

# The Matrix of Social Identity and Intersectional Power

## A Classroom Resource

BY R. TOLTEKA CUAUHTIN

**T**he Matrix of Social Identity and Intersectional Power visual and accompanying chart, which I originally based upon the Flower of Identity and Filter of Oppression published in *Rethinking Schools' Open Minds to Equality*, breaks down eight levels of social identity across 29 intersections. When developing it and collaborating with my colleague and talented graphic designer Steven Acevedo, we imagined this tool not only serving a purpose in Ethnic Studies classes at our school but also envisioned it assisting and facilitating pedagogy on these topics for teachers, professors, and students in many more classrooms at high school and university levels. A summary of the tool, accompanying guiding questions, and student handouts are provided here.

Ethnic Studies programs work to understand and analyze intersectional identity, relationships, and dynamics of power in order to resist oppression and help actively change the world for the better. While the curricular time needed to go in-depth into this matrix of social identity could easily go beyond a unit, semester, or even a school year, it may also be summarily introduced and referenced when directly applicable throughout a course or program and subsequently used as a foundational reference tool/framework for these higher levels of theory.

Following are a few guiding questions I developed to help educators and students better understand the matrix. The first eight questions are intended to explain the visual and how to read it. The questions relate to all interlocking intersections, but you can also zoom in on specific intersections of focus—for example, race, gender expression, nationality/“citizenship,” survivor status, age, or even spe-

cies. Question number 9 is the first question to really address personal positionality/reflexivity, which is a core purpose of this tool and can be the focus of autoethnographic assignments—some of the most transformational projects students may engage in to better understand their relationships to identity, space-time, society, and power.

1. What are the multiplicities and intersections of social identities we have as human beings?
2. Who are the Dominant/Hegemonic/Privileged Identities at each intersection?
3. What are the forms of discrimination present at each intersection?
4. Who are the Oppressed/Marginalized/Nonprivileged Identities at each intersection?
5. What are the Definitive Marginalizations at each intersection?
6. What are the Internalized Oppressions at each intersection?
7. What are the Transformational Resistances, Critical Hopes, and Elements of Social Justice at each intersection?
8. What are Hegemonic, Societal, and Institutional Structures, Systems, Oppressions, and Effects at each intersection?





9. What are your positionalities, your intersectional standpoints? In what ways are you privileged and oppressed? What are you doing about it?

10. Are there certain intersections that affect dynamics of power on a larger and/or stronger scale in society? How can we ask and respond to this question and not allow the injustices of “oppression Olympics,” “horizontal oppression,” and “suboppression/subhegemony” to manifest themselves in the process?

11. Considering this matrix, how does it all relate to each other? What can we do now to transformationally resist injustice in our communities, nationally, and throughout the world for past, present, and future generations?

12. Do you see anything missing here? What is fixed and what is fluid? What would you like to edit/change in your version of the Matrix of Social Identity and Intersectional Power?

13. How can you put this tool into praxis in the classroom?

So, how does this even work and what does it help us explain?

### The Breakdown of the Matrix of Social Identity and Intersectional Power

0. The center star is the matrix’s subtitle, “Who Are We?” It is not numbered.

1. The first ring contains a multiplicity of identities we carry as human beings. Many identity charts or identity wheels stop here, on a somewhat superficial plane, noting different social identities but rendering any analysis of related dynamics of power invisible. This tool expands upon this basic approach on several necessary levels.

2. The second ring represents the privileged group at each intersection of identity.

3. The third ring (both concentric circles, considered 3a and 3b) represents forms of discrimination and

oppression that relate to each intersection—there is some overlap.

4. The fourth ring represents the oppressed, marginalized, nondominant target groups at each intersection.

5. The fifth ring represents “the definitive marginalized” (while always being cautious of the “oppression Olympics”). This ring notes the focal identities marginalized at each intersection, with group members who cannot “pass” as the dominant identity and whose characteristics correspond to often having to deal with the oppression in a more concentrated way than those who do not correspond to that identity as “definitively.”

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6. The sixth ring represents the internalized levels of these oppressions, which relate to self-hatred and zoom in to the “definitive marginalized” of the group. For instance, internalized racism within a people of color group with darker skin colors being the target may be referred to as colorism. Also, the internalized forms of oppression cause oppressed peoples to want to conform to the dominant, hegemonic, oppressor group (the second ring), thus oppressing each other and causing suboppression/horizontal oppression/hegemony in the process. There is repetition here because certain internalizations (e.g., self-hate) are present across intersections.

7. The seventh ring represents the intersectional transformational resistances of how oppressed groups are critical of the oppression and motivated by social





justice. This ring is important for solidarities, or how oppressed peoples unite with each other across intersections and how privileged peoples from oppressor groups unite in solidarity with oppressed peoples to actively and transformationally resist hegemony and oppression. Certain general elements of resistance (e.g., love and dignity) also apply across intersections.

8. The eighth ring is on the outside because it works to

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house the matrix with its structure, regardless of the changes and strides for justice made. It works to absorb these moves toward justice in ways that it can “flip” or appropriate while continuing to maintain its hegemonic, societal, and institutional structures, systems, oppressions, and its effects at various levels.

This theoretical and curricular tool responds to several parts of the Ethnic Studies Framework (see p. 65), including respecting students as holistic human beings as well as developing critical consciousness and addressing intersectionality, dynamics of power, privilege, oppression, and solidarity.

As a teacher in the classroom, I’ve had students use colored pencils to shade in whichever intersectional social identity and its dynamics of power are addressed in class. At times, we also read and annotate a handout that explains how the tool works (usually just a one-page handout version of nos. 0 through 8 as listed in the breakdown found above and on p. 39). For students to demonstrate their understanding in

an engaging way, after modeling an example myself, I’ve had students in small groups come up with basic questions for other groups, who then have a timed countdown to show their answers on mini-whiteboards when time is called. The student group who came up with the question then chooses a group to share and explain their answers to the whole class. An example of a student-created question for this group activity might be: “For the social identity element of education level, who are the marginalized group?” Questions may also increase in difficulty, such as “What are the institutional hegemonic structures at the intersection of race, gender, and class?”

In a different activity, when an intersection is addressed, students may complete the corresponding cells on the accompanying chart (“My Intersectional and Multiple Identities and Their Relationships to Power”) by shading or circling their standpoint/location at that particular intersection, which can help them on their paths of understanding this theory in a very personal way. It is important to note that at certain intersections, students may have hybrid/mixed identities, be in the “borderlands,” in-between identities, or even “pass” as a dominant identity though they themselves may actually identify as a marginalized identity at that intersection; those who can “pass” carry more privilege in that sense than those who cannot. After the basics of the tool are understood, the matrix provides a helpful companion when students are doing autoethnographic projects, social-analysis assignments, or applying their understandings in other creative endeavors.

When students are familiarized with a deeper understanding of social identity and intersectional dynamics of power with a tool such as this, a variety of pedagogical approaches can be fruitful in relation to it for further shared inquiries, dialogues, discussions, reflections, creations, and actions.

A blank version of the matrix of intersectional social identity can be used for those who prefer a pedagogy where students fill in the text themselves or who wish to adapt the resource further for their own needs. When a simpler version of the matrix is necessary, and especially for younger grade levels, I highly recommend the Flower of Identity and Filter of Oppression from Rethinking Schools’ *Open Minds to Equality*.





Included here are two poems by Vanessa Vilaseñor, an 11th grader at Social Justice Humanitas Academy who wrote them in 2015. Inspired by her study of the matrix of social identity, she wrote the first, simply titled “Intersectionality,” which was later presented on PBS; at California State University, Northridge; and at the Central Library in downtown Los Angeles. It started in our Poetic Justice class; I offered students an assignment where the goal was to distribute teacher leadership among students, who would teach each other Ethnic Studies vocabulary through poetry and then create and perform a poem for each vocabulary term.

As students were working with different Ethnic Studies concepts and academic language, I offered scaffolds and helpful tools as necessary—both general guidance and more particular assistance that focused on scaffolding certain terms. When it came to Vanessa and her focal term *intersectionality*, I reflected and thought of how useful this curricular tool may be for it. I explained how the matrix of social identity works, what the different layers represent, gave her space to ask any clarifying questions (even through the process of drafting of her poem), and emphasized she could utilize whatever parts of it that were helpful to her process. Connecting this resource with content we had previously experienced in class, her prior knowledge, and events that were happening at the time (and continue to in different ways), she created her poem “Intersectionality,” included below. Immersed in spoken word and inspired after reading bell hooks’ “Understanding Patriarchy,” Vanessa penned a second poem, also presented here. She zooms in on that intersection through her poetic expression in “A Poetic Letter to Patriarchy.” Vanessa’s poems are found here on p. 42.

Vanessa went from a quiet student to being proud of her voice and story when encouraged to write and share her poetry in relation to our course and her own life as part of her path of healing. She shared with me how this theoretical tool helped her better understand intersectionality and articulated that understanding and language into praxis. For further poetry and reflection, I would encourage her to go deeper into how the intersections relate to each other and perhaps in response to her concluding line, ask the questions “Is the blame all on the patriarchy,

or do white supremacist, capitalist, heterosexist, xenophobic, ableist, ageist anthropocentrism also have a lot to do with it, and what are our roles in the complicity of all of it? How do we best move forward?” And of course, she may respond, “Yeah, but this poem is about gender justice and that’s about combating gender injustice, which we do have patriarchy to blame for, so we move forward by stopping the patriarchy and toxic masculinity that goes along with it!” Good point.

Vanessa’s work is one example of how the matrix of social identity and intersectional dynamics of power can be tapped into to help generate creative and analytical student work for purposes of intersectional social justice, in Ethnic Studies courses and beyond.

Lastly, gratitude and respect are due to the mandalas, tonalmachiotls, and tzolkins worldwide which provide inspiration for the design of this curricular and pedagogical tool. ✱





## INTERSECTIONALITY

by Vanessa Villaseñor

Intersectionality

that goes from  
ethnicity

Ability

Age

Race

Gender

Sexuality

And we can go on

and on and on and on

For we are all different

but those differences can either make our lives great  
or make us wish we had a different fate

Intersectionality

you see when you grow up you have to face reality

people will treat you different by the way you express yourself and who you are  
and that is

Intersectionality

White

straight

cis male

will never understand the loneliness and isolation from society  
because he is not a black transgender woman getting beaten to death inside a dark alley

Intersectionality

because sadly we live in a world where we have to create awareness that's #BLACKLIVESMATTER

and it's even worse because white people have to audacity to response after

coming back with #ALLLIVESMATTER

and won't accept the police brutality

Intersectionality

Men can go out and be as free as they want and become each other's wingman

but i can't do that without being called a slut just because i am a womxn.

You see i can't walk alone at night

without being afraid that i won't be alright

Womxn are being raped and they are the ones still getting blamed

"what were you wearing?" "why were you alone?"

"it's your fault for walking alone to get home."

Intersectionality

because the action of one minority speaks for everybody

Islamophobia is sadly a thing

because people saw in the news a bombing in the buildings

we still have yet to recover from 9/11

because we still have hate crimes towards Muslims from all the aggression

Don't you understand all the oppression?

We are all different from





social class  
language  
religion  
education  
i.d by association  
and let's not forget nationality  
and that is  
Intersectionality.

### A POETIC LETTER TO PATRIARCHY

by Vanessa Villaseñor

Patriarchy  
a system of society or government in which the father or eldest male is head of the family and descent is traced  
through the male line.

Patriarchy  
a system of society or government in which men hold the power and womxn are largely excluded from it.

Patriarchy  
a society or community organized on patriarchal lines.  
It's amazing how society was able to maintain between these lines from time to time  
When you are born a girl society gives you a set of rules you must follow

Or else who's gonna bother  
You have to learn from a young age how to clean and cook  
That way in the distant future a man will look  
You have to dress all nice and pretty  
And when you are old enough you'll have your makeup ready  
And maybe you'll find a man and start going steady  
Because apparently that's all we are here for  
The attention of men is our goal  
And that is what i was taught growing up as a girl  
But that's not all  
there is so much more  
You see within these rules are more rules  
Not only must you look pretty you also have to act like a lady  
Which means  
No burping  
No spitting  
You make sure you do your own cleaning  
Don't speak your mind about things and throw a fit  
Because that just makes you look like a total bitch  
Don't question the power of men  
Because they are the ones who are dominant  
Now let's go a little deeper  
Because it's time to get a little personal  
You see when i was a little girl





I didn't like dressing up in "girl" clothes  
And because of that my mom would get upset  
But she picked out my "cute perky pink outfits" anyways  
Now in school it was a different story  
All the girls hated me because i didn't like barbies and ponies  
And all the boys hated me because it was out of the ordinary  
Then as i grew older  
And went through puberty  
There was a large amount of pressure on me  
By society  
On how to get the "Perfect" body  
But since i didn't fit the criteria  
And since i was taught from a young age that my goal is to get a man to look my way  
It put me in a bad mental state  
Now i'm going left and right  
Trying to find anything to help me turn out alright  
And it took up everything in me  
To the point where i just gave up  
And since then my life went downhill  
But i won't get into detail  
But it's ok because of certain people  
I got the help that i needed  
And no my confidence isn't back up there  
But it's enough to give me a breath of fresh air  
And made me realize the truth  
That what society has done to me isn't cool, not a bit  
And i know i'm not the only one who goes through this  
And i blame Patriarchy for all of it.









## My Intersectional and Multiple Identities and Their Relationships to Power

### Who am I as an intersectional human being?

- To the extent possible and that applies to you: 1. Highlight, shade, or circle the group(s) that signify your own identity (e.g., whether you are privileged or oppressed) in that element of identity. 2. Take it further by highlighting/shading additional columns if you think they apply to you (for instance, which forms of resistance do you participate in?). 3. Use for historical or contemporary figures beyond yourself. 4. Use as a quick reference for the Matrix of Social Identity. Fluid/blank/editable chart can be found at [goo.gl/1v4Yib](http://goo.gl/1v4Yib).

Social Identity	Privileged/ Hegemonic Group(s)	Form of Discrimination / Oppression	Oppressed/ Marginalized Groups	Internalized Oppressions	Forms of Resistance	Institutional / Structural Oppressions
1. Precolonial Continental Ancestry	European ancestries	Eurocentrism	American Indian; African; Asian; Oceanic Ancestries	Internalized Eurocentrism; historical amnesia	Ancestral memory	Coloniality's hegemonic matrix
2. Race	White	Racism	People of Color: "Black, Red, Brown, Yellow"	Colorism; internalized racism	People of Color Power; anti-racism	White supremacy
3. Ethnicity	European WASP ethnicities	Ethnocentrism; paternalism	Third/Fourth World ethnicities	Internalized Eurocentrism; historical amnesia	Regenerating, reclaiming, and restoring roots	Genocide; ethnocide; culturcide
4a. Nationality / "Citizenship"	U.S. / "First World" citizens	Chauvinism	Undocumented migrants; Global South nationalities	Internalized chauvinism as less than the dominant	U.N. law; migration reform; asylum; amnesty; sovereignty	Neoliberalism; neocolonialism
4b. Familial National Origin	"First World" / U.S. / Western European	Xenophobia	Undocumented migrants; Global South nationalities	Internalized xenophobia; assimilation above all	Connectedness to family's national cultural origins	Neoliberalism; Eurocentrism
5. Language	"Proper" English speakers, readers, writers	Linguicism	"Nonstandard" English speakers, readers, writers	Internalized linguicism; self-hatred	Multilingual embracing; Indigenous language revitalization	Linguicide; linguistic domination
6. Religion	Christians	Creedism; Islamophobia; anti-Semitism	Muslims; Jews; non-major world religions; atheists; Indigenous spiritual traditions	Internalized creedism or specific religious oppression	Religious freedom; regenerating Indigenous spiritual traditions	Theocide
7. Class	The richest 1 percent; the 99 percent, the global 1 percent	Classism	Socioeconomically disadvantaged; poor; global poor; homeless, homeless	Internalized classism	Redistribution of wealth; shift in economic thinking	Capitalism; neoliberalism
8. Assigned Sex	Men	Toxic masculinity +	Womyn; intersexual people	Internalized patriarchy	Womanism; feminism	Patriarchy
9. Gender	Cisgender (males in particular)	Sexism + transphobia	Transgender people; (in particular womxn)	Internalized patriarchy	Gender justice; inclusion; love; integrity	Heteropatriarchy; cisnormativity
10. Gender Expression	Male/female gender-conforming	Misogyny + heteronormativity	Gender-nonconforming	Internalized patriarchy	Dignity	Heteropatriarchy; cisnormativity
11. Sexuality	Heterosexual	Heterosexism; homophobia	LGBTQ/AP+	Internalized homophobia; self-hatred	Pride; queering;	Heteronormativity
12. Survivor Status	Not traumatized or abused	Survivor discrimination	Trauma / abuse survivor	Internalized guilt and unworthiness	Solidarity; trust; self-worth	Culture of silence



<b>13. Mental Health</b>	Mentally healthy	Health discrimination	Mentally unhealthy	Shame	Empathy; compassion	Medical industrial complex
<b>14. Physical Health</b>	Physically healthy	Health discrimination	Physically unhealthy	Self-hatred	Healing	Medical industrial complex
<b>15. Ability</b>	Able-bodied; differently abled without special needs	Ableism	Disabled; differently abled with special needs	Internalized ableism	Accommodations; modifications	Medical and institutional industrial complexes
<b>16. Age</b>	Adults	Ageism	Youth; elders	Internalized ageism	Mutual human respect	Generational isolation
<b>17. Body Type</b>	Body "typical"	Body shaming	"Atypical" weight, height	Self-hatred	Acceptance; self-love	Eurocentric beauty standard
<b>18. Genetics</b>	Genotypical	Genism	Genetically "atypical"	Shame	Humane genetic literacy	Neo-eugenics
<b>19. Bio Family</b>	Raised with both bio parents	Fam. discrimination	Single parent; adopted; foster children	"Non-real" family member	Empathy; compassion; love	Colonial family models
<b>20. Family Responsibility</b>	Non-Caregivers	Family discrimination	Caregivers	Guilt for caretaking	Support	Colonial family models
<b>21. Species</b>	Human beings; homo sapiens sapiens	Anthropocentrism	All other lifeforms/ecology; abiotic ecology	NA	Environmental justice; In Lak Ech; Mitakuye Oyasin	Anthropocene; coloniality; ecocide
<b>22. Personal Association</b>	Not personally associated with oppressed groups	McCarthyism	Personally associated with oppressed groups	Self-traitor	Mutual human respect; solidarity	Empire
<b>23. Epistemology</b>	Hegemonic Eurocentric epistemologies	Exclusion	Non-Eurocentric epistemologies and worldviews	Internalized hegemonic Eurocentric thinking	Decoloniality; profound diversity	Epistemicide
<b>24. Discourse Communities</b>	"Mainstream" discourse communities	Mainstream as the only stream	Subculture discourse communities	Internalized "normality"	Belongingness	Hegemony
<b>25. Political Party</b>	Two major parties	Third partyism	Third parties; nonpartisan; ineligible; disenfranchised	Disengagement; "My vote doesn't matter"	SJ-based third-party wins; inclusive voting rights	Political industrial complex
<b>26. Labor Activity</b>	Corporations	Labor discrimination	Workers	Internalized classism	Unionization	Corporatocracy
<b>27. Profession</b>	Owners; white-collar workers	Worker discrimination	Blue-collar workers; unemployed	Internalized classism	Labor justice	Corporatocracy
<b>28. Criminal Record</b>	"Clean" criminal record	Recidivist discrimination	Criminal record; ex-felons; incarcerated	Internalized recidivist mind-set	Restorative justice	Prison industrial complex; school-to-prison pipeline
<b>29. Education</b>	Higher-education degrees	Education discrimination	No high school diploma; illiterate in "Western" sense	Internalized deficit thinking	CyRxPx; Ethnic Studies; healing the education debt	"Schooling"; the education debt; education industrial complex

There is considerable overlap, fluidity, interchangeability between several of the cells in the matrix, represented by having dotted rather than solid lines. Chart by R. Tolteka Cuauhtin.

