

Negotiating the “White Male Math Myth”: African American Male Students and Success in School Mathematics

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This article shows how equity research in mathematics education can be decentered by reporting the “voices” of mathematically successful African American male students as they recount their experiences with school mathematics, illustrating, in essence, how they negotiated the White male math myth. Using poststructural theory, the concepts *discourse*, *person/identity*, and *power/agency* are redefined or reinscribed. The article also shows that using a poststructural reinscription of these concepts, a more complex analysis of the multiplicitous and fragmented robust mathematics identities of African American male students is possible—an analysis that refutes simple explanations of effort. The article concludes, not with “answers,” but with questions to facilitate dialogue among those who are interested in the mathematics achievement and persistence of African American male students—and equity and justice in the mathematics classroom for all students.

Key words: Achievement; All school levels; Equity/diversity; Qualitative methods; Race/ethnicity/SES; Social and cultural issues

Derrick P. Alridge (2008), in his recently published book on the educational ideas of the eminent African American¹ scholar, activist, and educator W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963), concluded, “Du Bois’s intention in providing quality education for African Americans and others was to make the world a better place” (p. 144). Alridge’s historical analysis of Du Bois’s educational thought illustrates that

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¹The terms *African American* and *Black* are used interchangeably throughout this article to describe an individual of African descent who claims the cultural identity of the United States.

throughout Du Bois's prolific scholarship, which represents only one of Du Bois's methods in his numerous and radical attempts to make the world a better place, are calls for a more complex examination of the schooling experiences of African Americans. As far back as 1903, Du Bois stated: "We seldom study the condition of the Negro to-day honestly and carefully. It is so much easier to assume that we know it all" (1903/1989, p. 95). Echoing Du Bois, in 1997 Ladson-Billings contributed the article "It Doesn't Add Up: African American Students' Mathematics Achievement" to a special equity issue of the *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education (JRME)*. In that article, she stated: "Certainly enough literature documents the mathematics failure of African American students. What is lacking is the documentation of successful practice of mathematics for African American students" (p. 706).

Since Ladson-Billings's (1997) call for research documenting the mathematics success of African American students, a small but growing number of scholars have labored to refocus the discussion by documenting the life and schooling experiences of mathematically successful African American students (see, e.g., Berry, 2008; Martin, 2000; Moody, 2000; Stinson, 2008; Walker, 2006; see also the numerous other scholars who contributed to Martin's, 2009b, edited volume: *Mathematics Teaching, Learning, and Liberation in the Lives of Black Children*). This scholarship seeks to move beyond the "'gap-gazing' fetish" (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 357) by delving deeper into how the cultural, economic, political, and social discourses of society in general affect the life and schooling experiences of African American students and, in turn, their mathematics identities. On the whole, this scholarship adopts a degree of social consciousness and responsibility in seeing the wider social and political picture of mathematics and mathematics teaching and learning (Gates & Vistro-Yu, 2003).

The literature of "failure" to which Ladson-Billings (1997) referred includes countless research studies that have documented the mathematics "achievement gap" between Black students and their White counterparts (see, e.g., Lubienski, 2002; Strutchens, Lubienski, McGraw, & Westbrook, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2003). This literature most often has employed quantitative research methods, basing analyses on large assessment and survey datasets that have measured the mathematics outcomes (i.e., test scores) of African American students by a comparison with White, middle-class, male students. Lubienski and Bowen (2000), in their *JRME* Brief Report article reviewing the mathematics equity research from 1982 to 1999, concluded, "One gets the impression that researchers look primarily at outcomes of these equity groups [e.g., African American students] and rarely examine how schooling experiences contribute to these outcomes" (p. 631).

More recently in *JRME*, Lubienski and Gutiérrez (Gutiérrez, 2008; Lubienski, 2008; Lubienski & Gutiérrez, 2008) offered compelling, yet alternative, commentaries on equity research that has exclusively focused on the achievement gap. Lubienski (2008), in her commentary, argued for continued support of gap analysis, stating, "The mathematics education community should continue attending to gaps in mathematics instruction and outcomes, but it should also move toward more

skilled and nuanced analyses” (p. 354). Although there was some overlap between these two scholars’ commentaries (see Lubienski & Gutiérrez, 2008), Gutiérrez (2008) provided a direct counterargument, calling for mathematics education research “that focuses on advancement, on excellence, and on gains within marginalized communities” (p. 362). Overall, the individual and collective commentaries were not a methodological discussion of qualitative versus quantitative research, but a theoretical discussion in which Gutiérrez noted that she did not wish to completely eliminate gap analysis but rather to decenter what has come to be common practice within mathematics education equity research (see also Hilliard, 2003, and Ladson-Billings, 2006, for a discussion on the achievement gap in general). I believe that the continued overreliance on gap gazing within mathematics education research continues to reify the “White male math myth” discourse. That is to say, by using the White, middle-class, male student as the point of reference in such comparison research, researchers—unintentionally on their part, I suppose—continue to position mathematics as a discipline that is first and foremost a White, middle-class, male domain.

As part of my continued attempts to assist in decentering equity research in mathematics education (Stinson, 2004a, 2006, 2008, 2009a), this article reports the “voices” of mathematically successful African American male students as they recount their experiences with school mathematics, illustrating how they negotiated the White male math myth discourse. In the discussion that follows, I clarify what I mean by the White male math myth and from a poststructural² theoretical perspective, I discuss how I redefine or reinscribe the concept *discourse*. I then provide a general overview of my work with mathematically successful African American male students, specifically, outlining how I use poststructural theory to reinscribe the concepts *person/identity* and *power/agency*. Next, I provide snapshots and analyses of two young African American men that illustrate, in part, their robust mathematics identities. I then connect their mathematics identities to the poststructural reinscription of concepts and my research in general, providing for a more complex analysis of the negotiated robust mathematics identities of African American male students. I conclude the article, not with “answers,” but with disruptive questions.

THE WHITE MALE MATH MYTH DISCOURSE

Given the limitation of space, I do not provide a full account of what I call the White male math myth, except to note that research has documented how the myth

²Often the words *postmodernism* and *poststructuralism* are used interchangeably in the literature, but there are acknowledged differences in the terms (for a brief discussion, see Peters & Burbules, 2004). Peters and Burbules noted that *postmodernism* has two general usages: to describe developments in the arts subsequent to or in reaction to modernism, and to describe transformations (or shifts) in the system of values and practices that undergird modernity. Although the term *poststructuralism* is contested, it “can be characterized as a mode of thinking, a style of philosophizing, and a kind of writing, yet the term should not be used to convey a sense of homogeneity, singularity, or unity” (p. 17).

(might) explain mathematics preferences and identity (Nosek, Banaji, & Greenwald, 2002; Steele, 1999) and performance (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; Steele, 1997), and that the myth, I believe, permeates Western culture (see Martin, 2009a, for a critical discussion of race and mathematics education). In other words, the statement, “Boys are just ‘naturally’ skilled at mathematics” (implicit—if not explicit—in this statement is White and/or Asian boys), has become a “metanarrative” (cf. Lyotard, 1979/1984) within Western culture. Lyotard believed that metanarratives are foundational in supporting “transcendent and universal truths that serve to justify and legitimate modern Western culture” (Bertens, 2002, p. 246). For instance, Lyotard (1979/1984) claimed that these meta- (or grand-narratives) are evident in “the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth” (p. xxiii). Metanarratives make possible the utterance of discourses, such as the discourse regarding (White) boys and mathematics. These discourses, although initially understood as lower-case-*t* “truths,” often become upper-case-*T* “Truths” through their repetition within Western culture. “Science” often attempts to validate the “Truth” of an “observed” metanarrative, as evident in earlier research on girls and mathematics (see, e.g., Benbow & Stanley, 1980; Fennema & Sherman, 1977), often leading to both culturally constituted and “scientifically” accepted discourses.

Here the concept *discourses* is to be understood not only as language and structures but also as the complex web of signs and practices that order and sustain sociocultural and sociohistorical constructed forms of social existence (Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom, 1996). Or as Gee (1999) claimed, capital-*D Discourses* are innumerable and “are always language plus ‘other stuff’” (p. 17). That is to say, “Discourses are out in the world and in history as coordinations (‘a dance’) of people, places, times, actions, interactions, verbal and non-verbal expression, symbols, things, tools, and technologies that betoken certain identities and associated activities” (p. 23). Within poststructural theory, Foucault (1969/1972) argued that discourses “in the form in which they can be heard or read, are not, as one might expect, a mere intersection of things and words . . . [but are] practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (pp. 48–49). For Foucault, “discourses do not merely *reflect* or represent social entities and relationships; they actively construct or *constitute* them” (Walshaw, 2007, p. 19, emphasis in original). However, and most important, we are not forever doomed by discourse. In joining power and knowledge through discourse, Foucault (1976/1990) identified discourse both as an effect of power and as a possible point of resistance:

Indeed, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this very reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable . . . but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. . . . We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. (pp. 100–101)

Although Foucault claimed that discourses systematically form the objects of which they speak, their lack of uniformity and stability make discourses vulnerable to resistance, providing for the development of different (and at times opposing) discourses—and, in turn, different knowledges.

“Discursive formations” (Foucault, 1969/1972, p. 38), such as the White male math myth, therefore, are open to reconfiguration because they are produced culturally and historically in relations of power (cf. Foucault, 1976/1990). In other words, there is no truth or origin to discourse; or understood in another way, no center to discourse. Derrida (1966/1978) argued that accepting discourse as having no center allows discourse to be open for the “movement of play” (p. 289). He defined play as the “disruption of presence” (p. 292). In this context, play rejects the totalization of humanism with its “dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play” (p. 292). This movement of play provides more freedom. Thus, freedom might be reconstituted as play, given that play becomes generative, reconfiguring a discourse, and a reconfigured discourse allows the possibility of an opposing discourse, and so on. In short, this poststructural reinscription of discourse allows for the understanding of “how knowledge, truth, and subjects [i.e., persons] are produced in language and cultural practice as well as how they might be reconfigured” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 486). This reinscription has been a significant theoretical shift employed throughout my research exploring the mathematics socialization and identity of African American male students as I sought to understand how mathematically successful African American male students (might) reconfigure the White male math myth discourse.

MATHEMATICS SOCIALIZATION AND IDENTITY: A POSTSTRUCTURAL REINSCRIPTION

My study of and with mathematically successful African American male students grew out of my 5-year experience as a White mathematics teacher in a Black high school (Stinson, 2004a, see also Stinson 2008, 2009a). This experience afforded me the opportunity to work with many African American male (and female) students who demonstrated not only achievement and persistence in mathematics but also success in school and academics in general. Through this contact, I became puzzled by the scarcity of education literature that focused on African American students who achieve and persist in mathematics given the abundance of literature focused on African American students who appear to reject mathematics (and schooling and academics in general). Where were the success stories of African American students? As Ladson-Billings (1997) argued—and my 5-year experience confirmed—it just didn’t add up.

My desire to understand how my African American male students incorporated a robust mathematics identity within their larger efforts toward success led to a broader examination of their schooling experiences, extending beyond their experiences in the mathematics classroom. Given that my African American male students were achieving in ways that were counter to the literature and prevailing

societal discourses, I wanted to understand how sociocultural (and sociohistorical) discourses about male African Americans shaped their perceptions of themselves as mathematics learners and as African American students and how they negotiated such discourses. Here the meaning of the term *negotiate* is its more robust definition: “to deal with (some matter or affair that requires ability for its successful handling)” (i.e., to accommodate); “to arrange for or bring about through conference, discussion, and compromise” (i.e., to reconfigure); or “to successfully travel along or over” (i.e., to navigate, or in this context, to resist) (*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 1999, p. 777). Or, said more directly, there are three ways to negotiate: by “sucking it up,” by compromising, or by refusing to yield.

Methodologically, my study began with the goal of doing research with, rather than on, the study’s participants (for a full methodological discussion, see Stinson, 2004a, 2008). Participative inquiry (Reason, 1994), with its emphasis on testing theory, experiential knowing, and engagement with others, aligned with this goal and my study in general. Participant selection was conducted through a purposive sampling (Silverman, 2000) of five African American men between 20 and 25 years of age. The criteria for sampling included (a) attended Keeling High School³ (a pseudonym, as are all proper names throughout) from 9th through 12th grade, (b) completed at least one mathematics course with me at Keeling, and (c) demonstrated achievement and persistence in high school mathematics.⁴ I invited 16 of my past African American male students (out of approximately 90 who were eligible) by electronic and U.S. mail to participate in my study. The 16 contacted were students to whom I had easy access, in that I had maintained some form of contact with them and/or family members since my departure from Keeling High. Six of the 16 students contacted responded to my inquiry, 5 agreed to participate, and 4 completed the study: Keegan, Spencer, Ethan, and Nathaniel.

Data collection for my study included a combination of written artifacts and interviews. Each participant completed a demographic and schooling survey instrument, wrote a brief autobiography and mathematics autobiography, and completed four interviews. The first and fourth interviews were semi-structured, face-to-face interviews: the first used a traditional question-and-answer approach, the fourth a

³ Keeling High is a suburban high school located 10 miles from a large city in the South (see Morris & Monroe, 2009, for a discussion about the significance of education research regarding African Americans and the South); it is situated in a 95% middle- to middle-upper-class African American community. At the time of this study, Keeling High had approximately 1,300 students, with 99% of the students being identified by race or ethnicity as Black by the school system. Although the student population was homogenous racially, it was very diverse socioeconomically, ranging from the working poor (44% of the students were eligible to receive free or reduced-priced meals) to the middle upper-class. The school provided an embedded mathematics and science magnet program (25% of the students were enrolled in the program) for Newberry County, a large (over 70,000 students) and well-funded school system (i.e., school facilities were modern and well maintained).

⁴ The descriptor “demonstrated achievement and persistence in high school mathematics” was met if a participant achieved one or more of the following criteria his junior or senior year of high school: (a) completed an Advanced Placement calculus or statistics course with a grade of C (70%) or better, (b) completed a joint-enrollment calculus or statistics course with a grade of C (70%) or better, or (c) scored in the 4th quartile (top 25 %) of the mathematics portion of the Scholastic Achievement Test.

narrative approach (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). The second and third interviews, like the first, used a question-and-answer approach but were telephone interviews. Prior to each of these telephone interviews, the participants were asked to read, reflect on, and respond to three manuscripts (six manuscripts total) that discussed specific theoretical perspectives regarding African American children's schooling experiences. The manuscripts, from the disciplines of anthropology, cultural/social psychology, and sociology, discussed deficit theories in general (Ogbu, 1978), the cool pose theory (Majors, Tyler, Peden, & Hall, 1994), the stereotype threat theory (Steele, 1997), the cultural-ecological theory (Ogbu, 1992), the raceless persona theory (Fordham, 1988), and the burden of acting White theory (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). (These theories are briefly described subsequently in this article; for a full review and critique, see Stinson, 2006.)

In borrowing theoretical perspectives from the disciplines of anthropology, cultural/social psychology, and sociology, I position my study as being in what Lerman (2000) coined "the *social turn* in mathematics education research" (p. 23, emphasis in original). He claimed that the social turn signals something different, in that it turns mathematics education toward exploring theories that see meaning, thinking, and reasoning—and I might add, identity—as products of social activity. Therefore, although my study began with a zoomed-in lens examining my students' achievement and persistence in the mathematics classroom, I promptly refocused the lens, as Lerman (2001) suggested, zooming out so that I might explore how my African American male students not only resisted the White male math myth discourse but also negotiated broader sociocultural discourses in their quest to become school mathematics actors (see Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Cobb, Gresalfi, & Hodge, 2009; Gutstein, 2006, 2007; Martin, 2000; and Walshaw, 2001 for discussions of how identity and agency might be negotiated in the mathematics classroom).

Consistent with my zoomed-out lens for examining how mathematically successful African American students might negotiate broader sociocultural discourses is Martin's (2000) multilevel framework for analyzing mathematics socialization and identity among African American students (p. 30). Building in part on Reyes and Stanic's (1988) seminal *JRME* article,⁵ Martin's framework includes an analysis of sociohistorical context, community and school forces, and individual agency. The analysis of sociohistorical context examines the social and historical policies and practices of racism and discrimination (e.g., White supremacy) that prevent African Americans "from becoming equal participants in mathematics and other areas in society" (Martin, 2000, p. 29). The analysis of community and school forces explores how African American students' beliefs about mathematics and about African Americans as learners of mathematics are influenced by the beliefs and expectations held by community members and school personnel. And the analysis of individual agency investigates the robust mathematics identities of African American students as they respond to community and school forces.

⁵ See Lawler (2005) for a 20-year perspective of Reyes and Stanic's (1988) *JRME* article.

Mathematics identities, as defined by Martin (2000), are students' beliefs about their mathematics abilities, their beliefs about the instrumental importance of mathematics, their beliefs about the opportunities and constraints that affect their participation in mathematics, and their motivations to obtain mathematics knowledge (p. viii). Martin's definition of *community and school forces* might be broadly stated as the web of individual and collective beliefs held by community members and school personnel; the complex interactions of sociohistorical racism, discrimination, and limited opportunity that occur in schools and society at large; and the strategies used by African Americans to obtain knowledge. Here (and in my research in general) I extend Martin's community and school forces concept with the poststructural reinscription of the concept discourse (previously discussed)—coupled with a poststructural reinscription of the concepts person/identity and power/agency discussed subsequently.⁶ That is to say, where Martin argued for an analysis of how community and school forces might serve as barriers or springboards to mathematics success for African American students, I provide an analysis demonstrating that the robust mathematics identities of African American male students might be best understood as multiplicitous and fragmented as they negotiate sociocultural discourses.

To clarify how my poststructural extension of Martin's (2000) framework makes possible a different analysis of the robust mathematics identities of male African Americans, I provide a brief review of poststructural theory, specifically, outlining how person/identity and power/agency are reinscribed. Poststructural theory, generally speaking, adopts an anti- or postepistemological standpoint and is fiercely antifoundationalist and antirealist, rejecting the established picture of knowledge as an accurate or "true" representation (Peters & Burbules, 2004). The value of poststructural theory is found in its awareness of and tolerance toward social differences, ambiguity, and conflict and requires the development of new languages, conventions, and skills to address the moral and political implications of knowledge (Seidman, 1994). In short, poststructural theory requires shifting the "focus from foundations and familiar struggles of establishing authority toward exploring tentativeness and developing skepticism of those principles and methods that put a positive gloss on fundamentals and certainties" (Walshaw, 2004, pp. 3–4). The new language of poststructural theory in part reinscribes not only the concept *discourse* but also the concepts *person/identity* and *power/agency*, among many others (St. Pierre, 2000).

⁶Overall, in my research, I extend Martin's (2000) framework by borrowing theoretical concepts and methodological processes from poststructural theory (see, e.g., St. Pierre, 2000), critical race theory (CRT; see, e.g., Tate, 1997), and critical theory (see, e.g., Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994, 2000), that I used side by side while conducting research. Therefore, I characterize my eclectic theoretical extension as a critical postmodern framework that places concepts from critical theory, such as empowerment, class struggle, asymmetric relations of power, praxis, and so forth, under critique, while providing poststructural theory a foundation that precludes it from being perceived as nihilistic or inactive (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). Or, as Lather (1991, 2007) suggested, poststructural theory helps us "get smart" about the limits and possibilities of critical theory (see Stinson, 2009b, for a full discussion about this eclectic approach and its implications).

In poststructural theory, the person is reinscribed as a discursively constituted subject (cf. Foucault, 1969/1972) rather than as an individual. The term *individual* is a humanist term that implies that there is an “independent and rational being who is predisposed to be motivated toward social agency and emancipation—what Descartes believed to be the existence of a unified self” (Leistyna, Woodrum, & Sherblom, 1996, p. 341). Poststructural theory rejects this humanist notion of an essential, unified self who is always present, because it minimizes the force of sociocultural discourses on the person. This humanist perspective of the person virtually denies that discourses have any impact at all on the formation of the individual. To the contrary, a poststructural perspective reinscribes the person as a multiplicitous and fragmented subject who is subjugated—but not determined—by the sociocultural discourses that constitute the person (Butler, 1990/1999).

The multiplicitous is a key reinscription of the subject’s identity borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1980/1987) characterization of the rhizome. The rhizome is not “reducible neither to the One nor the multiple . . . has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (*milieu*) from which it grows and which it overflows” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 21). In other words, one’s identity is not static but infinitely dynamic—neither one nor multiple—as the multiplicitous and fragmented discursively constituted subject continuously negotiates not only physically different spaces (and times) but also different sociocultural discourses. Rajchman (2000) cautioned, however, “To think of ourselves and one another as ‘multiple,’ or as ‘composed of multiplicities,’ is not to imagine that we have many distinct identities or selves . . . [but rather] to get away from understanding ourselves in terms of identity” (p. 81). That is to say, given that identity is infinitely dynamic, any string of “labels” that might be used to describe either one’s own or another’s identity will always be incomplete, producing closure, limiting the possibilities of different “lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 9). In short, a poststructural reinscription of identity, I believe, is best understood as being in a constant state of becoming—a becoming that refutes closure.

It is important to note that this poststructural reinscription of multiplicitous and fragmented identities is working its way into the science of psychology, in that, cultural/social psychologists have begun to redefine what is meant by identity. For example, Downey et al. (2005) noted, “There is a growing consensus that identities are best viewed as multidimensional and dynamic, that identity activation is highly context-dependent, and that identity transformation is constantly occurring” (p. 2). Within cultural/social psychology, Murrell (2007, 2009) developed the situated-mediated identity theory. In this frame, “identity is dynamically situated in, and mediated by, the fabric of human networks and social situations individuals participate in” (Murrell, 2009, p. 99; see also Horvat & O’Connor, 2006, for a similar perspective of identity argued by cultural sociologists).

The poststructural reinscription of the subject’s identity makes possible a different inscription of power and, in turn, agency. Power in a poststructural frame is reconstituted, in that, from a Foucauldian perspective, “power is productive and can be found in the effects of liberty as well as in the effects of domination” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 491). Foucault (1975/1995) stated:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it 'excludes', it 'represses', it 'censors', it 'abstracts', it 'masks', it 'conceals'. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. (p. 194)

This Foucauldian perspective inscribes power not as an object that can be acquired, seized, shared, or slipped away, but as a dynamic and productive event that exists in relations (Foucault, 1976/1990). Therefore, rather than speaking of power, Foucault spoke of "relations of power" or "power relations" (p. 94). He identified four facets of power relations. Power relations are (a) a multiplicity of force relations that operate and constitute their own organization; (b) a process of struggles and confrontations that transforms, strengthens, or reverses the relations; (c) the points of support or resistance of a system; and (d) the strategies that design and maintain sociocultural discourses.

Foucault (1976/1990) further claimed that "power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations" (p. 94). For this reason, "where there is power, there is resistance," dependent on a "multiplicity of points of resistance . . . [with] no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead, there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case" (pp. 95–96). In this Foucauldian reinscription of power, revolution—or refusal—can be achieved not only by the united actions of working people from all countries (Marx & Engels, 1848/1978), but also, and more important, by the solitary actions (i.e., agency) of the discursively constituted subject.

This reinscription of power as relations, therefore, provides for a reinscription of agency. Here, the subject's agency is both constrained within the available sociocultural discourses and enabled in the active production of different and/or opposing discourses. That is to say, given that power and knowledge are joined in discourse, the discursively constituted subject possesses relations of power to subversively repeat (or not) the available sociocultural discourses. "Subversive repetition" (Butler, 1990/1999, p. 185) suggests that even though the discursively constituted subject is subjected to repeating oneself through the available sociocultural discourses, the discourses themselves are open to intervention and resignification. Agency, for this reason, is "up for grabs, continually reconfigured and renamed as is the subject itself . . . [and] seems to lie in the subject's ability to decode and recode its identity within discursive formations and cultural practices" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 504). This redefining of agency enables a different logic "in which structure and agency are not either-or but both-and and, simultaneously, neither-nor" (Lather, 1991, p. 154). In short, a poststructural reinscription of agency, I believe, is best understood as the discursively constituted subject's power to negotiate the very sociocultural discourses that attempt to construct or constitute its identity. Or, said more directly, agency is working within and against sociocultural discourses.

These reinscriptions of the concepts discourse, person/identity, and power/agency continue to be significant theoretical shifts borrowed from poststructural theory throughout my research. By employing these shifts, I began my initial study with

the acknowledgment of research participants characterized as discursive subjects—not as individuals—who negotiated (consciously or not) sociocultural discourses regarding male African Americans as they subversively repeated their constituted “raced”⁷ selves.

ROBUST MATHEMATICS IDENTITIES

What follows are snapshots and analyses of two participants from my study: Keegan and Spencer (see Stinson, 2004a, for full descriptions and analyses of all four participants). I have chosen to feature Keegan and Spencer here because I believe that the poststructural reinscription of their mathematics socialization and identity is indicative of the consistencies and inconsistencies found within and across all four participants’ counter-storytelling of success. I specifically use *counter-storytelling*, a concept borrowed from critical race theory (see, e.g., Tate, 1997), because it honors and values (scientifically) the stories of raced people whose experiences are often not told—stories that expose, analyze, and challenge the majoritarian stories of racial privilege (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The extracted textual and interview data that I will present illustrate not only how Keegan and Spencer viewed mathematics but also their relationship with mathematics. The discussion sheds light on Keegan’s and Spencer’s robust mathematics identities, as defined by Martin (2000), and how these identities are constituted within their life and schooling experiences and (some of) the larger sociocultural discourses that surround African American male adolescents.

I “retell” Keegan’s and Spencer’s “retelling” of their life, schooling, and mathematics experiences cautiously. Keegan and Spencer (as well as Ethan and Nathaniel) were complex multiplicitous and fragmented subjects, and any attempt to describe that complexity is always limited. Accordingly, the intent of the snapshots and analyses is only to provide poststructural inscriptions of these two young men, not to capture the “true” Keegan or Spencer. To suggest that a true Keegan or Spencer exists implies the existence of a static, unified self—an implication that is

⁷The executive board of the American Anthropological Association in 1998 adopted the organization’s official statement on race that disputed the concept of race as any biological human taxonomy. The board, however, securely positioned race as an influential and powerful social and political construct that “distorts our ideas about human differences and group behaviors” and stated that “scientists today find that reliance on such folk beliefs about human differences in research has led to countless errors” (American Anthropological Association, 1998, ¶ 9). They asserted that

The “racial” worldview was invented to assign some groups to perpetual low status, while others were permitted access to privilege, power, and wealth. The tragedy in the United States has been that the policies and practices stemming from this worldview succeeded all too well in constructing unequal populations among Europeans, Native Americans, and peoples of African descent. Given what we know about the capacity of normal humans to achieve and function within any culture, we conclude that present-day inequalities between so-called “racial” groups are not consequences of their biological inheritance but products of historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances. (¶ 12)

Butler (1990/1999) offered a similar argument regarding the construct of gender; likewise, Foucault (1976/1990) offered an argument regarding the construct of sexuality.

counter to a poststructural reinscription. As I will argue here, and have elsewhere (see Stinson, 2004a, 2008, 2009a), the individual and collective counter-storytelling of success from the participants according to my (critical) postmodern analysis demonstrates that they were dynamic subjects who shifted, altered, modified, or simply subverted their constituted raced selves throughout their pursuit of developing robust mathematics identities and robust academic identities in general.

Retelling Keegan

Keegan was a combination of the impassioned spontaneous Black Baptist preacher found on early Sunday morning television programming and the reticent reflective Black politician found later on Sunday morning's *Meet the Press*. At the time of the study, he was a 23-year-old, 170-pound, 5-foot 10-inch tall African American with short curly hair, intense observant eyes, and a smile that was equaled only by another southern politician, Jimmy Carter. Keegan took my AP statistics course his senior year, earning a B average both semesters, although he was more interested in history and political science than mathematics. His enthusiasm for history and political science was exemplified by his résumé at the end of his junior year in high school: Keegan had twice been a summer intern for significant members of the U.S. Congress, participated in the 1992 and the 1996 Democratic National Conventions, and attended the University of Michigan's Debate Institute. Even though Keegan noted that he was more involved in extracurricular activities at church than at school, he was an active member in several academic clubs, including the National Honor Society, and was a lead member of Keeling's debate team. Keegan graduated in the top 20% of his class with a 3.5 grade point average (GPA) and had competed for, and was awarded, the honor of delivering the commencement speech for his graduating class. During his high school years, Keegan lived with his dad, an influential spiritual and political leader of the community; his mother, a mathematics teacher at Keeling High; his two older brothers; and his younger sister. Keegan attended a prestigious historically Black college earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology with a minor in politics. At the time of the study, Keegan was in his first year of graduate studies at a theological seminary in the nation's capital.

Keegan was the only participant in my study who proudly proclaimed that he "hated mathematics and science" (Interview 1), noting that he had his biggest struggles academically with these subjects. Even though Keegan's academic performance in mathematics and science was always above average, he preferred the social sciences, identifying himself as a "history buff" (Interview 1). Nevertheless, given that both his father and mother valued mathematics (Keegan's father's undergraduate major was in mathematics and his mother was a mathematics teacher at Keeling High) and he was attending a mathematics and science magnet high school (although he was not in the magnet program), Keegan "always looked at mathematics as something that was very important and necessary for success"

(Mathematics Autobiography). Keegan claimed that it was through his mother and father imparting their skills in mathematics to him that he learned the “ways of maneuvering through mathematics” (Interview 1). Keegan’s mother, understanding where her son’s passions lay, was able to expand the utility of mathematics, providing him with the justification for persisting in mathematics:

I would say, “Mom, why do I have to study mathematics? How could you major in mathematics? How could you do this mess? Why do you like math so much?” and she told me, “Life is a problem that you will eventually have an answer to; mathematics is a great analogy for life. It can teach you that when you have a problem, there is a way of solving it. There may be two or three ways to solve it, there may be a best way to solve it, but there is always a way of solving it.” And that is how I look at life. . . . Life is a huge mathematical equation and all the time figuring out what x is. (Interview 1)

Keegan’s father echoed this message, providing for an important “different tone” regarding the utility of mathematics:

Hearing it from my dad gave it a different tone. . . . He would say that mathematics was very important in just running a household and being a Black male, that it is very important to have strong mathematics skills. It is just as important as having strong reading skills; that mathematics was a crucial part of life. (Interview 2)

Not only did Keegan’s parents expand the utility of mathematics for him, but also they provided inspiration for schooling and academic success in general. Keegan noted that his parents would often recount their education experiences as individuals who were among the first African Americans to integrate some of the more prestigious universities in the southeastern United States. This recounted history provided Keegan with additional motivation to succeed in education as well as in life in general:

So I felt that if they could [succeed], I could do better. If my parents could succeed in the face of segregation and racism, having to live in segregation the early part of their life, not having as many advantages as I have, that there was no reason for me to fail. If I failed it was my fault. (Interview 4)

Although Keegan’s lived experiences at home were very positive and a major factor in his success in mathematics and schooling and academics in general, he also often spoke about the critical impact of his teachers. As Keegan attributed his success to teachers, he remarked that the teachers who were most influential developed

a teacher–student relationship that went beyond just the classroom. . . . [A relationship] where you could go into their office or classroom after class and not necessarily talk about academics, but you can still learn from them, learn about life, and learn about just different aspects. . . . I think that is very important to have a relationship with a teacher . . . engaging in other things, things as academic, but not necessarily just the subject, where you develop a trust. (Interview 2)

Keegan stated that the trusting relationship he developed with teachers and professors was often a motivating force to succeed in a particular course. In addition to the effect of a teacher–student relationship that went beyond the classroom, Keegan noted the effect of teacher expectations on his motivation to succeed. The positive

impact of teachers who set high expectations for students is illustrated in Keegan's experience with his fifth-grade teacher:

Ms. Maxine Drew in fifth grade . . . I remember up until fifth grade I was kind of a student who was happy with a C. If I made a C, I was happy and that was the end of it: "Thank you, I am out of here. I can go on to the sixth grade." But Ms. Drew wouldn't let me settle for a C; she wouldn't even let me settle for a B. I remember . . . I didn't even care about making honor roll, but she made me motivated to make the honor roll every year. . . . Even when I didn't want to achieve, even if I wasn't doing it for my parents, I would think of Maxine Drew, and think of her, and say well, "I am doing it for her." . . . So I even carry that in graduate school, when I don't feel like reading, I think of her, even more so than my parents. So she gave me that motivation to achieve. (Interview 3)

Keegan, at the time of the study, expressed said that he would be apprehensive about solving an advanced mathematics problem, given that he had not taken a formal mathematics course in over 3 years, but he said that he still used mathematics in his everyday life in very practical ways. Keegan also extended the utility of mathematics to broader uses and to his future profession:

I enjoy mathematics because it allows me to practice solving problems. I believe that the more successful people are great problem solvers and able to conquer challenges effectively. Mathematics offers me that opportunity. In my future career, I must be able to solve problems effectively. [Furthermore,] as a clergyman and leader of a congregation, I have to know how to do a budget, how to get a loan, and how to ensure that the congregation is healthy financially. (Mathematics Autobiography)

Keegan appeared to contradict himself when he stated, "I hated mathematics" and "I enjoy mathematics." I argue, however, that the different attitudes expressed by Keegan were located in the context in which the mathematics was applied: He hated "school" mathematics—applying mathematics procedures to routine textbook problems—but enjoyed "everyday" mathematics—applying mathematics process skills to nonroutine, real-world problems. Keegan's later comments clearly illustrate an understanding that mathematics is integrated into all disciplines, even in his chosen field of study as a social scientist:

Every book, whether you are studying biology, studying physics, everything is going to have some basis of mathematics. I think that it is the only subject, or only academic field that is integrated into everything. You don't see much biology in political science, you don't see much physics, but you see mathematics in the social sciences. (Interview 4)

Keegan's most rewarding experience in mathematics was earning a B+ in his college calculus course, a course from which he nearly withdrew because he felt overwhelmed. Keegan noted that his experience with this specific mathematics course taught him not to drop courses in the future, even if he thought that he was going to fail the course: "There are ways that I can conquer courses; the experience gave me a tremendous challenge" (Interview 1). Keegan recalled that his most discouraging mathematics experience was his AP statistics examination score (he scored a 1 out of 5), claiming that he really did not have the best mindset for taking the examination, especially after what had happened during a speech he gave in

February of his senior year: “I was, just like, I don’t want to take it, I don’t care. I was so sick of high school; I didn’t care. I just wanted to get it over with” (Interview 1). The speech Keegan referenced was one that he delivered at the Black History assembly: “I remember I was giving a speech, and the students were so rude, they were talking and fighting, and it was just commotion all through it. . . . I was so fed up; we were graduating in May. I just said, ‘To [expletive] with it.’ I was through with Keeling High from then on” (Interview 1).

Throughout Keegan’s counter-storytelling, he did not distinguish himself much from other African American men. He simply identified himself as an African American man “who could succeed, who could meet and overcome obstacles” (Interview 1); he looked at himself as one who could meet a challenge head on, able to succeed against any odds that came his way. Keegan argued that doing well in mathematics and academics in general was not a choice but just a precedent-set expectation, set by his father, mother, and two older brothers.

Even though Keegan was aware of and acknowledged the damaging effects of racism and discrimination throughout his counter-storytelling, his perspective of himself, and African Americans in general, was as people who were “free to be great achievers” (Interview 2). He noted that his experiences with his family and through his church coupled with his readings of African American scholars and spiritual and political leaders were where he learned to celebrate his Blackness:

[I learned to celebrate my Blackness] from my parents, and I credit the church a lot, because in church is where I learned, even more so than in school, about my culture, and learned to celebrate it. For instance, [at church] I looked at Black as being free to be great achievers, great preachers, and being great teachers, all that in one setting. Every Sunday I got the experience of greatness, seeing individuals who were successful in whatever they did, who were professors at colleges. . . . Whenever I get discouraged and upset, feel like I can’t make it here in graduate school, I read some King, read some Benjamin Elijah Mayes, read Howard Thurman, read their writings, and read that they went through the same thing [racism and discrimination]. Not only did they go through the same thing, it was a lot worse. . . . they couldn’t even ride the bus home . . . because of segregation. . . . I believe I have adopted the Afrocentric culture ideology, and I believe that that is not a determining factor that leads to whether you will be able to block racism and discrimination. . . . I think that it just worked for me. (Interview 2)

Retelling Spencer

Spencer projected a stance of belongingness, a stance that conveyed self-confidence. At the time of the study, Spencer was a 24-year-old, 165-pound, 6-foot 1-inch tall African American male with the physical build of a long-distance runner. He had chiseled facial features with a clean-shaven face and close-cropped hair. Spencer had a sense of quiet reflective elegance that was embodied not only in his physical movements but also in his tone of voice and use of language. Being reflective and elegant in both his written and spoken communications enabled Spencer to construct streams of consciousness in a lyrical, almost poetic manner. Spencer took my AP statistics course in his senior year, providing him with opportunities to demonstrate both his advanced mathematics and communication skills. Spencer

earned an A average both semesters and largely maintained top grades throughout high school; he was in the talented and gifted (TAG) program as well as the mathematics and science magnet program. Spencer took AP biology, chemistry, statistics, U.S. history, and English (and calculus, which will be discussed subsequently), and earned membership in the Junior Beta and Beta clubs and National Honor Society, as well as the Spanish Honor Society. Spencer was an active member of the Academic Bowl, Mathematics Team, and Southeastern Consortium for Minorities in Engineering. He graduated in the top 5% of his class with a 3.8 GPA and scored in the 4th quartile on the mathematics portion of the SAT. During his high school years, Spencer lived with his mother, who had completed her undergraduate degree as a single mom, and his younger sister, 10 years his junior. Spencer's father was absent during his childhood and young adulthood. At the time of the study, Spencer was completing his 3rd year of law school at a prestigious private university; he had previously completed a Bachelor of Science degree in economics at a top-ranked, public university with very high research activity.

Spencer contended that, as far back as he could remember, he was always good at mathematics, noting that because of his early ability in mathematics, people just steered him in the direction of mathematics and science. Spencer believed that the logical nature of mathematics is what drew him to it, stating that the logical, rules-based nature of mathematics enables anyone to learn it through practice and study. Spencer understood mathematics to be culturally free: "It is the same whether you are Black, White, Asian, young, or old; it is just something that you can get better at with practice and with study" (Interview 1). Similar statements were made by the other participants. He distinguished mathematics from other things that might be "naturally" inscribed in some people; for example, the natural capacity for some people to be faster runners than others, even with equal training. Although Spencer acknowledged that people's capacity to learn might be different, he stated, "Everyone can learn, and mathematics especially lends itself to learning because of its very nature" (Interview 1).

Spencer attributed his identification and much of his success with mathematics to being in high-level mathematics courses with a high-achieving peer group throughout most of his schooling:

The fact that I was in [high-level mathematics courses] and around the same people all the time, kind of tends to shape how you identify yourself; you see yourself as being a member of a group of students that are achieving and are after a certain goal. (Interview 1)

He believed that his success in mathematics was significantly impacted by his motivation level in mathematics classes, which was directly impacted by the mathematics experiences his teachers provided. Spencer noted that he enjoyed mathematics in elementary school because he was always good at it: "Early math was fun, because it was all new, and each day presented a new challenge to be overcome" (Mathematics Autobiography). His classmates, however, did not match Spencer's pace of mathematics learning, and he increasingly became bored with the mathematics lessons his elementary teachers provided.

In middle school, Spencer's boredom was replaced with a renewed enthusiasm for mathematics, due largely to his TAG teacher, Ms. Murray, his "mathematical inspiration" (Mathematics Autobiography). Ms. Murray allowed Spencer to advance not only in "regular math," but also in "more exotic forms of math like number theory and the like" (Mathematics Autobiography). He noted that middle school mathematics "was never boring, although sometimes a chore, it was always fresh and new, and I honestly looked forward to each day in class" (Mathematics Autobiography). In speaking specifically about his teachers, Spencer attributed much of his mathematics and academic success in general to the expectations set by teachers:

I think that a lot of my academic success to this day is because of the push that I got from my two TAG teachers in middle school. I think that, by far, those two teachers had the most influence on me because I was coming out of a period where I was sort of bored in a way with school, because we weren't really being [challenged in elementary school]. . . . So my middle school experience was the first time that I was consistently pushed and challenged on a daily basis. I think it was good because it brought me out of that boredom of elementary school, and set me up well for high school and college. (Interview 1)

Spencer's motivation to do well in mathematics and in academics in general was not consistent throughout his high school years, however. He noted that his motivation to do well academically somehow diminished in high school as his desire to have "fun" became a focus. Spencer specifically recalled his experience in AP calculus, which clearly illustrates how his concern for fun overruled his desire to learn:

My most poignant math memory will always be AP calculus in my junior year. Myself, along with three other friends never paid attention, never did any work for class, always showed up late, and failed every test miserably. We were more concerned with laughing and goofing off than doing well in class, and the four of us, all bright, intelligent young men, were kicked out of class. We were offered a deal: leave class and get "Ds" or stay in class and surely fail (by this point in the year, it was mathematically impossible for us to get grades higher than "Ds" anyway, and this would happen only if we made perfect scores on everything else). (Mathematics Autobiography)

In college, Spencer's mathematics mindset was, "I need how many calculus classes to be an engineer???" (Mathematics Autobiography). Spencer acknowledged that this mindset was the single biggest factor in determining his major. Although Spencer's major (economics), in the end, required several mathematics courses, he noted, "The thought of taking five calculus classes left me sickened and terrified (especially after getting the boot from AP calculus in high school)" (Mathematics Autobiography). Nevertheless, Spencer summarized his collegiate mathematics experiences, writing

Now, I wish I had gone through all the pain of mathematics at University Tech. I have found that skill at math is hard to attain, and easy to lose. Unfortunately, I fear that my best math days are forever behind me. As a future lawyer and businessman, I doubt that I would have ever used the math knowledge that an engineering degree would have forced me to attain, but in hindsight, I really wish I had sucked it up instead of taking the easy way out. (Mathematics Autobiography)

In general, Spencer attributed his mathematics and academic success to his family, specifically his mother, stating that she “was a much better student than I could ever have hoped to be” (Interview 1). As he credited other family members who encouraged his success, he claimed that the expectation of his success was always a motivating factor. This expectation of success from his family coupled with the fear of failure or letting down those family members was a constant theme throughout Spencer’s counter-storytelling:

I have always felt like I had to be successful in education, and that maybe success really wasn’t much of a choice. I mean ultimately of course, it is up to me to study for the test, turn in the homework, write the papers, and that sort of thing. But I have always, and again, this is not something that I shy away from, this is something that I welcome, had the feeling, specifically from my family, that they looked at me as the success story for my generation in the family. . . . Although the ultimate choice has been up to me, I have always felt that there has been some sort of unspoken driving force in the background saying, “You have to make it.” (Interview 4)

In his efforts to make it, Spencer had a clear understanding of how society operated with regard to race and unjust stereotypes. He, however, subverted these constructed divisions and categories in society:

I am being a realist, noticing that those characterizations [Black stereotypes] are definitely a part of our culture and they are definitely a part of society; you can’t, realistically speaking, you can’t really get away from them because they are out there and they are very prevalent in our society. That is just the pure realist in me. But on the other hand, I also know and understand that generalizations in practice don’t really work, and especially when it is so broad as to characterize a whole race of people. (Interview 3)

Summarizing Robust Mathematics Identities

The lived experiences (life, schooling, and mathematics) that were influential in the development of Keegan’s and Spencer’s robust mathematics identities resonate with the reported experiences of other mathematically successful African American students found in mathematics education research (see, e.g., Berry, 2008; Martin, 2000; Moody, 2000; Walker, 2006). Through this work, and my own, researchers diligently labor to “[open] up the fictions, fantasies and plays of power inherent in mathematics education” (Walkerdine, 2004, p. viii). Specifically, research such as this replaces fictions about African American students and mathematics with facts. African American students do live in African American communities that emphasize mathematics success and school and academic success in general. African American students do have family and community members who advocate for them and assist them in navigating around or over individual and aggregated racism and discrimination. African American students do (historically and currently) maintain fluid peer relationships with high-achieving friends who share their interests in mathematics or serve as resources to assist in their study and understanding of mathematics. African American students do identify with the “good kids” group and do not care about the negative labels that their less successful peers might assign to them. African American students do experience teachers who establish

high academic expectations for students and develop relationships with students that reach beyond the school and academics (see also Ladson-Billings, 1994, for a discussion of African American students and pedagogy and King, 2005, for a discussion of Black education in general).

The robust identities of Keegan and Spencer also resonate, I suppose, with what many (if not most) mathematicians and mathematics educators would argue is needed to be successful in mathematics. These identities even resonate with the National Mathematics Advisory Panel's final report (2008) regarding "effort" in mathematics: "through work and study" (Spencer) . . . "I can conquer courses" (Keegan). Nevertheless, to refute simplistic explanations about success (or effort) and to develop deeper understandings of African American male students as school mathematics actors in general, I argue that the participants' successes, or even their efforts, in mathematics must be analyzed within a broader sociocultural context—a context that provides for a more skilled and nuanced analysis of their robust mathematics identities.

NEGOTIATED ROBUST MATHEMATICS IDENTITIES

I believe that I cannot speak of the robust mathematics identity of Keegan or Spencer as somehow separate from how each negotiated his robust school and academic identity in general. The data presented previously demonstrate that the development of Keegan's and Spencer's robust mathematics identities neither occurred in a vacuum nor was simply due to effort. For this reason, as I discuss Keegan's and Spencer's *negotiated* mathematics identities collectively, I connect the discussion to my earlier research (Stinson, 2008, 2009a). In that research, I argued that each participant, in his individual pursuit of school, academic, and mathematics success, found the need to negotiate a plethora of sociocultural discourses, discourses that often unjustly construct or constitute African American male adolescents (including the White male math myth discourse). The participants' robust mathematics identities cannot be fully understood in their complexities decontextualized from how these young men negotiated some of the broader unjust sociocultural discourses that surround African American male adolescents. In what follows, I do not present Keegan and Spencer as discrete subjects, but rather borrow extracted discrete data—representing "power in reserve" (C. Geertz, cited in Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre, 2007, p. 28)—from Keegan and Spencer, as well as Ethan and Nathaniel, throughout the discussion to represent a "collective consciousness" of all four participants. In so doing, however, I do not intend to suggest that the participants spoke with a single monolithic voice—the discrete data from Keegan and Spencer clearly demonstrate that they were not monolithic—but to suggest that the constructed collective consciousness presented might provide insights into the collective life and schooling experiences of mathematically successful African American male students.

One sociocultural discourse that was solidly present in the participants' collective consciousness—requiring continuous negotiation—was the discursive formation

of the Black male adolescent: the “thug.” The thug was described, in part, as the jewelry-bedecked, baggy-clothed, Black male adolescent who had a nonchalant attitude toward school and academics (and mathematics). The participants argued that the reproduction and perpetuation of this discursive formation was due to one of the nation’s “biggest ‘cash cows,’ television” (Ethan): “If you watch television, if you look at the news, you don’t tend to see Black men . . . being successful . . . you tend to see individuals who are thugs” (Keegan). Keegan stated that the discourse was so prominent that even he had fallen prey to it when mentoring “troubling” young Black boys: “I’m even guilty of it . . . when [Black boys] are not performing as well, if they are acting bad and not really doing well in school . . . you say, ‘Oh Lord, this is going to be a thug . . . I can’t help them.’” Exacerbating this discursive formation was the discourse that the African American female is somehow “smarter” than the African American male: “For African American males, when they come out of the womb they are already stereotyped; it is stereotypical for a Black female to be smarter than a Black male. That is just a stereotype that we are given” (Ethan). The participants claimed that the consequence of this discursive formation is lower school and academic expectations for African American male students, lowered by teachers, and most important, it was argued by the participants, lowered by the African American community in general.

Traces of how the participants continuously negotiated the consequentially negative discursive formation of the Black male adolescent were to be found throughout their data. The remark, “Society has decided that we want White behaviors and Black behaviors” (Ethan), however, exemplifies the participants’ understanding that cultural markers such as White and Black behaviors, or the thug, were merely social constructions, produced and reified within sociocultural discourses. This understanding that what many take as “real” is only a discursive formation generates the discursively constituted subject agency to decode and recode its identity: “I could be Black and successful . . . just because I am wearing a suit, or I don’t have an earring in my ear, or . . . a tattoo, does not mean that I am trying to appear White” (Keegan). The participants undoubtedly understood that the nonacademic Black male adolescent had been constructed through sociocultural discourses, making these discourses vulnerable to resistance and, in turn, allowing more freedom of play to develop opposing discourses, as evident in Keegan’s adopting “the Afrocentric culture ideology.”

There were several instances in which participants exerted their agency by developing opposing discourses: “To be successful in society you don’t have to get rid of your Blackness, but you can be successful by doing this, doing *a*, doing *b*, doing *c*” (Keegan). The developing of opposing discourses by doing *a*, doing *b*, doing *c* was evident as the participants spoke about how they negotiated (i.e., accommodated, reconfigured, or resisted) the theoretical perspectives discussed in the manuscripts they read and reflected on prior to the second and third interviews. The theories discussed fell into one of two larger sociocultural discourses: the discourse of deficiency or the discourse of rejection (see Stinson, 2006, for a full discussion of these two discourses).

The discourse of deficiency focuses on the perceived deficient cultural, life, and schooling experiences of African American children. Briefly, theories located in the discourse of deficiency include the cultural deprivation theory (i.e., Black children come from environments that are culturally disadvantaged), the culture conflict theory (i.e., Black communities fail to equip Black children with the White, middle-class skills necessary for school success and schools fail to use the unique experiences of Black children), the institutional deficiency theory (i.e., schools are organized to favor middle- and upper-class White children), the educational equality theory (i.e., schooling opportunities for Black children are not equal), and the heredity theory (i.e., Black children have inferior genetic endowments for intellectual work) (Ogbu, 1978).

The participants effectively negotiated the discourse of deficiency, reconfiguring or accommodating some theories while resisting others. When reconfigured, such as the cultural deprivation theory and culture conflict theory, the participants related the discourse to socioeconomic status, not to race or ethnicity: "Because Keeling was made up of vast socioeconomic status . . . a lot of the mainstream cultural aspects were still there" (Ethan). When accommodated, such as the institutional deficiency theory and educational equality theory, the discourse was accompanied with arguments that one could succeed in spite of the structural deficiencies or inequities: "One of my best friends went to one of the worst public schools . . . but she had a personal drive about herself. She ended up going to Princeton . . . and now she is in graduate school at Stanford" (Keegan). And when the discourse of deficiency was resisted, as in the case of the heredity theory, it was emphatically resisted: "I think that it is still sad that we are dealing with those . . . thoughts . . . that African Americans are inferior genetically, which I think is just stupid" (Keegan). Although the participants accommodated and reconfigured some of the theories located in the discourse of deficiency by relating them to socioeconomic status or to personal drive, throughout their counter-storytelling they emphatically resisted the discourse that "Black culture" was somehow in and of itself deficient. This refusing to yield to the deficit discourse in general assisted, in part, their effective negotiation of the discourse of rejection.

The discourse of rejection focuses on Black students' systematic rejection of school and academics or the systematic rejection of a "Black collective identity." Again, the participants reconfigured or accommodated some theories located in the discourse of rejection and resisted others. For example, they reconfigured the cool pose theory (Majors & Billson, 1993; Majors et al., 1994), which suggests that some male African Americans, to cope in an environment of racism, develop ritualized forms of masculinity that are oppositional to school success. This discourse was reconfigured by developing strategies, such as shedding, that allowed engagement in cool pose behaviors in social settings while limiting the negative impact on their school and academic success: "Once I came into the classroom, I would sort of shed those cool pose behaviors and adopt a more traditional educational behavior . . . those things [I did in the hallways] weren't necessarily brought into the classroom . . . they were two different environments" (Spencer). The stereotype

threat theory (Steele, 1997, 1999, 2003) was reconfigured by some participants and accommodated by others. This discourse centers on how negative societal stereotypes about specific groups (such as the limited intellectual capabilities of African Americans) influence the intellectual functioning and identity development of individual group members, resulting in disidentification with schooling because of the threat of confirming the stereotype. Those who reconfigured the discourse argued that it acted as “propulsion” or “motivation” to achieve (Ethan), to prove the stereotype wrong. Those who accommodated the discourse developed strategies that demonstrated that they were intellectually competent and did belong: “I make sure that I raise my hand to answer the questions early . . . I try to prove my worth, show that I belong” (Spencer).

Other theories located in the discourse of rejection, such as the cultural–ecological theory (Ogbu, 1992, 2003), were resisted, however. Embedded in this theory is the discourse of acting White, which positions school and academic success as a prerogative only for White students, resulting in Black students’ rejection of school and academic success. This discourse in particular was resisted, as it was argued by the participants that the term *nerd* could be applied to all races—“to the Black community, to the White community, to Asians, whatever” (Nathaniel). Similarly, the raceless persona theory (Fordham, 1988, 1996), which claims that Black students who achieve school and academic success feel the need to reject the Black collective identity in the process of achieving success, was resisted. The participants had parents, family, community members, and teachers who explicitly made the discourse of success colorless: “My ignorance [that success was perceived as having a color] allowed me to not necessarily take on a raceless persona, but to keep my ethnicity, to not necessarily feel educational success was a color” (Ethan). Consequentially, the burden of acting White theory (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Ogbu, 2004), which attempts to explain how Black students who are high achievers in schools manage the burden of acting White, was, for the most part, resisted: “Because I was surrounded by so many African Americans who actually wanted to achieve, the burden of acting White was not necessarily there . . . none of us saw success as Black or White; we saw it as being successful period” (Ethan; see Stinson, 2010, for a full discussion of how the participants negotiated the burden of acting White theory.)

Seeing success not as Black or White, but success, period, facilitated, I believe, the participants’ successful negotiation of the White male math myth discourse—that is, they refused to yield to the discourse. The participants emphatically argued that mathematics was “the same whether you are Black, White, Asian, young or old” (Spencer). These arguments, found throughout the participants’ data, were neither philosophical arguments against ethnomathematics (see, e.g., Powell & Frankenstein, 1997) or social constructivism (see, e.g., Ernest, 1998) nor pedagogical arguments against culturally specific mathematics teaching (see, e.g., Leonard, 2008), but rather emphatic declarations that mathematics did not reside in a White male domain. The participants, however, were aware of the dominance of the discourse; understanding that they were—within sociocultural discourses—

somehow unique: “Like the cherry on top . . . ‘Man, that is a minority male achieving at a high level of mathematics’ ” (Ethan). Furthermore, the participants understood the gatekeeping status of mathematics (Stinson, 2004b); that is, the need of success in mathematics for school and academic success in general. Like Martin’s (2000) mathematically successful African American students, my participants viewed success in school mathematics as just one component in their larger efforts toward success: “I was always . . . willing to learn . . . what I needed to do to achieve, and if the core curriculum [which included mathematics] was what they needed me to do, I was willing to do it” (Ethan).

The negotiated robust mathematics identities of the participants were not, however, static and singular. That is to say, the participants’ mathematics identities, like their school and academic identities in general, are best understood as dynamic, multiplicitous, and context-dependent. For example, as previously discussed, the context of learning and doing mathematics was significant in Keegan’s construction of his mathematics identities: He hated “school” mathematics, but enjoyed “everyday” mathematics. He learned to maneuver through school mathematics but looked forward to using everyday mathematics to ensure that his future congregation was healthy financially. Context was evident in Keegan’s discussion about the AP statistics examination as well. Keegan was a solid B student throughout the AP statistics course, but when it came time to demonstrate his statistics competency on the examination he just didn’t care. Keegan’s lack of caring, however, must be placed in the larger context of the speech he delivered earlier in the school year—not in the context of his mathematics abilities.

Context, evidently, was also significant to Spencer’s multiplicitous mathematics identities. In AP calculus, Spencer stated that he, along with three other intelligent African American male students, was more concerned with “laughing and goofing off” rather than doing well in class. He recounted how he, and his friends, “never did any work for class, always showed up late, and failed every test miserably,” resulting in “getting the boot” from the course. A year later, however, in AP statistics, Spencer earned an A both semesters, consistently demonstrating his advanced mathematics and communication skills. Clearly, Spencer’s mathematics identity took a different line of flight over the summer break. But, then again, was Spencer’s identity in AP calculus playing out the cool pose discourse? The acting White discourse? Or was it just playing out the “boys will be boys” discourse, a discourse that appears to be unavailable to African American male students.

If identity is understood, not as dynamic and multiple but as static and singular, the previously highlighted dichotomous attitudes about and experiences with mathematics raise a difficult question: Which identity is the “true” mathematics identity? I believe that it is not feasible, or helpful, to reduce Keegan’s or Spencer’s (or Ethan’s and Nathaniel’s) dynamic and multiple mathematics identities to a static or singular identity or to a simple discussion about effort. Rather, I conclude that their multiplicitous and fragmented negotiated robust mathematics identities are best understood within the context of how they continuously accommodated, reconfigured, or resisted unjust sociocultural discourses as a means of subversively repeating

their constituted raced selves and, in turn, refused to yield to the White male math myth discourse. This conclusion leads to the most difficult question: What might the schooling, academic, and mathematics outcomes of African American male students be if they did not have to expend so much energy—intellectually and physically—on negotiating a plethora of sociocultural discourses that attempt to unjustly construct them as being somewhat of “a problem”?

NO ANSWERS—JUST DISRUPTIVE QUESTIONS

So, where are the “answers” regarding African American students and mathematics? Where are the prescriptive recommendations of what mathematics teachers should do? Where is the *nouveau* theory that mathematics education researchers might apply? Where are the “what works” strategies for mathematics education policymakers? Consistent with a poststructural sensibility that refutes closure and encourages an awareness of and tolerance toward difference, ambiguity, and conflict, I offer none here. However, in keeping with the purpose of this special issue of *JRME*, I do provide the reader with some different, and at times disruptive, questions to ponder. My intention is not to provide answers to the questions, but, like this *JRME* issue, to facilitate a dialogue among mathematics teachers, researchers, policymakers, and others. I frame the questions around passages extracted from Du Bois’s 1903 collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk*, which when first published was considered, “the political Bible of the Negro race” (W. Ferris, cited in Gates, 1989, p. xiv). I use this frame not because Du Bois was a poststructural scholar—he was not—although, “people of color have had to live postmodernity for some time” (Noblit, 2004, p. 193). Rather, I believe that Du Bois’s prophetic and lyrical prose coupled with the discussion of African American male students’ becoming school mathematics actors provides an appropriate frame to motivate questions for mathematics educators (and educators in general). The extracted passages and accompanying questions should generate reflections on how many of the problems in U.S. society that Du Bois highlighted more than 100 years ago continue to be problems today—in society generally and in U.S. schools and classrooms, specifically, in the mathematics classroom.

Du Bois (1903/1989) opened his collection of essays with the statement, “Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question. . . . How does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word” (pp. 1–2). This statement, I believe, holds true today in mathematics classrooms across the nation for many African American students, male and female alike. I often wonder how many well-meaning mathematics teachers—White, Black, or any “race”—perceive African American male (and female) students as a problem. The negative discursive formation of the African American male child is so embedded in the daily discourses of U.S. society that it even leads young African American men to succumb to characterizing the “troubling” Black boy as a “thug” How might mathematics educators exorcise this discursive formation from U.S. schools and classrooms and, more important, from their own perceptions? And if not exorcised, how might mathematics educators

create environments that reverse the discursive formation, bringing the discursive formation of the thug into schools and classrooms as a discursive subject of critique, revealing both its negative and positive attributes?

Du Bois (1903/1989) defined his concept *double-consciousness* in the following passage:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 3)

Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness, I believe, continues to be applicable today, especially in education, as African American students negotiate the White hegemonic discourses of U.S. public schools. People of color have recommended for years that White educators (re)teach themselves about the hegemonic discourses that exist on multiple levels in U.S. schools and society and engage in self-reflection about the meaning of Whiteness, but most remain unwilling to do so (McIntyre, 1997), often resulting in dysconscious racism (King, 1991). Even though school knowledge consists of the facts, concepts, and generalizations presented in textbooks, teacher's guidebooks, and other forms of media used by schools, it is directly and indirectly dependent on how teachers mediate and interpret this knowledge for their students (Banks, 1996). Consequently, the lack of critical examination of the White hegemonic discourses of schools most often biases this mediation and interpretation, resulting in privileging Whiteness over Blackness (Hilliard, 2001). How might mathematics educators become knowledgeable about the ways in which they are implicated (or not) in (re)producing and regulating the unjust White hegemonic discourses of schools? How might mathematics educators create learning environments that reduce (if not eliminate) the White hegemonic discourses of schools, providing for easier negotiation for Black students (and other historically marginalized students)?

Du Bois (1903/1989) argued that African American lives are often essentialized, writing, "We seldom study the condition of the Negro to-day honestly and carefully . . . so much easier to assume that we know it all . . . having already reached conclusions in our own minds, we are loth to have them disturbed by facts" (p. 95). The essentializing of the African American experience, I believe, holds true for African American lives today. This essentializing is clearly evident in the gross generalization of African American male students who are often characterized as "pathological," lacking the behavioral and social skills and life experiences to be academically successful (Polite & Davis, 1999). The essentializing discourses of the African American male student have often reduced him to the education labels of *at risk learner* or *special needs learner*, placing him in disproportionate numbers into lower-track and special education classes (Harry & Anderson, 1999; Oakes,

1995). How might mathematics educators learn to use the multiplicity of lived experiences of African American students as starting points for collectively building knowledge in schools and classrooms? How might mathematics educators learn to examine honestly and carefully the conclusions in their own minds about African American students, disturbing the fictions with facts about African American students, specifically, African American male students?

Du Bois (1903/1989) poetically argued for the inclusion of the Black voice within the discourse of society and specifically within the discourse of education: "Herein the longing of black men must have respect: the rich and bitter depth of their experience . . . may give the world new points of view and make their loving, living, and doing precious to all human hearts" (p. 76). Although the Black voice is much louder today than in decades past, still it is often silenced within the discourse of education and in U.S. society generally. This silenced voice is detrimental to the development of equitable and just schools and classrooms, given that an important source of information for mathematics educators in developing such schools and classrooms should be how African Americans (and other historically marginalized groups) recount their education experiences (Secada, 1995). How might mathematics educators learn to listen for and to the voices of African American students, using these voices to develop equitable and just schools and classrooms for all students? How might mathematics educators learn to abandon their often-misguided "understandings" of African American students, adopting new points of view through listening to and learning from African American students?

One of the most often cited passages from *The Souls of Black Folk* is Du Bois's (1903/1989) statement regarding the problem of the 20th century: "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relations of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea" (p. 10). Numerous incidents in world and U.S. history validate this prophetic statement and illustrate how the color-line was problematic for the 20th century—and how it has continued to be problematic for the 21st century. How might mathematics educators become knowledgeable of the ways in which they are implicated (or not) in (re)producing and regulating the problem of the color-line? How might mathematics educators learn to reduce (if not eliminate) the problem of the color-line, at least in U.S. schools and classrooms?

In the preceding discussion, I provided just 10 questions for 21st-century mathematics educators (and educators in general) that Du Bois's passages inspired. I leave the reader to think of other disruptive questions that Du Bois's prophetic and lyrical prose might inspire regarding not only Black students, but also all students who are constructed outside the hegemonic discourse of "the white, Anglo, heterosexual male of bourgeois privilege" (P. McLaren, cited in Torres, 1998, p. 178). I do not pose the questions naively. I acknowledge that the questions are challenging, requiring tremendous effort from mathematics educators in determining plausible, nonessentializing answers. In our efforts as mathematics educators, I can only hope that as we continue to journey into the 21st century, an increasing number of educators will heed Du Bois's calls for a more complex examination of the schooling

experiences of African American students (and other historically marginalized students). I trust that these examinations will motivate different understandings and renewed efforts in providing a high-quality and humanizing (Bartolomé, 1994) mathematics education for African American students as our collective contribution in making the world a better place.

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