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Mapping the Field

Observers of the twentieth and the onset of the twenty-first century will note how these times are distinguished by a peculiar passion for identity: identities made around nation, community, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexuality, and age; identities premised on popular culture and its shifting sets of representational practices; identities attached to fashion and new imagined lifestyles, to leisure and work, and to the mundane and the exotic; identities made in relation to place and displacement, to community and to a sense of dispersal, to "roots" as well as "routes." This book is an engagement with the passionate question of identity in what I call "global times." It explores these questions of identity and related questions of culture through an ethnographic study of the dynamics played out by youth in an urban high school in the city of Toronto. I will call this school Maple Heights.¹

Returning to the passion for identity, and the passion of identity, observers might also note a peculiar paradox of these times. On the one hand the closing decade of the twentieth century is marked by openings and possibilities for

reaching out across differences, by transnational and post-national identities that accompany aspiration toward global citizenship. Challenges are made to the previously taken for granted assumptions about what one's place of birth has to do with the ways identities are made. But on the other hand these times are also marked by closures, identity politics, social aggression, and civic strife. While new and improved forms of technology enhance rapid movements and flows of communication and bring about the global village, new boundaries, identities, and exclusions (built upon racist practices, ethnic absolutism and nationalism) reassert restrictions on the movements of others.² Furthermore, while the conditions of displacement and migration are celebrated by some, millions more are affected by persecution, war, and poverty. What these contradictory and conflicting conditions suggest is that identities are shaped by context and history. Identity experimentation and imagined possibilities are free floating and a matter of choice for some, but they are also the results of encounters with boundaries of exclusion for others.

The passion for identity takes shape as assumptions about sameness or difference between selves and communities are brought into question and people begin to reflect upon who they are or worry about what they are becoming.³ Such a passion is evident in intense academic debates, popular talk shows, and everyday conversations. Since talk of identity merges with the practices of identity, identities cannot be separated from the knowledge and representations which they express and repress. Nor is identity beyond what Giddens describes as the "double hermeneutics."⁴ This is a reference to how those we research may internalize the language of the researcher and talk and act through the concepts and meanings that language produces. There is, in other words, an intimate relationship between the various discourses and representations of identities and how identities are made and performed. But this observation does not

mean that individuals are passive objects or dupes of identity trends and fashions. Instead it draws attention to the self-reflexivity entailed in identity construction, to how individuals mediate and reflect upon these trends and make them their own. People act upon knowledge, even as it acts upon them. For understanding this process the concept *discourse* is of special importance, and central to our ethnographic study of the encounters of youth and identity at Maple Heights.

In popular usage “discourse” refers simply to conversation and writing. It is used both as a noun, designating a treatise on a subject, and as a verb meaning to speak or to write. What is important here is the intimate relationship between noun and verb, between knowledge and its actions. In thinking about this relationship I am influenced by the large and established field of discourse analysis and discourse theory.⁵ In this field discourse is defined as a collection of statements and ideas that produces networks of meanings. These networks structure the possibilities for thinking and talking and become the conceptual framework and the classificatory models for mapping the world around us. Discourse shapes how we come to think and produce new knowledge, and facilitates shared understandings and engagements. Important to note, however, is that even as discourse facilitates thought and actions it may also work to constrain, as it sets up the parameters, limits, and blind spots of thinking and acting. This recalls Michel Foucault’s notion of *power/knowledge*, by which discourse disciplines subjects even as it positions them and facilitates in the social world.⁶ In other words, discourse is both enabling and constraining.

Clearly, power is central to discourse. But power must not be thought about in this context as something that one has or does not have. It exceeds the Marxian sense of power as that which can be seized or that from which one is alienated.⁷ Power is neither simply about material ownership nor about making relationships to what Bourdieu calls “cultural

capital.”⁸ It is not synonymous with the decision-making apparatus of institutions and government. Instead, the power of discourse is productive, and works in multiple, multidirectional ways. For example, the power that is inherent in identity categories such as *woman*, *man*, *youth*, *Black*, and *White*, structures the possibilities for acting in terms of socially intelligible subjectivities or what it means to be one or more of these categories. The categories, in other words, can be categories of empowerment. But even as they enable and empower subjects, such identity categories also hold the potential to constrain by prescribing and restricting what it means to *be* woman, man, youth, Black, White, and so on. To consider such conflicted possibilities, notions of both power and discourse must be dynamic and include an understanding of how constraint is also productive. This will become clearer later when we see individuals acting with and acting against the power effects of identity categories and knowledge.

The concept *discourse* alerts us to what language does, and to how it produces and situates individuals. Such a critical engagement with language and its effects also asks us to think about how certain meanings become common sense—how specific discourses become “authoritative” or “dominant.”⁹ For example, let us take our concept of culture. Culture is often popularly talked and written about as a set of stable and timeless attributes that distinguish groups. It is imagined in terms of what anthropologist Clifford Geertz, following Durkheim, refers to as the “webs of significance” through which people make sense of their worlds and those of others.¹⁰ This specific understanding of culture is about histories, traditions, shared beliefs, and folklore. These visual, oral, and written forms of cultural representations are seen as the property of individuals and groups, prompting talk of “your” culture, “my” culture, “dominant” culture, “minority” cultures, and so on. Culture is here viewed as a product to be received and passed on. So dominant is this

specific discourse that alternative notions of culture that challenge the very idea of culture as a site of identity may be difficult to imagine. In this book, the concept *elusive culture* responds to this challenge. The book is an attempt to gesture toward a more open and pervasive view of culture, which is not only a product or a set of attributes that can be claimed and neatly recorded, but more significantly, a process that is ongoing. Individuals participate in the process of culture, not just in webs of tradition, but, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, also in surprising movements and ways that may exceed the culturally given or expected.

As I map out the conceptual field for the ethnography of Maple Heights, there is a tension within my attempts to delineate the concepts of culture, race, and identity. In dealing with each separately below, I draw attention to their conceptual distinction. After all, these are specific words and concepts that address different social phenomena. However, it is equally important to bear in mind the relationship between these concepts, their discourses, and their convergences in academic and popular discourses. As this study of Maple Heights demonstrates, race may function as culture, culture as identity, and identity as race. Such convergences lend elusive qualities to the categories. I stress convergences because culture, race, and identity are often talked about as if they are stable, bounded entities rather than slippery and shifting.

Discourses of Culture, Identity, and Race

Culture

While undertaking the research for this book, I came across a relatively short UNESCO publication entitled *Voices in a Seashell: Education, Culture and Identity*. The publication is the outcome of a seminar on indigenous cultures and

schooling in the South Pacific. I quote from this work because the particular discourse of culture that it reproduces is one that a notion of elusive culture can critically engage:

At the heart of our education and social problems in small indigenous cultures is the loss of cultural identity. Young people do not know who they are. Flowing from this lack of identity is a chain of consequences: low esteem . . . leading to feelings of disempowerment . . . leading to failure in school.¹¹

At the start of my research in the high school, one teacher expressed enthusiasm for my project and its concerns with schooling, culture, race, and identity because, she pointed out, if we can help children to find and release their identity it will be a good thing. One reading of this teacher's claim might be that she sees identity as essential but suppressed and therefore capable of being released, as expressed in the UNESCO document. The fact that in both places, that is, in the South Pacific and here in the North American city of Toronto, cultural identity is understood as an entity that can be lost and, by extension, found speaks to the global authority of this particular discourse of culture.

According to this dominant view, subjects are the unified objects of a culture which tells us who we are. Cultures are viewed as objects that can be set against each other, so that "new cultures" and "not having a culture" are set against "old cultures" and "being at one with culture." Elusive culture, made from the fragments and mingling of representations, is a critique of this dominant discourse of culture. However, we must bear in mind that the sentiments expressed by both UNESCO and the Maple Heights teacher are frequently responses to the violence of racism and marginalization. Calling attention to the elusiveness of culture does not detract from the need to confront racist practices because culture must be used in antiracist actions. However

we also need to note, as Michele Fine puts it, that “even ‘for’ Others there are growing stifling discourses that essentialize to make culture.”¹² Indeed, to consider that culture is experienced ambivalently and in multiple and conflicting ways may well open new forms of antiracist practices that are capable of exceeding the old.

While the educational guide *Voices in a Seashell* offers us a rather narrow conceptualization of culture as a set of attributes, this view has until relatively recently been the dominant anthropological understanding of culture. More recently, though, in the field of anthropology (and in the humanities in general) this definition has become hotly contested—with the result, as James Clifford puts it, anthropology’s culture is no longer what it used to be.¹³

In his elaboration of the culture concept, Raymond Williams notes that culture is an “exceptionally complex” term that, in English, initially described a process, as in the culture or cultivation of crops, rearing of animals, and tilling of the soil.¹⁴ In the eighteenth and earlier part of the nineteenth century a “cultivated” person was one concerned with breeding practices, and was therefore viewed as possessing culture. Contemporary use of the word in the sense of “high culture” and “cultured persons” has its origins in this earlier notion of cultivation. Wagner suggests that anthropology helped to democratize this meaning by speaking of a “people’s culture,” thereby generalizing the idea of human refinement and domestication from individuals to collectives.¹⁵ The shift in meaning is evident in late-nineteenth-century description of culture as “that complex whole” of beliefs, morals, customs, capabilities, and habits that people acquire as members of society.¹⁶ This late-nineteenth-century articulation crystallized what I call *attribute theory*, the understanding of culture as a set of stable and knowable attributes. This theory dominated anthropological research and thinking for the greater part of the twentieth century. It underpinned the structural functionalist approach to the study of

culture and an understanding of the concept as “coherent and predictable.” It made it possible to talk about “patterns of culture” and to tie the concept to questions of nationalities.¹⁷ In short, by the beginning of the twentieth century the meaning of culture had evolved into something quite different from its initial meaning in agriculture and horticulture.

The theory of culture as the attributes and distinguishing features of a community meant that ethnography, or writing culture, became the practice of recording and analyzing the traits that distinguished communities and groups. This approach, premised largely on modernist beliefs in objectivity and scientific models and a propensity for classification and ordering has subsequently been critiqued for objectifying and fixing cultural differences and for bringing to bear Western-centered assumptions upon the study of cultures considered non-Western.¹⁸ Ironically, however, it is this attribute theory that was frequently borrowed in anthropology’s second phase in the later part of the twentieth century to study ethnic and subcultures in Western multicultural settings.

If modernist beliefs in rationality, objectivity, and positivism shaped the theory and study of attribute culture, in the sixties and seventies concerns with subjectivity and the role of the anthropologist in “producing” culture marked a new phase in theorizing cultural phenomena.¹⁹ Thus observes Roy Wagner, who called attention to how culture is “invented” in the process of being written about: “The study of culture is culture. . . . The study of culture is in fact our culture; it operates through our form, creates in our terms, borrows words and concepts for its meanings and re-creates us through our efforts.”²⁰ To recall Toni Morrison, the subject of the dream is always the dreamer.²¹

One way for anthropologists to move beyond the previously unquestioned faith in objectivity and empiricism was to stress an interpretative approach, viewing culture as an open-ended text. Thinking about culture as text allows for

multiple meanings and, as Geertz put it, insists upon the refinement of debates rather than the closure of consensus.²² At the same time, anthropologists influenced by Marxism also urged us to think about how culture is not simply a naturally occurring phenomenon, but is situated within and shaped by systems of political economy.²³ The notion of elusive culture grows out of these earlier challenges to scientific models and their claims to being able to represent other cultures.

What might be identified as a third phase in the development of cultural theory emerged in the 1980s and is associated with what is called the “postmodernist turn.”²⁴ In this third phase, debates on culture continue to critique ethnographic practices and authority. It is impossible to adequately survey the range of positions that mark this phase of critique except to note that among the influences are neo-Marxism, structuralism and poststructuralism, psychoanalytic theory, discourse theory, postmodernism, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory.²⁵ These various influences challenge the notion of the unitary, fixed subject, and insist upon the instability of meaning. They also open up questions about how the body is read and performed. Anthropological concerns with culture came to share with other academic disciplines a move away from grand theorizing and holistic explanations of “that complex whole” towards an interest in “partial truths.” The monologic voice of the ethnographer gave way to an engagement with multiple voices that are competing and contradictory. Far from being a stable and knowable set of attributes, culture has now become a matter of debate about representations and the complex relationships that individuals take up in relation to them.

I have attempted to sketch out three phases as a crude periodization of developments in the theory of culture that have resulted in breaks in the ways that culture is theorized. Such an overview runs the risk of compromising the com-

plex and dense field of cultural theory, and I ask the reader to keep this in mind. It is also important to keep in mind the relationships between these competing theories because such relations give rise to the lived tensions of identity and to the ways that culture is experienced. While new discourses, insights, and theories of culture may displace old theories, they do not replace them. Elusive culture must be understood in the light of competing and converging theories of culture. For example, and as will be seen in subsequent chapters, it takes account of the different forms of representations that are produced by attribute theory, but it also is attuned to the ambivalent and contradictory cultural processes of everyday lives.

Race

Perceptions of race as a natural and obvious given have long been challenged, not least by the discipline of anthropology. It is now commonplace to state that race is a social construct and a discursive category.²⁶ Thinking about race as discursive means understanding that races have been socially created and therefore have no intrinsic meaning outside their histories. While race might have a specific meaning in a given context and time, its significance changes in different circumstances and times. Studies of the construction of races demonstrate how the objectifying of racial difference coincided with and was contingent upon imperialism. Making racial categories was also in keeping with modernist obsessions with classification and ordering, a strategy for control. When different races were attached to different cultures and regions of the world, discourses of race also became discourses of geography and culture.²⁷ It is the crosscutting and mapping of different discourses onto bodies that make race a discursive category, but at the same time one of the most naturalized discourses available for making sense of the world.²⁸

Being a discursive category means that the signs and meanings that are subsumed by race can be quite broad and subject to change. This was aptly illustrated when I asked a group of university students to make a random list of the everyday key words that are evoked by the concept *race*. The list was wide ranging and included the following: peoples' looks, skin color, culture, religion, musical tastes, hairstyles, place of birth, dress, intelligence, attitudes, identity, beliefs, and history. This spontaneous list demonstrates that when it comes to thinking about race, it is difficult to pin down stable and singular meanings or to distinguish materiality from interpretation. In its everyday operations, race draws upon and draws together a variety of discourses affixed to human bodies. This observation also shows how the theoretical distinctions between *ethnicity* as about culture and *race* as about biology fall down in everyday practice. In the chapters that follow, we will see that through these discursive practices, race can be many things.

Various genealogies of race suggest that its attachment to biology is relatively new.²⁹ The present day practice of replacing biological explanations for race with cultural ones might well signal a return to older, more rigid forms of classification.³⁰ In recent years we have witnessed a resurgence of interest in race sciences even as beliefs in racial hierarchies have long been discredited. "New racism" is a term that was coined to describe the shift from crude forms of scientific racism based on biologically determined social hierarchy to racism premised on belief in immutable cultural differences. This newer form of racism may be couched in a language of "values," "incompatible cultures," and "complex differences," effectively discriminating without even using the word "race." New racism also draws upon discourses of nation in order to suggest belonging or not-belonging, inclusion and exclusion. For example, when a columnist writing in one of Canada's respected magazines poses the question, "Why have Black activists trotted out this tired old rhetoric

about systemic racism?" and answers her own question by stating, "Canadians know themselves and they know that Canadian society is not racist," the identity "Black activist" is thereby constituted as incompatible with "Canadian."³¹ A similar practice is at play when Ontario's premier attempts to dismiss a demonstration against his government's social and economic policies on the grounds that he saw Iranians and Iraqis taking part in the march. Race, articulated through the codes of nation, culture, and identity, divides those who belong from those who are made other.

One of the symptoms of these new forms of racism is the presentation of observation as fact, as in the instances cited above. This practice produces the sense of an objective discourse that is outside the speaker's opinions and evaluations—one is only describing what one sees. But discourse analysis requires us to think about the situation of what one sees, and the power of specific locations and institutional bases. Such an analysis interprets discourse as a site of struggle where groups strive and compete for the production of meaning and for authoritative expertise. In the next chapter the concept new racism becomes significant for understanding the subtle ways by which such struggles are waged at the site of schooling. We will also see that new racism is further complicated by discourses of multiculturalism and immigration and claims about declining standards. In the same way that the meaning of culture changes, so shall we see that the meanings attached to race by students at Maple Heights also shift and change.

Identity

Much of the growing field of literature on the question of identity is structured by tension between conceptualizations of identity as a category or as a process. As a category, identity announces who we are and calls upon notions of nation,

class, gender, and ethnicity for definition. But a second way of talking about identities recognizes that identity is a process of making identifications, a process that is continuous and incomplete. This distinction between identity and identification is important because while the former implies an essential and fixed individual, the latter recognizes that identity is a constructed and open-ended process. The concept of identification raises critical questions about the complex relationships that youth form in a context of multiplying lifestyle possibilities, and enables the researcher to observe the kinds of identifications that youth are making. The researcher can note how these might shift and change in contradictory ways, rather than search for the authoritative youth culture and identity.

With respect to questions of human subjectivity, Hall distinguishes three concepts of identity linked to three overlapping models of how the subject is conceptualized. They are the Enlightenment subject, the sociological subject, and the postmodern subject.³² The Enlightenment subject has an innate inner core which unfolds as the individual moves through life. Identity, within this framework, is the linear development and unfolding of the individual's essential core or self. The sociological subject is the product of the increasing complexity of modernity. What the Enlightenment saw as an autonomous inner core, sociological models view as being mediated and produced by cultures and socialization. In social psychological terms, identity, and the self, is the result of symbolic interaction between the individual and what Mead and others term "significant others."³³ Identity offers coherence and completion to relationships between the subject and the social world. But this sense of unity, security, and coherence is, Hall points out, a fantasy in a world where identities multiply, fragment, become contradictory, and remain unresolved.³⁴ It is this latter condition of fragmentation, of multiple, competing identities, that makes for

the postmodern subject. Within this category, subjects are no longer perceived as fastened to cultures and external social structures. It is important to note, however, that this third notion of the subject does not mean that identity cannot produce feelings of security, rootedness, and coherence. Instead it recognizes that such feelings arise from the practice of constructing and situating the self within narratives. This means, Hall reminds us, that identity exists in relation to representations that anchor the subject in the social world.³⁵

While youth experiment and play in the making of race, and while their cultural practices might be quite elusive, they may at the same time be acted upon by racist stereotypes that adhere to race as stable and predictable. Such tensions are central to the question of making identity. I do not use “tension” to suggest a condition that can and should be resolved, but rather as central to the ways that identity is theorized. There are not only tensions between lived experiences and outside prejudices, but also within subjects, between similitude and difference. When we declare who we are, the markers that we might borrow often seem both sufficient and inadequate, perhaps because the categories to which we appeal do not offer any guarantee of stability or social recognition, nor do they fulfill the desire for recognition that may precede the ways we name ourselves. These shortcomings of naming identity are an important theme in the chapters that follow. This ethnography of Maple Heights stresses the question of identity as a process of making identifications—identifications made, for example, with the different cultural and racialized representations and the multiplying lifestyle possibilities that mark the arena within which social relations are forged. But as we shall see, the kinds of identifications that are made by the subjects in this study, mainly youth at Maple Heights, are never complete. They are always in process and are therefore partial and often contradictory.

Globalization, Diaspora, and Difference

I want to draw attention to three larger dynamics that open new challenges and have forced the need to re-examine the questions of culture, race, and identity in relation to schooling. These are globalization, diaspora, and difference, respectively. Again I ask the reader to keep in mind the relationships among these dynamics.

Globalization

Although the concept “globalization” came into use to refer to the specific conditions that distinguish the closing decade of the twentieth century, these conditions go back several hundred years. Globalization signals the internationalization of capitalism and the rapid circulation and flow of information, commodities, and visual images around the world. The technological developments associated with these times have changed the nature of global and local relations and challenged many of the binaries that were taken for granted, such as insider and outsider, and the “West and the rest.”³⁶ Processes of globalization have significantly changed perceptions of time and space and rendered problematic notions of identity as fixed in time and space.³⁷ These late-twentieth-century developments have also challenged belief in culture as tied to place. The developments of globalization ask us instead to pay attention to “cultural flows,” “creolization,” and the “deterritorialization” of culture.³⁸ In short, the dynamics to which globalization refers have changed the nature of the arena in which questions of identity, culture, and race are now being posed. These dynamics are also contradictory because while globalization erodes national identities, these and other identities are also being strengthened as resistance to globalization. Further-more, while national identities as they have been traditionally known are in decline, new identities of hybridity are taking their place.³⁹

In the chapters that follow we will see that while the youth in the Toronto high school identify closely with a specific part of the city, they are at the same time partners in cultures that circulate globally. The local, namely the school and the location wherein they live, is at the intersection of the global. Under these conditions, the media and now the Internet have come to profoundly influence how individuals see their place in the world. Social space is constructed out of social processes that occur elsewhere, so that as Massey suggests, the place to which we belong might best be thought of as a part and moment in the global network of social relations and understandings.⁴⁰ Under these conditions, associations with multiple places and transnational identities are commonplace, and individuals in Toronto may well feel closer to family and friends in Latin America, Africa, Asia, or Europe than they do to the neighbors in the apartment above or those next door. The question of loyalty and belonging to the nation-state, in this case Canada, may appear to be at stake under these new conditions, as we shall see in chapter 2. But perhaps what is really at stake is the question of how the nation is imagined and the possibilities that these late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century conditions open up for new kinds of imagining.

Diaspora

In its original use, “diaspora” referred to the dispersal of a people from a homeland and the multiple journeys that form collective memories and the desire for return to the place of origin, imaginary or real. However, diaspora has also come to refer to the conditions of living with multiplace associations and of being immersed in social networks that span different countries. It is a concept that has associations with human displacement and today encompasses both forced and voluntary migrations. Unlike its original use, in much contemporary theorizing diaspora is used to critique

the claims that fixed origins and identities are dependent on a center to which one hopes to return. Contemporary understanding of diasporic means being at home in the place where one lives while still living with the memories and shared histories of the place from which one or one's ancestors have come. Living with a diasporic identity might well mean that the relationship to the imaginary homeland is an ambivalent one. Discourses of "roots" may invoke nostalgia, but "home" remains a place of no return. For many of the youth in this study, Toronto is the place to which they belong, though belonging may also be about relationships with other places.

Avtar Brah makes the useful distinction between diaspora and "diaspora space." While the former describes everyday life experiences built in relation to stories of movement and displacement, diaspora space is where diasporic peoples converge and where multiple subject positions and identities are proclaimed, juxtaposed, contested, and disavowed. It is the place where the permitted and the prohibited are perpetually interrogated:

Diaspora space is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of "us" and "them" are contested. . . . It includes the entanglement, the intertwining of the genealogies of dispersion with those of "staying put." The diaspora space is the site where the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is a native.⁴¹

The notion of a diaspora space is useful for understanding how the school is the stage for the enactment of native Canadian and diasporan identities—a place of contests between belonging and otherness, and the making and remaking of nation.

Diaspora thus refers to the historical experience of movement and dispersal of peoples, but we may also draw on

diaspora as a theoretical concept that helps us to think about culture and cultural processes as forged through transnational networks and identifications. Such an understanding of diaspora and its relationship to culture, identity, and race is important if we are to understand the complex processes of making identities and cultures among Toronto high school students, the majority of whom were born elsewhere.

Difference

This third concept, “difference,” is frequently related to discourses of globalization and diaspora. It is usually talked about in terms of the social attributes of different cultures, but it is also used as a critique of the essentialism and assumptions about fixity made by this first understanding of the word. Difference in the first sense is used to refer to separate cultures, communities, and social formations and to distinguish between groups. This notion of difference is what is often invoked by multiculturalist discourses that talk about “different cultures.” The problem with this meaning of difference is that it relies upon the principle of a common denominator, or what Toni Morrison calls an “economy of stereotypes,” in order to recognize different cultures.⁴²

In the second sense the word is used to grapple with difference within groups. It refers to experiences of change, transformation, and hybridity. As Rutherford puts it, this difference asserts identities as unfixed and critiques the ways identities may be “overdetermined” by reference to cultures.⁴³ Thus while identity might invoke notions of sameness, asserting difference stresses discontinuity within sameness.⁴⁴ Within this second understanding of difference individuals may mimic the cultural attributes through which they are defined, but they assert their individual differences by mocking and displacing those same attributes. This notion of difference is particularly significant in this study of youth at Maple Heights.

The concept difference may therefore complicate discourses of culture because while it is frequently invoked to imply commonality, as in individuals sharing a common culture that is different from another, it also refers to disruptions, discontinuities, or difference within the shared culture. Difference is about the similitude attached to different cultures. But difference as used in this work is about undermining the assumptions upon which beliefs in similitude are premised. Difference in this sense borrows from Rutherford, who sees it as “an experience of change, transformation and hybridity” and “a critique of essentialism and mono-culturalism.”⁴⁵

Multiculturalism and Antiracism

This ethnography of identity, race, and youth in a Toronto high school is also in conversation with two large and growing fields of research in education, multiculturalism and antiracism. I will point to some of the significant trends in the volume of research on multiculturalism, antiracism, and inclusive education that are especially relevant to the focus on Maple Heights.

In Canada ethnocentric policies of assimilation into an imagined dominant culture went unquestioned for the greater part of the twentieth century. An extreme example of the resulting racism was the forced removal of Native American children from their homes and families in order to “exorcize” them of their “malignant” culture.⁴⁶ Such policies, however, were undermined in the latter part of the sixties and the early seventies. The challenges came from a number of directions including decolonization movements, theories of liberation, increasing concerns with human rights and cultural difference, and, of particular significance, the influence of the civil rights movement in the United States. The challenges that came from these various directions coin-

cided with massive demographic changes throughout the world. Demographic changes in the 1970s were such that in Toronto, now recognized as a global city, it was estimated that there were as many as seventy different ethnic groups or subgroups, and about four hundred ethnic organizations contending for place.⁴⁷

In the early seventies the Federal Government of Canada took measures to replace the policies of assimilation with support for cultural pluralism, and in 1971 it declared multiculturalism an official state policy. This policy was based on a view of Canada as a “cultural mosaic,” suggestive of a wide range of ethnic cultures coexisting as the nation.⁴⁸ This view of Canada sought to distinguish itself from the “melting pot” of the United States. In the field of education, in Canada as in countries like the United States, Britain, and Australia, cultural pluralism and multiculturalism are premised on the belief that learning about one’s own culture, heritage, or ethnic roots will boost self-esteem, improve the performance of minority students, and reduce prejudice toward groups that are different from one’s own. However, framed by a “folk model” discourse of culture, and disarticulated from social and economic inequalities, multiculturalism may celebrate cultural differences while at the same time perpetuating racist practices and beliefs. It was this realization that gave rise to the more proactive policies of antiracism.

Subsequent theories and policies of antiracism in Canada followed upon the British critiques that argued that while multiculturalism privileged “lifestyles,” antiracism was more interested in “life chances” and in addressing the structural inequalities and the impact that racism has on the schooling of minority students.⁴⁹ This was an important strategic distinction as it called attention to the different ways that racism operates within the school system and institutions in general. However, despite marking distinctions, multiculturalism and antiracism still share a view of culture

as a set of knowable attributes and value the mutual coexistence of cultures as discrete and bounded entities.⁵⁰ As Paul Gilroy notes, the emphasis on race as culture, identity, and ethnic essence rather than as politics and history is congruent with the nationalist concerns of both the political right and the antiracist left. This left includes many within the Black community who develop their own fascination with ethnic difference, and in the process reduce political definitions of race to a narcissistic celebration of culture and identity.⁵¹

Both multiculturalism and antiracism assume, as Friedman expresses it, that just as we have a gene pool, so too do we have a culture pool.⁵² Challenging the gene pool analogy, elusive culture is interested in the more ambivalent processes of making culture and the often troubled relationship between cultural and personal identity. While elusive culture recognizes, with Cohen, the need for “reductive representations” of racism in order to achieve specific political goals, at the same time it critiques the practice of disavowing complexity for the sake of political ideals and moral certainties.⁵³ “Elusive culture” exceeds a view of subjects as simply objects of culture or of identity categories as being definitive of cultures by considering the tensions, contradictions, and surprises in the ways youths make culture and identities.

Doing the Ethnography

“Fieldwork” is the term anthropologists use to describe their extended periods of participant observation and interviewing “in the field.” In anthropology’s earlier days anthropologists traveled to a distant place, “lived among the natives,” learned their language, and spent long periods of time recording and translating their culture to make it intelligible to an audience. This practice of ethnography was, in large part, the means by which the West came to know its Other

and, paradoxically, to know itself. As noted, such a view of culture, ethnographic authority, and the detached observer has long been considered problematic.⁵⁴ Postcolonial theorists interrogate the binaries of West and Other;⁵⁵ globalization challenges belief in culture as a bounded entity tied to place;⁵⁶ and postmodern theorizing asks us to consider the poetics of writing, the significance of representations, and the ways by which the participants, authors, and readers are all implicated in the production and reception of the text.⁵⁷ These developments are such that ethnography might also become, as expressed by Britzman, “a contested and fictive geography” because the identities of those involved, “including author and reader—are, in essence, textualized identities, a cacophony and dialogic display of contradictory desires, fears and literary tropes, that, if carefully ‘read’ suggest just how slippery speaking, writing, and reading subjectively really is.”⁵⁸

At Maple Heights the school day begins at 8:50 A.M. when students stand in their classrooms to the Canadian national anthem played over a public address system. The anthem is followed by a very short reading, sometimes little more than one sentence, which is billed as the “thought for the day.” Quite early in my year at Maple Heights the reading was a sentence by Canadian novelist Margaret Atwood. It was a simple and perhaps self-evident statement: “The answers we get in literature depend on the questions we ask.” Simple as it was, the thought prompted me to think, “For ‘literature’ read ‘anthropology and the social sciences in general.’” As I took my place among a class of older and more advanced students to listen to their presentations on a range of issues including domestic violence, youth and crime, and the issue of zero tolerance,⁵⁹ the Atwood reading gave me the opportunity for timely reflection on methodology and the age-old questions of objectivity and subjectivity in doing research.

While recognizing their limits, in undertaking this

research I utilized the classic anthropological methods of participant observation and extensive interviewing. I spent an average of four days per week for a full academic year at Maple Heights. There are two main advantages of spending extended periods in one place. First, an extended observation means witnessing the shifts and changes that occur over time and the contradictions and tensions that might mark identity as contextual and historical. Second, time is a necessary factor for building confidence and trust. I undertook participant observation in a wide range of settings including classrooms, the library, hallways, the cafeteria, the drama studio, the art studio, the music room and, when the weather made it possible, in the parking lot and on the playing fields. I also spent time during lunch periods with students in the nearby shopping mall. My interviews were one-on-one as well as group conversations, and both formal, in the sense of a set time and place, and informal, in the sense of spontaneous extended conversations around the school.

I was given the opportunity to both facilitate and take part in discussions on a variety of subjects linked to my research with students in English classes. Discussions with grade nine classes, for example, offered interesting insights into the wide range of backgrounds and places of origin represented at Maple Heights. Discussions and writing exercises with grade ten and eleven students resulted in written works on culture and identities, an example of which I draw upon at the end of this chapter. Work with grade twelve and Ontario Advanced Certificate (OAC) students did not result in written work, but the class discussions were useful for offering insight into the various musical tastes and youth cultural trends that are represented at Maple Heights. Other approaches to research were experimental. For example, with grade eleven classes I facilitated a media project, the aim of which was to produce twenty-minute videos of different aspects of life at the school. Also of special importance was a drama project with grade eleven students which resulted in

three half-hour videos on identity. Participants performed monologues on personal identity and worked on sketches in which they explored different themes and sites around which identity is contested, such as family, peer groups, ethnicity, and racism. Close involvement in these sorts of projects provided possibilities for working with students and building the appropriate networks while being able to collect data.

Tape recordings were made of some of the formal or pre-arranged conversations. In other cases, handwritten notes were made and written up at the end of the day. In all I recorded forty interviews with students drawn from grades ten, eleven, twelve, and OAC, and made notes on an additional thirty. Instead of recorded interviews with grade nine students, I held class discussions. In addition, I had conversations with twenty-five of the forty teachers and staff, of which only four were recorded. While these various conversations are the main source of data for this ethnography, I make no attempt to represent them as realist ethnography. The aim instead is to reflect upon the various fragments of discourse from which these conversations draw and to call attention to the possible relationships and associations that might be made among these various fragments. I also attempt to draw attention to the cooperative and collaborative nature of this ethnographic project.⁶⁰ In writing this account I draw upon the postmodern concepts of reflexivity, collage, montage, and dialogism.⁶¹

I have noted the multiple approaches that I adopted for this ethnography, including having students talk and write about identity. Striking about some of this work were the ways students themselves theorize identity and their challenges to the tendencies to fix and essentialize identity, race, and culture in multicultural and antiracist discourses. They also stress the social and relational importance of identity. Identity was thus variously described in short pieces of writing by students as “the way you want to be perceived,” “the

way you are recognized by others," or "things you do for people to see you." Most students recognized that identity is a process. As one stated, "Your identity is developed gradually over years." They were aware of the importance of youth: "Youth is the period which determines what your identity will be when you are older." Another student remarked, "I believe that a person's identity is created and molded depending on how easily that person can be influenced by others." Others noted the importance of consumption and style in making identity: "Identity is made up of the clothes you wear, what music you listen to, or even small things such as how you do your hair. It could mean a lot of things, however it is mostly the small individual things that makes a person unique."

In these various observations and theories students appear to depart from the discourses that fix culture and identity. Also significant was the realization of the difficulties in talking and writing about identity: "In your mind you know exactly who you are and how you want to be perceived but if someone wants you to explain or discuss your identity your mind goes immediately blank and you are left speechless." Such observations recognize that identities are always partial. When one explains who or what one is, the description can never satisfy the desire to be recognized as a complex subject. This is a necessary inadequacy of identity. It is a shortcoming in any talk of identity because, as the same student points out, "identities change everyday, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. But in the end it is all up to us to try to be the person we want to be."

Another writing exercise undertaken by grade twelve students used metaphors for thinking about the complexity of identity. In this exercise, identity was collapsed with personality. It was poetically compared to "sponges in the pool of life, absorbing knowledge and understanding in order to develop their identity." Other metaphors included the Shame-o-lady flower, "bright and blooming when no one is

looking but the minute some one sees me or touches it, it gets shy and goes into hiding, closes up." There was a "jigsaw puzzle" that requires "time and patience to be fully understood," and a "coconut" that makes it difficult to see "the real me on the inside" because of "the hard barrier protecting the self from getting hurt." finally there was the metaphor of the river, deceptive since one is unable to tell how deep it is just by looking at it, what the mouth would be like, or whether it is smooth or rough.

Many of the themes that emerge in this snapshot of how youth at Maple Heights theorize identity we will see recurring throughout this ethnography. This initial glimpse, however, demonstrates how the academic distinctions that are made among such factors as race, nation, identity, and culture all become unfastened and muddled in the discourse of youth. At first this observation might seem insignificant, but it is quite crucial because it opposes the discourses and the structures, the procedures and the orientations, of much of what goes on under the names of multiculturalism and antiracism. We see here, and will see more clearly as this ethnography proceeds, that the students do not discuss their desires and worries, their views and aspirations by settling upon a definition of identity, culture, or race once and for all. Furthermore, as the processes of globalization might suggest, identity unfolds as an odd combination of first- and second-hand memories, shifting geographies, desire for community, and resistance to being contained by community all at the same time. These are the complications and tensions of the everyday ways by which identity is lived.

Overview of Chapters

The complications and tensions of culture, race, and identity are a consistent theme in the chapters that follow. In chapter 2, I constitute Maple Heights High School as a dis-

cursive space, and move away from constructions of ethnographic sites as devoid of the subjectivities of those who populate them. I draw largely upon conversations with teachers at Maple Heights that took place over the year that I spent in the school and show how in this space of schooling discourses of identity, history, nationhood, and multiculturalism are conflated, crosscut, and mapped onto one another. The three subsequent chapters work more closely with student conversations, and I ask the reader to note the relationships between these two levels of discourse—that of the students and that of their teachers.

Chapter 3 describes conversations I had with students who were part of a school program called Positive Peer Culture. I use the metaphor “portraits” to think about the construction of identities in this chapter, and show how students make (and resist making) identifications in relation to one another, peer groups, diaspora, and community.

In chapter 4 I draw largely on one-on-one conversations to focus on race. I draw attention to the complex and contradictory ways race is imagined and lived. In this chapter the impossibility of separating race, culture, and identity is evident, and discourses of race are muddled with discourses of nation and community.

Chapter 5 centers on a public discussion of interracial dating organized by a group of students calling themselves “The African Queens.” The chapter examines race as a set of social relations and also draws attention to how a politics of identity may shape the workings of race in public spaces. By inserting accounts of the public meeting between discussions of private conversations, I call attention to how what one argues for in public might be set in tension with what one thinks and does in private. I give special attention to confluences of race and gender, how race becomes gendered, and how gender becomes racialized. But I also call attention to how gendered and racialized subjectivities are made

through secrets, fantasies, and conflicting desires as well as through the range of racial stereotypes that abound.

In the final chapter I return to the dilemma of writing elusive culture and the ethnographer's implication in fixing in representation what we observe as fluid. While I underscore the importance of understanding the cultures of youth and the culture of schooling as emergent rather than foreclosed, I stress that elusive culture does not emerge in a vacuum. I therefore ask readers to keep in mind the relations of power and the sets of tensions wherein and from which culture emerges. Indeed the book calls attention to a whole set of tensions that mark the making of race, culture, and identity. These include tensions between the various cultural representations and the different identity categories that are available on the one hand, and the complex subject positions that are taken up by individuals on the other; tensions between the desire for continuity in the notion of "roots" and how they are continually reworked through "routes"; and tensions between rigid ways of thinking about knowledge and identity and the fluid and multiple affiliations that youth make in their everyday practices. With respect to the question of schooling, this book ultimately raises the question of what it might mean to conceive of these sets of tensions as opportunities rather than impediments to learning and pedagogic practices.