity
and to persons of African descent” which excluded those who were neither “white persons” nor “of African descent.”

From a pedagogical perspective, Jacobson and Lopez provide students with a deeper understanding of the process encapsulated in the cliche “race is a social construction;” i.e. they come to appreciate the intense labor invested in racing people. When students discuss the formation of class consciousness among Kentucky miners a few weeks later, particularly after viewing *Matewan* (dir. John Sayles, 1987) and *Grapes of Wrath* (dir. John Ford, 1940), they are better prepared to notice, and then to interrogate, the naturalized linkage of whiteness and civility which presumes the synonymity of white and “middle-class.” This leads to the corollary revelation, quite evident in *Grapes of Wrath* (and unusually salient in the representations of ice-skater Tonya Harding, whom they remember), that to be poor and white is to be less than white—to be disposable or “trash”—and to be a person of color and middle class is to become “just a human being.” As we near the end of the semester, most of my students appreciate, without my commentary, that the model of the “human” invoked is white by default. They are more attuned to the vocabulary used in their social circles, on the news, in the movies and they notice the carefully crafted advertising images on television, CD covers, in magazines and newspapers – and for the first time, these predominantly white students are able to discern the routinization of difference: there are human beings and there are Blacks, Asians, Latinos.

I could have my students read essays that more directly tackle questions of “race relations.” For instance, Patricia Williams’ excellent essays in *Seeing A Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* which opens with an anecdote about three nursery-school teachers insisting that her son was color blind. After a visit to the ophthalmologist, Williams discovers that, as a result of their well-meaning but misguided intentions, he had “resisted identifying color at all.” She writes, “the very notion of blindness about color constitutes an ideological confusion at best, and a denial at its very worst” (4). Instead of Williams, however, I tend to choose texts which analyze the roots and phenomenon of inequality with more subtlety precisely because I am more often than not, the first black professor these students have encountered up to that point in their lives (there are four black professors in different departments at my college and a small number of students deliberately try to take a course with at least one of us). I know they anticipate discussions about race—but I also realize that they come burdened with assumptions and stereotypes: race is about people of color and blacks are rappers, basketball players, poor people. Many are quite comfortable with generalizing phrases like “the white patriarchial system”—but if asked to explain it, they are at a loss. They are even more surprised when I take it out of their
vocabulary for the duration of the semester. In order to avoid the tension that arises when white students contemplate their own racialist biases, encouraging them to grapple with the complexity of racism, classism and sexism from a broader, less subjective perspective seems preferable. Selecting texts which make whiteness visible in a narrative style that seems disengaged, facilitates a greater appreciation for the arguments that equality cannot occur without strategic intervention and that a color-blind world cannot be willed into being by insisting on the pretense that we are all “just” human beings.

It is obvious that the choice of material and teaching methods are informed by a silent autobiography which integrates interactive and lecture strategies to engage students with ways in which race-based identities and experiences are neither “natural” nor a manifestation of biological differences. Instead they have been conditioned by and constructed through struggles whose battlefields included courtrooms as well as socializing institutions such as school, church and work. This places the issues of power and privilege within a wider time frame and beyond the superficial boundaries conjured up by attention to perceived cultural differences, where culture serves as a metonym for race. For most Jewish Americans whose ancestors immigrated from Europe and for whom white skin has provided inconspicuousness, racial identity is delicate as they confront the slippage between whiteness and Jewishness with a Jewish professor who is Black and easily draws on experiences from Israel to illustrate points under discussion. For African-American students, loosening American hegemony on definitions of Blackness invites a recognition that it is a constructed category which in turn requires, as Stuart Hall noted in 1989, acknowledgment “of the weakening or fading notion that ‘race’ or some composite notion of race around the term black will either guarantee the effectivity of any cultural practice or determine in any final sense its aesthetic value” (New Ethnicities 443).

For the majority of white Christian students, most of whom are from the Mid-West, critical engagement with race and racial identities interrupts (at least for the semester) the benign security of white normativity as most of them learn for the first time that “white skin”—looking white—has historically not guaranteed legal recognition of being white (Jacobson 1998; Kaplan 1949; Thomas 1997). They learn about the manner in which the analytic construct ethnicity was adopted into the social sciences in order to move away from speaking of racial differences between Europeans while consolidating a white identity, regardless of class differences, in opposition to Blacks, American Indians, Mexicans and Asians. The significance of vocabulary becomes important in unveiling habits of thought which have been entirely erased from both academic and popular discourse. Retrieving the history of the terms “race” and “ethnicity” serves to underline the multifaceted manner in which opportunities
available to immigrants incorporated as “white” Americans was purposely
denied to “native” people of color in general and Americans of African descent
(of any color) in particular.

A few years ago, I introduced a course titled “Postmodernism and
Anthropology” and used the first third of the semester to walk my students
through David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* and Jean Francois
Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*. These were followed by essays which inter-
rogated the analytical utility of the concept “postmodernism.” The challenge
was in keeping students focused on the debates and reflections which shaped
the emerging discourse in the 1980s, weaning them away from a vague collec-
tive assumption that postmodernism was mainly about giving voice to the
silenced Others—aka people of color, women of all colors and poor people.

Postmodernism, an elusive concept, is inseparable from late twentieth cen-
tury capitalism and alludes to the conditions and production of knowledge in
highly industrialized and super technological societies. As a conceptual point
of reference, it is about language games and rhetorical skills: asking students to
restrain their impulse to make judgements about exponents of postmodernism
was a pedagogical strategy that represented an intellectual exercise to discipline
them: “bracket your intuitive reactions until you can map out the arguments of
this text.” Yet their distaste for postmodernist discourse intensified the more
adept they became at deciphering texts and demystifying the author’s linguistic
prowess. By mid-semester, many noticed a pattern: theorists advocating—and
sometimes critiquing—postmodernism were themselves assembling a body of
canonical figures and self-referential texts predominantly authored by white
men and white women and failed either to mention, or did so only in passing,
black thinkers who had raised similar issues more than a hundred years earlier.
Women like Phyllis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Anna J. Cooper had
already interrogated the politics and power of experts in the production of
knowledge which percolates into the public sphere as commonsense or circu-
lates within medical circles and among policy makers and informs legislative
decisions. We ended the semester with Hanif Kureshi’s film, *Sammy and Rosie
Get Laid* (UK 1987) in order for the students to experience a cinematic version
of the explosion of difference in which whiteness does not serve as a norm
(Chatterjee 1996). Kureshi, whose parents are, respectively, Pakistani and
English, offered them an opportunity to experience the inadequacy of tradi-
tional analytic constructs (race/ethnicity/nationality) and required a discussion
which disentangled questions of political power and privilege from vague refer-
ences to the ambiguous notion of “culture.”

One of the decisions I made after teaching Postmodernism and
Anthropology, was to eliminate certain key terms from my students’ vocabulary
for the 14 weeks they are with me. One of these words is “culture.” Noting that in all my classes, students use the word as a synonym for society, race, ethnicity—in other words, any time they want to politely refer to what/whom they perceived as different from themselves—I now ask them to specify whatever they are talking or writing about. If the reference is to values, attitudes, behaviors or social practices, then they need to state this; if they are speaking about racial difference, they are asked to specify what these are. By closing the short-cuts which code words facilitate, my objective is to encourage students to think more carefully and therefore more critically about the ways in which they think about the world around them. A careful selection of readings which provide a new conceptual framework to move beyond essentialist notions, helps ease the difficult transition for students to make for they are not accustomed to reading carefully and often they rehash opinions rather than acquiring a more informed perspective from which to engage with past or current events. Ultimately, it is an empowering experience for students who are in the classroom in order to learn—in the old-fashioned sense of discovering, revising and refining ideas with new information and analyses. I do want them to be aware of, and to question, the implications behind the false homogeneity of everyday vocabulary such as “African-American,” “white,” “diaspora” or “middle-class.”

I entered the field of cultural anthropology when the politics of representation was being confronted more directly. Who gets represented, what gets selected and given attention, what remains in the shadows and festers while new rhetorical strategies are refined in texts which are read, evaluated and validated by a small circle of privileged capitalists (capital here being both symbolic and cultural as well as economic) (Behad 1993). These are issues anthropologists were forced to confront precisely because, as a discipline, anthropology remains an inquiry rooted in the delineation and objectification of an Other. This objectification is not in itself violent—it is the tendency to universalize the unmarked author which is an act of violence. And yet, despite its popularity, the notion of “textuality” and fashionable emphasis of “texts” conceal the fact that texts do not speak back. An imagined notion of popular culture and textual analysis remains inadequate without a conceptual framework that persistently interrogates the space of theoretical procedures and the conditions of theory’s claims (D. Scott 1992).

Viewing the world as a text can be a strategy which actually disempowers and reinforces the marginal positions of people who have been kept out of the center. As Jonathan Friedman, in describing the “agonistic relation of anthropology to the contested realities of formerly silent others,” points out, “the ideas that culture can be negotiated and that invention is a question of sign substitution, a kind of cognitive exercise in pure textual creativity, are linked to
a structure of self and of culture that is perhaps specific to capitalist modernity. The notion of culture as code, paradigm and semiotics is very much a product of modern identity. Some of the cynical dismissal of other peoples’ constructions of their pasts is merely a product of modernist identity in defence of itself” (855).

Embodying diversity entails living comfortably with contradiction and dissonance. This contributes to theory-making and also necessitates political commitments to social justice, which explains my attraction to scholarship that goes against formula and dogma. I actively seek out material that assists me in directing students to question the assumptions behind their knowledge so that they can sharpen their ability to notice and therefore question presuppositions underlying texts they read. My physical presence challenges many of the concepts which dominate and constrain scholarship on “ethnicity”, “race” and “culture” as well as the history behind these analytical constructs: what is the history of these words whose meanings are taken for granted until, on closer examination, they are shown to be contested and convoluted? Until students have acquired a broader base of information, I make an effort to guide them away from an over-reliance on the personal precisely, as Joan Scott argues, because of the self-evident assumptions embedded in the notion “experience” (J. Scott 1992). Only when students can contextualize personal experience, are they in a position to perceptively employ their own embodied genealogies and subjective histories as resources.

If the business of exploring the tensions and contradictions of concepts has been seductive, caution mandates an explicit recognition that some insightful analyses employ metaphors which render comprehensible events and phenomena in particular ways for particular purposes to the benefit of particular persons. Take the popular metaphor fluidity—for whom is identity “fluid?” What do the metaphors of absorption and solvency convey and imply for communities with claims to self-determination. And for whom are borders and boundaries “porous?” The concrete material reality is that those who wait for entry visas and exit permits, will find little enlightening about the vocabulary of “porousness” when their request is deferred. When my oldest son, Gabriel, was born, I tried to register him at the U.S. Consulate in East Jerusalem so he would have the advantage of dual citizenship. The clerk smugly informed me that my child was not entitled to American citizenship since I had left the States without the necessary five years after my fourteenth birthday, and his father was a foreigner. Bewildered, I left without argument but halfway down the street, the spirited rage of a 22 year-old pushed me back to demand—loudly—to see the Consul. Standing across from President Gerald Ford’s photo, an inch taller in an Angela Davis Afro, I adamantly declared, “I am an American citizen and
demand to speak with my Consul!” It was the first time in my life that I had occasion to even think these words.

The Consul—a stocky white man with a Marine crew-cut—emerged from his office as the clerk and I engaged in an escalating exchange (“he’s busy and you can’t see him;” “watch me”). With a conciliatory manner, he invited me into his office. After reviewing the file, he patiently explained the constitutional statute on inheriting citizenship. The law was amended shortly before my daughter, Dorit-Chen, was born—now one needs only two years after the 14th birthday—so she has U.S. citizenship but the changes were not retroactive. When I moved back to the States for graduate school, my father had to file an affidavit for my husband and two sons so they would have the privilege of permanent residence, the coveted green cards (which are, in fact, not green). When my husband and I divorced, his pending application for citizenship was halted and he had to resubmit despite the fact that we had been married for 22 years. Married to an American he could file after three years in the country; single, he had to wait at least five years and is now caught in the backlog of applications.

I have simplified an arduous and frustrating process: borders, boundaries and access to citizenship are concrete constraints on one’s autonomy and mobility. When a mean-spirited clerk or an archaic law stands between the applicant and the visa, the barriers are anything but metaphorical constructs. In subtle and invisible ways, experiences like standing on lines in the U.S. consulate, traveling on an Israeli passport to Jamaica and Germany, and living in a working-class neighborhood in Jerusalem inform my perspectives as much as the identities of Blackness and Jewishness.

Given my interest in the manner in which audience can alter the meaning of ideas, the question of porousness and fluidity can also serve as a useful example for the ways in which seemingly similar theoretical insights can communicate radically different ideas. For instance, when identity is understood as a process articulated in the context of social interactions and political contexts, the reference to fluidity does not imply fiction or invention but rather addresses the complex subjectivity which includes, but is not overshadowed by, conscientious commitments to group-based identities. However, when the concept of identity is analytically disassembled without respect for the significance of the complex ways in which people position and are positioned in relation to other social beings, then the metaphor of porousness can be disabling if not paralyzing. Here I tend to agree with David Scott’s critique of the manner in which theory is taken for granted as a “narrative that was authored (and authorized) the hegemonic career of the West.” Despite my own dismay with the use of culture as a metonym of race, Scott correctly questions the motives behind the drive to discredit the culture concept: “this recognizably ‘anti-essentialist’ characterization of ‘culture’
as mobile, as unbounded, as hybrid and so on, is itself open to question: for whom is ‘culture’ unbounded—the anthropologist or the native?” (375f).

The presence and voice of a professor shapes the intellectual orientation and practical issues of selecting subject matter and organizing syllabi. For instance, in 1995 I was invited to Grinnell College to rejuvenate the Afro-American Studies Concentration. Looking at the available offerings across the general curriculum, I broadened and reorganized the structure of the program under the title Africana Studies introducing two bookend courses, Foundations of Africana Studies and a Senior Seminar. The Foundations course registers the influence of my biography which fostered a pedagogical inclination emphasizing the complicated histories of people in the African diaspora. This introductory course highlights the significance of interrogating the intersection of “blackness” as an experience and as a trope, and the grammar of roots and routes which characterizes—and thus summons—a broad interdisciplinary approach to studies about people of African descent. This translates into a course which, though focused on the experiences of Black people in the United States, constantly questions the ghettoization of Black people in the academy through texts such as Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* and excerpts from Paul Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic*.

The effort to use theory—and not be used by theory—requires stepping into the dirt (to borrow from Stuart Hall) of tension and contradiction without being paralyzed by anxiety. This means valuing and validating any source which helps to reconceptualize and reformulate questions with the specific purpose—however utopian it may seem in these cynical times—of making the world a more humane place (Hall *Race*). Critical thinking refuses to be imprisoned by discipline and control. In this sense, intellectual creativity needs to be tempered by the contradictions of real lived experiences. My personal background produced and reflects a predisposition to question judgments, evaluations and conceptual frameworks of those who write from perspectives they presume are universal even where they include disclaimers of this position in their introductions. For example, the acquisition of another language (Hebrew) for everyday use, along with immersion in Israeli life, fostered a persistent and conscientious recognition of the suspect nature of all translation—a consciousness about the gaps in communication which result from being positioned differently. From the mid-1980s, my articles critiquing Israeli relations with pre-Mandela South Africa as well as dismissing vacuous, though popular, analogies between the two countries appeared in *The Jerusalem Post* and *New Outlook* (written while I was Coordinator on South Africa on the Foreign Affairs Committee of RATZ, the Civil Rights Party of Israel) but it was the essays on ethnic discrimination and elitism in the Israeli Peace Camp
which foreshadowed my growing frustration with the gap between political rhetoric and social activism.

In Israel, after acquiring the credentials necessary to secure a recognized public voice, I witnessed processes of exclusion which became sensible only later in graduate school. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu remains instructive: “movements of rebellion on the part of the privileged are extraordinarily ambiguous: these people are terribly contradictory and, in their subversion of the institution, seek to preserve the advantages associated with a previous state of the institution” (In Other Words 45). One personal example concretely illustrates Bourdieu’s insight.

In the Fall of 1982, I approached a social scientist who is also a founding member of Israel’s largest peace group, Peace Now. At the time, we resided in Neve Yaacov, a working class Jerusalem neighborhood with a large population of Georgians (from the USSR) and Jewish Israelis of North African background. Asked whether it was possible to organize activities in this neighborhood, the professor recoiled in horror, “we don’t go to those places.” Both she and I were American-born Israeli women. The parents and older siblings of my Israeli-born (ex)husband emigrated from Morocco in 1949 and our social network was primarily composed of Israelis of middle-income and Mizrahi background. The social scientist moved in academic circles which, at the three main universities, are still predominantly Ashkenazi. Most of the people in her social network frequently travel between the States and Israel on academic or politically-oriented visits. Such trips often include speaking engagements focused on the Middle East conflict and Israeli foreign policy. Their proficiency in English and visible positions in the peace movement also make them convenient resources for the foreign press which in turn enhanced their visibility.

Beginning with the election of Menachem Begin, prejudice against Mizrahi Jews by people described as “leftists” because they favored territorial compromise with Palestinians was a sensitive topic in Israel although it received little attention among American Jews who tend to be poorly informed on the country’s domestic issues. For instance, the chair of a powerful non-partisan feminist lobby featured regularly in radio and newspaper interviews, often invited American Jewish women to speak out against the oppression of Palestinian women. At the same time, and despite the fact that her reputation as a feminist was built on advocating affirmative action for women, she repeatedly stated her distaste for the “levantization” of Israeli society. In a newspaper interview in The Jerusalem Post in July 1986, she described Israel as a lovely country until the Moroccan Jewish immigration: “As far as interpersonal relations are concerned, (things) took a turn for the worst, I remember, in the early 1950s, when the Moroccan immigration began. Until that point, there wasn’t any violence.
But the North Africans really pulled knives... Of course, I must confess that at that time I had almost no contact with people from the Edot Hamizrah (Eastern Jews). I never even took a bus, so this wasn’t a phenomenon I personally encountered" (25 July 1986; italics added).

A Moroccan colleague from Hebrew University responded, condemning the stereotype of North Africans as criminal deviants (7 August 1986). Not only did the professor not retract her statement, she reiterated her perspective (4 September 1986). Three years later, she responded—in her capacity as chairperson of the Israeli Women’s Network—to my op-ed in The Jerusalem Post chastising elitism among women in the peace camp with the following comment: “what is most disturbing about Ms. Azoulay’s article is the totally unsubstantiated accusations of elitism and ethnic exclusivity. It is in the nature of leaders to lead and perhaps unfortunately, to be ahead of and different from their fellow men and women. To interpret this as being elitist or a sign of rejection of those one hopes to lead is reverse snobbery of the very worst kind” (20 July 1989, italics added).

The same summer, following considerable debate over whether Reshet, a new umbrella for feminist peace activists, should concern itself with the issue, I organized a symposium, “Identities in Israeli Society and Peace: the Place of Mizrahi Women in Political Activities.” The event was held at Tel Aviv University through the sponsorship of the Forum for Women’s Studies. As a result, it momentarily generated academic recognition to the topic and, in Bourdieu’s currency, symbolic capital. The discussions focused on Mizrahi Jewish women in an attempt to directly confront the obvious absence of Mizrahi women in the peace camp. Six college educated, articulate Mizrahi women, all of whom have been involved in political activities for a number of years, presented papers to a forum of 153 women and 5 men (most of whom were not Mizrahi) on a hot Thursday evening in Tel Aviv.

The size of the audience exceeded expectation and was viewed by Reshet as a success. Most of the Ashkenazi women, the main audience, had never engaged with women with a specifically Mizrahi consciousness, convinced that there were no Mizrahi women with the necessary skills who could assume central roles in the organization. Strategically, the symposium demonstrated the possibility of dramatically altering the image of yet another peace group which looked like, and spoke to a predominantly elite Ashkenazi audience. The potential existed for bringing together Mizrahi women and Ashkenazi women with a network of powerful contacts through family connections and with media and political parties, as well as among philanthropists and professional activists abroad. These connections trace a specific social and class position, thus networking was not merely a metaphor, but an efficient and convenient means of empowerment and advancing a particular cohort of women.
These Mizrahi women represent 60% of Israeli Jews, relate to, work with and are sensitive to a working class sector whose marginalization and resentment often led to support for political parties intransigent on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Lederer-Gibel 1984). Unlike their Ashkenazi sisters, the Mizrahi women who addressed the symposium linked their politics to both domestic social issues and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. They viewed these as interconnected, part of a political process through which an image of Israel as a western nation has been constructed.

The possibility of a joint effort between these two groups of women within the coalition of Reshet remained hypothetical. The association of academic and professional credentials exclusively with political insight and expertise severely reinforces structural inequities, reproducing overlapping ethnic and class discrimination. But it was lack of symbolic capital, rather than academic credentials, that was the greatest impediment to propelling educated Mizrahi women into pivotal positions even in newly-formed “leftists” women’s organizations.7

1990 was a turning point and in October, I submitted an application to one doctoral program abroad. Then, a few weeks before I left for Duke University, a group of Mizrahi activists requested a meeting with Tikkun publisher and editor Michael Lerner, then organizing a major peace symposium in Jerusalem. During the meeting, he asked me to participate in the plenary. The plenary papers were later published in Tikkun with the exception of the one which focused on both peace and ethnic chauvinism although (as The Jerusalem Post favorably noted) it was greeted by “thunderous applause.” I relate this anecdote in order to highlight the lesson I internalized about how events are written and erased even as they are in process. The frustration of being thus canceled has been channeled into an acute awareness of the many situations in which new voices, insights and directions are censored by people vacillating over altering the structures of power unless they have secured their own position and explains why I am attracted to interrogating the process through which particular narratives are privileged over others, by whom and why. Herein lies the reason why my students are encouraged to historicize events—to return to sources and their contexts in which particular ideas and people were actively promoted while others were conscientiously concealed.8

When I returned to the States, I was not prepared for the extent to which 1970s demands for, and resistance against, the inclusion of people of color in courses and on faculty continue. Focusing on race as a central theoretical and pragmatic subject of study continues to challenges many white faculty and administrators who perceive themselves as raceless and their actions as unmarked by the inflection of their racialized positions (Azoulay 1998; Dovidio 1997; Mills 1997).9 As a social scientist interested in group relations in the U.S.,
I privilege race as a significant social fact which needs to be at the center of analysis. From this perspective, to study the invention of the Negro—the invention of Africa and Africans—obliges an inquiry into the invention of Man and Whiteness; the invention of the West (Trouillot 1991). Here too, the constraints of racial categories and their corollary stereotypes surface as objects of study in my classroom.

Interest in the question of Black and Jewish identities in the context of the United States begins with my own socialization, but it also emerged from a renewed curiosity about Euro-American notions of “interraciality.” I left the States when “Black is Beautiful” anticipated a moment of political transition but returned to celebrations of an ahistorical biraciality where Black had been displaced by the hyphenated African-American and demands for faculty of color and curricular diversity echoed those of my youth.

Dissatisfaction with public conversations on fragmented anxiety-laden multiple identities motivated my initial research focus. I wanted to accentuate the conditions that make it possible for individuals who embody and thus inherit membership in different socially marked groups to identify with both groups and thereby name their identity in the language of coupling rather than contradiction or fractions. I intentionally distanced myself from providing idiosyncratic experiences that satisfy a voyeuristic desire for the exotic or the traditional search for insights into race relations via a purient fascination with the products of interracial sex (Yu 1999).

Consider the language of biracialism which silently obscures and yet saliently evokes the multiracial history of American Blacks. In the seventeenth century, English legislators in the colony pondered the status of children of Englishmen and Negro slave women. Was the child slave or free?—not was the child black or white. The question was settled rather quickly by changing English laws of inheritance and introducing status through maternal descent—a child was bond or free according to the status of the mother. With the abolition of indentured servitude and the institutionalization of slavery only for people of African descent, slavery and the stigma of color were formally linked. By the mid-nineteenth century, the stigma of inferiority associated with blackness was given scientific legitimacy which enabled the language of species and hybrids. Nineteenth century racial classifications introduced the discourse of black and white species whose sexual encounters produce hybrids updated in today’s vocabulary of interracial couples. Many of the children whose mothers are not Black/Afro-American increasingly identify as biracial and mixed race without grasping that these terms testify to a legacy of scientific racism which is stronger than the disclaimers that race is a social construction. For instance, despite the plethora of newspaper and popular journal articles
celebrating multiracialism, racial blending does not forecast a color-blind society although, in a throwback to the melting pot metaphor of fusion, it does expand the boundaries of probationary whiteness for children of interracial unions. Increasingly, the absence of recognizable signifiers of blackness lends itself to racial ambiguity which facilitates the individual’s right to control information about herself. This, in turn, serves to shield the individual from discrimination and to diffuse the stigma of blackness by accentuating identities with greater social currency (Goffman 1963). In this context, accentuating biraciality, instead of blackness, suggests that “(w)ith the pinning of racial hope upon blood mixtures in such a literal way, there comes a sneaky sort of implied duty to assimilate—the duty to grab on to the DNA ladder and hoist oneself onward and upward” (Williams 1997, 53).

Although I want students to understand that race is a social construction which we reproduce with each invocation, I do not want them to imagine that we can merely wake up one morning and claim to be raceless. (Appiah 1992; Azoulay 1996). The tendency of the media to present biraciality, multiracialism and multiculturalism as a barometer of national moral health presumes a biological component to racial groups in which fusions are the prescription to their dissolution and an antidote to racism. But, as Carol Camper, editor of Miscegenation Blues: Voices of Mixed Race Women writes, “We should not be forced into a ‘closet’ about White or any other parentage, but we must recognize that our location is as women of colour.” Her political position is underscored by the selections of essays in her book which do not include “the idea that racial mixing would be the so called ‘future’ of race relations and the future of humanity . . . I strongly disagree with this position. It is naive. It leaves the race work up to the mixed people. It is essentially a racist solution” (1994, xxiii).

As we move into a new millennium, theorizing and historicizing race should not be deployed against the efficacy of race-based communities of meaning (Outlaw 1996). Therefore, it is of crucial importance that students understand the processes which constitute the social construction of race in particular and other socio-political units of analysis. Unfortunately, too often they learn to use code words (such as “social construction”) without a clear understanding of what they encapsulate and for this reason are unable to export them into in-depth analyses of topical political issues.

While writing Black, Jewish and Interracial, I found it useful to step outside the limitations of normative western Christian bounds which informed almost all the academic and political texts I was reading. I returned to a Jewish source—Genesis, the story of Creation in Hebrew Scripture—in order to rethink “identity” in a way that cohered with my experience. The creation of complementary and complimentary domains resonated with Stuart Hall’s
notion of the logic of coupling: the conjunction “and” without polarity and opposition (Minimal Selves 29). Although attracted to philosophical explanations on identity, the solipsism of Descartes’ pronouncements—the inadequacy of “I think therefore I am” resolved by “I cannot doubt that I am doubting”—seemed to honor the self in isolation. As Levi-Strauss commented in response to Sartre’s claim, “Hell is other people,” an identity which presumes the primacy of self is easily sociologized into a collective “we” who assume the right to reshape the world in its own image (BJI 38). That year, during the Passover Seder, I realized that while Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities was interesting, the annual recounting of the Exodus already recognized the effort required in maintaining a collective sense of identity among a disparate group of individuals whose self-interests often bring them into conflict with each other. In sum, the in-between consciousness of difference provided a foundation from which to revisit rather than reproduce ideas about racial identities in the United States.

Philosopher Adrian Piper’s reflection resonates well: blacks who refuse to accept a subordinate role and expect to be treated with respect as valuable people “reveal their caregivers’ generationally transmitted underground resistance to schooling them for victimhood” (25). How exciting, in this context, to be introduced to Michel Foucault’s appendix to The Archaeology of Knowledge, “The Discourse on Language,” when he writes, “It is always possible one could speak the truth in a void; one would only be in the true (dans le vrai), however, if one obeyed the rules of some discursive ‘policy’ which would have to be reactivated every time one spoke” (224). And yet, crossing disciplinary boundaries inheres a sense of empowerment precisely because these boundaries are regulated, governed and controlled by procedures, rules and gatekeepers. My family history is complicated only when defined against the norms of homogeneity. Consequently I accentuate the complicated histories of people, the emergence of diasporic communities, and the significance of interrogating political signifiers. This approach lends itself toward uncoupling those hyphenated identities currently channeled into and imprisoned within hyphenated departments: those marked areas of studies—African-American studies, Asian-American studies, Latino Studies which reinforce, rather than challenge, the equation and primacy of Anglo-American studies as authentically American.

There are many new voices on the academic scene who do not fit the imposed traditional categories of ethnicity, race, and nationality. Although they—like me—may assert a particularistic identity in the public sphere, their in-between experiences and genealogies motivate and direct their scholarship toward an interrogation of traditional lines of inquiry and processes through which disciplinary canons have been instituted and institutionalized. Their
repertoire of courses and syllabi selections as well as research projects reflect intellectual inquiries that have been shaped and crafted from the advantage of multiple perspectives.

In conclusion, an insight from South African writer Andre Brink has significant relevance for how I perceive my vocation, teacher and scholar, as a practice. Reflecting on the distinction between *an act* that is a commitment—it obligates—and *a gesture*—which is merely a performance for an audience—Brink notes that the political distinction is profound: “An act, implies involvement in the whole chain of cause and effect; it leads to something; it has direct moral or practical bearing on the situation in which it is performed; and thereby it commits the (wo)man who performs it. The heroic rebel, in other words, is committed to rebellion not *against* but *toward* something.” (61)

Rather than dismissing canonical legacies, interventions to reveal their archaeology witness efforts toward highlighting the personal fusions and cross-cultural diffusions that underlie any and all academic pursuits. My education and life experiences have led to the conclusion that one goal of any teacher should be to guide students toward valuing knowledge learned in the classroom and finding a way to put it to practical use in their daily lives. It is a deceptively modest objective.

**NOTES**

1. Jewish immigration to Israel is referred to as *aliya* and quite literally means to go/rise up. One goes up to Israel and Jerusalem – every other geographical movement is just to go or to go down.

2. I am here using a capital W to indicate white as a racial identity and not merely an adjective.

3. At different moments, discrimination against Mexicans, Japanese and Hindu Indians reinforced a generic sense of whiteness. However, it should be noted that despite negative attitudes towards Asians in general, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the only legislative ruling to explicitly name a nationality for the purpose of their specific exclusion.


5. In 1988, two feature articles on my activities, (see Tom Segev, “The Raymond Suttner Affair,” *Haaretz*, 23 September and the Jerusalem weekly *Kol Hair*, 30 September) importantly helped highlight the case of detained South African lawyer, Raymond Suttner. At the time I believed that extensive attention to South African Jews who were anti-apartheid activists was needed in order to buttress criticism of Israeli foreign relations with the apartheid government.
Over time, cynicism has displaced naivete as I realized that all government policies are dictated by pragmatism and not principle. The military contracts between Israel and Pretoria continue—only the signatories changed.

6. Mizrahi—which explicitly refers to the East—is used more frequently than Sepharadim for Jews from Afro-Asian countries. While the term was initiated by political concerns, historical accuracy encouraged it’s incorporation into daily use.


8. As in my book, I refer to Bourdieu’s statement from Homo Academicus about the temptation “to adopt the title A Book for Burning, which Li Zhi, a renegade mandarin, gave to one of those self-consuming works of his which revealed the rules of the mandarins’ game. We do so, not in order to challenge those who, despite their readiness to denounce all in inquisitions, will condemn to the stake any work perceived as a sacrilegious outrage against their own beliefs, but simply to state the contradiction which is inherent in divulging tribal secrets and which is only so painful because even the partial publication of our most intimate details is also a kind of public confession (Bourdieu 1988,5).

9. In 1997, George Yancy interviewed William Jones, founder of the first formal Committee on Blacks in Philosophy, whose reflections on institutional rigidity in the American Philosophical Association of the 1970s saliently resonate as accurate for the academy of the 1990s: “We have found that oppressors go through three denials. They would describe the present situation such that the labeling of oppression is inaccurate or inappropriate. You can use internal criticism to have them relinquish the first denial. But then they’re going to move to the second denial, Well I’m not the cause. But then again, through internal criticism, we get them to relinquish that claim. So, they admit that there is oppression, that they are culpable, and that there is something that must be done to correct this oppression. But this is where the third denial emerges. The oppressor will select a method of correction that will not correct. The APA did not see the oppression in their structures or in their policies because they were not looking at it from the angle of analysis that would reveal such things as oppression.” (Yancy 1998).