Chapter Eleven

Neither Black Nor White Enough – and Beyond
Black or White: The Lived Experiences of
African-American Women at Predominantly
White Colleges
Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Emily Brooke Barko

Introduction

I never really had a strong connection to black people, or people of color…not that I couldn’t relate to the people of color in my university, but those students of color here got this image from me and completely shut me out. They were thinking, ‘Oh, that girl thinks she’s white, why does she want to join our group?’ I don’t have the same stereotypical kind of black background as they do, and I often resent when they say ‘Oh, you’re white.’ Then you start to think about it, and then I will ask them: ‘What is white?’ And they respond, ‘Oh, you talk white.’ I speak like an educated person, but that doesn’t mean I’m white (I, 18).

This excerpt is from a recent interview conducted with a woman of color who currently attends a predominately white northeastern college. While she identifies herself as a black woman, the black community at her college does not fully accept her. She comments on her torn emotions: “I don’t understand why I’m forced to have to choose one side or
the other, the left or the right, black or white…why can’t I be both, or even, why can’t I just be the way I want to be, you know?” Among her white friends, she often feels she is not “white enough.” This is a recurring feeling among these African-American women, and it guided much of our research in this study. In particular, our research explores a conception of “double consciousness” (DuBois 1903), in which someone experiencing double consciousness is advantaged and disadvantaged – able to negotiate multiple spaces, and yet not a member of either group or world. In DuBois’s words, such a person is “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (1903:3).

Background and Research Problem

While colleges seek to achieve diversity, perceptions regarding the goal and meaning of diversity often miss the impact of cultural and racial/ethnic factors on the minorities’ racial identity and self-esteem. There remains a lack of attention to minority students’ experiences, expectations, and satisfaction once they come to college. While affirmative action, initial academic support, and enrichment initiatives created a positive impact on equalizing access, these policies also nurtured a climate ripe for backlash on the part of majority students toward minorities they perceived as being given special treatment and admission, not based on their merit, but on their minority status (Feagin and Picca 2007).

Persons of color who attend historically white colleges often live within diverse social worlds. They are bound by the macrocosm, the larger popular American-white culture, but they also racially identify with a specific subculture. This dual identity presents these students with a very unique role-conflict; they are simultaneously “insiders” and “outsiders,” and there is the challenge of to what extent they integrate aspects of these different cultures. In addition, some students of color, like the woman cited earlier, remark on identity dilemmas stemming from differences in social class upbringing that make them appear “too white” to certain groups of color and not “white enough” for their white peers. These conundrums often affect their sense of racial identity.