RACE AMONG FRIENDS: RACE, FRIENDSHIP, AND MULTICULTURAL

LITERATURE IN A SUBURBAN SCHOOL

by

MARIANNE MODICA

A dissertation submitted to the

Graduate School-Camden

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in Childhood Studies

written under the direction of

Dr. Lauren Silver

and approved by

_____

Dr. Lauren Silver

_____

Dr. Lynne Vallone

_____

Dr. Charles Watters

Camden, New Jersey [January 2014]

i

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

RACE AMONG FRIENDS: RACE, FRIENDSHIP, AND MULTICULTURAL

LITERATURE IN A SUBURBAN SCHOOL

By MARIANNE MODICA

Dissertation Director:
Dr. Lauren Silver

Race continues to be an important factor in youth identity and a stratifying

element within school environments. Race influences relationships among students and

staff, the construction and implementation of curriculum, and broader school policy;

these aspects of school life intersect to inform racial identity in youth. This dissertation

examines the varied and complex ways that students and teachers think about race and act

out racial identity as they study multicultural literature in suburban high school

classrooms.

During the spring semester of 2012 I acted as participant observer in 10th and 11th

grade literature classes at Excellence Academy (EA), a suburban, racially mixed charter

school. Students and teachers at EA spoke of the school's friendly environment, and

especially mentioned the prevalence of long term, close cross-racial friendships among

students. Using critical race theory as my theoretical framework and students' responses

to multicultural literature as my focal point, I argue that in this friendly environment race

affected the daily experiences of students and teachers in important but largely

unexamined ways. Students and staff constructed and maintained racially informed

boundaries that perpetuated power structures among them. Some African American and

white students expressed anger, frustration, and resentment at perceived marginalization,

while white teachers were anxious about possible student accusations of racism; however,

these feelings usually remained beneath the surface of the school's friendly setting.

Students' cross-racial friendships allowed the space for some white students to engage in

insensitively expressed discourses that denied the salience of racism in a present day

context. Other white and African American students listened in silence, not wanting to

contradict their more vocal white friends or make them feel "blamed" for racism.

Therefore, the school's friendly environment did not promote (and may have hindered)

deep and productive conversations about race and racial inequity. I recommend ways that

schools can facilitate broader understandings among students of how race continues to

affect their lives in educational settings.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Introduction

Colorblind or "Cowards"?

On a late summer day I sat in a cluttered classroom with Joann Mitchel, a high

school teacher at Excellence Academy (EA), a suburban, K-12 charter school. Joann had

invited me to participate in her 10th and 11th grade literature classes the following spring.

There, I would explore the varied and complex ways that students and teachers think

about race and act out racial identity as they read multicultural literature.[1] I knew that EA

was predominantly white, but more racially diverse than its host and neighboring school

districts. As we discussed our plans, I asked Joann what I thought was a straightforward

question: "What is the racial demographic of your classes?"

Joann looked away, frowned, and then squinted as if trying to remember. Instead

of answering my question directly, she told me the following story. A few years ago,

while driving home from a conference in the nearby city, Joann got lost for seven hours.

Finally, as evening loomed, she stopped at a gas station and got out of her car to ask for

directions. To Joann's surprise, an elderly black man approached her and said, "Honey,

get back in the car." Joann looked at him quizzically. The man explained further that she,

a white woman, was not safe in that neighborhood. He said to her, "Don't you see where

you are?" Apparently Joann hadn't noticed what a "bad" neighborhood she was in, and

that she was the only white person around. I believe this illustration was Joann's way of

---

[1] I will describe my research site in much greater detail in the next chapter.

[2] Students consistently mentioned the topic of affirmative action during class discussions of race, although neither Joann nor I ever specifically called attention to the subject, and nowhere in the curriculum was affirmative action mentioned. It seemed as if anti-affirmative action arguments functioned as the default position for many students when we began to talk about race.

[3] See Appendix B.

[4] One of the creators of this map, an African American 11th grader named Anthony, was an especially

telling me that she wasn't aware of the racial backgrounds of her students because she doesn't notice race. She considered herself to be colorblind.

Joann's claim of colorblindness was not unusual. Many saw the 2008 election of our nation's first African American President as an indication that we, as a society, have finally grown past the issue of race. Newspaper editorials, political pundits, and talk show hosts speculated about the end of racism, suggesting that surely the American people could now stop talking about race and move on to more important matters. Perhaps, finally, a colorblind society was within our reach.

Certainly, the election of President Obama was an important milestone in the history of the U.S. However, one need not look very far to see that institutional racism continues in a variety of venues. Prisons are overpopulated with people of color (Carson & Sabol, 2012; "Racal Disparity," 2000), many neighborhoods remain racially segregated (Seitles, 1996), people of color remain disproportionately poor ("Income, Expenditure, Poverty & Wealth," 2012) and urban schools, attended primarily by children of color, are under-funded, under-resourced, and have far lower test scores and graduation rates than their neighboring whiter suburban school districts (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Perhaps this is why in 2009, less than a year after President Obama's election, Attorney General Eric Holder, who is also African American, stated that we, as Americans, are "a nation of cowards" when it comes to discussing race. Holder insisted, "though there remain many unresolved racial issues in this nation, we, average Americans, simply do not talk enough with each other about things racial" (Thomas & Ryan, 2009).

Although his remarks were controversial, many critical race scholars would agree with the Attorney General's assessment, finding that the desire to ignore race in favor of a colorblind approach has so permeated America's cultural ethos that many whites, in particular, fear that talking about race in any capacity leaves them open to accusations of racism (Bonilla Silva, 2006; Lewis, 2006; Pollock, 2004; Tarca, 2005). As a result, race has become a taboo subject in many classrooms, with serious implications for students and teachers. When race is not discussed openly, students are denied the opportunity to think about how race affects them and their relationships with others. Further, one does not need to look very far to discover that attempts to be colorblind do not end racism; in fact, ignoring race increases the likelihood that racism will occur in schools (Lewis, 2006; Pollock, 2004; Tarca, 2005) and in other facets of society (Gallagher, 2003). In light of this, educators face a serious predicament: how can teachers help students to explore issues of race and racism in an environment where talking about race has become increasingly uncomfortable?

Ironically, as Joann was describing her inability to notice race, boxes of multicultural literature waiting to be unpacked surrounded us. Because of her commitment to exploring race with her students, Joann had planned to incorporate multicultural literature, i.e., literature that expressly investigates the experiences of racially oppressed or marginalized peoples, into all of her classes. Clearly, Joann believed in the importance of discussing race with her students. Yet, that day as we discussed my project, Joann found herself in the untenable position of trying to maintain her commitment to social justice while claiming a colorblind approach to race. Although she didn't realize it at the time, Joann's dilemma was very much like that of teachers

described by Pollock (2004), wherein "'difference' was alternately to be highlighted and actively downplayed" (p. 48). Joann was not the only teacher who struggled with this predicament. I will describe later how Lisa, a white social studies teacher, grappled with the challenge of considering race in her grading practices while maintaining the façade of colorblindness, and how school practice, in general, sought to highlight difference through cultural celebrations but did not encourage students' engagement in discussions of present day racial inequity.

As I explained to Joann that day, the goal of my project was to discover how students construct understandings of race as they study multicultural literature. I wondered how students would cope with the challenge of exploring racism through literature in a wider school environment that does not encourage such discussions. In such an environment, how would studying texts meant to expose and critique racism influence students' ideas about race, and how would students' preconceived ideas about race affect their interpretations of these texts? Would students of diverse racial backgrounds respond to texts differently, and if so, in what ways? I also wanted to discover how a white teacher's beliefs about race would influence her pedagogical choices and interactions with students.

The Element of Friendship

Joann described what she viewed as an important element of her classroom dynamic: the close friendships that existed among the students in her classes. She told me at our very first meeting (and reiterated many times after) that her students had known each other for a long time and were very close friends. In keeping with her colorblind stance, Joann did not mention the cross-racial nature of many of the friendships among

students in her classes, but once I began my fieldwork I noticed that aspect of students'

friendships almost immediately. Scenes like the following that took place in a busy 11th

grade classroom were common:

> *I sat at my desk in the corner and watched students mill around, waiting*
> *for class to begin. Susan, a white student, picked up the large hand lotion*
> *dispenser that sat on Joann's mini refrigerator and carried it to the desk*
> *of Rihanna, an African American student. Susan pumped a blob of lotion*
> *out for herself and, without asking permission, squirted some into*
> *Rihanna's hand as well. The girls rubbed lotion into their hands for a*
> *minute, chatting amicably, until Joann signaled students to get quiet and*
> *Susan returned to her seat.*

What struck me about this interaction was the familiarity between these girls: their small

exchange over the hand lotion was effortless and intimate. Susan and Rihanna's easy

camaraderie exemplified the nature of the many cross-racial friendships I witnessed at the

school.

I knew that in order to obtain a fuller understanding of student and teachers' racial

identities, I would need to consider the many ways they related to one another within the

context of their particular school environment. As I participated in Joann's classes,

observing and analyzing students' responses to the multicultural literature in their

curriculum, I began to see how the cross-racial friendships among students played an

important role in the formation of students' racial identities. In fact, I came to believe that

the friendly environment at the school in general informed ideas and behaviors regarding

race for students and teachers alike, complicating race relations in profound ways. For

this reason, my study developed in an unexpected direction. While students' responses to

multicultural literature remained central to my project, I also considered how the context

of the school's friendly environment influenced the way students, teachers, and

administrators thought and behaved surrounding race.

Key Arguments: Race, Multicultural Literature, and Friendship

Regardless of the prevalence of colorblind ideology in modern discourse, race continues to play an important role in the educational experiences of youth. I argue that even in a friendly, suburban environment where students of all racial backgrounds worked and played together harmoniously, race affected the daily experiences of students and teachers in profound but unexamined ways. Students and staff constructed and maintained racially informed boundaries that, in some cases, perpetuated power structures among them. During class discussions of multicultural literature and other school events, some African American and white students expressed anger, frustration, and resentment at perceived marginalization, but these feelings were usually kept safely hidden under the surface of the school's ethos of friendship. White teachers, as well, were anxious and worried about possible student accusations of racism. For some students, study of literature meant to encourage racial tolerance instead became an opportunity to engage in discourses that denied the salience of racism in a present day context. I argue that rather than create a space for honest and constructive conversations about race, students' cross-racial friendships allowed the space for some white students to respond insensitively to literature depicting racism toward African Americans; because of their close cross-racial friendships, these white students assumed their African American classmates would tolerate their impatient and insensitive comments. At the same time, other white and African American students listened in silence, not wanting to contradict their more vocal white friends or make them feel "blamed" for racism. Therefore, the school's friendly environment did not promote (and may have hindered) deep and productive conversations about race and racial inequity.

Critical Race Theory

At the foundation of my work is the premise that race continues to be a crucial factor in maintaining the hierarchical power structures upon which our society was built. Because of my focus on exploring the effects of racism in education, I use critical race theory (CRT) as the organizing scheme of this work. CRT originated in legal scholarship and examines the intersection of race and power (Kumasi, 2011) and, over the last several decades, has become a methodological tool to analyze and critique educational structures of inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). Following are key concepts of CRT that were foundational in my analysis with brief descriptions of how I apply and extend these concepts through this project.

First, while recognizing the intersection of race with factors such as social class and gender in explaining societal inequity (Kumasi, 2011), CRT insists that racism is a present and persistent societal force which shapes the lives of every citizen on macro and micro levels. Delgado & Stefancic (2000) note that racism is "normal, not aberrant, in American society" (p. xvi). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) stress the need to consider race as a factor in educational inequity, stating, "class- and gender-based explanations are not powerful enough to explain all of the difference (or variance) in school experience and performance" (p. 51). One explanation for the persistence of race as a significant element in power relations is the notion, derived from critical legal studies, that whiteness functions as a valuable form of property, granting rights of citizenship to those who posses it that others cannot claim. Examples of the function of whiteness as property are many. In educational settings, the cultural practices of whites are valued above others and form the language and behavioral norm against which all others are evaluated; in this

sense, whiteness serves as an access-granting commodity. The manner in which educational funding is derived from real estate taxes is a tangible way that whiteness works as property, since past and present racist housing policies ensure that whites are most likely to own more highly valued real estate (Seitles, 1998). Bell (2000), one of the founders of CRT, notes that even whites who are not affluent gain something from their whiteness: the feeling of racial superiority. McIntosh (1989) expands on the concept of whiteness as property in her seminal essay on white privilege. She uses the metaphor of an "invisible knapsack" to describe the way in which whites benefit from, but fail to recognize, their privileged status. According to McIntosh, contained in that metaphorical backpack are the many unearned benefits that work to keep whites in a position of societal dominance.

As I will describe in the next chapter, my exploration of participants' racial identities and my critique of race-related administrative practices at the school are founded on my belief that racism is a present and prevalent social problem. This foundational tenet of CRT became a point of contention for many white students who argued vehemently that racism is no longer a salient issue. Some insisted that while racism against African Americans had decreased, they and other whites were victims of discrimination in various forms, sometimes perpetuated against them by African Americans. Some white students responded negatively when Joann wove information about housing discrimination and white privilege into her lesson plans, rejecting the idea that whites hold a privileged position as members of the dominant racial group. At times during large group discussions, African American students, too, tended to downplay the importance of race in their daily experiences.

I argue that even as students denied the salience of race in their lives, they constructed and policed racial performance boundaries in a struggle to maintain power through social status.

Students consistently categorized their own and others' behaviors as "acting white" and "acting black," and although in some ways boundary crossing was allowed, in other ways boundaries were fixed. African American students used this boundary keeping as one of their only available means to acquire social dominance through their status of "cool." At the same time, teachers and administrators granted or denied academic power by preserving the naturalized racialization of academic tracking and by limiting educational opportunities based on misconstrued conflations of race, social class, and emotional maturity.

A second key concept of CRT is Bell's theory of interest conversion. Bell (1992) argues that whites will pursue racial justice only when it is in their best interests to do so. Conversely, when whites perceive that adherence to non-discriminatory policies will result in some form of loss, they will cease to subscribe to racially just belief or conduct. Bell (2009) cites anti-affirmative action arguments as a prime example of interest conversion among whites; he states that although whites may "agree in the abstract" that African Americans "are entitled to constitutional protection against racial discrimination" (p. 75), rarely would they agree to practices that would decrease their economic and societal dominance. Throughout my project, students argued against affirmative action[2] and employed related discourses to deny the need for counter-racist measures that I will

---

[2]Students consistently mentioned the topic of affirmative action during class discussions of race, although neither Joann nor I ever specifically called attention to the subject, and nowhere in the curriculum was affirmative action mentioned. It seemed as if anti-affirmative action arguments functioned as the default position for many students when we began to talk about race.

describe below. However, I extend Bell's theory by arguing that some students practiced interest conversion on a more subtle level, as well. I argue that, perhaps because of the cross-racial friendships that flourished at the school, white students strongly aligned themselves with non-racist personas. In fact, anxiety over potential accusations of racism was prevalent for both white students and teachers, albeit for different reasons. It was, therefore, important to whites' social and emotional sense of well being to be viewed as forward thinking regarding race; it was, so to speak, in their best interests to be viewed as not racist. But when asked to admit that they, as whites, were recipients of unfair societal advantage, some white students' antiracist attitudes gave way to frustration, defensiveness and anger. Their willingness to take an antiracist stance faltered when they were challenged to surrender the idea that whites achieved social dominance through merit alone. As my analysis will show, I found that the reasons for white students' denial of the salience of racism were complex, and I am not suggesting that interest conversion alone can explain their resistance. I do, however, believe that for some white students, adherence to antiracist ideas sharply declined when they were challenged to think about their racial dominance.

The importance of storytelling and counter-narratives is a third central idea of CRT, and giving voice to the experiences of racially oppressed people is a prominent methodology of this theoretical framework (Kumasi, 2011; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1992; Solorzano & Yosso, 2009). Because whites have historically used racist narratives to normalize their dominance, CRT scholars stress the importance of using counter-stories that describe the experiences of people of color as a "tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solorzano & Yosso, p. 138).

According to Solorzano & Yosso, CRT utilizes three forms of counter-storytelling: individual's personal narratives, experiences with oppression told in the third person voice, and combined counter-narratives that compile data to "create composite characters and place them in social, historical, and political situations" (p. 139).

Of course, a robust and thoughtful analysis of my data required that I encourage participation by all students and staff at my field site, and I endeavored to hear and respect all perspectives. However, in line with the tenets of CRT, I also worked to ensure that the experiences shared by African American students regarding racism were heard during class discussions and considered carefully throughout this work. This was especially important because I found that many students, both white and African American, tended to remain silent during class discussions on racism, allowing their more vocal white friends to dominate. Yet, I found that some of the same African American students who had been silent during class discussions were eager to tell their stories during the unstructured interviews I conducted. Some were so enthusiastic about sharing their experiences that more than a year after I'd completed my field work they voluntarily created a map of their neighborhood for me, detailing the racial demographics of the area and their perception of criminal activity of specific blocks, playgrounds, and parking lots.[3] Joann noted when she presented the map to me, "It was like they were so excited because no one had ever asked them about their neighborhood before."[4] Building on CRT's call for the use of storytelling and counter-narratives in conversations about race, I

---

[3] See Appendix B.
[4] One of the creators of this map, an African American 11th grader named Anthony, was an especially important voice in this study. Anthony skillfully used counter-narrative during class discussions to try to help his white friends understand the experiences of students of color as targets of racism. In addition, the insights he shared with me during our interview, sometimes in the form of counter-storytelling, were invaluable to my analysis.

propose ways for educators to ensure that the voices and experiences of all students be heard and valued in classrooms where white students comprise the majority. I suggest that rather than using class discussion as the foremost method for students to process and respond to complex topics like racism, secondary teachers find ways to incorporate written reflections and technology (such as discussion forums) into their pedagogy. These methods provide students with needed time to share their stories and consider the experiences of others in a more reflective way.

Exploring Race Through Literature

I began this work convinced that literature is a powerful and important tool in helping students shape understandings and construct identities (Trainor, 2008). Botelho and Rudman (2009) remind us that since literature is infused with dominant cultural meanings that readers internalize to construct their social identities, it can be a conduit through which children see the world. Literature, the authors claim, may help children engage "in social practices that function for social justice" (p. 1). Authors from a variety of backgrounds have produced many fine works that explore the damaging effects of oppression, and through critical analysis of these texts, students can develop "repertoires of literacies" (p. 12) to help them broaden their understandings of how race impacts them and the people around them. I found that the process of this "broadening" was messy and sometimes painful, as students responded to the texts and to Joann's and my input in many different and complex ways. Over the course of this research I witnessed a range of responses to texts, including appreciation, disinterest, silence, and anger. As I've mentioned, the most vocal of these responses were from white students who resisted the

idea that racism is a persistent social problem through which they and all whites maintain a position of privilege.

The responses to multicultural literature that I encountered from white students in Joann's classes were not unique. Several researchers have described similar responses and have concluded that, for some students, merely reading multicultural literature will not necessarily lead to antiracist understandings (Haviland, 2008; Naidoo, 1992; Saul and Wallace, 2002; Trainor, 2008). Instead, as they interpret these texts, students may engage in discourses that position whites as the new victims of racism and perpetuate racial stereotypes. For example, Trainor found that while reading Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* high school students alternately praised Maya Angelou for being an exception to the rule (i.e., an African American who "made it") and a racist who "needs to learn to be more tolerant of white people" (p. 53). Some students accused Angelou of blaming white people for her problems, saying, "The message I get from this book is it's white people's fault" (p. 57). They preferred Wideman's autobiography, *Brothers and Keepers,* above Angelou's text because they believed that Wideman's work took a colorblind approach to race, although race and racism were integral parts of the story.

Likewise, when Saul and Wallace (2002) asked white college students in an education program to construct fictional dialogues of any two characters discussing Mildred Taylor's award winning *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, they found that sixty-five out of seventy-one white students created characters "who worried about what it means for a white reader to be engaged in a text in which white is not the norm" (p. 44). Expressing concern that their future white students would "feel bad" about the negative

portrayal of whites in the novel, these pre-service teachers constructed a view of racism which, according to Saul and Wallace, "fails to take into consideration the important issue of hegemony, allowing racism to be recast in relativist terms that enable claims of reverse racism against Taylor's text" (p. 47). Cochran-Smith (2004) found that, at first, college students insisted that *The Indian in the Cupboard* should be included in the curriculum because it is an "engaging" story, and because there were no Native American children in the classes these pre-service teachers served. However, after continued discussion some students came to admit the inherent racism and possibly damaging effect of the story. Naidoo (1992) also experienced mixed results in her study of how white, British high school students responded to multicultural fiction. While the majority of students responded positively to the literature, some remained defensive and resisted ideas of white hegemony.

These studies have provided important insights about how students perceive race as they read multicultural texts. In many cases, study of literature that is meant to produce deeper understanding of societal inequity and foster attitudes of tolerance may, instead, provide an outlet for the intolerant attitudes students hold. While I agree that inclusion of multicultural literature in curriculum is important, I stress the need to rethink what specific literature educators choose for their classes. Along with the "classic" works of historical fiction that depict racism in past forms, students need to read works that show how racism functions in the present. Though important, studying our nation's racist past without considering how that past directly relates to our present state of racial affairs may foster the idea for some students that racism is over. I also stress that multicultural literature must help students to broaden their definition of racism. Again, while important,

works depicting the effect of individual racism on characters will not help students to understand the many prevalent structural forms of racism that work to maintain white dominance.

Teachers' understandings of race are an integral part of how class discussions surrounding multicultural texts unfold. Naidoo (1992) notes that the English teacher in her study failed to reflect on his own racist assumptions, causing the author to remark, "a teacher who has not begun to examine how living culturally steeped in racism for centuries has infiltrated their own substratum of beliefs…will not be in a position to help students engage in that difficult and often uncomfortable task" (p. 147). Similarly, McIntyre (1997) warns that white teachers who have not reflected on their own position of racial dominance "run the risk of passively transferring unexamined knowledge, thus, reifying and maintaining oppressive structures" (p. 117). Hollingworth (2009) reports the case study of Patrice, a white fourth grade teacher in a white dominant school, who added multicultural literature to her social studies curriculum after being called a racist by an African American student in her class. Although Hollingworth notes Patrice's courage in being willing to talk with her students about race after this incident, she also found that Patrice consistently used language and practices that "normalized Whiteness in ways that shut down student explorations of racial diversity, power, and oppression, especially as they figure in contemporary American life" (p. 31).

My study supports the conclusions of these and other scholars who insist that white teachers will not be equipped to help students engage with the topic of racism until these teachers have examined the role that race plays in their own lives. I found that white teachers normalized whiteness in a variety of ways: the school dress code and the

policy prohibiting the use of nonstandard grammatical forms under any circumstance are examples of the normalization of whiteness. White teachers and administrators did not reflect on how their whiteness might impact their teaching or their relationships with students. At the same time, anxiety over the topic of race was prevalent for these teachers, as they feared they'd say or do the wrong thing and be accused of racism by their African American students. I argue that white teachers will not feel free to explore their racial identity and examine their position of privilege in an environment where talking about race leaves one open to accusations of racism. In order to be equipped to lead students in important conversations about race, teachers need both the tools to explore their own racial identities and institutional assurances that honest reflection about race will not leave them vulnerable to such accusations from administrators.

Whiteness Discourses

Students employed several common discourses to deny the salience of racism as they responded to multicultural texts. I utilize Bucholtz's (2011) definition of racial discourse as "all talking or writing about race or racialized issues" (p. 7). She argues that white youth reflect larger societal beliefs about race through their use of discourse. Researchers have documented discourses common among whites that indicate narrow perspectives regarding race. One such powerful discourse is the "reverse racism" argument, which claims that whites are the new victims of discrimination and are suffering because of the unmerited advancement of people of color. Bonilla-Silva (2006) describes how white college students used Freudian projection in the form of reverse racism arguments, either claiming that people of color "are the racist ones" (p. 63) or that affirmative action initiatives make blacks feel "kind of inferior" (p. 65).

Other discourses whites employed involved denying white privilege with arguments against affirmative action and claiming they were unjustly blamed for racial inequity (Bucholtz, 2011; Kromidas, 2012; Lewis, 2006; Marx 2006; McIntyre, 1997). Some whites denied the salience of race by using class or culture as explanations of marginalization (Bucholtz). Others expressed envy and resentment at the group cohesiveness that they imagined people of color experience (Marx), and cast themselves as victims of racism by blacks (McIntyre), or as victims of other types of discriminatory behavior, such as "blonde jokes" (Haviland, 2008, p. 46). They espoused "exception to the rule stories" about famous African Americans to argue against the existence of structural racism (McIntyre, p. 65). White high school students believed that they had no ethnicity or culture, and expressed ethnicity envy with statements like, "I *wish* I had a little more uniqueness to me" (Perry, 2002, p. 81). For some, the wish to be more "ethnic" was tied to the reverse racism argument; one student explained, "I guess I'm kind of jealous because I don't have this kind of ethnic background that I can claim and get college scholarships and stuff" (p. 82). Trainor (2008) found that white students expressed stereotypes about the "laziness" of African Americans (p. 1), comparing them to supposedly more industrious whites who lose out on opportunity due to reverse racism.

Having spent a lifetime being white, and having spent what sometimes seems like a lifetime teaching religiously and politically conservative white college students, I've heard these arguments many times. Therefore, it did not surprise me to hear them from the students in Joann's classes, but I was surprised by the inventiveness her students used as they extended these arguments. My analysis builds on and expands previous studies as I point out that students created and employed unique discourses within the context of

their particular classroom setting to avoid exploring racism. During class discussions, students used *retrojection*, a technique by which they interpreted the past through the lens of their present experience, to create a discourse that denied the focus on racism in the works of Langston Hughes, a famous African American poet and veteran of the Civil Rights Movement. When Joann challenged them on this approach, students shifted gears; "this is all we ever talk about" became their rallying cry and ultimately developed into a consistent discourse meant to truncate Joann's attempts to engage them in discussions of racism.

The Role of Cross-racial Friendships

As I mentioned, I did not go into this work with the goal of studying cross-racial friendships, but the number of times students and teachers at EA mentioned the friendly environment led me to consider the role of cross-racial friendships in students' responses and in the way race functioned at the school in general. Several researchers have explored the effect of a multiracial environment on students' proclivity to form cross-race friendships, and some have compared the quality of same-race and cross-race friendships at those schools. Killen, Kelly, Richardson, Crystal, and Ruck (2010) confirmed their prediction that white students in diverse schools are more likely to have cross-race friends than those in non-diverse schools. White students attending racially diverse schools also "used fewer stereotypes to explain interracial exclusion" (p. 294) and were more likely to say that exclusion based on race is wrong. Other researchers, however, found that although students are more likely to form cross-racial friendships in racially diverse settings, they continue to prefer same-race friendships and the quality of same and cross-racial friendships differ. Aboud, Mendelson, and Purdy (2003) interviewed

students at a mixed race elementary school in Montreal and found that students participated in more same-race than cross-race friendships, and reported lower intimacy rates with their cross-race friends. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Kao and Joyner (2004) report that cross-racial friends were less likely to spend time together in shared activities. They argue, "these friendships face greater challenges than do those between individuals of the same race" (p. 557). Munniksma and Juvonen (2012) also found that students in a multiethnic middle school preferred same-race/ethnicity friendships, although the authors argue, "diverse environments provide increased opportunities for students to form cross-ethnic friendships" (p. 490). Tavares (2011), who looked at interracial friendships in religious congregations, also confirms adolescents' tendency to prefer same-race friendships. However, he, too, argues the importance of interracial contact to encourage cross-race friendships among youth, as do Quillian and Campbell (2003). Rude and Herda (2010) focused on the stability of self-proclaimed "best friendships," and found that these friendships were less likely and less stable cross-racially. However, these researchers also found that cross-race friendships were most likely to form in schools with the most racial diversity among their student population.

Hence, several studies support the idea that racial diversity is important to encourage cross-racial friendships among youth, but that, once formed, these friendships may lack the intimacy and stability of those among students of the same racial backgrounds. Similarly, it seems likely that the diverse student population supported the forming of cross-racial friendships at EA. Students told me that EA was more racially diverse than their neighborhoods and than other schools they had attended. Assessing the

way students' ideas about race influenced the nature of those friendships was a more complicated matter, however. For example, students and teachers reported that some friendships had existed for "a long time," but I also saw a great deal of racial self-segregation among students, and some students told me that it was "natural" for their peers to maintain friendships with those who came from the same (largely segregated) neighborhoods. Further, while I do not doubt students' claims of strong cross-racial friendship bonds, when class discussions about race became tense, racial boundaries were drawn, tempers flared, and some insensitive remarks from white students made me wonder at their lack of understanding of their African American friends' perspectives.

Other researchers explored how cross-racial friendships influenced students' behaviors in more specific ways. Kromidas (2012) analyzed students' use of humor within friendships to work through the role of race in their lives. She believes that elementary school children in a mixed-race, mixed-class area of New York City used humor to cross racial boundaries: i.e., to appropriate language and cultural styles to which they might not otherwise have access. Pettigrew (2011), too, found that students used humor to work through their racial positioning, claiming that joking about race proved they weren't racist. Matrenec (2011) studied the way in which African American males attending a white-dominated school understood and navigated racist stereotypes. He found that the students who had attended the school for the longest periods of time were more concerned with behaving in ways that combated racial stereotypes. These African American males were apprehensive that their white peers and teachers would unfairly ascribe stereotypical behavior (such as fighting) to them. Matrenec states, "there was a

clear and constant struggle through the voices of the participants to combat the racist stereotypes in an effort to negate the self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 238).

My focus on the influence of cross-racial friendships on students' responses to multicultural literature adds to the body of research exploring race relations in educational settings. While many scholars have examined race relations among students in conflict-ridden school environments, racially diverse schools with harmonious student and staff relations remain under-studied spaces. What's more, while some studies have analyzed the prevalence and quality of cross-racial friendships in schools, the effect of these friendships on students' racial identities and on student-staff relations is especially under examined. I argue that a friendly school environment does not rule out the presence of racial tensions among students and staff. Rather, the opposite may be true; the absence of racial conflict at the school may enable teachers and administrators to make racially informed pedagogical and administrative choices without examining the role race plays in those choices and may make racial tensions among students easier to ignore. Like Kromidas (2012) and Pettigrew (2011), I found that students often joked with one another about race, but I argue that, for some, racial joking masked tensions that existed beneath the surface of the school's friendly environment. In the case of one 10th grade class where racial joking was prevalent, racial tensions erupted into a heated argument over a multicultural text that rattled students and teacher alike. Sadly, the intense feelings students expressed during this argument were never resolved, and the racial tensions that surfaced briefly were quickly covered up under the guise of a "friendly" classroom.

In an 11th grade class, close cross-racial friendships added to a class dynamic that allowed a vocal group of white students to dominate discussions on racism. These white

students insisted that racism is a thing of the past and met Joann's attempts to explore

racism through curricular materials with frustration and anger. I argue that, from the

perspective of these students, close friendships with African Americans allowed them to

maintain non-racist personas, no matter how adamantly and insensitively they insisted

that racism no longer exists. Further, I show that cross-racial friendships influenced the

role that silence played in class discussions for both whites and students of color. For

example, because of their friendships with white students, some African American

students who had initially spoken up in support of Joann's curricular goals grew

increasingly silent throughout this study, "holding their tongues" so as not to make their

white friends feel as though they were being blamed for racism, and perhaps, as Matrenec

(2011) proposes, to avoid fulfilling stereotypical ideas held by their white friends (i.e.,

blacks "just can't get over" past racism). My findings show that, friendly or not, schools

are places where students and staff work out racial identities if a variety of ways that may

include uncomfortable and even painful interactions. If antiracism is a critical and

relevant educational goal, scholars and educators must pay closer attention to the less

obvious, but still important role race plays in congenial school settings.

Studying Racial Identity

While my project rests on the foundation of CRT, research on racial identity was

crucial in helping me understand the perspectives of the youth and adults at my field site.

Throughout this work I use the term *racial identity* broadly. For the purposes of this work,

racial identity refers to participants' views of themselves and others as members of

particular, socially constructed, hierarchical racial groups. I view students' identification

with racially based cultural groupings and their expressed opinions about race and the

salience of racism in their everyday lives as indications of racial identity. Scholarship on

racial identity helped me determine what specific student attitudes and behaviors

regarding race were most important for the focus of this work.

Scholars have explored racial identity formation from both psychological and

cultural perspectives. Helms (1990),[5] who studies racial identify formation from a

psychological perspective, explains, "racial identity refers to the quality or manner of

one's identification with the respective racial groups" (p. 5). From this standpoint, how

people think and feel about their racial group identity is important because it can

influence both interpersonal and intrapersonal relations. Helms explains that from a

psychological perspective, racial identity is a developmental process wherein a person

may move back and forth along a continuum of statuses or profiles (Carter, Helms, &

Juby, 2004) of racial awareness and beliefs, with antiracism as the culmination of their

developmental process. Psychologists attempt to understand a person's behavioral

dispositions by analyzing that person's present positioning along the racial identity

continuum (Helms, 2007). Psychological models of racial identity formation do not

suggest that all individuals pass through levels of racial identity in the same manner, or in

fact, at all. Tatum (1997) elaborates on Helms' ideas, suggesting that the levels or

statuses of racial identity are more spiral than linear in nature. She explains, "As you

proceed up each level, you have a sense that you have passed this way before, but you are

not in exactly the same spot" (p. 83).

---

[5] Helms' work has been widely used to study relationships between racial identity and psychological
constructs in individuals, with the goal of providing insights into the counseling process (Abrams & Trusty,
2004; Hays, Chang, & Havice, 2008; Silvestri & Richardson, 2001). Some scholars have critiqued Helms'
work and have cast it in the category of pseudo-science (Rowe, 2006). Regardless of this critique, the
approach developed by Helms and her colleagues has had a major impact on thinking about racial identity
development.

Psychological theories of racial identity claim that developmental commonalities exist for people who grow up in places where whiteness is privileged, regardless of their racial backgrounds. For example, Tatum (1997) notes that the societal dominance of whiteness in the U.S. impacts the racial identity formation of people of all racial backgrounds; all students internalize whiteness as the standard of normalcy at a young age because they are influenced by cultural images that reinforce stereotypes and elevate whiteness as the standard of beauty. Therefore, these internalizations form the early foundation of racial identity for students of all racial backgrounds who grow up in a white dominated society. In addition, developmental racial identity theories view alignment with antiracist belief as the end goal of racial self-actualization for individuals of all racial backgrounds.

Aside from these commonalities, the journey toward racial actualization follows divergent paths for people of color and for whites (Helms, 1990; Tatum, 1997). For people of color, awareness of the existence of racial inequity usually comes later in childhood or during adolescence through exposure to racism in some form. Some scholars claim that students of color may incorporate an oppositional factor into their racial identity, rejecting dominant group processes such as education[6] (Tatum, 1997). Or, students of color may employ the opposite strategy, "racelessness" (p. 63), seeking to minimize their affiliation with a subordinate racial group. As they move along the continuum of racial identity profiles, self-actualized racial identity may require students of color to immerse themselves in their own cultural backgrounds to the exclusion of others for a time so that they can dispel internalized standards of white superiority, come

---

[6] I will address this claim in detail later in this study.

to value their own heritage, and become committed to social activism (Helms, 1990).

Whites, immersed in dominant cultural values, may think little about race unless racism becomes visible through relationships with people of color (Tatum, 1997), or by some other means (such as media exposure to racism). Whites may then experience guilt, shame, or anger, and respond by either avoiding people of color or developing discourses that absolve themselves from responsibility for racism (Helms, 1990). Whites who do not move beyond these negative feelings may stagnate in beliefs that disallow them from facing the reality of present day racism, and may employ one or more discourses to avoid recognizing their own position of power in a white dominated culture. Those who progress toward a self-actualized racial identity "seek new ways of thinking about Whiteness, ways that take them beyond the role of victimizer" (Tatum, p. 108). According to Helms and Tatum, for whites, fully actualized racial identity formation culminates in the assuming of an antiracist persona.

One might reasonably ask, is racial identity for whites only about their status on a developmental continuum that leads to antiracism? I agree with theorists who believe that the answer to that question is, simply, yes (Gillborn, 2009; Roediger, 1994). Race is and always has been about power. Racial categories are socially constructed and were intentionally developed by whites in order to create and maintain a strict power hierarchy, with whites firmly established at the top. As Fine (1997) reminds us, "Whiteness was produced *through* the exclusion and denial of opportunity of people of color" (p. 60). Therefore, while racial self-actualization for people of color involves finding that which was denied to them through centuries of subordination, i.e. pride in one's racial heritage and a sense of belonging as fully equal members of society, for whites, the road to a fully

realized racial identity involves recognizing the privilege gained through centuries of domination, and finding ways to work toward undoing the negative societal effects that remain as the legacy of racism.

This working toward racial justice is the definition of *antiracism*. I lean heavily on Tatum's (1997) explanation of antiracism in my thinking, and, on one occasion, shared her ideas on the topic with an 11th grade class (with surprising results; see Chapter Five). Tatum describes three possible ways of behaving regarding racism: active racism, passive racism, and antiracism. People engaged in active racism behave in blatantly racist ways, while passive racists may not initiate racist behavior but may collude with such behavior through silence. Those who are antiracist actively work to combat racism through their words and deeds. Tatum encourages her readers to discover their own personal "sphere of influence" (p. 206) through which they may find and build support for antiracist activism.

Whereas psychologists have used racial identity theories that culminate in racial self-actualization in quantitative studies, ethnographers have rarely applied these theories to the study of students' racial identity. Instead, many have analyzed students' understandings of racial group memberships from the perspective of cultural styles that focus on language, speech, musical taste, and physical appearance (Bucholtz, 2011; Carter, 2005; Lueck and Steffen, 2011; Perry, 2002). I, too, found that even within the constrictions of school uniforms, students performed race through physical appearance and other modes of behavior. During informal conversations and formal interviews, students often described groups or cliques, such as "nerds" and "jocks," that they believed existed in their school, and although they denied the salience of race in these

groupings, membership clearly fell along racial lines. In addition, students used speech, musical taste, and other aspects of behavior to create and maintain racial boundaries, and incorporated these behaviors into their designations of "acting black" and "acting white," terminology that was commonly used at the school.

Because I believe both are important, I've incorporated aspects of both the psychological and cultural approaches to examining racial identity formation in youth into this work. Analyzing students' racial identity through their performance of cultural styles is important because, unlike psychologically based racial identity theories that impose a top-down categorization of identity statuses on subjects, viewing identity through cultural style performance is a bottom-up approach that originates with the students. Whereas psychologists define statuses to categorize people's state of racial identity, students themselves ascribe cultural groupings, often informed by race, as part of their everyday school life. In spite of this difference, in the end, viewing students' racial identities through these differing approaches has a comparable goal. Similar to those who utilize a psychological approach to racial identity formation, ethnographers who pay close attention to students' cultural style groupings seek to discover if students of color find a sense of value and belonging by their group affiliation (Carter, 2005), and if white students who see themselves as members of one or more specific cultural groups will de-normalize whiteness and gain greater understandings of the benefits their whiteness bestows (Beach, Thein, & Parks, 2008; Bucholtz, 2011; Lueck & Steffen, 2011; Perry, 2002).

I do not subscribe to the idea that a complex construct like racial identity can be essentialized into neatly packaged developmental levels, nor do I try to determine the

specific racial identity status of individual youth or adults. But I do believe that psychological theories of racial identity development help us to analyze specific racial discourses students use, and to maintain the focus of antiracist goals. Without that focus, studying race in the classroom may degenerate into a form of uncritical multiculturalism that, as Chalmers (1997) describes, "selectively engages with only the good and comfortable components of difference" (p. 73) and fails to explore realities of class struggle, poverty, and disenfranchisement experienced by groups outside of the white, middle class experience (McCarthy & Dimitriadis, 2005). Therefore, while paying attention to students' ascription of selves and others to cultural groupings helped me to understand how students performed their racial identities in everyday school life, keeping in mind the psychological approach to racial identity helped me to analyze the racial discourses that students utilized as an indication of their position regarding denial or acceptance of antiracist ideals.

Overview

This study explores how cross-racial friendships among suburban high school students informed and complicated students' understandings of race, ultimately impacting the racial identity of students. While much of my evidence showed that cross-racial friendships among students were genuine, racial tensions that were imbued with the struggle for power existed beneath the surface of this friendly environment. The classroom study of multicultural literature often acted as a catalyst for conversations about race, revealing the potent and unresolved feelings that students harbored surrounding the subject of racism.

Chapter One describes the methods I used to gather and analyze information. I describe my field placement at Excellence Academy, a suburban charter high school, and detail the racial demographics of the school and the surrounding area. Here we will meet Joann again as I discuss more fully my relationship with her and with the students in her classes. I explain the details of my qualitative methods, which included observation, class participation, interviews, and analyses of students' work. Because reflexivity is an important element of all ethnographic work, I reflect on my position as participant observer and on my own racial identity. Further, my status as a graduate student of childhood studies and a critical race researcher presented me with specific theoretical challenges. In this chapter I describe these challenges and other tensions I faced during the course of this study.

Chapters Two through Five comprise the substance of this work. These chapters recount and analyze the many interactions I witnessed and participated in at the school. Chapter Two sets the groundwork for the chapters that follow because it describes how students performed race in an environment where many cross-racial friendships flourished. In spite of these cross-racial friendships, racial identity for students and teachers was imbued with the struggle for power. I describe how students performed race through physical appearance, speech, participation in cultural style groups such as "jocks" and "nerds," and other behaviors. Students maintained racial boundaries, sometimes permeable but often fixed, through categorizing behaviors as "acting white" or "acting black," and were quick to correct errant friends who might cross these performance boundaries. While African American students denied that racial performance was connected to academic achievement, they also acknowledged their underrepresentation in

the school's honors classes. Teachers and administrators maintained an academic hierarchy related to race through academic placement of students and curricular choices. This chapter will show that, in the midst of an overall friendly environment, students were both producers and products of a defined racial geography that perpetuated power structures among them.

Chapter Three looks more closely at the racial tensions that existed beneath the surface of this friendly school environment. In the midst of an atmosphere where "we all get along here" was the prevailing mantra, students and teachers felt marginalized over the issue of race for a variety of reasons. African American students felt that their background was ignored, while white students and teachers feared accusations of racism or felt they were the victims of "reverse racism." As the result of these usually unspoken tensions, a discussion of Ishmael Beah's *A Long Way Gone* erupted into an argument in a 10th grade class that left students and the teacher upset and failed to resolve the feelings of marginalization that students expressed. The argument was not addressed openly in subsequent classes and, therefore, the anger that erupted in class that day was pushed safely back beneath the surface while, outwardly, students continued to "get along" with one another.

Chapters Four and Five explore the responses of the 11th grade honors class to the poetry of Langston Hughes and *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison. This class stood out both for the complexity of students' responses to the texts, and for the consistent claims of close cross-racial friendships among them. These chapters examine how students' friendships informed responses to this multicultural literature. During study of the Hughes' poetry, many students created contextualized discourses to resist talking about

racism and deny its salience in their present reality. Friendships not withstanding, throughout both these units of study a group of vocal white students dominated class discussions and did not incorporate their African American friends' perspectives into their increasingly angry responses. These white students felt they were being blamed and made to feel guilty when, despite their protests, we continued to discuss racism as part of the class curriculum. Lighter-skinned African American students tended to side with whites during class discussions, leading me to consider the effect of colorism[7] on the students in this class. The angry responses of white students reached a crescendo on the last two days of *The Bluest Eye* unit over class discussion of McIntosh's (1989) *White Privilege* essay and Episode Three of the California Newsreel video, *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (Pounder et al., 2003), titled, "The House We Live In." At the same time, African American students grew steadily more silent on the topic, not wanting to make their white friends feel guilty or uncomfortable. I analyze the anger, resistance, and silence students displayed within the context of students' friendships to discover what these varied responses reveal about students' racial identities.

The concluding chapter of this work argues that schools should consider the continuing influence of race on their policies and practices, even in friendly educational settings like the one highlighted in this work. I recommend ways that schools can facilitate broader understandings among students of how race continues to affect their lives and the lives of their friends. For example, schools must examine how deeply ingrained institutional processes hinder educational equity before they can expect to encourage students to think critically about race. The institutional "ethos of excellence,"

---

[7] Colorism is defined as in-group discrimination based on skin color.

the prevalence of uncritical multiculturalism, and academic tracking are examples of processes that help to maintain racially informed academic hierarchies. Then, as I examine more deeply the complicated influence of cross-racial proximity and friendship on students' racial identities, I explore the emotional place that students spoke from in their angry responses regarding race, and possible reasons for the silence of both white and African American students in the face of their friends' anger. Finally, I suggest ways to encourage and support students and teachers' participation in continued classroom conversations about race.

Chapter One

Methods: Studying Race in a Suburban School

With the goal of studying the intersection of participants' racial identities and their engagement with multicultural texts, I arranged a five-month field placement at Excellence Academy[8] (EA) during the spring semester of 2012. This chapter will describe my field site in detail and my role as participant observer in four literature classes and a daily study hall period taught by the same teacher. I will also describe the tensions I experienced in conducting this research.

The Site

EA is a public charter school located in Woodlark, a mostly white suburban town of approximately 32,000, located 30 miles from a large northeastern city. Charter schools are publically funded, privately operated schools and are not controlled by the public school districts in which they are housed. Because they are public schools, charter schools must be nonsectarian and may not charge tuition. Individuals or groups wanting to start a "brick and mortar" charter school (i.e., a traditional school, not a cyber school) must apply for a "charter" from their host school district, showing that their school offers "substantively unique and innovative educational options for the community."[9] Amidst a fairly hostile reception from the teachers and administrators of the Woodlark Area School District, EA opened it doors in the year 2000 as a corporately run charter school, but has since cut ties with its corporate founder. Excellence Academy defines itself as an "award-winning, college-prep, tuition-free public Charter School" whose mission is to "prepare a diverse cross-section of children for success as students, workers, and citizens by

---

[8] All names of participants, schools, and places in this study are pseudonyms.
[9] Source: State Department of Education website.

providing them with a high-quality liberal arts, college preparatory education."[10]

I chose EA as my field site because I was interested in studying how suburban youth, in particular, think about race. My experience as a parent of four children who attended suburban public schools and as a college professor in a suburban environment indicated to me that white, suburban students do not often discuss race in school settings. EA was one of two schools in the same area that I contacted through email, requesting permission to study middle or high school students' responses to multicultural literature in the curriculum. While the other school turned down my request, EA's upper school principal took the time to meet with me and then proposed my study to his faculty. Joann Mitchel, the 10th and 11th grade literature teacher (who I will describe below) responded positively to my request and we met shortly after. Joann felt it was important to discuss racism with students, but confessed that she was not always sure how to go about addressing this sensitive issue in her classes. She was eager to have help in this area.

The Building

EA's upper school, where I spent my time, is a modern style, two-story cement structure, described by 11th grader Anthony as a building that "happens to look like a prison." The upper school houses grades nine through twelve, along with administrative offices, a small cafeteria used by the younger students, and the school's library and gymnasium. Although students like Anthony joke about the minimalist-style, cement-block outer appearance of the upper school building, on the inside the upper school is not prison-like at all; its spacious lobby is flooded with light and adorned with art work. Comfortable leather chairs, sofas, and coffee tables fill the lobby, perfect for student

---

[10] Source: EA website

lounging during lunch. Since private space is at a premium at EA, it was in this heavily

trafficked lobby that I conducted most of my student interviews.

Joann's Classroom

The classroom that became my daily home was square shaped and spacious.

Because of the school's focus on cooperative learning, students' desks were almost

always arranged in table-like clusters, and often I traveled from table to table as students

worked (or chatted about other topics that had nothing to do with their work). I listened in,

asked questions, and offered my help when needed. Joann's desk, at which she rarely sat,

was positioned in the front left corner of the room, covered in stacks of students' work

and surrounded by shelves containing her personal teaching books and more stacks of

files and papers. Behind Joann's desk was a large metal supply cabinet that held, among

other things, snacks (bought with her own money), which Joann gave out now and then

when students seemed to be especially dragging. I'd approached that cabinet more times

than I could count to check the complicated class schedule that was stuck with magnets to

its front; if not for that schedule neither Joann nor I would have known when one class

was over and the next about to begin.[11] A large supply table sat under a bulletin board

that spanned almost the entire front of the room. Between the bulletin board and the door,

in the far right corner of the room, hung the American flag to which we pledged our

allegiance every morning. The school code of conduct, also recited every morning, was

posted under the flag.[12] Against the wall to my right there were five desktop computers

---

[11] The school was philosophically opposed to the use of bells to signal the end of classes, believing that waiting for the bell to ring causes students to focus too much on time and not on the quality of their educational experience. Instead of waiting for the bell, Joann and her students watched the clock and asked each other every few minutes, "When does this class end?"

[12] See Appendix C.

that students used mainly for class projects, but sometimes for entertainment purposes.[13]

A large TV that didn't work sat on a tall stand next to the computers, and Joann's mini-

refrigerator and microwave (which students often came in to use during lunch) were

positioned below the TV. In the back corner of the room, next to the student desk where I

sat each day, was a comfy green faux leather chair that Joann had rescued from

someone's trash on her way home from school. Along with the sofa against the back wall,

that chair served as premier seating in Joann's classroom; students rushed to grab those

seats and sometimes Joann let them stay there throughout class. Since both those pieces

of furniture were near my desk, I was able to chat with students as they used that space to

relax and avoid classwork for a few minutes. A long white marker board, which Joann

sometimes wrote on and sometimes used as a screen for PowerPoint presentations and

videos, covered the wall directly across from my desk. The room also contained supply

shelves, bookcases, and a fish tank. The wall space was cluttered with signs declaring

rules, slogans, writing tips, warnings, and educational objectives, along with several large

movie posters highlighting the texts from Joann's curriculum. Even the ceiling space was

not wasted; literary terms and their definitions hovered over our heads, suspended by

white thread on yellow poster board clouds.

Area Demographics

        Although Excellence Academy is a majority white school, it is more racially

diverse than Woodlark, its host district, and Brookside, the closest neighboring school

district. Nine percent of students at EA are from the Brookside School District, 31% live

in Woodlark, while 36% travel daily from the Carletonville Area School District. The

---

[13] "Be careful what sites you go to," Joann often warned. "They can track everything you do on those computers."

remaining 33% of EA's students come from 18 different school districts in the

surrounding area. The community of Carletonville is larger and more racially diverse

than Woodlark, and many of the students in Joann's classes would have attended the

Carletonville High School (located approximately 12 miles away) had they not been

enrolled at EA. Below is a comparison of the racial and economic demographics of EA

with the Woodlark and Brookside school districts, and with Carletonville High School.[14]

	Excellence Academy Charter School*	Woodlark Local School District**	Brookside School District**	Carletonville High School**
Total Students	987	3319	7705	1912
White	60%	81%	87%	33%
African American/Black	20%	9%	5%	48%
Multiracial	9%	***	***	***
Asian/Pacific Islander	5%	4%	5%	2%
Hispanic	5%	5%	2%	17%
American Indian/Alaskan	***	.1%	.2%	0
Free or Reduced Lunch	26%	20%	8%	53%

*Source: email from Excellence Academy's Registrar, May 2012
**Source: National Center for Education Statistics, http://nces.ed.gov, 2009-10 school year
***No statistic given

The Classes

Like most other high schools in the U.S., EA's classes are academically tracked.

Joann taught an "honors" and "on level" version of her 10th and 11th grade literature

classes. The school used the term "on level" euphemistically for classes that were

comprised of any students who were not in the honors group, regardless of their actual

level of academic ability. The relationship between academic tracking and race is a long-

---

[14] Since the Carltonville School District is so much larger than Woodlark and Brookside districts, comprising of 11 schools in neighborhoods with vastly differing economic and racial demographics, I felt it more pertinent to compare EA with the only high school in the district and not with the entire district.

standing, controversial, and complicated subject, and as I participated in Joann's ability

tracked classes I often felt that, had I chosen to study that topic alone, I would have had

more than enough material to fill a dissertation. Although my study necessarily adopts a

broader focus, the in-school racial demographics caused by academic tracking at EA

were intricately connected with teacher expectations, pedagogy, classroom management

decisions, and students' perceptions; all of these worked together to influence racial

identity in ways that are too important to ignore. Therefore, while I chose not to focus

solely on the effects of academic tracking on racial identity, I will address the way that

tracking created boundaries among students and impacted the cross-racial friendships that

became an important element of my work.

The chart below describes the racial demographics of Joann's literature classes,

according to information provided by parents:

Class	Total #Students	White	African American	Asian	Hispanic	Biracial
10th Grade On Level	15	60%*	40%	0	0	0
10th Grade Honors	26	65%	15%	15%	4%	0
11th Grade On Level	26	42%	54%	0	0	4%
11th Grade Honors	23	65%	30%	4%	0	0

*Percentages are rounded to the nearest hundredth.

While I knew that EA was more racially diverse than its host and neighboring

districts, I was pleasantly surprised at how diverse some of Joann's classes were. Online

pictures of high school classes from previous years had consisted of mostly white

students, leaving me with the false impression that the racial diversity at the school

decreased as grade levels increased. As my study will show, the racial diversity in

Joann's classes added depth to my study because it allowed me to compare students'

cross-racial responses to the literature, and to analyze how their cross-racial relationships complicated their understandings of race and racism.

The Texts

The following chart lists the texts assigned in Joann's literature classes:

Class	Literature
10th Grade On Level	*Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare *The Woman Warrior*, by Maxine Kingston Hong *A Long Way Gone,* by Ishmael Beah *Night*, by Elie Wiesel *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini
10th Grade Honors	*Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare *The Woman Warrior*, by Maxine Hong Kingston *A Long Way Gone,* by Ishmael Beah *Night*, by Elie Wiesel *The Kite Runner*, Khaled Hosseini
11th Grade On Level	*The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne Harlem Renaissance Unit *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald *The Crucible,* by Arthur Miller *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger
11th Grade Honors	*The Scarlet Letter*, by Nathaniel Hawthorne Harlem Renaissance Unit *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald *The Crucible,* by Arthur Miller *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison

Interestingly, the only difference in choice of texts for the on level and honors classes of either grade level was the substitution of *The Catcher in the Rye* for *The Bluest Eye* in the 11th grade on level class, an administrative decision that I will analyze more fully in Chapter Two.

My Research Partner

Perhaps because of the smallness of the school and the fact that EA was not connected to the local public school district, in arranging my fieldwork I was able to avoid virtually all contact with "gatekeeping" forces, those individuals or systems that

can either "facilitate or interfere with your study" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 82). While, of course, my initial access into EA had been approved by the school administration, my major contact was with the classroom teacher, Joann Mitchel. At thirty years old (young enough to willingly admit her age), Joann's bright and bouncy personality matched her long, springy, red hair. I could not have asked for a more open, willing, and enthusiastic partner with whom to conduct my research. Through our many conversations over the five months we spent together, Joann often expressed her concern about racial inequity and her desire to help educate her students in issues of social justice. I was fortunate to work with a teacher who was willing to do the difficult labor of exploring not only her students' racial identities, but her own identity as a white person as well.

Even so, as I recounted in the previous chapter, my initial conversation with Joann before the school year began led me to believe that, at least subliminally, she had adopted a colorblind approach toward racial difference. I'd asked Joann about the racial demographic of her classes; she knew most of her upcoming students well because she'd taught them the year before. To my surprise, instead of answering my question directly, Joann responded by telling me the story of how she'd once been lost in a "bad" neighborhood but hadn't noticed that she was the only white person around. Through her story Joann indicated that she couldn't answer my question because she doesn't notice race. Had Joann not been eager to explore race through literature with her students she would not have insisted, sometimes amidst resistance from the administration, that multicultural literature be included in her curriculum. Further, I doubt she would have so eagerly invited me into her classroom. As Pollock (2004) notes, in order to ensure fairness, teachers often feel that they must recognize race some of the time and ignore it

at other times. Hence, in spite of Joann's desire to address race with her students, her claim that she didn't notice race showed her discomfort with the topic. This study will explore possible reasons for this discomfort, and will show that Joann's position changed as her awareness grew throughout the project. Joann's openness and willingness to explore her own feelings about race deepened my study considerably, enabling me to analyze the discomfort that she and other white teachers sometimes felt about race relations in the school. Additionally, through her willingness to delve into the topic of racism, Joann was a great help to me as I formulated my analysis of students' responses and the school's approach to race.

Description of Research

Participant Observer

Throughout the five months of my fieldwork I arrived at Joann's "Home Base" (EA's version of homeroom) every morning at 8 a.m. I remained with her, sometimes as a quiet observer and sometimes as an active participant, through four literature classes, lunch, a prep period, and a study period called "Flex" that rotated daily through several different groups of students. In exchange for being allowed to participate in Joann's classes, I offered myself as a sort of in-class tutor, volunteering to work with individual students or small groups who might need some extra help. Thus, I adopted the role of participant observer that is common to ethnographers. During my times of quiet observation, I had access to my computer, which allowed me to document student conversations and class discussions either as they were happening or shortly after. Segments of field notes that I analyze in this study were recorded in this manner. Often I was more active, contributing to small and large group class discussions, sometimes at

Joann's request, but often at my own discretion based on my interest in the conversations that were taking place. Again, I was usually able to document these discussions in writing directly after they took place, and if I couldn't remember exactly what students had said, Joann, whose memory was better than mine, would remind me. Therefore, although my field notes are not direct transcriptions of digital recordings, I believe they are accurate representations of the discussions that transpired in the classroom.

Along with taking daily field notes, I wrote memos to ponder what I was seeing and hearing, and conducted 26 interviews: 20 with students, five with teachers, and one with the school's curriculum coordinator (who attended Joann's 11th grade on level class daily to keep the students in order). My interviews took on the unstructured quality of ethnographic interviews that, Bucholtz (2011) notes, are meant to be "relatively informal interactions oriented to the cultural concerns and norms of the interviewee rather than the interviewer" (p. 37). I found that interviews were an indispensable way to follow up with students and teachers about discussions or situations I'd witnessed in class or that Joann had told me about. By interviewing students and teachers I was able to understand the very different perspectives of the school's major stakeholders. I recorded the interviews and transcribed them shortly thereafter. Segments from interviews included in this study are direct transcriptions in which I did not edit grammar.[15] In addition, I had access to students' written school assignments, school demographic reports, and to a few emails that Joann received and sent regarding administrative issues. Students' written assignments and the faculty emails were important to my study because they sometimes

---

[15] In some cases in both field notes and interview segments I used ellipses to indicate brief omissions that were needed to maintain clarity and flow, but the use of ellipses in no way changed the meaning of the speaker's words or field note segments.

told a deeper story than that which I would have seen or heard had I depended on observation or interviews alone.

When my fieldwork reached its conclusion, I coded field notes, memos, interview transcripts, emails, and student's written work to see what themes regarding race and racism emerged. Many critical race/whiteness researchers have found rhetorical patterns or discourses that whites, especially, engage in when faced with the issue of race (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Haviland, 2008; Marx, 2006; McIntyre, 1997; Pollock, 2004), including silence, incoherence, and "colorblind," and "reverse racism" arguments. I looked for these patterns of discourse among whites, but also remained sensitive to other patterns that emerged from my data and that will be described in subsequent chapters. I also noted the responses of students of color in Joann's classes, and analyzed cross-race and within-race interactions among students and student-teacher interactions. Thus, my study combines existing theory with grounded theory (that which I formulate from my own data), since, as Maxwell (2005) explains, "In qualitative research, both existing theory and grounded theory are legitimate and valuable" (p. 43).

My participation in Joann's classes varied according to the needs of the students and the assigned texts. Many of the texts studied, especially by the 11th grade, did not fall under the general rubric of multicultural literature or particularly lend themselves to discussions of racial oppression (despite some white students' insistence that race was "all we ever talk about"). However, from the outset I believed that every day I spent at EA was valuable in two ways. First, I knew it would take time to establish my presence in the school and to get to know the students. I intentionally did not conduct any student interviews until the latter part of my fieldwork, partly because it took that long to collect

parental consent forms, but mostly because I felt I needed time to build relationships and trust with students. Second, the many hours I spent quietly observing students when they *weren't* discussing multicultural texts were crucial in helping me discover how students performed race informally through cultural styles that incorporated physical appearance, language, speech, and other outward behaviors. I wanted to understand not only what students thought about race as they read multicultural texts, but also how they acted out their racial identities on a daily basis. I admit that there were a few occasions when I suspected that the performance of race was being executed for my benefit. For example, one African American 11th grader who told me to call her "Rihanna" would sometimes break out in snippets of a rap and then smirk in my direction. However, for the most part students adjusted to my presence quite quickly and ignored me as they did the many other adults that came and went in their classroom.

My Relationships with Students

Participant observation, as Hume and Mulcock (2004) describe, is an awkward space that requires researchers to form relationships with the people they are studying, while "maintaining enough intellectual distance to…undertake a critical analysis of the events in which they are participating" (p. xi). When I began my research at EA I did not worry about maintaining appropriate distance from the students, since I knew they would view me as an outsider. I worried more about my ability to establish an open, friendly rapport with students, so that they would feel comfortable with me and be willing to share their ideas freely. While I believe that in many cases this is what transpired, my relationships with the students turned out to be varied and complicated. As to be expected, some students were friendlier than others, some took longer to warm up to me

than others, and some started out friendly but ended up resenting my presence because it precipitated discussions about race that they did not want to have. While a younger ethnographer, like Bucholtz (2001), might hope to blend in and avoid alignment with teachers, I recognized from the start that my age, demeanor, and status as an adult helper would likely cause students to view me as an authority figure. The fact that Joann introduced me to students as a college professor (as in, "Isn't it great, we have a college professor to help us in our class!") and that she would occasionally leave me "in charge" while she used the bathroom or ran a quick errand compromised my attempts to maintain a low profile.

Mandell (1988) advocates that researchers of children adopt the "least-adult role," through which the researcher puts aside adult "authority, verbal competency, cognitive, and social mastery" (p. 438) while interacting with young subjects. Although I knew that the students would view me as an authority figure no matter what I did, I tried to distance myself from the role of teacher as much as possible. For instance, in order to leave class for any reason, students were required to have agenda books signed by teachers, with time and dated noted. Students often approached me to sign their agendas, but I consistently refused, explaining that I was not a teacher and did not have the authority to grant the permission they sought. Additionally, I was careful to remain uninvolved in any disciplinary matters, never correcting behavior no matter how obviously students broke school rules. The students quickly realized that I could be relied on to keep a secret and might even function as a co-conspirator in their harmless breaking of rules. For example, students who were denied permission to leave the room would often surreptitiously ask

me to get them a water bottle or snack from the vending machine in the hallway, which I

would do, sometimes providing the change they needed to complete the purchase.[16]

Students routinely caught my eye and smirked during Joann's mini-lectures,

complained to me if they didn't understand an assignment she'd given, and confessed

when they didn't do the readings (a common occurrence even among the honors students).

At times my biggest struggle as a classroom participant was to keep a straight face during

some very funny student antics, but while I didn't want to appear as an authority figure to

the students, I also needed to be careful not to undermine Joann's authority. So, although

blending in with the students was not an option, by rejecting a position of teacher-like

authority I do believe I was able to achieve, if not least-adult, perhaps lesser-adult status.

John, a white 10th grader, tested this status by addressing me by my first name, a cultural

taboo at EA and most other K-12 schools. "Hi, Marianne!" he would shout whenever he

entered the room or saw me in the hallway. "Hi, John!" I would respond cheerfully, as

the other students laughed and shook their heads. Of course, I'm not implying that

students routinely included me in private conversations about important personal issues.

Although there were a few times that students, at Joann's prompting, allowed my

presence as they shared personal struggles with her, there were many more times when

students' conversations about someone getting arrested, someone in trouble with the dean,

or someone fighting with parents, ended abruptly when I came near. Still, although the

invisible wall that separates students from teachers was certainly present in my classroom

interactions with students, I believe students allowed me a few windows through which I

could witness their daily exchanges with one another.

---

[16] This happened often in the 10th grade on level class, which was scheduled long after lunch period when students were once again ravenous.

A dilemma I faced at the beginning of my fieldwork at EA involved how to explain my presence to students. Since I knew from talking to Joann that students and teachers did not often discuss race outwardly, I worried that some would shut down immediately if I told them from the outset that I was there to study their ideas about race. I decided to take the approach used by Naidoo (1992), and on my first day I simply told the students that I was interested in their responses to the literature they'd be reading in class. Then, as time progressed and we began to read literature that dealt more specifically with racial oppression, I explained to students that I was especially interested in their views on race and racism. This allowed for a warming up period that, I hope, encouraged students to speak openly and honestly during small and large group class discussions.

My Racial Identity

Like all white people who grow up in the U.S., I have experienced the privilege of being part of the dominant racial group over the course of my life. Therefore, I knew that I would need to reflect on my own racial identity throughout this project, continually monitoring my own feelings about the students and teachers at EA, especially as discussions about race developed. Would a subliminal sense of racial privilege emerge in me somehow during the course of this project, and if so, in what ways? Would students of color respond to me differently than white students, and would I respond differently to them? Would my age and whiteness make it impossible for students to relate to me? I hoped that my years of talking about race with college students who were not very much older would help me to relate to these high school students. However, I also knew that I

needed to maintain a continual awareness of how my whiteness would affect my relationships with students and teachers at EA.

Beginning a new position in any context can be awkward, and my first few weeks at EA certainly contained awkward moments. Sometimes I didn't quite know what to do with myself. Should I sit quietly at my little desk in the corner of the room, or float around near students' tables as they worked together in groups? Should I initiate conversations with students, or wait for them to get desperate enough with an assignment to turn to me for help? I used both of these approaches, and, as I said, students were accustomed enough to having random adults in the room to either ignore me or make eye contact if they needed help. The one task that caused me to create a field note category titled, "Feeling Like a Stupid White Person" was my attempt to learn students' names. Joann had provided me with a student list for each class, which I studied diligently from day one. Yet, I had trouble remembering and pronouncing some of the students' names, and I noticed that it was not the Anglo names with which I struggled. Names like "Sue" or "John" stuck like glue on the first pass. However, the "ethnic" names – and even my use of that term shows my own intractable ethnocentricity – were difficult for me to hear clearly and remember. At times I would ask students to repeat their names so that I could be sure I was hearing and learning them correctly. During this process there were a few times that, to spare us both the embarrassment, I made believe I'd mastered the student's name and then ran to Joann for help when class was over. I recognize that part of my struggle to remember these names involved lack of familiarity; I know that our brains learn by relating new information to that which we already know. Still, I worried that by stumbling over students' "ethnic" sounding names I would create the impression among

students that I thought these names were exotic or strange. I did not want the students of color to view me as insensitive, nor did I want to embarrass them by mispronouncing their names. Of course, within a week or so I did learn all the students' names, and this mini-crisis passed. I relate it here as an example of the anxiety about race that is an element of my own white racial identity.

Validity

My project addresses validity through the triangulation of data sources. Classroom participant observation (which in and of itself included a variety of methods built in to Joann's lessons), interviews, and document collection provided a strategy that "reduces the risk of chance associations and of systematic biases due to a specific method" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 112). Observing students and teachers in a multiplicity of settings provided another opportunity for triangulation. While most of my time was spent in the classroom, I also observed students and teachers at lunch, a school pep rally, an African Dance Troupe presentation (meant as a celebration of Black History Month), and on a field tip to the Holocaust museum in Washington, D.C. In this way I gained insight about students' relationships with one another and with their teachers, as I was able to witness many informal interactions and associations. Observing casual exchanges in a variety of settings became especially important to me as my interest in how students' friendships affected their ideas about race developed during my research.

"**Skewing the data.**"

During the course of my fieldwork I was asked to share about my research in an undergraduate class being taught by a friend. At the end of my presentation a white male student asked, "Aren't you afraid that your presence in the classroom will skew the data?"

Joann, too, expressed this concern several times after particularly intense class discussions. "I didn't know how much to say," she admitted to me one of these times. "I didn't want to skew the data." I explained to both the undergraduate student and to Joann that as an ethnographer, it is not possible to avoid the impact my presence will have on the group of people I am studying. As Maxwell (2005) explains, the researcher cannot avoid influencing his or her research; therefore, "trying to 'minimize' your effect is not a meaningful goal for qualitative research" (p. 109). Instead of *if* I will "skew the data," then, a more realistic consideration might have been *how* I will "skew the data." This approach, known as "methodological reflexivity," compelled me to reflect throughout this study about how my own proclivities regarding the topic of race impacted both my behavior at the research site and the interpretation of my findings.

Mills and Gale (2007) note that qualitative researchers must recognize that "all research is motivated by practical or intrinsic interests of some kind" (p. 441). No research is value neutral, and I came to this project with many biases. The very fact that I chose to pursue this project and not some other indicates my beliefs about race: I believe that racism is a very real and present problem on individual and structural levels and that it is the responsibility of every citizen to work toward a just society. What's more, as Katz (1978) and Lewis (2006) point out, through racist actions whites originated the problem of racial inequity and, therefore, we must do all we can to work against present day forms of racism.

While I believe that my intentions in undertaking this project were good, I also recognize the danger in holding such strong opinions coming into a project such as this; I might be the opposite of colorblind and harbor a "hypersensitivity to color" that would

see racism lurking under every rock. Added to this is the fact that I had a professional interest in finding racist discourse at my site in order to validate the need for my research. Forsey (2004) reminds us that when examining power relations, ethnographers must diligently pursue the perspectives of all research participants, with the aim of understanding "how people come to grips with their lives in the particular historical and social moments in which they find themselves" (p. 69); researchers must not privilege the experiences of some participants over others. Trainor (2008) warns of the danger of analysis that ends with the "gotcha!" moment (p. 15). I needed to avoid the self-satisfying practice of justifying my own biases by focusing on catching other whites, whether students or teachers, at being racist. Instead, my goal was to pursue, as Bucholtz (2011) describes, the "co-construction of cultural meaning" that is inherent in ethnographic research, wherein data is "jointly produced in the encounter between researcher and researched and then recontextualized through analysis and writing" (p. 37). With this in mind, I purposed to understand the perspectives of all research participants and to account for their actions and words through careful analysis of a variety of data sources.

"But how can you generalize?"

Another common response I've received when I've described my research to friends and colleagues involves the issue of generalizability. People have often asked me what kind of surveys or questionnaires I've used to obtain information from my subjects, and what other schools I've sent these instruments to for comparison purposes. When I explain that my research explores race relations in one school only, blank looks often follow. Perhaps these individuals are wondering, what value are research findings that cannot be generalized? After all, I studied four classes, all taught by the same teacher, in

one small school in one suburban area. Am I trying to say that *all* students and teachers think or respond similarly on the topic of race? Emond (2009) reminds us that ethnographic research aims to uncover "participants' understanding of their social and symbolic world" and not to "construct generalizable theories" (p. 124). However, Hammersley (1992) argues that when a setting may be considered typical of "some larger whole or aggregate," (p. 86), findings may be generalized to similar settings. While I do not claim that my findings are universal, my study confirms much prior research exploring constructions of racial identity in youth and adults. I found that my participants' ideas about race were similar to those in the many studies that comprise my theoretical framework. My work also extends previous scholarship through its focus on how the calm, friendly environment at EA complicated students' constructions of race and, in some cases, enabled them to hold firmly to the belief that racism is over. Therefore, I believe that my findings are relevant and will add further insight to the existing body of research on this important topic.

<div align="center">

Theoretical Positioning

</div>

Combining Critical Frameworks

Although I felt strongly that my antiracist stance was an important element of my project, throughout my fieldwork and subsequent data analysis I also felt torn between the differing goals of two theoretical frameworks: childhood studies and critical race theory. Hume and Mulcock (2004) describe the feelings of fear, confusion, or self-doubt that ethnographers can experience regarding their positioning in fieldwork. For me, this self-doubt occurred not because of my positioning among research participants, but

because I felt I needed to reconcile two very different theoretical frameworks.[17] The tension between these two fields of scholarship became most evident to me during a dissertation critique session offered by my graduate school department, led by a faculty member and attended by other childhood studies graduate students. As we were discussing the tendency of some white students at EA to define racism as individual prejudice only and to insist that racism is no longer prevalent, a member of the group looked at me piercingly and stated, "It sounds like you're saying the students should define racism in a particular way." I felt the expectation to clarify that, no, of course I would never presume to tell children or youth what to think. Such behavior, I worried, would be the antithesis of childhood studies, a branch of scholarship that is dedicated to giving voice to children's ideas and opinions, not to telling children what those ideas and opinions should be.

Instead, I answered, "Yes, that's exactly what I think."

"Oh," said the group member who had spoken, and a brief but awkward silence followed. Though uncomfortable, the interaction made me realize the need to balance the two very different agendas of childhood studies and critical race theory in my project.

Allison James (2007) explains that at the core of childhood studies "is a conception of children as articulate social actors who have much to say about the world" (p. 261). She argues that it is not enough to allow children opportunity to express their opinions; childhood studies researchers must strive to explore "the unique contribution to our understanding of and theorizing about the social world that children's perspectives

---

[17] It is quite possible that the need to reconcile the theoretical frameworks of childhood studies and critical race theory existed only in my imagination. Perhaps my grappling with this topic is more an indication of how anxiety influenced my personal journey as a graduate student researcher than it is a scholarly imperative.

can provide" (p. 262). On the one hand, as a graduate student in a childhood studies program I sought to discover how youth's conceptions of race and racism might contribute to the understanding of race relations in our country. If white students at EA, many of whom sustained close friendships with youth of color, insisted that racism is no longer a salient social issue, does that mean that U.S. society truly is edging toward post racial status? Since a goal of childhood studies is to value the ideas and opinions of children and youth, perhaps when white students insist that they no longer wish to talk about race (as they did in this study), teachers and researchers should respect their wishes and stop talking about race. Further, at the core of my project is the idea that students are "becoming" in terms of their racial identity; i.e., they are not yet fully developed in their understandings of race and need adult help in the form of imposed curriculum to develop a more enlightened racial identity. This way of thinking would seem to belittle the status and disrespect the opinions of the "articulate social actors" that attended Joann's classes every day.

On the other hand, DeCuir and Dixson (2004) explain that the concept of societal transformation is an implicit and crucial objective of critical race studies. Infused with the goal of social justice, this area of study privileges the voices of traditionally oppressed groups and insists that societal progress in the form of racial equity in part depends on whites, as members of the powerful dominant culture, "becoming" aware of racism and incorporating a racial identity that moves them toward antiracist action. The notion of racial identity as a developmental process was imbedded in my project from the outset, but I worried that this developmental view was somehow in opposition to my position as an emerging childhood studies scholar. My background in education and my years as a

teacher educator also added to my feelings of uncertainty, since educators take for granted that the role of the teacher is to help students develop both academically and socially, a position that also might appear to be in conflict with the tenets of childhood studies.

My feelings of uncertainty were ultimately productive, in that they forced me to think more deeply about how my project combines differing theoretical frameworks into a unified whole. While the goal of critical race theory is to move policy and practice toward social justice, it does not create a dichotomy between childhood and adulthood, nor does it disrespect children's viewpoints and agency. Racial identity theories do not suggest that adults are necessarily more deeply enlightened regarding antiracist thinking than children or youth. Even scholars like Cross and Helms, who advocate a stage theory approach to racial identity formation, do not incorporate development through aging into their theoretical framework. While adolescents may become more aware of racism as they gain experience in the outside world, racial identity theories do not suggest a set time frame in which individuals progress through levels of racial identity. In fact, Tatum (1997) explains that some individuals may not progress through Cross and Helm's proposed levels of racial identity at all. Further, in its call to respect children and youth as complete human beings, the field of childhood studies does not reject the idea that people of all ages experience transformative processes in many areas throughout life.

Therefore, I have come to realize that my position as an emerging scholar in childhood studies complimented, rather than contradicted, my position as a critical race researcher throughout this study. Forsey (2004) warns against the danger of conflating cultural and moral relativism; the former seeks to understand participants' perspectives

through the lens of their cultural beliefs, while the latter claims that there is no objective right or wrong. My aim in this study was to understand students' ideas about race by analyzing their responses within the context of their cultural location. Thus, I listened closely to students' opinions in the classroom and during interviews. I observed their interactions with each other and with adults carefully. I sought to understand why some students vocally resisted talking about race, while others remained silent. As my analysis will show, I respected and valued the complexity of students' ideas. However, respecting students' viewpoints about race did not require me to succumb to moral relativism and give up my antiracist stance or the belief that education should help students to incorporate antiracism into their racial identities. Therefore, I hope that by paying close attention to adolescents' voices regarding race, this study will help to move educational systems toward more socially just practices.

Writing and Teaching Lessons

Even as I worried about tensions in my theoretical positioning, my backgrounds in childhood studies, critical race theory, and education made me wonder how students might respond to a combined childist/critical race literary critique of the multicultural texts they were assigned. With this in mind, on a few occasions I wrote and presented lessons to Joann's classes that used this combined childist/critical race approach to the texts. In keeping with Wall's (2010) concept of *childism,* a childist approach to literary criticism considers historical and philosophical constructions of children and childhood, adult-child relationships and boundary crossing, and an exploration of childhood as a site of marginalization. A childist approach to literary criticism complements and intersects with the application of other areas of literary criticism that explore the concerns of

marginalized or oppressed groups. Therefore, a combined childist/critical race critique might explore the adult/child role reversals that take place between the white child characters and adult characters of color in a text. Such an approach might compare and contrast age and racial/ethnic oppression experienced by characters, or consider historical and philosophical views of childhood and compare them to how people of color are treated or viewed in the text. My goal in presenting these lessons was to discover if students who might not relate to racially oppressed characters would, because of their youth, relate to characters who were either marginalized because of age and race, or who, through racism, were denied adult status.

My lesson presentations, along with my participation in large and small group discussions, created another important tension in my research. I wanted to understand how students' ideas about race influenced their readings of multicultural literature and, reciprocally, how these readings influenced students' ideas about race. At the same time, through developing and presenting curricular activities and discussion questions that reflected my own critique of the literature, I hoped to lead students to more complicated understandings of race and social justice. I recognized that I was both studying students' current understanding of race, while at the same time seeking to influence those understandings, and I worried that my lesson presentations placed me too close to students' responses to analyze them objectively. Joann was a great help in this area as well, as she provided a sounding board for me to discuss and evaluate students' responses to my lesson activities. Ultimately, through my active participation in the classroom, I hope that I was able to combine the listening to youth that is inherent to childhood studies scholarship with the activism that is fundamental to critical race theory.

As I will note later in this study, students were polite and engaged during my lessons. However, while the childist/critical race approach I took in lesson construction was unique in that other curriculum aids do not typically take this approach, students' responses to my lessons were not particularly indicative of their deeply felt ideas and opinions about race; rather, these feelings were more strongly expressed during the use of other curricular materials that I will describe in subsequent chapters.

A Few Final Words

When I began my fieldwork at Excellence Academy, my intention was to study the influence of multicultural literature on students' construction of racial identity, and I imagined most of my analysis would involve students' direct responses to those texts. I found that although students did respond to the texts in important ways, my study was greatly enriched by my daily observations and interactions with students throughout the entire school day. Through the hours of intense discussion, mind-numbing tedium, cheerful conviviality and, on occasion, high drama that make up the high school experience, the themes of this work emerged. I did not embark on this project with the intention of studying cross-racial friendships; that theme materialized as I listened to students and teachers and observed their interactions over the course of the months that I spent at the school. As Emund (2009) points out, "ethnography takes time" (p. 137). It is my hope that my time at Excellence Academy was well spent, and that this resulting work will advance our understanding of the complicated and ever-changing processes that inform racial identity development in youth.

Chapter Two

Boundaries Among Friends: Performing Race and

Policing Its Boundaries at Excellence Academy

If there was one thing the folks at Excellence Academy agreed on, it was that the

school was a friendly place. Students of various races, grade levels, and ethnicities, guys

and girls together, milled about freely, chatting and laughing behind the stacks of books

they carried from class to class. Research on cross-racial friendships among students has

shown that when students of differing racial backgrounds attend school together, "school

propinquity effect" (Qulllian & Campbell, 2003, p. 561) takes hold; i.e., because of their

proximity to one another, students in more diverse schools are more likely to form cross-

racial friendships (Killen, Kelly, Richardson, Crystal & Ruck, 2010; Munniksma &

Juvonen, 2012; Rude & Herda, 2010; Tavares, 2011). This seemed to be the case at EA.

Had I spent only a week or two at the school I might have come away with the belief that

the students, teachers, and administrators there had reached some kind of racial nirvana;

the school seemed to serve as a model of racial harmony. There was no doubt that

friendships flourished and that the school provided a safe, comfortable learning

environment.

In all of Joann's classes I noticed friendships that crossed racial boundaries.

Sometimes these relationships were obvious, as students sat together in class or ate lunch

together every day, but at other times I was surprised by a hug, a backrub, a high five, or

even a half-joking "I love you" between black and white students that I hadn't known

were friends. Joann had mentioned before I began my fieldwork that many of the students

had "been together since kindergarten" and were very close friends, a fact that students

confirmed during interviews. However, by the students' own accounts, interracial

friendships between white and African American students existed within the context of

behavioral boundaries. Students eventually accepted friendships across race as long as

one continued to "act" as a member of one's own race. Those who crossed these

boundaries risked the disapproval of their peers (Bucholtz, 2011). Students worked hard

to create and maintain these racial performance boundaries, often discussing among

themselves their views regarding what was and was not expected and acceptable behavior

according to racial ascription.

This chapter will explore the ways that students at Excellence Academy

performed race daily within socially constructed language and behavioral boundaries. In

the midst of the cross-racial friendships that existed at the school, students ascribed racial

categories to one another and constructed borders[18] around those categories, "set up to

define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*" (Anzaldua, 1999,

p. 25). One lazy afternoon during Flex period I witnessed the following scene, recorded

in my field notes, among a group of African American females that illustrates this racial

boundary keeping in action:

> *Donna, a substitute teacher, and one of the few African Americans on staff at EA,*
> *sits chatting with four African American girls, three of them on the couch and one*
> *at the table with Donna. The friendly, relaxed nature of the conversation tells me*
> *that they've known each other for a while, and since I've never seen these girls*
> *relate to Joann in such an intimate way, I wonder if the racial background they*
> *share with Donna is a factor in the ease of this exchange.*

---

[18] Erickson (1987) differentiates between the term "boundary" and "border," arguing that cultural
boundaries "are politically neutral phenomena" (p. 345), but become *borders* meant to keep out those not
in possession of specific cultural knowledge when intergroup conflict arises. This chapter will show that
the cultural boundaries students created through their performance of race were not politically neutral;
rather, they defined behavioral categories (i.e., "acting white" and "acting black") that helped maintain
power structures among. However, these boundaries among students were often permeable, depending on
the situation. Therefore, for the purposes of this study I have chosen to use the terms interchangeably.

The students and Donna talk about food for a while, and then the conversation gravitates to boys. Adrienne, the only senior in the group, says in amazement, "You know, we only have two black boys in the whole senior class. Two out of 42!"

They spend a few minutes naming the cute black boys at the school, and complaining that there aren't more of them. They mention one boy in particular, Henry. The girl sitting at the table, Chelsea, asks, "Is he black or does he just look black?"

The other girls glance up in surprise. "What kind of question is that?" says Keisha from the middle position on the sofa. "If his skin is black, he's black."

Chelsea defends her question. "Well, like, he could be Dominican or something, and have dark skin but not be black."

They agree on this. Keisha, nodding, says "Yeah, that's how it is with my uncle."

Fine (1997) notes that both "the discourse of race and a personal *embodiment* of race" (p. 58) produce racial identities. How was race embodied in the view of these young women as they explored the question of Henry's blackness? What did it mean to be black? Is racial ascription tied to country of origin? Does home language decide racial background? Or are there specific ways of being or behavioral patterns that indicate racial background? For decades, critical race theorists have explained that race is a social and not a biological construct (Nakkula & Toshalis, 2008). The musing of these female students confirms that, for them, blackness was socially constructed through performance. Henry might *look* black, but that did not mean he *was* black; he needed to *act* in a certain way associated with the African American experience in order to be considered black. Although these students were in the process of interrogating blackness and showed some uncertainty as to what, exactly, the criteria for blackness might be, they clearly believed that looking black was not enough to qualify one as being black. Blackness was a quality to be performed.

Racial boundaries at EA were sometimes firm and other times porous, and often policed by students. Bucholtz (2011) notes that racial classifications were manufactured and continue to operate as a means of "gaining or maintaining power" (p. 5), and others have shown that the struggle for power continues to infuse the ascription of race in school environments (Chalmers, 1997; Lewis, 2006). At Excellence Academy, racial identity for students and teachers was imbued with the quest to gain and maintain power. I will describe how students expressed racial identity through their use of language, physical space, and cultural styles, creating, maintaining, and policing the borders of acceptable racial behavior and jockeying for position in the racialized hierarchy of social power. Students controlled their racial identities through this boundary work, often keeping identities safe from invasion by others who did not possess "land rights" to their group's identity. However, perhaps as a result of the friendships that existed among them, in some cases students deconstructed traditional racial boundaries and allowed free passage to friends of different racial backgrounds.

Teachers and administrators also took part in boundary work at EA, creating and maintaining boundaries that were not within students' control. Carter (2012) explains that school personnel often construct social boundaries for students based on the conflation of race, ethnicity, gender, or class ascription with academic placement. Caught up in a system of academic tracking that is typical of high schools across the U.S., students at EA were often at the mercy of adults who controlled the racialized boundaries inherent in the school's academic placement system. Because, as we will see, decisions about academic placement created unequal curricular opportunities for students at EA,

the school's tracking practices resulted in insider/outsider status among students and were, therefore, imbued with social power.

<div style="text-align:center">**Performing Race**</div>

Performance v. Performativity

Not surprisingly, at EA whiteness functioned as the invisible norm against which all behavior was measured (Beach, Thein & Parks, 2008; Hollingworth, 2009; Marx, 2006; Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005; Trainor, 2008). Therefore, in presenting the following descriptions of how EA students expressed their racial identity, we must recognize an important distinction explained by Gillborn (2009). Citing the classic work of Goffman (1959) and the more recent findings of Youdell (2000), Gillborn points out that the word "performance" implies that the actor is aware that he or she is performing. In the case of whites, this is largely not true, since whites have normalized their position of dominance and its accompanying social power. For whites, the expression of racial identity might be more aptly classified as performativity, because as dominant social players, their "identities are strengthened and legitimized through countless acts of reiteration and reinforcement" (p. 55). Thus, white students are not aware of how their behaviors could be characterized through racial terms. This naturalized performativity gives whiteness "its deep-rooted, almost invisible status" (p. 56) that forms the backdrop upon which African American students' appearance and behaviors stand out. So, whereas white students at EA expressed racial identity through an invisible performativity, African American students seemed to express racial identity through performance of

quintessentially "black" ways of looking, talking, and being, of which they and others were continually aware.[19]

During my time at EA I observed many distinctive behaviors through which students performed identity, with race often functioning in an unspoken way to solidify student identity groupings. Of course, identity groupings among high school students are nothing new. Researchers have studied a variety of these groups, among them skaters, homies, straights, hippies, rappers, gangstas, preppies, jocks, nerds, and goths (Bucholtz, 2011; Lueck & Steffen, 2011; Perry, 2002; Thomas, 2011). Perry (2002) points out that through "music, clothing, hair styles, body piercing, sports, and street language…young people can claim personal power and mark a multiplicity of identities" (p. 105). Although the number of identity groups present at the school was limited by the size of the environment, the groups that the students mentioned to me and that I witnessed were largely racially segregated. Thomas (2011) notes that students often naturalize group divisions, "assuming that peer groups organically come together because of similar tastes, personalities, and identities" (p. 11); so it was at Excellence Academy. The following descriptions of students' spatial positioning, appearance, and behavior will show that students ascribed identities to themselves and others that embodied race. At the same time, during our interviews, students denied the salience of race in their everyday lives.

Looking the Part

The school's strict uniform and dress policy made it difficult to determine how students expressed identity through dress, but the clothing regulations at EA modeled the preppy look that, Bucholtz notes, "traditionally designates a clean-cut conservative

---

[19] It was this performance of race, highly visible against the naturalized backdrop of whiteness, that earned black students the coveted designation of "cool" that was, as we shall see, one of the only tools that African American students had at their disposal to acquire and maintain social power.

style…associated with inherited wealth and privilege" (p. 91), and, by extension, whiteness. Students at EA were required to wear polo shirts (tucked in at all times) with the school's name embroidered on the left shoulder. The color of students' shirts reflected their academic year, but all students were required to wear khaki "bottoms": pants, shorts, capris, or skirts. Hoodies and hats were banned at all times. Since EA advertises itself as a college preparatory school, it comes as no surprise that the school's strict dress code forced all students into dressing in the traditional preppy style, whether they liked it or not. While I do not mean to imply that if not for the imposition of the school uniform and dress code all black students would favor hip hop fashion styles any more than all white students would wear preppy style clothing, in terms of overall cultural style, whiteness was the invisible standard of normative dress at EA (Beach, Thein, & Parks, 2008).

Gimme a Head with Hair

Students had little freedom to alter their dress at EA, but they could and did express identity through their choice of hairstyle. The shaggy look was definitely "in" among many of the white boys, and seemed to coincide with interest in science fiction and video games, activities that earned one the designation of "nerd." Many of the members of the Gamers Club (populated by the male "nerds") sported this longer, shaggy hairstyle.

Other white males had traditional short hair or buzz cuts. Several of the boys in Joann's classes played sports (the "jocks"), and they all wore their hair very short. At one point the white members of the baseball team began to grow "Mohawk" hairstyles: buzzed around the sides with a strip of longer hair growing down the middle. Rob, a member of this group, told me that the hairstyle was a "thing" the team was doing to

imitate their coach, Mr. Jay.[20] Almost all of the African American males I came in

contact with wore their hair short, and sometimes brushed it during class (something I

never saw a white male do). Dan, an African American 10th grade honors student, wore

long cornrowed braids for a while, but eventually cut them off and kept his hair short

after that.

Hairstyles for females varied and, as might be expected, represented complicated

identity choices. For white girls the most popular hairstyle by far was long, straight, and

silky, sometimes worn back in a ponytail, but more often down and flowing. A few

African American girls wore cornrows or beaded braids, but this style was not very

common. Many wore their hair pulled back in tight ponytails or buns and held in place

with clips and headbands (à la 2012 Olympic gold medalist Gabby Douglas, whose

choice of this hairstyle stirred up controversy on social media sites). Some wore their

straightened hair down – I walked into the ladies room one morning and saw two African

American girls straightening their hair with a flat iron before classes started – and others

wore weaves, hair extensions, or wigs.

One day Carrie, a white female in the 11th grade on level class who usually wore

her wavy, blond-highlighted hair up in a bun, appeared with her hair straightened and

down. The response from the other girls was immediate. Susan (also white, with long,

silky brown hair) and Rihanna (a black student whose own hair was shaved around the

sides and back, but who changed her look often with long, silky hair extensions) ran over

---

[20] Mr. Jay, a young, white history teacher, was a major player in the racialization processes that I observed at the school. During lunch periods, B.K., Rob, and other white students ate in Mr. Jay's classroom, and during a field trip to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., Mr. Jay's student group was exclusively white. I'm not sure what prompted the conversation, but as we stood outside of the museum that day I heard Mr. Jay and his group of students joking about New Jersey governor's decision to fly flags at half-mast in honor of the deceased pop star, Whitney Houston. Mr. Jay commented sarcastically, "Well, she *was* a national treasure." The students laughed.

to Carrie, squealing, "Your hair is so cute!" and "I didn't know your hair was so long!" Both girls stroked Carrie's hair for several minutes until they were required to sit down for the start of class. I spent many hours watching white girls run their fingers through their hair during classes, something the African American girls who wore wigs, weaves, extensions, or who straightened their hair with chemical relaxers did, as well.

Lester (2000) describes the importance of hairstyle in African American identity, going so far as to state that the "implications and consequences of the seemingly radical split between European standards of beauty and black people' s hair become ways of building or crushing a black person' s self-esteem, all based on the straightness or nappiness of an individual' s hair" (p. 203). As a white woman, I cannot pretend to understand the complexities of hair for African American females, or what the primacy of the long, silky (white-haired girl) look among the black girls at EA said about their racial identity. Although in 11th grade honors class we discussed the damage that internalizing white beauty standards did to the characters in *The Bluest Eye*, ironically, we never talked about how this same internalization might be reflected in hairstyle choice for modern African American women, or for the African American girls in the class. We simply didn't go there. Instead, we skirted the issue and failed to challenge students' statements that normalized whiteness as the standard of beauty. As an outsider, I questioned my right to comment on the subject. In retrospect, thinking about what hair meant to the black girls in Joann's classes may provide more insight into my own racial identity than into theirs. The truth is that both Joann and I avoided commenting when African American girls changed their hairstyles, pretending we didn't notice the dramatic transformations that took place almost before our eyes. Perhaps this is understandable on Joann's part,

although I found her claim that she really didn't notice when Kala, an African American 11th grader, went from dark hair to blond and back to dark again in the span of 48 hours, or when Rihanna grew silky, shoulder length hair overnight, a bit hard to believe. My own hesitancy in addressing the topic with students, even casually, was much more difficult for me to understand. Here I was, an ethnographer whose work was meant to problematize colorblind ideology, pretending to be colorblind when it came to black girls' hair, acting as if these girls were members of a secret club that I dare not enter or even acknowledge. Perhaps I sensed the struggle that Lester describes within the ranks of black girls and women over what constitutes "good hair" and how to achieve it.[21] Perhaps I feared that attention to African American hairstyles from a white woman would exoticize the students, somewhat akin to Lester's first white roommate who asked to touch his hair and was surprised that it "did not feel like steel wool" (p. 202). Or, perhaps my own unexamined fear that pointing out differences in physical appearance based on race might result in accusations of racism stopped me from chatting about hair with the African American girls. For whatever reason, I had created a racial boundary that did not exist among the students in the form of a wall of self-imposed silence over the topic of hair.

Ironically, it was the students themselves who eventually shattered this boundary. One morning toward the end of the school year students in the 11th grade on level class had been assigned to work on their "autobiographies," a portfolio project that was meant to sum up the year of academic learning. Cross-racial friendships were evident among the females in the room as they milled around, chatting and laughing while they decorated

---

[21] The controversy over Gabby Douglas' 2012 Olympic hairstyle indicates that this struggle is far from resolved.

the three-ring binders that contained their work. I did a double take when Susan and

Carrie (both white) walked past me wearing something dark across their foreheads; they

were Rihanna's hair extensions, which she had playfully removed and given out to her

friends. Susan switched hers to her upper lip as a mustache, and Damara, a black student

who'd also been a recipient of Rihanna's generosity, glued hers to the front cover of her

binder. For the first time I felt the courage to approach the subject of hair with Rihanna. I

asked her if the extensions were expensive, and we chatted for a few minutes about the

problems she'd had finding a hairdresser who would give her the look she wanted. Joann,

who had joined the conversation, seemed surprised to hear that the extensions that

Rihanna had worn for weeks, and that were now being passed around the room, were not

Rihanna's real hair. Rihanna laughingly chided, "Miss Mitchel, you know what my real

hair looks like." Blankly, Joann shook her head and said she didn't. I ventured, "It's

shaved around the sides, right?" With no self-consciousness, Rihanna confirmed that only

the hair at the very top of her head was her own. She was comfortable talking about her

hair, and even jokingly sharing her hair extensions with her white friends.

Chin (1999) complicates Lester's claim that for African Americans, self-esteem is

impacted by a strict good hair/bad hair dichotomy. Finding that poor, urban, African

American girls endowed their white dolls with black hairstyles, Chin posits that these

girls challenged "constricting notions of race" (p. 315), reshaping racial integration on

their own terms. One might argue that Rihanna and Kala's use of hair extensions and

wigs signified their willingness to play with racial boundaries, recognizing, as Chin

suggests of the girls in her study, "the socially constructed nature of race, the ambiguity

of a racialized existence, and the flexibility of racialized expression" (p. 316). Rihanna's

literal play with her hair extensions that day in class represented her symbolic boundary work in two ways. First, as Chinn suggests of the girls with whom she worked, Rihanna broadened her racial identity past the traditional strictures of the racial discourse surrounding the good hair/bad hair dichotomy, in so doing establishing a position of power by refusing the boundaries that discourse implies. Second, Rihanna used her friendly relationships with the white females in the class to allow them entrance into her boundary work, handing out her hair extensions to invite them into her play. Because of these friendships she allowed a boundary to be permeable rather than fixed.

<div align="center">**Acting the Part**</div>

Seating By Race

Students' self-segregated seating choices were another way that friendships at the school complicated a traditional racial boundary. As Pettigrew (2012) points out, students' tendency to physically cluster according to race is well documented and "scarcely a novel finding" (p. 4), and at EA it was common for African American and white students at EA to sit separately during classes, lunch period, and special events. A few white students consistently crossed this visual boundary, but for the most part self-segregation prevailed. In Joann's classes this wasn't always easy to achieve, since she would often assign seats based on either academic level or behavioral issues. Students would follow her prescribed seating pattern for a day or two, but then count on her forgetting the new arrangement and go back to sitting where they pleased. Usually, this strategy worked. Even among the self-proclaimed friendships of the 11th grade honors class, students usually sat not only according to race, but according to color, as the two light skinned African American

and one Chinese American female tended to sit with whites and the four dark-skinned African Americans usually sat together.

Gender, too, was a factor in students' seating choices, but for some students race trumped gender when it came to choosing a seat. For example, Michael, an African American male and one of the stars of the basketball team, always sat at a table with Latina and African American females during Home Base, but at other times during the day was found almost exclusively in the company of other African American males.[22] Edward, a white 11th grader, always sat with white females and never with the African American males in his class.

Tatum (1997) views self-segregation by African American students in mixed race settings as a "developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism" (p. 62). She believes that for African American students in racially mixed schools, self-actualized racial identity depends on connecting with other African American students during the school day. During our interview, Anthony, an African American 11th grade honors student, confirmed Tatum's claim. Although he was friendly with many white students, Anthony told me that he felt a "divide" existed between black and white students, and explained the tendency to self-segregate thusly: "…we see things the same way. We act the same way. We understand… not saying that they don't, it's just that they usually don't.…not saying that they can't, it's just that they usually don't." Perhaps to ensure a sense of emotional comfort or safety, Anthony needed to connect with students that thought and acted like him and, therefore, understood him. While he valued his

---

[22] Michael often performed gender with his African American male friends by mimicking stereotypical female behavior to express happiness – he and his friends would break into high-pitched squeals, wave their hands with bent wrists, and jump up and down when they met up unexpectedly in the cafeteria or hallway.

friendships with whites, he also needed to socialize with students with whom he could most identify.

However, Anthony's experience differs from Tatum's explanation of self-segregation in a significant way. Borrowing from Ogbu, Tatum suggests that racial clustering may be a sign of oppositional identity and may therefore be threatening to white teachers (p. 62). In contrast, Anthony's reflection that it is *possible* for white students to "understand" African American students ("it's not that they *can't*"), but that this understanding is usually not present ("they usually *don't*") puts the responsibility for the racial divide he perceives on the shoulders of the white students and on the academic structures that kept students racially segregated. Anthony explained, "In our school in general, most of the white kids are in excelled classes and most of the black kids are in unexcelled classes, so there's not much time…to get to know each other." Therefore, it is white students' lack of understanding, along with academic tracking structures that, in Anthony's mind, are responsible for self-segregation at school, not African American students' need to declare opposition to the dominant white culture.

When I pointed out to Joann how students in her Home Base tended to self-segregate, she was surprised, saying she'd never noticed and had always assumed that students sat together according to interests, "like Dungeons and Dragons," she said. Thus, Joann naturalized students' self-segregation. The racialized aspect of her assumption – Dungeons and Dragons is largely a white, "nerd," phenomenon – did not occur to her. Still, Joann did not experience her students' seating choices as "threatening" (Tatum, p. 62) and did nothing to intervene.[23] Social Studies teacher, Lisa, did notice the racial

---

[23] The only attempt to interrupt students' racial clustering came not from teachers or administration, but from the student council, who sponsored a "mix-it-up" lunch period that all students and teachers were

clustering that was common in her classes, but, unlike teachers in Tatum's assessment, did not see it as a problem. Since there was nothing threatening about the behavior of the students at this "friendly" school, there was no need for teachers to notice or think deeply about students' self-segregation.

Thomas (2011), who studied girls' racial and gender identity at an urban school after a painful "race riot" between Hispanic and Armenian students had taken place, cautions against ignoring the damage of the racialization processes that lurk beneath students' self-segregation. She points out that the way students utilize space at school reflects their segregated experience outside of school, an experience steeped in past racist policies. Viewing self-segregation at school as a step in the journey toward racial self-actualization, as Tatum (1997) does, ignores both the painful history of racism and the present pain of racialized exclusion that students of color face both inside and outside of school. Although some white EA students insisted that neighborhoods and public schools are segregated due to individual choice, their lack of awareness does not change the fact that racially segregated suburbs throughout the U.S., including those that surround EA, are the product of past and present racist housing policies and practices (Meyer, 1999; Seitles, 1998).

Researchers have noted the exclusionary nature of racialized physical spaces in schools (Shankar, 2008; Thomas, 2011). Again reflecting the friendly atmosphere, this was not the case at EA; there, the lines of self-segregation were visible but easily penetrable. Students did cluster racially, but milled around freely with none of the

---

required to attend. After having their hands stamped when they entered the cafeteria, students were told to sit at the table with the picture that matched their stamp. This random stamping should have resulted in racially mixed tables, but did not; the black/white divide continued. Tables that were populated by black and white students tended to be split down the center with each group choosing opposite ends.

threatening looks, racial epitaphs, or other types of harassment among students described at other schools (Thomas, 2011). From what I observed there were no out of bounds physical spaces on school property for students of any background.[24] As we shall see later in this chapter, the same was not true of the boundaries that protected other racialized behavioral patterns at the school.

Nerds and Jocks

Freaks, greasers, and hippies may come and go, but nerds and jocks, it seems, live on. When I asked students during interviews what styles or groups existed at their school, they consistently mentioned nerds and jocks. The jocks, members of the school's sports teams, were largely divided racially; African Americans dominated the basketball team, while soccer, baseball, and softball teams were made up mostly of white players. The nerds were almost exclusively white or Asian, described by students as "smart," "into books," "into computers," and "artsy."

B.K. a white female and self-proclaimed jock, described the 10th grade nerds in this way:

> *So they're really artsy, they're all so very artistic. It makes me, like, I'm in all their classes, and they get assigned an art project, and I'm like (groans, puts head down as if deflated) and they're like, oooh! (raises arms as if ecstatic). And I'm like, oh (groans, lowers head again)… And um, they're all like, love each other. They're best friends, and they have all the same classes together, which is the honors class, so, if you want to categorize them into the "nerds" or something, that's what they would be categorized to.*

These white and Asian students exerted a form of social and academic power because of their "artsy" persona; their work on the many visual projects that Joann assigned and displayed in the classroom stood out for its aesthetic quality.

---

[24] The physical boundaries of racial segregation were not so easily transgressed on the school bus, however, as Tom, a white 10th grader, will describe later in this chapter.

In spite of the racial segregation that existed among students in these cliques, when I asked students during interviews if groups like the nerds fell along racial lines, I was consistently met with blank stares, and then denial that race played a part in these groupings. Carter's (2012) suggestion that students' avoidance of recognizing race as a factor in school friendship groupings might be "universal" (p. 58) was confirmed at Excellence Academy. Radha, a South Asian 10th grader and a member of the "artsy nerds," admitted that there were "racial cliques" in "public schools," but not at her school, she said. She attributed this to the fact that, in her words, "There isn't much diversity here, I think." When I pointed out the EA is much more racially diverse than the surrounding public schools, including the school that Radha had previously attended, she seemed genuinely surprised, telling me that she hadn't noticed that. Nakia, a black 10th grader from the Virgin Islands, explained that "cliques" among students were based on the neighborhoods students came from, saying, "…it makes sense, cause like you live together so you play together and you come here together." Likewise, Jada, an African American 10th grader, said of student groupings, "…it doesn't have to do with race, but people who are into stuff that…they're into, they'll group up." Like their teacher, Joann, these students had naturalized identity group choices and denied the salience of race in these groupings.

Coolness

According to Bucholtz (2011), nerds are the "hyperwhite" (p. 140) opposite of cool. She describes African American students, though, as "cool almost by definition" (p. 45), positioned at the top of the coolness chain among a student body that, she says, shared in the "quest for coolness" (p. 46). Kromidas (2012), too, found that students

contrasted coolness with whiteness, and that students of color made fun of white kids for not being cool. Majors (2001) describes the development of the "cool pose" in black males as a response to "an externally imposed invisibility" (p. 211). He explains that for black men, the adopting of the cool persona is a response to the limitations they've experienced as the targets of racism. Therefore, posits Majors, coolness is an alternate means of gaining social power for African American males. Pascoe (2007) found that among males at a mixed race high school, the dreaded designation "fag," the very antithesis of coolness, was highly racialized. African American males were able to engage in behaviors that might earn their white counterparts "fag identity" (p. 72) because their coolness protected them from such verbal attacks.

The same social hierarchy surrounding coolness existed among some males at EA,[25] in spite of the friendly environment. Tom, a white 10th grader, stated during our interview that it was "harder to be cool" if you were white. Tom was not happy about this arrangement; he saw coolness as a status to be desired and didn't appreciate his possible exclusion from the cool category because of his racial ascription. For Tom, coolness at EA was infused with the "whites as victims" or reverse racism discourse, since he clearly believed that his whiteness caused him an unfair disadvantage in social placement. Tom, who lives in Carletonville and rides the school bus with many African American students, illustrated his point by describing what he perceived as the victimization of whites on the school bus:

> Tom: But, you know, I'm not trying to be racist in the Rosa Parks way, but you know, the back of the bus used to be the bad thing, and now the back of the bus is the cool thing.

---

[25] The females that I observed and interviewed did not seem to share this concern.

MM: Mmhmm.

Tom: So who sits in the back, who speaks up, you know if, actually on my bus, generally, the African American people, if they speak up to someone who's white, it's fine. But if someone who's white speaks up, then they're ignorant, they're, you could go as far as being called racist.

MM: And what do you mean by "speak up"?

T: (Deep breath) Uh,

M: Just, you mean

T: Speak up for equality.

M: Ok, so you mean "I want to sit here" kind of, like arguments about who gets to sit where? You don't mean just regular conversations.

T: No, I, I'm talking about like, I deserve to sit here just as much as the next person.

Like many of the white students I spoke with, Tom begins his statement with the

"I'm not trying to be racist" disclaimer, perhaps fearing that the mere mention of race

leaves him open to this accusation. He then follows by mentioning Rosa Parks, the black

woman who in 1955 refused to give up her seat at the front of the bus for a white person.

From the context of our conversation I believe that, ironically, Tom identifies himself

with Parks as the victim of discrimination, which, for Tom, takes place on two levels.

Not only is Tom denied access to coolness by his exclusion from the back of the bus

because he is white, but if he decides to "speak up for equality" (as Parks did) he runs the

risk of being accused of racism. African Americans, says Tom, are allowed to "speak up,"

but he, as a white person, is not. Tom's racial identity is infused with a power struggle

over possession of a highly sought after coolness status. Further, Tom believes that

whites are more restricted in what they can do or say because African Americans use accusations of racism to gain unfair advantage over whites.[26]

Although they were not in the same class or grade level, Anthony confirmed Tom's dualistic construction of white v. cool during a class discussion about discrimination. Edward, a white student, had argued, "all people have experienced discrimination in some form." Naturalizing racism, Edward continued, "If you're a minority among a group of others who are the majority, discrimination is just natural." Anthony agreed with Edward, saying, "Some people may think they're the only cool ones, and if you're not like them you're not cool." Anthony did not specifically refer to African American students as the "some people" who think they're "the only cool ones," but within the context of the discussion the implication was clear. Anthony's example positions whites as the victims of discrimination at the hands of "cool" blacks. Thus, by inhabiting "coolness" as their exclusive property, African American students constructed a racial identity that granted them social power over whites.

Going to "Choych"

African American students often performed their "coolness" with classroom behaviors designed to entertain themselves and the students around them. One category of such behaviors involved religious expression. Many students talked about attending religious services at their temples, synagogues, or churches, and a few told me that their fathers were pastors. Christerson, Edwards, and Flory (2010) explored the role of religion as a socialization process for youth of varying racial backgrounds. Analyzing data from the National Survey of Youth and Religion, the researchers found that African Americans

---

[26] Tom was not alone in this belief. I will explore how other students subscribed to reverse racism arguments later in this study.

were "on most measures the most religious among American teens" (p. 139). White and Latino youth also expressed a high level of religious belief, but African American youth expressed not only high levels of belief, but also high levels of religious practice, including church attendance, Bible reading, and prayer (p. 140). In a society that has racialized religion,[27] it is not surprising that religious expression serves as a way for some youth to perform racial identity. Many black students regularly mimicked religious expression for the sake of humor, sometimes among themselves, and other times in front of the class.

I first began to wonder about the role of overt religious expression by African American students on the morning the 11th grade on level class presented their "American Dream Quilt" squares, part of a project from *The Great Gatsby* unit. The "quilt" was made of pictures students had found on the internet to represent their ideas of the American Dream, and captioned with a quote of their choosing from Fitzgerald's novel. Students were told to share their ideas of the American Dream before pinning their picture to the board. Following is an excerpt from my field notes:

> *Samar, a slightly built African American male, stands in front of the noisy class, waiting for quiet. Rihanna calls out, "Everybody at choych say amen!" Several students, all African American, respond with a loud, "Amen!" Jolene closes her eyes and raises her right hand in mock Pentecostal worship, then perks up and asks excitedly, "What if everybody did church?"*

> *Next up is Kala, an African American female wearing false eyelashes and a wig of long, silky, straight, black hair. She stands up to share her quilt, a painting of a grassy field. "Love doesn't have any race, color or religion," she says.*

> *"That's right!" exclaims Rihanna. She puts her head down in her arms, making believe she's crying. "Choych! Choych!" she calls out several times.*

---

[27] The saying, often attributed to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that eleven am on Sunday is the most segregated hour of the week holds true for many of the churches that surround the Excellence Academy area.

Rihanna's shouts of "Choych! Choych!" and Jolene's raising of hands in mock Pentecostal worship are examples of the mock religious expression among African American students that I witnessed many times at EA. Violet and Juliette, African American 11th graders, often pretended to be singing in a church choir, at times joined by Karla (also African American) and Dana (the only white student in the group of friends); once they launched into a soulful version of "Amazing Grace" during group work, but stopped when they couldn't remember all of the words. When class ended that morning Juliette and Violet picked up again as they left the room, singing, "Amazing Gra-ay-ay," holding the notes in an exaggerated way. During the unit on *The Crucible*, Joann told the class that reciting "The Lord's Prayer" was a way for those accused of witchcraft to prove their innocence during the Salem witch-hunts. Violet, who was standing up at the board, immediately recited the prayer in full, to the giggles of those around her. During the same unit, Joann asked the class to define the word, "theocracy." Violet replied with the words, "the Lort," an expression made famous through the comic religious mimicry of Tyler Perry's Madea character. At other times I heard African American students jokingly tell each other, "You need to pray!" or say of themselves, "I need the Lord!" One day Jada rushed into the room between classes, looking for a book she'd left behind. When she found it inside a desk, she declared a loud "Thank you, Jesus!" to the surprise of the white boys sitting at the table. Another day, Jada thanked me for providing pizza for her class by saying dramatically, "Mrs. Modica, you are the blessed savior! You are the blessed favored one!" She then went on to describe how hungry she was because of the terrible lunch served in the cafeteria earlier that day.

Dana, of the 11th grade honors class, was the only white student who participated

in the mock religious mini role-plays or overt religious comments that I observed among

African American students. Early on in my fieldwork I'd noticed Dana's friendship with

Juliette, Violet, and Karla, all darker skinned African American females. Dana often

jokingly imitated church members with them, pretending to clap offbeat or play a

percussion instrument incorrectly (i.e., blowing on a triangle instead of hitting it). When I

mentioned this friendship to Joann, she said that Dana was "completely accepted by them"

(meaning the African American girls). Joann also told me that Dana had a reputation for

"only dating black guys," saying that she'd heard Dana admit to this herself. One day I

observed Dana teaching a Christian children's song to Juliette, Violet and Karla. It was a

song that I was familiar with from my days as a Sunday School teacher in white churches.

The words were:

> *I am a C*
>
> *I am a C-H*
>
> *I am a C-H-R-I-S-T-I-A-N*
>
> *And I have C-H-R-I-S-T*
>
> *In my H-E-A-R-T*
>
> *And I will L-I-V-E E-T-E-R-N-A-L-L-Y!*

Dana sang this to her friends so quickly, clapping and patting her legs in rhythm, that if I

had not been familiar with the song I would not have been able to decipher the words. As

she ended, all of them burst into giggles, and Michelle (one of the lighter skinned African

American girls in the class) came over to see what the laughter was about. Dana

explained to her laughingly, "It's what we white folks sing in church."   While meant

as a joke, Dana's explanation served the purpose of acknowledging and respecting the racial boundary that existed between her and her African American friends. She related to and connected with their religious practice, yet, as a member of a white church, differentiated it from her own.

Talking and Rapping Black

Black students also performed race through the use of Black English.[28] Words and phrases like, "Sup?" "Jawn," "Gangsta," "Where she at?" "I ain't got none," or "She be talking" were common, especially among the African American on level students and those in the Flex groups when talking amongst themselves, but not when addressing teachers. Ogbu (2004) notes, "after emancipation, Blacks were required to behave and talk the way White people actually behaved and talked" (p. 14); this expectation was clear at EA and was another way that whiteness functioned as the invisible norm. In fact, number seven on a list of "Classroom Norms" displayed on a large poster in Joann's classroom stated, "Use formal conventions for ALL oral and written responses."[29] With these directions looming above, it is easy to understand why the students who were most likely to speak in Black English almost always switched to standard grammatical forms when talking to teachers. African American students in the honors classes tended more toward standard grammatical forms, but on occasion they, too, used Black English when talking quietly with one another.

Carter (2012) views school policies that privilege white modes of language and behavior as "organizational (in) flexibility that bars reciprocity in cultural exchanges among students within schools" (p. 13). Such policies and practices construct symbolic

---

[28] Also know as African American Language, African American Vernacular English, or Ebonics.
[29] See Appendix D.

boundaries among students, creating outsider status and, therefore, the lack of belonging for students whose home cultural language and behaviors fall outside of the white cultural "classroom norms." At EA, students' performances of "blackness" stood outside the norm because of these school policies that insisted on white behavioral standards. Therefore, the teachers and administrators who maintained these policies, posting them on classroom walls for all to see, were partly responsible for turning cultural practices into racial performance boundaries among students. Further, by affirming white cultural language as the "classroom norm," teachers and administrators designated all other cultural behaviors as unacceptable and undesirable, contributing to a school "sociocultural climate" (Carter, 2012, p. 14) that privileged whiteness.

African American students in the 11th grade on level class were also likely to perform race during their down times (often before class officially started, but sometimes during group work) with impromptu raps, sometimes accompanied by drum beating on the desks and chair-dancing. Megan, the curriculum coordinator who acted as the unofficial "bouncer" in this class, was usually quick to put a stop to the fun, but now and then if she was distracted with something or someone (Megan, coach of the girl's softball team, spent much of her time chatting with the "jocks" in the class, most of whom were white males) they would continue for several minutes, gaining in enthusiasm as they did. Many white students looked on, smiling, and a few participated, but for the most part these musical performances were owned by the African American students, and it was this behavior that partly earned them "cool" status among their peers.

Policing the Borders

Thus, at Excellence Academy, the performance of race was imbedded in cultural

identity group membership and performed through a complex interaction of physical

appearance and overt behaviors that distinctly positioned students in alignment with

white or black[30] identity status. Discussions of "acting white" and "acting black" were

common at EA, both in class conversations and during my interviews with students. I

first heard African American students talk about "acting white" during *The Scarlet Letter*

unit. As a means of exploring the social "labeling" that takes place in the novel, Joann

asked students to record on one side of a sticky note the labels they felt others placed on

them, and on the other side, the labels they placed on themselves. Most of the students in

the class focused on personality traits like "funny" or "shy," but table four, populated

mostly by African American girls, chose to label themselves by race. On the side of the

sticky note that was meant to depict how others labeled her, Juliette wrote, "acts like

white girl, oreo." I asked Juliette why she thought people said that about her. She

explained, "I used to go to an all white school, and so people said I act like a white girl."

"What does a white girl act like?" I asked.

Juliette shrugged. "I don't talk a lot, I talk nicely, I dress nice," she said. Violet

volunteered that she and her cousins were often told that they "act like white girls" for the

same reasons. Juliette and Violet's experiences reflect the "border maintenance work"

that Erickson (1987) describes when African American youth tease their high academic

---

[30] Out of Joann's 95 literature students, only five were Asian. These were of Indian and Chinese background, and, fulfilling the "model minority" stereotype (Shankar, 2008; Wong, Lai, Nagasawa & Lin, 1998), all were in honors classes and tended toward close friendships with white students. There was only one Latina in Joann's classes, who sat mostly with African American students both in Home Base and in class.

achieving peers for deviating from the cultural norm of "nonstandard black English" (p.

350).

During our interview, Ryan, a female African American 10th grade honors student,

stated that it was common for students to accuse others of acting white or acting black.

She believed that students are "forced" into friendship groups based on physical

appearance (i.e., racial category) even if their personalities are dissimilar. Ryan

explained the repercussions students may face for too much white/black boundary

crossing in their friendship groups:

> *Ryan: I think it's something that people accept eventually. At first it's uncomfortable because you know, people don't just let it go at first. They, like, make sure that everyone knows about it, and make sure that everyone puts their opinion out about it, you know what I mean? Nothing is ever a secret. Everything is always out in the open (laughs).*
>
> *MM: (laughs) Everybody knows everything about everybody.*
>
> *R: (laughing) Yes, yes.*
>
> *M: And that can be hard sometimes.*
>
> *R: Although, I mean, but with that, it's like, you get everything out at one time. You know, everyone knows, so eventually tomorrow I can, I can move on from it. But today, everyone gonna, (laughs) everyone's gonna know, everyone's gonna approach you about it.*

Ryan describes how the policing of racial boundaries functions: cross-racial friendships

may be accepted tomorrow, but not without scrutiny today. These friendships, while

eventually accepted, are also the fodder of public commentary and critique among

students.

Later in our interview Ryan revealed her belief that blacks face more rigid

behavioral expectations than whites:

Ryan: I feel like as soon as an African American person walks into a room they're categorized, their whole entire life is just spilled out in front of them because everyone already knows their entire, you know, their struggles and everything. But for a white person it's not like that. I mean, I feel like people give them a chance to, you know, tell about themselves and, you know, paint their own picture. I feel like for African American people it's painted.

MM: So people already kind of have you pegged. And they make – I guess what you're saying is people are more likely to, to, um assume things about you.

R: Yes.

M: To make judgments about you.

R: Yes.

Ryan feels that as an African American she lacks the opportunity or the power to "paint her own picture": to present herself to the outside world in whatever unique way she might choose. In her view, her blackness creates expectations about her that she cannot escape.

Another African American 10th grader, Nakia, also felt that she had been pigeonholed by racial performance expectations that existed at the school. She said, "I used to have a clique with the smart people and stuff, and they're white." Because of these friendships, she said, "the black kids" would accuse her of acting white. She said:

We've all experienced it, like someway or another, where (laughs) someone would be like, tell a white person, stop acting black, or somebody will tell a black person, stop acting white, like, that's kind of like a racial slur.

It's not clear whether it was Nakia's association with white students in and of itself that brought about the sanctioning she received, or if it was her black peers' recognition of white students as "the smart people" that earned Nakia their disapproval. What is clear is that, her laughter notwithstanding, Nakia perceived this peer sanctioning to be a form of racism. Her analysis, "that's kind of like a racial slur*"* may suggest that she felt degraded

(as someone called a racial slur would) when she came under the scrutiny of black students for supposedly acting white.

B.K. also connected the policing of racial performance boundaries with racism. She said, "I think that both black and white people are racist, like 'Stop acting so white,' like, 'Why are you trying to act black?'" In B.K.'s view, policing the borders of racial performance is, in itself, racist activity because it forces people into, in her words, "definite stereotypes." Further, B.K. believes that questioning racial performance boundaries is risky. She says:

> *I think it's not addressed…because people try to address it and they get accused of being racist. And like, that's not something you want to be accused of, like, people, you don't want people to think you're racist. It's just not how you want to be seen or viewed.*

When I asked B.K. what it meant to act white, she explained, "It depends on the person. Like, maybe it's how they're talking, maybe it's what they're doing, what music they listen to, what sports they like." And, according to B.K., for a white person, acting black would consist of "talking weird – not that black people talk weird[31]…Using, um, slang, like that. I don't know, listening to rap music." B.K. confirmed that "anybody" might tell a person to stop acting outside of the prescribed racial norm, and that conversations of this nature are common at EA. "I heard it an hour ago," she said during our interview.

Kanye, an African American 11th grade honors student, also emphasized the boundaries of racial behavior during our interview:

> *MM: Have you ever heard of anybody talk, a couple of people mentioned this to me already so I thought I would ask you, um, kids talking, saying stuff like, oh you're acting white*

---

[31] Although she caught herself and tried to retract her statement, it is clear that for B.K., white speech patterns constituted the invisible standard of normal.

Kanye: (interrupts) Yes.

M: or oh you're acting black. You've heard kids say that?

K: Yes.

M: And what's the context? Like, over what kind of things?

K: Like how white people talk, like very proper, like.

M: So if somebody talks that way?

K: Yeah. Yeah, like, a few kids in my class, they talk like they're white. But like, the one Caucasian girl that I'm friends with, she acts like she's black.

M: Mmhmm. And do people say that to her?

K: Yes.

M: Yeah.

K: And she say, I know, I'm black.

M: Ok, so she's (laughs) – ok. So, um, so people say it in a teasing way, kind of?

K: No, like, stop acting black. You're not black, you're white.

M: And she says –

K: No, I'm black.

M: Ok. And so what do people think about that?

K: They don't care. Except for, I don't know.

M: What do you mean they don't care?

K: Like, they don't care.

M: They just accept her anyway as a friend?

K: Except for when she like to take it overboard. Like with some of the words she says. I don't think you know the word we talking about. (pause)

M: You could say it.

K: Nigger.

M: She says that?

K: Yes.

M: And how do people respond when she says it?

K: They, they don't like it when she does that.

M: Yeah. Why not?

K: (pause) Cause they feel like she's, I guess, trying too hard, or that, (pause) I don't know. Really, I don't know the reason why, because I don't know why it's not ok for her to say it because she white, but it's ok for us to say it. Because we're black.

M: Mmhmm.

K: I don't know which one is worse.

M: Mmhmm. But, but that is the way it is.

K: Yes.

M: So if you say it, it's ok.

K: Yeah, if I say "Nigger, please." If she say "Nigger, please" they would look at her like, "What? Stop saying that, Janie. Like, you not, you not black."

Kanye, utilizing Black English at times during the interview, is clear that his

white friend has crossed a firm border in the use of the word, "nigger," a word that Kanye

believes may be acceptable for African Americans to use, but is clearly not for whites. In

his view, a certain amount of boundary crossing by this white friend is tolerated, but

when she uses a racial slur, approval is withdrawn. Kanye's hesitation to say "nigger" in

my presence shows his awareness that its use is not acceptable in every context, and,

although he admits that he, too, uses the term, his statement, "I don't know which is

worse," indicates he is not entirely comfortable with its use. Kanye further qualifies his

use of the word by saying, "I don't feel like because we're black we ever should get to use that against each other. Like, use that word to each other. Like, it's a form of disrespect." For Kanye, saying "nigger" is within the boundary of acting black, as long as no real disrespect, no use of the word "against each other," is intended. The same is not true for his white friend. When she uses the word she crosses a boundary of acceptable behavior and is pulled back by her friends.

Thus, for students at EA, racial identity existed within marked behavioral boundaries that served several important and complicated functions for students. As Kanye's friend Janie found out, the students themselves often policed boundaries of racial performance, even though they were not always sure themselves the meanings they gave to racial categorization, or where these boundaries began and ended. The atmosphere of friendliness at Excellence Academy did not stand in the way of these racial boundaries performing their functions. Identities such as "nerd," "jock," and "cool" held unspoken racialized meanings at EA, and membership in these groups provided students with insider status. The white and Asian "artsy nerds" maintained academic and social power through their tight-knit friendships and artistic abilities. African American students reversed the traditional black/white power differential, gaining social power through their "cool" status and perhaps, as Carter (2005) found, gaining a sense of belonging and self-worth by protecting group membership from outside intrusion. In response, Tom, a white student, sought to regain power by positioning whites as the new victims of racism, excluded from coolness and, ironically, able to identify with Rosa Parks as targets of discrimination. Kanye protected his racial identity by policing the racial language boundary. For him, the ability to use the word, "nigger" represented insider status, and

although he was not sure if his use of the word was acceptable, he was sure that use of the word by his white friend, an outsider, was not. As one of the only African American male honors students in the school, Kanye's use of the insider term may have been especially important to him; although he was in the "smart" classes with the white students, his friends could rest assured that in this regard, Kanye acted black.

Racial Performance and Academic Achievement

As students performed the work of racial boundary keeping, the institution also worked to maintain racial boundaries through its academic tracking practices, and the friendly school environment did nothing to alleviate the damage done by academic racialization processes. For decades scholars have debated both the function and consequences of racial boundaries as related to academic achievement. Educational anthropologist John Ogbu has often been cited in his claim that African American students develop an oppositional identity and reject good grades to avoid accusations of acting white (Tatum, 1997). Widely critiqued for this claim by more recent scholarship, Ogbu (2004) clarifies that it is not the grades themselves students want to avoid; rather, it is the "attitudes and behaviors conducive to making good grades" (p. 28). Carter (2005) argues that many African American and Latino students who fail to succeed academically do so not because they oppose education for fear of "acting white," but because they are not welcomed into an educational system that privileges whiteness. I found that, outwardly, students did not equate academic achievement with acting white, insisting that ascription to racial performance categories had more to do with membership in friendship groups and cultural styles expressed through language and music. For example, when I asked Ryan if people might say a person was acting white because of academic

achievement, she responded hesitantly, "Um, I've never, I've never seen that. But, I have seen it, like, as far as the way people talk or dress, who they hang out with, what they watch, what they listen to. Um, I've seen it in that way."

However, although students did not directly equate academic achievement with acting white, in subtle ways some students confirmed that race and academic achievement were, in fact, related. For example, during our interview, Kanye denied that acting white is equated with academic achievement, but as this interview segment shows, was ambivalent about the subject:

> *MM: Ok, so um, has anybody ever been accused of acting white because they're smart, or in honors classes?*
>
> *Kanye: Mmm, no. Like, all my classes are, like literally, all my classes are honors. They don't like, "Oh you act white," or*
>
> *M: Nobody's ever said that?*
>
> *K: No.*
>
> *M: So it's only about kind of talk, slang expressions*
>
> *K: Yeah, I feel like, cause, because you're white, you're smart, because you're black, you're dumb.*
>
> *M: You don't feel like that, or you do?*
>
> *K: I do feel like that.*
>
> *M: You do feel like that?*
>
> *K: Yeah. Like how, like they was talking about, remember the day we was talking about in class like, like, people from Carletonville,*
>
> *M: Yeah.*
>
> *K: or like, they're like, the black people are mostly focused on athletics, whereas the white people are focused on school, which is why when they come here, the black people are in all the normal classes and the white people are in the honors classes.*

M: Mmhmm.

K: I know besides me and Anthony, that's the only black person that I see in honors classes.

M: Males, at least. Yeah.

K: Yes…other than that, like in the honors chemistry, I don't really see anybody.

M: Yeah. So then I'm trying to understand your answer then. Do people think that if you're smart, it's like you're acting white?

K: No, not my friends.

M: So nobody's ever said that to you,

K: No.

M: but there is kind of this underlying kind of theme that the honors classes are mostly white kids, or

K: which they are.

M: or Asian.

K: They're mostly white or Asian, and they're mostly female.

M: Yes. Right, ok. And so people are aware of that, kind of.

K: Yes.

My trouble getting to the crux of Kanye's meaning during this interview was obvious. Was he or wasn't he saying that he and his peers view academic achievement as acting white? Perhaps Kanye, himself, is unsure of how his position as an honors student affects his racial identity. If acting black involves use of Black English and identification with black cultural styles, then Kanye acts black. But if acting white involves placement in honors classes, then Kanye acts white. Kanye seems to be saying that although his black friends have never accused him, personally, of acting white, they are aware that

white and Asian students mostly populate the honors classes. Therefore, among these students whiteness was associated with academic achievement, but crossover into academic success for students like Kanye was allowed and maybe even coveted by his African American friends.

Anthony, the other African American male in the 11th grade honors class, also both affirmed and denied that race was linked to academic success:

> *MM: Some kids have talked about this whole notion of acting white,*
>
> *Anthony: (interrupting) Oh, yeah!*
>
> *M: and acting black. That, that comes up a lot*
>
> *A: Yeah*
>
> *M: among students. In what ways does it come up, in your, from your perspective?*
>
> *A: So, let's see. Acting white is more, uh, not being studious, but kind of like, studying all the time, the nerd, the, uh, being in the house, not going to parties, and just, the way you talk also. Like, you laugh at different things, like, you don't listen to a certain kind of music. Like if you listen to, like, country, or that pop stuff, like Lady, not Lady, yeah, no, not really Lady GaGa*
>
> *M: I know what you mean.*
>
> *A: But, you know what I mean?*
>
> *M: Yeah.*
>
> *A: Like, like, the bands, like One Direction, like all that goes into acting white. So like, I know, my best friend is criticized all the time for acting white…*
>
> *M: Because of the music she likes.*
>
> *A: Because of the music she likes, how she acts, like the, even the clothes she wears!*
>
> *M: And so she's criticized by black kids?*
>
> *A: Yeah!*

M: For acting - ok.

A: Mmhmm…Definitely. I mean, like with me, I guess you can say I don't really get teased for acting white, but I get teased because I am black. I don't act white, but I have white friends. And I am in classes with white people.

M: 'Cause you're in honors classes.

A: Exactly. So I don't really, you know what I mean? I don't really have, I don't have that, I don't act that way? But, I, I guess, it's because I'm still there.

M: Yeah. Right, because of who you associate with.

A: Yeah.

M: And is it kind of a good natured teasing? Or is it

A: (interrupts) Nah, no, definitely not.

M: (laughs) It's not good natured? It's, like, serious?

A: No, not serious. It's like, "Oh man, he's gonna go to his white friends. Just, just go ahead."

Like Kanye, Anthony demonstrates ambivalence in his understanding of the relationship between race and academic achievement. For the most part, he equates acting white with musical taste, clothing style, language, and friendships. However, he also associates acting white with nerdiness and with "not being studious" but "studying all the time." He admits that his black friends tease him, not for acting white through speech or cultural styles, but for his proximity to white people both in his friendships and because of his academic placement in honors classes. The fact that Kanye and Anthony situate race with academic achievement while denying that they are related speaks to the complexity of the issue for them and other students, and the simultaneous levels on which the ascribing and monitoring of racial identity functions. Students are caught between the performance of race in every day behaviors, an area that they control, and the school's

academic tracking practices that function to segregate students through class placement,

an area that is beyond students' jurisdiction.

Samar did not talk with me about racial performance boundaries, but made it clear

that he equated whiteness with academic achievement through the following scene that

took place in the 11th grade on level class:

> *Samar, Chris (both African American), Jack (white), and several other students are working together in a group at table five. The group has chosen Jack as their leader, and Samar does not look happy about this. They begin to banter, Samar making several sarcastic references to Jack's ability to lead. The other group members chat about unrelated topics during this exchange.*
>
> *Samar: I wish I got good grades like Jack so I could lead. Great leading, Jack.*
>
> *Jack: You can lead if you want.*
>
> *Samar: My skin color stops me from leading.*
>
> *Jack looks surprised. He glances at Chris, who is sitting directly opposite him. They both smirk and shake their heads at Samar's words.*
>
> *Samar: Chris isn't black.*
>
> *Chris: (surprised) I'm not?*

I found out after this incident that Samar was upset because Joann had told him he

was failing the class. Samar's words, "my skin color stops me from leading" show that he

felt his race was connected to his inability to succeed academically. What's more,

Samar's barb, "Chris isn't black," is meant as an attack on Chris because of his friendship

with Jack (who is white and who had recently received school recognition for good

grades). During that moment of frustration, in Samar's view, Chris had abandoned his

blackness and had gone over to the other side.

Therefore, although students insisted that acting white was not equated with being

smart, there was a clear acknowledgment among African American males, in particular,

that few of them populated the honors classes; this was a boundary that few were willing or able to cross. Their black friends did not accuse the two male African American honors students in the 11th grade of acting white. They both told me that other black students respected their academic success, looked up to them, and wished they could do the same. Samar equated his skin color with his poor grades in anger; he was upset about his failing grade. The usually self-assured Rihanna, also an on level student, put her head down on the desk and cried one day when, as per school policy, Joann would not accept a late homework assignment. Another African American on level student, Daniel, told me angrily several times that he didn't belong in that class and couldn't wait to get back into the honors class. Although Daniel was a high scorer on the PSAT exam (a pretest meant to prepare students for college entrance exams – I saw his scores because he waved them around the room, bragging, when he received them), he lacked the required grades to be placed in the honors class. These students clearly cared about their education. None were discipline problems, and all participated in class discussions with insight and creativity. Yet, they were unable or unwilling to meet the requirements of entry into the honors class. Thus, from the perspective of many students, race and academic success were interrelated at EA, and many felt powerless to advance academically the way they wished. Daniel's anger, Rihanna's tears, and Samar's frustration point to this feeling of powerlessness.

Lukes (2005) posits that power functions most effectively when people "accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable" (p. 28). In spite of the frustration these students showed about their academic failings, they seemed at some level to accept their place in the on level class. Stoughton and Sivertson (2005) found that,

in a middle school with a racial demographic almost identical to that of EA, white and African American students naturalized and took for granted the white/black dichotomy that existed in the academically tracked classes, and this seemed to be the case at EA. While black students at EA did not avoid academic achievement because they might be accused of acting white, many of them did seem to accept their underrepresentation in honors classes as the natural order of school life, wishing they could achieve, but unable to cross the boundary that functioned to keep whites at the top of the school's academic hierarchy. As Anthony noted:

> *...our valedictorian is white, our second in line would be white, and our third, she is, well, Asian, I guess?...But, and then fourth, white. Fifth, white. Sixth white. Seventh white. I don't think, it goes like eighth and ninth, and then you might, I think they're like right next to each other, they'll be black. And then white, white, white, white, white.*

The Complicity of Adults

Teachers and administrators, too, played a role in policing racial boundaries by naturalizing racialized assumptions about academic ability. Anthony told me that it was standard practice for Linda, the school guidance counselor, to refuse African American males entrance into advanced placement classes before checking their actual grades. He described the following scene between his friend and the guidance counselor:

> *Yeah, my friend... he said, "These are the classes I wanna take."*
>
> *And she said, "Uh, I don't know if you're gonna be able to take these classes."*
>
> *"Why not?"*
>
> *She said, "I just don't know if it's gonna be a good idea." She pulled up his grades, and he has like 3.5, 3.6. She said, "Oh! Really? Wow! I didn't know you were doing this well! That, oh, okay, of course you can take these classes!"*

Further, Anthony described how a different African American friend was kept out

of the same class:

> *He wanted to take an AP class. He, alls you have to do is get a parent's signature,*
> *and a teacher's signature. The teacher signed off for the AP class. So he goes*
> *downstairs, gets it, and shows her the paper, she pulls up his grades, and then,*
> *she's like, "Ahh, you aren't doing bad, but I don't know if you'll be able to handle*
> *it." And, he's quieter, so he didn't really stand up for himself, so now he's not*
> *gonna take that class, because she said that he couldn't handle it.*

Of course, I feel certain that Linda would deny this allegation and insist that class

placement is based solely on academic merit. Unfortunately, I did not have the

opportunity to interview Linda about the school's placement practices and I have no way

of knowing whether or not Anthony's version of his friend's experience is accurate. I do

know, however, that on several occasions Joann and other teachers confirmed to me that

there was more leeway in students' academic placement than was admitted to students;

because of the smallness of the school and the limited number of classes offered,

sometimes grade requirements for higher tracked classes were lifted in order to make

students' schedules work. Whether the decision regarding Anthony's friend's placement

was just or unjust, it's important to note Anthony and his friends believed that racial bias

existed within the school's academic placement practices.

In another case, teachers and administrators naturalized the racialized hierarchy

inherent in academic tracking practices by policing the boundary of curriculum assigned

for the differently tracked classes. Both Joann and Megan (the curriculum coordinator)

confirmed to me that because teachers believed that the on level students lacked the

"maturity" needed to handle the serious nature of the content in *The Bluest Eye*

(specifically, incest/rape), only the 11th grade honors class was allowed to read

Morrison's novel; the on level class was assigned *The Catcher in the Rye*, instead. Megan explained:

> *I feel like they have the ability to discuss it and be more comfortable with it, because they see it as an author's choice, and not a (pause) shocking crime (smiles)…I'm not saying that – unfortunately, the classes aren't perfectly level, and you're never gonna have – I'm saying maybe some of the on level students absolutely could read it and experience it, but it was a decision made because of the intense portions of the book…Something that needed that maturity, that it wasn't a joke…it was a decision based off of the fact that we needed to discuss it as intellectual adults, not run around looking at it as pornography.*

First, Megan acknowledges that the classes (supposedly tracked on the basis of grades alone) are not "perfectly level," admitting that students of varying ability or maturity populate the classes. Second, even assuming that students are justly placed according to academic merit, in making the decision to keep the on level class from reading *The Bluest Eye,* teachers and administrators conflated emotional maturity with academic ability in students. Therefore, the on level students (ironically, the majority of them African Americans) were kept from a text that might stimulate discussion and empower their thinking about important social issues that directly impact their daily lives.

Not only were the students in the on level class deemed too immature for the text, teachers and administrators believed that their parents, too, were not mature enough to understand the value of this text for their children. While Megan admitted that *The Bluest Eye* was excluded from the on level curriculum because of fear of parental challenges, Joann was more descriptive in her explanation of the curricular decision:

> *My impression is, we can't have parents calling in and complaining. But if you do it with honors kids, their parents can listen to a rationale and respond to that calmly. But if you do it with an on level kid, it's going to be some uneducated person that calls you up, screaming and cursing at you…on voicemail…that's out of control, storms into the building. I mean, there are stories of this, but it's definitely an unsaid prejudice, I think. That on level kids – I think it's, I guess a class thing.*

Therefore, students in the 11th grade on level class were denied the right to study an important text not because of pedagogical considerations, but because of a complicated series of logical missteps that were fueled by race and social class bias. First, the on level students' academic ability level was conflated with their emotional maturity when it was assumed that these students would, in Megan's words, "run around looking at" *The Bluest Eye* "as pornography." Second, administrators connected the students' academic level with the family's socioeconomic status, which was then seen as an indication of parents' level of education and propensity toward violent reactions. In addition, race is an unspoken factor in this decision because Joann's mention of social class as an explanation for poor parental behavior points to students from the most economically under-resourced surrounding areas, which are largely African American. I'm not sure to what extent that type of bias existed among the staff, but certainly, it was present; Joann told me that a school administrator labeled the African American parent of an on level student as "ignorant" for arguing with teachers about her child's grades. Further, while Joann recognized the class prejudice that informed the decision to keep the Morrison text out of the on level class, by not mentioning race she naturalized the racial implications of the decision. In this way, through naturalized assumptions about students and their parents, teachers and administrators at Excellence Academy worked to keep the racialized boundary of academic placement secure. The friendly, harmonious school environment did nothing to protect students of color from biased judgments about them and their families that ultimately limited their educational opportunities. Instead, teachers'

perceptions of the racial harmony at the school may have stood in the way of their taking a much needed closer look at the negative[32] impact of pedagogical decisions on students.

This chapter has shown that within the friendly environment of Excellence Academy, students constructed racial performance categories and sometimes policed the borders around them in a struggle to maintain power through social status. At the same time, teachers and administrators granted or denied academic power by preserving the naturalized racialization of academic tracking and by limiting educational opportunities based on misconstrued conflations of race, social class, and emotional maturity. This being the case, one might wonder if the positive effects of the cross-racial friendships that were the source of pride at the school were as far-reaching as they seemed. The safe, calm, friendly environment that prevailed at EA daily is to be admired and preserved. However, in the midst of this friendly environment, students were both producers and products of racialization processes that perpetuated power structures among them.

---

[32] I do not mean to imply that the inclusion of *The Catcher in the Rye* in the 11th grade on level curriculum impacted students in the class negatively. Rather, I argue that although *The Catcher in the Rye* has much value for classroom use, omitting *The Bluest Eye* from the curriculum had negative consequences because it prevented students in that class from engaging deeply with the topic of racism.

Chapter Three

Anger Among Friends: Beneath the Surface of "We All Get Along"

When I asked students and teachers to describe the racial atmosphere at

Excellence Academy, I typically received hearty assurances that "we all get along here."

Some students and teachers favorably compared EA to other school experiences where

there were frequent fights in the hallways or other signs of overt racial tensions. Juliette,

an African American student, said of her old school in a neighboring white suburb,

"People would be disrespectful and talk about my color…it was very obvious that people

didn't like me because of my skin tone." Juliette was clear that she had never had this

experience at EA. As I've noted previously, I witnessed several close friendships and

many moments of playful intimacy among students of varying racial backgrounds. In

many respects the claim of racial harmony among students and faculty rang true; a safe,

friendly, daily atmosphere was an important characteristic of the school. However,

despite the prevalent belief that "we all get along here," racial identity for students and

teachers was nuanced by tensions about race. Beah, Thein and Parks (2008) note that

students are often inexperienced in talking about race in public settings, and white

students in particular are often reluctant to do so; I found that same reluctance in many

students at Excellence Academy. As a result, while students felt comfortable enough with

each other to joke about racial difference, when class discussions of multicultural

literature focused on racial power, privilege, and structural inequity, students expressed

frustration, resentment, and anger at the marginalization they perceived. White teachers,

as well, were anxious and worried about possible student accusations of perceived racism.

This chapter will examine the tensions that existed beneath the surface in an outwardly tranquil environment where present day racial inequity was not often discussed. For both students and teachers, racial identity at Excellence Academy was infused with feelings of marginalization, victimization, and fear. In the case of one 10th grade class, these feelings flared dramatically during a discussion of the text, *A Long Way Gone*.

Getting Along

Making Fun of Race

There is no doubt that the students in Joann's classes were comfortable with each other; so comfortable, in fact, that it was common for them to joke about race and racism. Radha, an Indian student whose close friendship circle included whites and other Asians (the "artsy nerds" that I described in the last chapter), told me laughingly that, "…like, no one cares, and if anything we just make fun of, um, race." Students did "make fun" of race in a variety of ways. One day John, a white tenth grader who often operated as the class clown, sat next to Marc, a tall, quiet African American male, who was eating a ham sandwich out of a brown paper bag. John began to beg Marc over and over again, "Marc, do you have any crackas? I like crackas, Marc. Do you like crackas?" Marc, smirking, responded, "Why are you so weird?" while the other students at the table laughed. John's joke was as clever as it was comical, since his use of a racial slur, "cracka," was nebulous enough to allow him to cry innocence had Joann overheard him. A student might easily say of someone sitting nearby, "Oh, you give him candy but not me? Are you racist?"[33] The student in possession of the candy might just as easily laugh and toss a piece over. Sometimes, students used their race joking to make teachers uncomfortable, as when

---

[33] This example is representative of many such similar interactions I witnessed that took place over candy, chips, cookies, or even a pen or pencil.

Andrew, an African American male, teased Becca, a white female, by reporting to Joann that Becca had called him a monkey. "Did you?" Joann asked seriously, ready to shift into discipline mode if need be. The usually calm Becca turned bright pink and insisted, "I certainly did not!" and again, the students around them, both African American and white, laughed. Ron and James, two white 11th graders, had a standing joke with Joann in which they accused her of being "racist against Italians." Joann usually laughed this off, but once in a while reprimanded them, saying they'd "gone too far" in their joke. "Someone is going to hear you and take you seriously," she said sternly one of these times.[34]

Pettigrew (2012), who studied secondary students at Kingsland, a British multicultural, urban school, found that despite the staff's disapproval, "the prevalence of racialized language, 'banter,' and joking discourse among and across collective groupings was markedly pronounced" (p. 3). Kingsland students claimed that their freedom to joke about race, even telling racial jokes that some would deem offensive, was evidence that they were not racist. Kromidas (2012) found among elementary aged children in a multiracial New York City school that students used humor as a playful means to redefine racial politics. In one particular case, such humor was acceptable in the context of friendship and the student's known antiracist position. Students at EA joked about race, but unlike Kingsland students they did not tell blatantly racist jokes. At times their jokes about race were made in the context of friendship: Becca and Andrew, for example, always sat at the same table and were obviously friendly during school hours. According to Radha, joking about race among her friends indicated an antiracist stance. She

---

[34] I believe that if students of color had been teasing Joann about being racist, she would have reacted to their teasing much more seriously.

believed that their tendency to "make fun" of race with one another was their way of

suggesting that their close friendships would not be marred by racism.[35]

At the same time, playful references regarding race at EA were not always made

within the context of students' friendships, nor were they always indicative of an

antiracist stance. John and Marc were not friends, and there was nothing particularly

antiracist about John's status in the class. In fact, on a student questionnaire (used by

Joann in response to a heated argument about racism that I will describe later in this

chapter), John responded to the question, "Do you think talking about racism can help

improve society in any way?" with a simple, "No," showing that John did not think it

important to address the issue of racism in class discussions. Other students who joked

about race, such as Ron and James, did claim to have close friendships with students of

color, but actively resisted discussing race and the very idea that racism still exists.[36]

Therefore, race joking served different functions for different students at

Excellence Academy. For Radha's friendship group, on one level, it indicated a relaxed

friendship and a desire to rise above the traditional restraints of racism. On another level,

though, joking about race allowed the "artsy nerds" to declare themselves non-racist

without actually establishing and maintaining friendships with African American students,

or even including them in small group discussions assigned by Joann (as I will describe

below). Others teased about race to illicit a response from their teacher, and possibly to

make her feel uncomfortable. White students like John, Ron and James, resisted

---

[35]It is important to note that Radha's clique was comprised of only white and Asian students, and no African Americans. While I am not implying that these white and Asian students were racist because their friendship group didn't include African Americans, I do think it's significant that they stayed within their comfort zone in their cross-racial friendships; i.e., that whites in this group formed friendships only with members of the "model minority" group (members of groups who are stereotypically perceived to be higher achieving) (Wong, Lai, Nagasawa & Lin, 1998).

[36] Ron and James were members of the 11th grade honors class, and their responses to the *The Bluest Eye* will be explored in a subsequent chapter.

discussing racism in the classroom, but freely joked about it during informal moments. Perhaps this combination of joking and resistance indicated that, ill equipped through inexperience to deal with the topic of structural racism and white privilege in present day society, students created their own spaces to address race. Joking about race allowed students to acknowledge the racial difference that surrounded them in their daily school lives without examining the racial hierarchies that exist at school and in society. When Joann brought discussions of racial inequity into her curriculum, taking the topic of race out of the realm of playing with difference and into discussions of power and access, the joking was often replaced with anger on the part of white students.

Revisiting Students' Self-Segregation

In the midst of the relaxed, joking atmosphere at EA, as I described in the previous chapter, students' racial self-segregation was prevalent. I revisit this practice here because, while self-segregation was not exclusionary, there were times that students' seating choices were nuanced by racial tensions. For example, when Joann asked Cathy, a white, 11th grade honors student, to move away from her white friends to a table where African American students were seated, Cathy refused, and, in Joann's words, "looked horrified." Joann then asked her, "Do you feel really strongly about this?" Cathy said, "Yes," and was allowed to remain with her white friends. In the 10th grade honors class, Ryan, an African American female, was equally reluctant to join a group of white and Asian students for a class discussion (the "artsy nerds"), even though Joann had assigned her to that table. She sat quietly on the couch next to the table while the white and Asian students ignored her. I noticed Ryan's hesitancy to interact with the group and asked her if it was because she wasn't friends with the people at the table. "No, not that," she

answered, "I just don't like to break into a group." Nevertheless, I'd seen Ryan in this situation before and had noticed that she tended to quietly change her seat without Joann's permission in order to sit with the African American or Latina students during group activities. Ryan and Cathy's experiences illustrate the "subtle exclusion" among students that Lewis (2006) describes, expressed in "a certain look" or "a certain tone of voice" (p. 138). I'm not suggesting that it is unusual for adolescents to feel awkward with those not in their immediate friendship groups, but, I am suggesting that in a school where "we all get along" was the party line, these incidents complicated that claim; at EA, "getting along" meant the absence of overt racial conflict and did not necessarily suggest that racial divides and marginalization did not occur. And, while students may not have meant or even recognized these behaviors as marginalizing, nevertheless, there were times that their actions had that effect.

Noticing Marginalization

Black History Month

African American students noticed their marginalization in ways less routine than students' seating choices. One of these ways came to light in relation to the school's handling of Black History Month. Thomas (2011) warns of the danger of tokenistic multicultural programming, or "banal multiculturalism" (p. 5), with purposes that "are unexplained and uncontextualized to students" (p. 4). Such programming (sometimes referred to as *uncritical multiculturalism*) is problematic because it places racial identity "within a narrow definition of cultural expression" (p. 5). Through token celebrations, students come to believe that racial equality is a matter of recognition, allowing them to remain uninformed of how past and present racial discrimination directly impacts their

lives. Thomas warns that uncritical multiculturalism is likely to cause resentment in students of color; this, for many, was the case at EA, where African American students were aware that the school's attempt at multicultural recognition through the celebration of Black History Month was feeble at best.

Every morning in Home Base during the month of February a largely inaudible announcement was made, presumably honoring the achievement of African Americans in some way. We all chatted uninterrupted through these announcements until Joann reminded students to get quiet for the reciting of the school code of conduct and the Pledge of Allegiance that followed. Other than an assembly program that I will describe shortly, these announcements were the only school wide acknowledgement of Black History Month. An African American staff person who had access to many classrooms over several years (and nervously asked that I not divulge any identifying information) told me that as memory served, nothing concrete in the classroom had been done to help students explore their African American identity at school. Further, Joann's attempt to include more African American history into her curriculum was not wholeheartedly supported by school administration. Because in previous years her African American students had complained that their classes did not talk enough about race, Joann had argued to stretch an 11th grade unit on the Harlem Renaissance from three to nine days, although she feared her determination might result in a negative evaluation at the end of the school year. Although Joann was willing, lack of administrative support limited the amount of time students spent exploring Black History Month.[37]

---

[37] I will explore this lack of support further in Chapter Four.

The one significant event offered to students in celebration of Black History Month was a late-day school assembly featuring a West African dance troupe, an interesting choice on the part of the administration since, other than the fact that the American slave trade derived its victims from West Africa, the program had nothing to do with American Black History. I entered the gym with the students that afternoon, sensing their excitement at the chance to get out of class for a while and do something fun. I was surprised to see that all three members of the dance troupe were white.[38] The vibrant drumbeats kept the students engaged and many danced at their seats or jumped up to join Joy, the main dancer, in a line at the front of the gym comprised mostly of African American students, with a few white students on the end. This continued through several numbers, and then Joy introduced a "warrior song" that, she said, symbolizes "all those who choose to stand in solidarity with those who struggled in West Africa and in the Civil Rights Movement."[39] She then asked the students, "Y'all study Martin Luther King, Jr., right?" A group of African American students sitting near the front shouted in unison and without hesitation, "No!" Joy looked surprised, but continued, "…and Malcolm X, right?" Again, there was a loud "No!" from these students. Joann and I exchanged looks from the sidelines, surprised at the immediacy and cohesion of the students' reaction. It was as if these students knew Joy's questions were coming and had rehearsed their response, but, of course, they had not. The immediacy and cohesion of the students' responses show that they had noticed the absence of these important historical figures in their curriculum. Social studies teacher Lisa was especially upset by the students'

---

[38] One might argue that these performers, well intentioned as they were, serve as an example of white appropriation of someone else's culture and history for their own gain.

[39] A characteristic of uncritical multiculturalism is its lack of accurate historical context. Joy conflated events that were centuries apart with no explanation.

reaction to Joy's questions, claiming that, yes, they did "go over" Martin Luther King, Jr. in her classes. While I don't doubt her word, from these African American students' perspective the time spent on African American history was inadequate.

In 11th grader Kanye's view, EA was not the only school in the area that largely neglected the study of African American history. He told me in frustration that his old school in Carletonville, a school with a black student population of fifty percent, "never" celebrated Black History Month. "But as soon as, like, Hispanic Heritage Month come around," he complained, "it's, like, parties, all that." Kanye's complaint illustrates Thomas' (2011) point that ethnic celebrations at schools can exacerbate racial tensions because of the vying for recognition these events cause among students. Like the girls that Thomas interviewed, Kanye expressed a "wounded otherness" (p. 43) at his perceived exclusion, and felt resentment toward another group, in this case Hispanics, that he believed got more attention from school administration. In reality, Thomas argues, no students benefit from the recognition these tokenistic celebrations bring because they divert attention from the reality of racial injustice that impacts their lives. Still, in the lived experience of students like Kanye, recognition was important, and the school administration's failure in this respect left them feeling slighted and resentful.[40]

The Case of the Yellow Posters

During my interview with Kanye he told me that he'd never experienced racism. However, when I asked if kids at school talked about race, he said the following:

> *Kanye: Yes, about the school, like how the teachers, they think some of the teachers are racist.*

---

[40] Violet and Juliette, two African American females in Kanye's class, also expressed their disappointment that so little time was spent on African American history and on the Harlem Renaissance unit specifically. More will be said about this in the next chapter.

MM: Oh really? Why do they think that? What kinds of things do teachers do that might make kids think that?

K: Like if a group of African Americans are talking, they would be like, "Be quiet and do your work." But soon as the Caucasian kids start talking, they be like, they won't even care. They just single every black person out in the class.

M: Hmm. And that happens pretty often, people feel like?

K: Yeah.

M: Has that, have you experienced that?

K: Yes.

The fact that, at first, Kanye did not recognize the favoring of white students over African Americans as a form of racism speaks to his own ambivalence about racism, and perhaps to the ambivalent nature of race relations at the school. As friendly as the school was, Kanye indicated that the word was out among the black students: when it came to classroom disciplinary matters, they believed that white teachers favored white students. Although Kanye admitted that he, himself, had experienced this favoring system, he did not immediately recognize it as racism. A bit later in the interview Kanye related other incidents of racism that he or his family had experienced: he had been followed around by store personnel as if he intended to steal merchandise, and when his sister and her white friend applied for the same retail position, the white friend received the job even though Kanye's sister had more work experience. Of the change in his position during our interview, Kanye explained, "I just had to think about it." Kanye's responses show that he is in the process of figuring out what behaviors constitute racism and what impact these behaviors have on him, personally. In terms of student-teacher race relations, the ethos of racial harmony that exists at the school further complicates Kanye's process, because to admit that white teachers favor white students challenges this ethos.

Anthony described the dilemma African American students faced over their treatment by white teachers in a more nuanced way one day during a class discussion of *The Bluest Eye.* James, a white student, had insisted that "people are too sensitive" about race. Challenging dominant beliefs by utilizing counter narrative (Kumasi, 2011, Taylor, 2009), Anthony responded with this story:

> *Suppose a teacher singled out a certain group of kids for not doing their homework. I don't want to say what group – we'll just call them the – (glances up at yellow poster on wall) – "yellow posters." If all the yellow posters in the room get told, you didn't do your homework, even though some other kids, say, the "blue posters," didn't do their homework either, then they start to wonder, are we being singled out? But the truth is, they really didn't do their homework!*

The discussion continued along these lines for several minutes, the class laughing every time Anthony used his poster analogy. He then told the story of how he'd recently been stopped by the police while on the way to play basketball with his dad and a few friends. Since the gym was close to home and since he had no pockets in his gym attire, Anthony's father had left the house without his driver's license. A few blocks away from home they were stopped at a road block, where four police officers "jumped out of the cop car," ordered everyone out, handcuffed Anthony's father and pushed him against the car, and told Anthony to take his hands out of his pockets. Anthony's description of how the police found a bag of popcorn in the back seat and searched it for drugs provoked more laughter from the class.

Anthony used this example to illustrate that he and his father, like the "yellow posters," will never be sure of how much their race played a part in the events of that evening. The fact was that Anthony's father had no I.D. on him. Still, would they have received the same treatment by the police if they had been white? Anthony described quite adeptly the dilemma that he and other people of color face regarding racial profiling

– are they being singled out because of their race, or not? When Kanye remembered that store employees had followed him around retail stores, he assumed it was because he is black, but, he said, "maybe it's just ironic[41] that I was being followed around." Still, Kanye had noticed that store personnel had left whites of the same age alone. Perry (2008), a white college professor, relates the story of how a black college student accused her of racism when she inadvertently singled out the student for talking; a white student had been talking too, but Perry hadn't been able to remember the white student's name and so said nothing to her. A faulty memory may have been the cause of Perry's action, but from that African American student's perspective, race had been involved. Sue et al. (2007) refer to interactions such as those described by Kanye and Anthony as *racial microaggressions*: "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to people of color" (p. 273). They describe the difficulty faced by people of color in determining if a microaggression has taken place, and the tendency to rely on patterns of past experience to make this determination. Bell (1992) explains, in the past racism was pronouncedly more visible and easy to recognize. Now that "bias is masked in unofficial practices" African Americans must "wrestle with the question whether race or some individual failing has cost us the job, denied us the promotion, or prompted our being rejected as tenants for an apartment" (p. 6). Anthony's narratives were meant to illustrate the doubt that he and others experienced as possible targets of racial profiling; while there may have been legitimate reasons for their negative interactions with whites, as in the case of the "yellow posters" at EA, it was impossible to know for sure if race had played a part.

      Anthony laughed through the telling of his brush with the police, making the class

---

[41] From the context of our conversation, I believe that Kanye meant to use the word, "coincidental" here.

laugh with him. When I suggested that, although we're laughing now, the incident probably wasn't funny when it happened, he largely brushed off that idea. A few minutes later, though, Anthony admitted to the class that he was angry that night, and that he and his dad "got the cops' badge numbers," but never followed through with a complaint. Even though he was angry about the incident, perhaps Anthony chose a comedic style for his narrative because humor is the only tool at students' disposal to deal with the serious topic of racism without challenging the discourse of racial harmony at EA.[42]

Juliette expressed a similar ambiguity when she referred to the lack of African American teachers at the school. She said, "I'm not saying it's intentional. It's not intentional, but it's odd, that's all. My mother said, 'Can't they find any African American teachers at that school?'" Therefore, sometimes African American students felt sure about their marginalization, but at other times it was the not knowing, the uncertainty of racial favoring that added to the tensions they felt in this supposedly harmonious setting.

What's in a Word? Tensions Over Language

"Is it okay to say that?"

In her study of a racially mixed, white-minority high school, Pollock (2004) noted hesitancy and confusion from students and teachers regarding whether, when, and how to talk about race (p. 9). Lewis-Charp (2003) found that white high school students were uncomfortable talking about race partly due to unfamiliarity with racial terms. Likewise, Trainor (2008) reported that white students had trouble negotiating the terms, "colored,"

---

[42] Anthony shared his narratives at the end of the 11th grade unit on *The Bluest Eye*, taking great pains to explain his position in a way that would not offend his white friends and that they would understand. As subsequent chapters will show, these white friends did not show they understood Anthony's perspective.

"black," and "African American."[43] Similarly, racial tensions surfaced at EA over use of

the term "black" as a racial descriptor during a 10th grade honors class group discussion

of "A Class Divided," the documentary based on the famous "brown eyed/blue eyed" role

play exercise that third grade teacher Jane Elliot conducted with her students in 1968.

The day after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, Elliot explored the nature of

discrimination with her white class by dividing them according to eye color and, on

consecutive days, encouraging the ill treatment of one group by the other.[44] I'd asked the

students what they thought of the video, knowing that it usually provokes strong

emotional responses about the evils of racism. To my surprise, this was not the response I

received that day. Instead, Ned, a white student, observed that if this exercise were done

today, Elliot would be viewed as racist because of the language she used. Puzzled, I

asked what he meant.

> *Ned: Well, like, she uses the term 'black.' If she said that now she'd be called racist.*
>
> *MM: So just using the term black is racist? Like as opposed to African American?*
>
> *N: I feel like it's seen that way. Like, if I pointed to someone across the street and said, "That black guy over there," that would be seen as racist.*
>
> *M: Just for using the word to identity someone?*
>
> *N: Yeah.*

Hannah, an African American student, tried to help Ned understand how to use

the term black appropriately. She explained:

---

[43] I've often noticed this tendency on the part of my own white college students and other white adults (for example, the uncertain white speaker who uses air-quotes around the word "black" to mitigate use of a potentially politically incorrect or offensive term).

[44] While one might wonder what a modern Institutional Review Board might make of Elliot's "lesson," the original 1970 documentary describing the exercise was widely heralded as a groundbreaking exploration of racism. An updated version of the documentary is still being shown to students and other groups today.

It depends on how you say it. Like, if you just say, "that black girl" (keeps voice light and even) it's not, but if you say, "that black *girl" (voice deepens, showing distaste on the word* black*), then it's racist.*

While many students did use the terms "black" and "African American" interchangeably, for others, like Ned, "black" was not a neutral term, but was instead a racial slur. Hannah's explanation reinforced the idea that use of the term is risky business because if said in the wrong tone of voice, use of the word "black" might leave one open to accusations of racism.

I followed up with Ned during an interview:

MM: There was one day when, um, we were talking at your table. And you guys were, some of the people at your table, mostly the guys, I guess, were saying that they were amazed at the fact that the teacher in the video used the terminology "black"

Ned: (interrupts) Yeah

M: so freely, because you felt that if she were to do that today, people would accuse her of racism.

N: Yeah. Um, that's a clear example of, um, someone modern day just trying to call someone out for being racist, even if it's just saying the color of their skin. Like, uh, if an African American, if I went over and I called an African American "black," he would, stereotypically, he might come over and think I'm racist just because I called him black instead of African American. Same way for a black calling a white, like, "cracker" or something. If he came over and did that to him, he, the white, would think that he's being racist, cause he's calling him a derogative name.

M: Uh huh. So you think that the word black itself is a racial slur now, where it used to be just kind of a descriptive word?

N: I don't even want it to be a racist term. If you don't, I don't want to say (pause), all right, if, if you don't like being called a black, then you shouldn't be calling your other black friends "blackie" or that kind of stuff.

M: Has anybody ever, like, made it, has anyone ever made you feel like when you used that term, like, it offended them?

N: I try to stay away from saying anything like that.

M: So you haven't ever had that experience?

N: Yeah.

M: It's just kind of an idea that you've pick up just from kind of being around

N: being raised

M: people.

N: Yeah.

This conversation reveals much of what Ned thinks and feels about race. His use of the phrases, "if I went over," and "he might come over" indicate his awareness of the racial self-segregation that is prevalent at the school, since in his fictional scenario students are spatially segregated according to race. Once he travels "over" to talk, Ned envisions being accused of racism because he uses an improper racial descriptor. Although Ned has never actually had this experience, he has somehow internalized the fear of accusation. His statement, "I don't even want it to be a racist term" shows that he, himself, would have no racist intentions in using the word "black," but also reveals his discomfort over the situation. Thomas (2011) found that female students felt threatened and harassed by "stares" or "looks" from students of other backgrounds, but, the students admitted, "'…you can't really prove it'" (p. 103). She believes that the girls' fears are "indicative of the paranoid processes motivating girls' spatial practices at school" (p. 104). In the same way, Ned shows a certain paranoia in the scenario he creates over use of the term, "black."

Perhaps it is inexperience that leads Ned, who told me that his neighborhood was "ninety-eight per cent white," to equate the word "black" with "cracker," a word that students clearly understood to be a racial slur toward whites. Admittedly, the number of

racial descriptors available in English and the complex history of these words present a

challenge for many people, youth and adults alike, who are unsure of how to use these

terms correctly and inoffensively. However, as the conversation surrounding the Elliot

documentary continued that day in class, it became evident that some white students'

hesitation over the term "black" masked their resentment over their perception that

African Americans unfairly use their race to their advantage. During that class discussion,

Bill, Ned's friend and also white, stated his belief that racism is used as an excuse for

"people" to get what they want. "Like," he said, "if you budge in front of someone on

line and he says it's because of race when it isn't." Ned agreed, noting, "people just say

someone is being racist toward them if they don't like what the person does, even though

it has nothing to do with race." He explained, "That's why I don't think racism exists.

People just use it as an excuse."

Bill confirmed this line of reasoning during our interview. I asked if he thought

Elliot's use of the term "black" would lead to accusations of racism today.

> *Bill: Well, I think that it's just people trying to, like, contort society to get what they want.*
>
> *MM: What people?*
>
> *B: People that, that are not, that are not, again, not being, like, trying not to be racist here, but, that are not of what they think is the best class, of the best race, the best class of people. Um, and they're trying to use societal pressures on people to make them change. Um, like, I don't think, like, anyone, like, people, teachers use the word, like, for Aryan, they use the word, like, white. Which, that doesn't offend anybody. But all of a sudden you pull up the other color, other colors, like, uh, black, um, yellow, that, and all of a sudden, bam! You're off on a whole racist trant. Um, I think it's because that people who were treated unfairly back then feel like they need to get back at the people that were, that were mistreating them.*
>
> *M: So you think that people of color*

B: Mmm

M: are, um, kind of jump down people's throats for using those terms?

B: Yes.

M: And it's because they suffered so much in the past that now they think it's, like, their turn to be on top, or

B: To be

M: to get back at

B: to get back at society.

M: at, at whites, basically?

B: Yes.

Much of what Bill said in this part of our interview indicates that he, like Ned, lacks the experience to use racial descriptors in context. For example, Bill's use of the term "Aryan" as a synonym for "white," a term made famous by the Nazis and not widely used outside of extremist groups, is curious, but perhaps Bill's use of the word can be explained by the fact that he'd recently heard it many times during the unit on *Night*. Additionally, Bill does not understand why the racial descriptor "white" is acceptable, but the terms "black" and "yellow" are not. Here he not only mischaracterizes "black" as a racial slur, but is unaware of the historical racism toward certain Asians groups that the term "yellow" connotes. It is also possible that, although the term "black" is not regarded as a racial slur and was used freely by other students at EA, Bill may have heard whites say the word in the same derogatory tone that Hannah described above.

Bill's comments reveal the tension that underlies his complaints over the use of racial descriptors. Bill believes that people of color, people who, he says, are "not of what *they* think is the best class, of the best race, the best class of people" unfairly accuse

whites of racism in order to "get what they want." It is not clear who "they" are in Bill's

narration. Is Bill suggesting that "they," people of color, think poorly of themselves, or

does Bill mean by this that society at large thinks poorly of people of color? Perhaps Bill

uses this convoluted sentence construction to avoid specifically naming the group or

groups to whom he refers, purposely distancing himself from racism (i.e., *they* think this,

but *I* don't). In the same way, Bill's prefacing of this statement with the phrase, "trying

not to be racist here," (a phrase he used several times during the interview), illustrates his

fear of being falsely accused of racism, but also signals that he knows what he is about to

say could potentially be considered racist.

Other students in Bill and Ned's class showed they understood that merely talking

about race opened one up to potential accusations of racism. Below is a class discussion

that I recorded in my field notes during the unit on *Night*:

> *As the students worked on their projects, Joann shared something her 11 year old daughter had asked last night: "Why is it that everybody is fine talking about sex and telling me everything I don't want to know about it, but nobody will talk about race?" Joann posed the question to the class.*
>
> *Ryan (African American female) responded quickly, "Because it's controversial." She thought for a second and then asked, "But why is it controversial?"*
>
> *Fran (white female): Because people are afraid.*
>
> *MM: What are they afraid of?*
>
> *Fran: Of being accused.*
>
> *MM: Being accused of what?*
>
> *Nina (white): Of being called racist.*

As this segment indicates, students understood that, for many whites, racial

identity is nuanced by anxiety over potential accusations of racism. For some, like Bill

and Ned, this fear is accompanied by another commonly held discourse.

Whites as Victims

Just beneath the surface of Ned and Bill's fears of racist accusation is a familiar discourse that positions whites as the new victims of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Marx, 2006; McIntyre, 1997). Bill's assessment of African Americans as people who are "trying to contort society to get what they want*"* and who act out of the "need to get back at…people" ignores the existence of racism in a present day context. Moreover, Bill believes that blacks use accusations of racism to gain power over whites. Likewise, Ned's statement, "People just use it [racism] as an excuse," illustrates his belief that African Americans cry racism in order to gain benefits that they do not deserve. Bill and Ned responded in similar fashion as the white students in Trainor's (2008) study, who followed their musings over correct terminology ("colored," "African American," or "black") with the sentiments, "I think they think they're special," and "…if you could get something for nothing, you'd do it. That's all they're doing" (p. 13). These students, like Ned and Bill, believe that whites are victimized on two levels. First, in order to protect themselves from unfair charges of racism, they are required to be especially careful about the language of race. No such requirement exists for African Americans, they believe, who are not only allowed to use the term "white" freely, but can also, according to Ned, call each other "blackie" with impunity. Blacks are at a clear advantage here because they are allowed a freedom of expression not available to whites; therefore, a double standard exists. What's more, these students believe that this unfairness in language use exemplifies a deeper problem: African Americans may advance unfairly by accusing whites of racism, therefore placing themselves above whites in the racial hierarchy.

Although they "got along" with the African American students in their classes, for Ned and Bill, racial identity was infused with notions of unfairness and marginalization. Other white students from the 10th grade on level class expressed similar feelings of marginalization that eventually came to the surface in a heated classroom argument which will be described below.

"Can I just call them black?"

Nakia, a black student who was a recent arrival from the Virgin Islands, expressed some of the same sentiments and hesitations that Bill and Ned had shared. During our interview, she used the term "African American," but then stopped and said, "…do I have to call them that, or can I just call them black?" She went on in exasperation:

> *When, uh, like say, uh, a white person calls somebody, like, African American, it's like, I feel like they kind of go out their way. Just call, like, them black! Because that's what we're used to. Because, like, you don't hear us calling you guys Caucasian.*

Nakia introduces the word "Caucasian" into the mix, substituting it for "white" the way that Bill had done with "Aryan," and positioning it as the equivalent of "African American." Perhaps because she spoke so quickly or perhaps because she couldn't quite decide if she identified herself with African Americans, blacks, or neither, throughout the interview Nakia switched back and forth from first-person to third-person pronouns. A bit later in the interview Nakia stopped again mid-sentence, this time interrupting herself with a laugh. "Sorry," she explained,

> *I was thinking about a movie where, when, I think a white little guy, I can't remember the movie, but it was, like, a white little guy and he called, like, cause, you know how black people will be like, 'Oh, what's up my nigga' and stuff, and a white boy, like, went to a guy and was, like, 'Hi, what's up my nigga," and, like, the guy was like, 'Oh my gosh, you're being racist and like…*

Again Nakia burst out laughing and didn't finish her sentence. I laughed too, partly because Nakia's laugh was infectious, but mostly because the naïve blunder of the "white guy" in the movie that she described was funny. Although Nakia had not been part of the conversation at Ned's table described above, the example from the movie that she found so humorous makes the very same point that Ned and Bill made: whites are held to a higher standard in adhering to racial language boundaries than blacks.

Nakia felt that both white and black people were oversensitive on the topic of race, saying of whites, "they make it awkward, like they're afraid to talk about it because of what happened in the past. And with slavery, and like Africans, and all of that." However, she held blacks more responsible for the problem than whites:

> *MM: Ok, so it's, let me just go back to something you said, though. Because it, so that you can clarify, because it almost sounds like you're saying two different things. So on the one hand you're saying that black people are over sensitive about it,*
>
> *Nakia: (laughs)*
>
> *M: right? And that they should kind of just get over it…'cause slavery happened a long time ago,*
>
> *N: Yeah, like, I'm not trying to say like, live and forget. It's like (pause) ok, like when slavery happened, it happened cause, like, they didn't think we were humans because we were black and stuff, and ok, I understand. That happened, and, but it's 2012, you can't hold a grudge for so long. You have to understand that what people did in the past, like, isn't what they're doing now. Cause they're not capturing us and making us, like, their slaves now. So, like, people have to understand it happened, and you have to understand it, and you have to, you can't live, like, hating white people for their past, because some white, like, the white people here, they weren't in the past, like, they, well, some of them, cause some people are still alive, like, they weren't in the past, they weren't doing that things, like, that happened, and like, we understand, it's wrong, and, it's, like (exasperated breath), I wanna tell em, like, but like they're holding a grudge for so long, and it's, it's not fair!*
>
> *M: Ok.*

N: Like why hold a grudge for so long?

M: So, you think black people are over sensitive sometimes.

N: Yeah.

M: And you also think that white people are over sensitive sometimes.

N: Yeah, it's like, when it comes to race people are just very sensitive and, like, extra cautious about what they say

M: Mmhmm.

N: because they don't want to offend this person, or…that person, or feel offended (exasperated breath) like sometimes, like, people say the dumbest things, and they'll be like, oh, that was racist, and like, and, it's like people are so quick to judge someone and be like, oh, you were racist, like cause you're white, and you said that thing. But if a black person says it, it's like, oh, you're fine.

Nakia starts out by saying that both black and white people are at fault in being "over sensitive." She is exasperated at both groups, wishing for both to "get over" their anxiety about race. However, she soon shifts her narrative to show sympathy for whites. Like Ned and Bill, she believes that blacks are unfairly allowed more leeway in their use of racial language than whites (*But if a black person says it, it's like, oh, you're fine.*) Not stopping there, she aligns herself with the position that African Americans use past racism to try to advance unfairly in the present when she states:

> *But, I feel like, sometimes, like, (laughs) African Americans, I feel like they get upset, and they get sensitive about it because of what happened, like slavery, and yes, we understand that it was wrong, but they like, they feel like people owe them things and stuff.*

Here Nakia separates her experience from that of African Americans by using the pronoun "they." Nakia identified her best friend as Kiya, one of the white girls who was directly involved in the argument over race in the 10th grade on level class that I will discuss shortly. My interview with Nakia took place a little over a week after that event.

Although Nakia was in a different class and was not involved in the argument, it is likely

that she heard a full rendition of the event from Kiya's perspective. Much of what Nakia

said during our interview was similar to the sentiments her friend, Kiya, expressed on the

day of the argument and during my interview with her: like Trainor's (2008) white

subjects and her own white classmates, Nakia stated that blacks use cries of past racism

(slavery) to gain present, unearned benefits.[45]

In spite of her depiction of African Americans as people who believed "people

owed them things," as our interview continued Nakia related two incidents when she had

personally felt the effects of racism. Once, she explained, when she'd entered an

electronics store she'd been ignored by store personnel while her white friend was

greeted warmly, and a second time, during a golf tournament, she was ignored by the

white spectators while the white golfers were cheered enthusiastically. In that context,

she clearly understood racism as a present day phenomenon that she, herself, had

experienced. In retrospect, I wondered if Nakia's statements about African Americans

holding grudges and feeling owed something because of long past racism reflected her

attempts to view racism from the perspective of her white friend, Kiya. It seemed that

Nakia struggled to reconcile the need to construct her white best friend as not racist with

her own experiences as a target of racism at the hands of whites.

Thus far, this chapter has shown that both African American and white students

felt racially marginalized in this racially harmonious school. While some black students

---

[45] The fact that Nakia hails originally from St. Thomas may be a factor in her pronoun switching, and in her alignment with white students in issues of race and racism. While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the experience of West Indian immigrants, I suggest Waters' *Black Identities: West Indian Immigrant Dreams and American Realities* for a thorough treatment of the West Indian immigrant experience.

felt that their heritage was ignored or believed that they were singled out for disciplinary issues by white teachers, some white students felt marginalized through too-quick judgments on the part of blacks that led to false accusations of racism. Students were not the only stakeholders at the school who experienced tensions over race; teachers too, felt anxieties over race that impacted their pedagogical decisions.

Tensions for Teachers

The Language of Snowflakes

It would be easy to brush off Ned's claim that African Americans cry racism "if they don't like what the person does" as an example of a white youth's refusal to acknowledge racism. However, Pollock (2004) found that at times the students of color in her study behaved exactly as Ned described. Sensing teachers' discomfort in talking about race, students occasionally used accusations of racism to get back at teachers with whom they'd had problems. Lisa, a white social studies teacher at EA, described a similar incident to me during our interview. She'd told a class of mostly African American students that they were "all unique snowflakes." This wasn't the first time Lisa had used this metaphor with students; she and other teachers often compare students to snowflakes in an effort to encourage students to appreciate their individual strengths. She was surprised and dismayed, however, when her African American students "took exception to snowflakes, and told me black ice would be more appropriate than snowflakes." Of course, Lisa did not mean her comment to refer to race in any way. She did not mention the whiteness of snowflakes, only their uniqueness. Did these students really believe that Lisa's words were racially insensitive? I don't think so. But by implying that Lisa had referred to race with her snowflake illustration, these African American students

fashioned racial language from a heretofore non-racial term, an action that served them on two levels. First, the students' teasing comments again signify the use of humor as a release for feelings of marginalization that bubbled under the surface. Second, by taking the opportunity to make Lisa squirm a little with the mischievous implication that her illustration was racist, African American students appropriated the power of their white teacher and temporarily shifted the usual white-black, teacher-student power balance in their classroom. They coped with the marginalization they felt at school, perhaps at the hands of that very teacher, by marginalizing her in that moment in time as a possible racist. Interestingly, as we'll see below, Lisa responded to accusations of racism by covering up the function of race in academic achievement with these very same students. Hence, racial tension moved from students to teacher to students in a cyclical pattern of "getting along" at Excellence Academy.

Avoiding the "Racially Charged"

Although it is likely that Lisa's students were teasing her during the snowflake episode, for Lisa, the incident was anything but funny. Past accusations from students and their parents had caused serious difficulties for teachers at EA. Previously that school year one such circumstance had arisen; an African American male student had accused a white female teacher of racism, apparently because of something she'd said as a joke. Of course, no one was supposed to know about this highly confidential situation, but, of course, everyone did. It was understandable, then, that uneasy classroom moments over race fostered teachers' fears of accusation, and that these fears affected teachers' relationships with students and their pedagogical choices. The following account illustrates how one teacher tailored her pedagogy based on these fears.

One day during Joann's prep period Lisa burst into the room, brimming with enthusiasm. She'd recently attended a teachers' conference and was thrilled at the success she'd had in applying one of the techniques she'd learned with her social studies students. Instead of uniformly giving students the same classwork, homework, quizzes, and final assessment, she'd applied a technique in differentiating instruction that had really seemed to work for her students. She'd quizzed students at the beginning of the unit and separated them into groups based on their scores, working longer with students who needed help early in the unit, and not allowing any students to move ahead until they had shown mastery of the subject. She'd also stopped giving credit for effort alone so that students could not "squeak by," passing the marking period without actually passing assessments. Lisa was thrilled with the results, reporting that all students had received a passing grade for the unit.

In order to determine which students needed extra work, Lisa had to designate a cut-off in the students' initial quiz scores. The original passing grade was 65%, but Lisa had noticed that all of the students who scored below that grade were African American. Lisa was "nervous" about this, so (without telling the students) she moved the passing grade to 70%, so that a white student would be included in the group that failed the quiz. During an interview a few days later I asked Lisa about this choice. She justified the decision to raise the passing grade for the quiz by saying that the white student now included in the failing group would benefit from the extra help. "There really was no downside to that," she explained. Lisa worried about her decision though, saying, "I'm not used to finding myself making decisions based on considerations of race." She explained during our interview:

Lisa: I was concerned if I stuck with the 65% or below all African American population that someone might, that, that a student might perceive that as racist.

MM: Mmhmm.

L: Or (pause), if not racist, racially charged in some way. And I want, I was interested in defusing that. I felt that I was, I knew, without a doubt that I wasn't being racist, I was confident the administration wouldn't think I was being racist, but I didn't want any irrational justification for not, for this activity not being successful.

M: Right. So…on one hand, you wanted to have diversity in that group so that a student wouldn't look at it and misunderstand.

L: Yes.

M: But on the other hand…did you, like, fear that by changing your criteria because you wanted diversity that you might open yourself up, not that you thought it would really happen, but the thought was there that

L: (interrupts) Yeah! Like wow! I'm having to think about this.

M: you might be critiqued in another, in the opposite way.

L: By fellow professionals in another way. Yeah!

M: Right, right. So in a way

L: Yes! (laughs)

M: you're kind of in between, and whatever you do… isn't right. Or, there's a fear that it might be perceived

L: That, that there are definitely outsiders looking in who would take exception to either course of action.

M: Right. So you're kind of in a, in a difficult situation.

L: Right. Yes.

Although she knew "without a doubt" that in her decision to change the grading scale for her social studies class she wasn't being racist, Lisa worried that the appearance of a group of failing students comprised exclusively of African Americans would be

"racially charged" in some way. This term, one that I'd heard other teachers use, is softer than the word, "racist," but I believe that in this context Lisa meant she feared being accused of racism. While Lisa didn't think anyone could actually make this case against her, she worried that what she meant as a technique to help students succeed academically would become complicated by the topic of race. "I wanted to take the course of action that was going to lead the activity to be as successful as possible," she explained. During our interview Lisa realized she was in a no-win situation; had she done nothing the black students might accuse her of racism, but by altering the cut-off score she'd opened herself up to accusations of racism on a different level. She'd violated the unspoken colorblind code that insists that academic achievement stand apart from racial considerations. By considering race in a grading practice Lisa had broken a strong taboo. One might also argue that Lisa's choice, if found out, could lead to accusations of "reverse racism," since, after all, the white student had not really failed the quiz. Her epiphany during our interview (*Yeah! Like wow! I'm having to think about this)* shows that she hadn't fully realized the untenable nature of her position during her decision making process. No matter what course of action Lisa took, the accusation of racism might follow.

More importantly, Lisa's anxiety and interest in "defusing" any possibility of a "racially charged" response stood in the way of her asking some fundamental questions: why is it that the African American students in her class were the lowest achievers? What societal systems worked to create this situation, and how can educators work to correct those systems? Instead, Lisa uncharacteristically considered race in order to create the appearance that race played no part in the achievement demographics of her class. Lisa's

behavior confirms Pollock's (2004) argument that teachers do notice race but choose to be "colormute" for fear of uncomfortable repercussions. Sadly, as Pollock points out, failure to talk about race ultimately makes race matter more, not less, as important questions regarding inequitable systems remain unaddressed.

Joann confessed to me on many occasions that she, like Lisa, felt anxious when talking about race with her students. She, too, feared accusations of racism, but also of "losing control" during class discussions, a fear perhaps born from Joann's intuitive perception of the tensions brewing beneath the surface of her usually calm classes. To combat the threat of potential accusations, Joann used narrative to position herself as "not racist" during class discussions and in her conversations with me. For example, one day during the 10th grade unit on *Night*, Jada begged Joann to "tell that story about the skinheads again." Joann complied and told of how many years ago, when she was in high school, skinheads had attacked her. Joann did not explain what these individuals had against her, which furthered the impression that it was her very non-racist nature they objected to. She described how these ruffians had caught up with her in a deserted area of the school with intent to do serious harm. They encircled her, brass knuckles in hand, and the situation was so dire that right before they struck, Joann told us, "I came to peace with my death." Then, in the nick of time, a friend from the basketball team saw what was about to take place through the crack of a closing door and led the entire team to Joann's rescue, taking down the skinheads in a brawl that left Joann shaken but unharmed. While Joann utilized colorblind ideology in that she did not mention the race of her rescuers (or of her attackers, for that matter) their identification as members of the basketball team at Joann's racially mixed high school implied that they, or at least some

of them, were African American. Through this story Joann positioned herself firmly against a white racist group and on the side of African Americans, who helped her because of her friendship with them. Bucholtz (2011) notes that students created a hierarchy of racialized masculinity through employing the trope of the physically powerful black male; in Joann's version of this theme, her rescuers were powerful enough to defeat a group of whites bearing weapons.[46] While I don't doubt the veracity of Joann's story, I find her need to use storytelling to position herself as a friend of African Americans and an enemy of racist whites to be a significant indication of the anxiety she felt over how students would perceive her as a white person.

Tensions Rise to the Surface

Because of her commitment to social justice, Joann tried to push past her anxieties on the subject of race, intentionally including texts in her curriculum that explored themes of oppression and bringing up racism in class discussions during the teaching of these texts. One such text was Ishmael Beah's memoir, *A Long Way Gone,* the compelling story of Beah's brutal experiences as a child soldier during the civil war in Sierra Leone during the 1990s. Coincidentally, the 10th grade reading of Beah's text coincided with the viral release of Invisible Children's emotionally laden KONY 2012 video. The video described the atrocities of Joseph Kony, a rebel leader in northern

---

[46] Joann often positioned herself as "not racist" in her conversations with me. One of these stories went like this: while waiting on a city street corner she'd been stopped by a group of black men who demanded she give them her wallet. Nine months pregnant at the time, Joann had pointed to her distended middle and shouted, "Do you see what I look like? Do I look like I have money on me? I have all of 37 cents. You can have it if you want it!" I don't know what Joann's pregnancy had to do with the amount of cash she carried, but apparently the men had laughed. One had tousled her hair and told her "You're cool," as the group walked away. Through this story Joann transformed a potentially dangerous group of African American males into a big-brotherly crew who had apparently meant no harm. The implicit moral of her story was either that black males are not as scary as they seem, or that even the scary ones sense something about Joann that causes them to leave her alone. Either way, Joann's "not-racist" persona remained securely in place.

Uganda accused of recruiting child soldiers into his Lord's Resistance Army. As a result,

much class time during this unit was spent debating the claims of the video. Students also

explored Beah's references to the loss of his childhood innocence, a major theme in the

book, and discussed whether or not he and others like him should have been held legally

accountable for their actions. They held varying strong opinions on these topics, leading

to lively and engaged class discussions. On the surface all seemed well, until the day that

racial tensions unexpectedly erupted into a heated exchange that left Joann and the

students rattled.

I'd been away at a conference for a few days, and returned to my hotel room one

evening to find a panicked email from Joann asking that I call her immediately. Her voice

shaking, Joann described in detail what had transpired in the 10th grade on level class

that day. She'd been leading an activity called "The Spectrograph Game" that had

spiraled out of control. Following the directions in a publisher's curriculum guide, Joann

had run a strip of masking tape down the center of the room to divide it into two sections.

She'd then read a series of statements and asked the students to move to one side of the

tape or the other depending on how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement;

the more strongly they agreed or disagreed, the further from the tape on opposite sides of

the room they were told to stand. All was well until Joann read the following statement:

"The message of this book would be different if it were written about a white man and set

in a predominantly white country." In response, the white students moved to the far edge

of the "disagree" side of the room, while the African American students moved to the far

edge of the "agree" side. Three African American females, Jada, Dawn, and Adana,

adamantly agreed with the statement, Jada claiming that "It wouldn't change the message,

but it wouldn't have gone on so long. Nobody cares when stuff like this happens to black people."[47] The girls contended that the rest of the world would have intervened, stopping the war and rescuing child soldiers if the events in Beah's life had happened to a white person in a predominately white country. Dawn argued, "White people's problems are everybody's problems, but black people's problems are only black people's problems." Joann reported that Becca[48] and Bubbles, both white, disagreed from the other side of the room, insisting, "It isn't about race."

Up until this point the discussion had been civil, but when Brit and Kiya, both white, got involved, emotions began to intensify. They, too, stood far from the tape in the "disagree" side of the room, insisting, "It's not fair, because black people are just as racist toward white people." As evidence, they both said that they had personally been "harassed" by black people. Kiya complained in anger, "I'm sick of being accused of being racist. Every time a white person says anything about race they get accused of being racist. That's racist against white people. Black people are racist too!"

Dawn countered, "You have no idea how much easier you have it as a white girl. You have no idea how hard it is to be a black girl in this country." Jada agreed and said, "Racism will never change, because white people won't talk about it, so nothing will ever change." During this discussion, which purportedly was becoming more heated with every passing moment, the African American males in the class said nothing, but sat near the African American girls with their arms folded. The racial segregation of the room was a physical representation of the deep division of these students' opinions.

---

[47] Dialogue in the section is recreated, based on the rendition of the events that Joann related to me that evening.

[48] Becca is one of the white students who consistently sat with African Americans during both Home Base and this class. While her friendships with black students were secure, they did not necessarily help her to see racism from their perspective.

Tom, a white male, tried to be, in Joann's words, "a unifying agent." He agreed with Jada, Dawn, and Adana, but also shared that during the 2008 Presidential election he was afraid to express his conservative political views because as "soon as I said something against Obama I was accused of racism." While everyone agreed with Tom that his scenario was accurate and that his treatment was unfair, by now the argument had gone too far and none of the girls were willing to back down. Joann reported that they got louder and louder, accusing each other of rudeness and yelling over each other until she had to stop the activity. All of this took place within the last ten minutes of class time and happened so quickly that the argument got out of control before Joann could intervene. Joann estimated that it took her about twenty seconds to get the girls to stop shouting at each other. "That doesn't seem long," she said, "but it's a long time to not have control of a class." She finally had to position herself between the arguing girls in order to "break eye contact" so that they would stop shouting. Although Joann tried to defuse the situation by telling students that the classroom needed to be a "safe space" for these kinds of conversations, students left class angry and frustrated, with no sense of resolution or closure.

Dealing with the Aftermath

Joann was close to tears as she told me about this incident. She said in frustration that while she now understood the social constructionist view of race, "I still hate the idea of races. We should all be just the human race." It was evident that the students, too, were frustrated by the incident. The next day the students wanted to continue their debate, but Joann refused to let them. She felt they needed time to calm down and asked them to write about their feelings instead in the form of a "racism survey," a brief questionnaire

she constructed that asked of their experiences and feelings about racism. In response to the questionnaire prompt, "When discussing racism in the classroom, what rules do you think should be in place?" every one of them made reference to their discomfort surrounding the events of the day before with statements like, "Don't raise your voice," "Don't speak over each other," and "Calmly talk about the topic." Joann hoped that the class could continue the discussion on the following Monday, when I would be back at school to support her in mediating students' responses. However, by then the students were back to their usual friendly demeanor, and if Joann had not told me what had happened I would never have known of the serious dispute that had taken place just a few days before. During class, Joann showed a PowerPoint presentation that described modern day forms of structural racism, and although the students listened politely and with moderate interest, the conversation remained calm and impersonal. The intensity of emotion had faded and students once again discussed racism as something that existed in the outside world but did not impact them directly.

As I prepared to interview students from this class in the coming weeks, I worried about how I might broach the subject of the argument. I feared they'd been so upset during the incident that they might not want to discuss their feelings with me, an outsider. I needn't have worried; Jada, one of the African American girls in the class, and Brit and Kiya, both white, were eager to talk about what had happened. Jada actually brought up the topic before I did, and Brit and Kiya, who I interviewed together, sat up straight and said, "Yeah, oh yeah!" when I asked if they were okay with talking about the day of the argument.

During our interviews, all three girls reiterated the positions they had taken in class. Jada said, "I just think that African Americans or black people or people of a different color have, have it harder, because people still think that they're superior over (pause) us." When I asked Jada why she thought there'd been so much anger from students that day, she said,

> I think they felt attacked. But, I don't think they were. I don't, I didn't really understand why they felt attacked, 'cause, I remember one girl said that what we were saying was rude. And I didn't quite understand how she thought what we were saying was rude when it was about us.

However, while holding her position firmly, Jada was careful to clarify her feelings about the white members of the class:

> I think they were thinking that we were just saying, (deepens voice) "Oh, all white people are just mean and ignorant and that you guys did this" but I mean, it's not you guys, it's just people who have this instinctular, who think differently than you. We're not saying, grouping you all together, it's just people who have different ways of thinking.

Jada stressed that she was not accusing her classmates of racism; neither does she believe that all white people are racist. About her own feelings that day, Jada did not admit anger. She stated, "I had no bad feelings with anybody…I think people thought I was mad 'cause I was kind of yelling. But I was just trying to get my point across." This is a very different story than the one Joann had told; she had specifically pointed out to me how horrible she felt about the events of that day because of "the look on Jada's face" at the end of class. According to Joann, Jada had been devastated by the incident. Since I'd heard about Jada's reactions on the day of the argument through Joann's lens, it's impossible for me to know the extent of Jada's anger that day. However, by Jada's own admission, the people around her during the debate believed that she was angry and upset.

But by the time of our interview several weeks later, the anger Jada expressed over the

marginalization of African Americans was once again safely out of view.

Brit and Kiya, too, repeated the sentiments they'd expressed in class during our

interview, insisting that all groups were equally racist toward one another. Kiya said:

> *…there's not one race that's singled out that gets the most white people racist toward them. I mean, they were saying that, like, black people always are, like, targeted, and not white people and stuff, but I'm like, well if I were to move into a community, like, that was all black, and, like, to a school and everything, I was, like, one of the few white kids, I would guarantee that I would get made fun of, picked on, same with if it was the other way around.*

Brit agreed, saying:

> *Racism is everywhere, and no person can say they haven't been racist once in their life, whether it be a thought or you saying it. Like, it's not just one race that we're racist against. Black people are racist against white. White are racist against black. Mexicans, Chinese – it's everywhere. And just for one race to say that they're targeted, yes, they were, like over hundreds and hundreds of years ago, but it's not like we're still doing that now. We're actually working on it.*

Even after Joann's PowerPoint presentation on structural racism, both Brit and

Kiya continued to view racism as a problem among individuals. While Kiya referred to

racism in education during our interview, saying, "a lot of them in the hood don't have

good education," she took a defensive position about the facts Joann had presented. Kiya

stated, "it's, like, not our fault, you know. It's kind of the way they were brought up, just

like we're brought up." So, although Joann was careful to state several times throughout

her lesson on structural forms of racism that "it's not the fault of anyone in this room,"

Kiya still felt the need to absolve herself of blame. As Flynn (2012) points out, a narrow

definition of racism that stresses individual prejudice only will cause whites to feel

threatened or judged and will limit productive conversations about race.

Kiya and Brit were quick to admit that there was racism at their school, but both felt it was mostly blacks that were racist toward whites. Their feelings were consistent with those of other whites; Marx (2006), too, found that when asked to define racism, some white college students could only think of examples of racism against whites (p. 83). And, while Jada was clear that she was not accusing her classmates or whites in general of racism, Brit and Kiya stressed that they'd been falsely accused of racism and that blacks were oversensitive about the subject. They aired the same sentiment that their friend, Nakia, had expressed: black people need to stop "holding a grudge" for the racist actions of the past (Beach, Thein, & Parks, 2008).

All three girls mentioned Joann's follow-up PowerPoint presentation about modern examples of racism, but with very different opinions. Jada believed that Joann's lesson had been helpful in clarifying her position, saying about it, "I think it kind of changed people's minds, somehow." I'm not sure which people Jada was referring to, but during my interview with Brit and Kiya it became obvious that their minds had not been changed. Rather, they had felt marginalized by Joann's presentation, saying that Joann had "dominated the black side more than the white side."[49] They argued that Joann's facts were invalid because they were from "years ago, like 2000," a time period that may not seem long ago to adults but is almost a lifetime ago to these teenagers. Brit pointed out that black racism toward whites was just as real but not as obvious because it is not well documented. Kiya said that the Obama presidency was evidence of the decline in racism toward blacks, as was the fact that she has "known a lot of rich black people."

---

[49] Students were especially interested in one of the slides that included a map of hate groups in the surrounding areas. I noticed that although some of the groups listed were black separatist groups, Joann did not point this out and class discussion proceeded on the assumption that these were white supremacist groups.

It would be easy for me to label Kiya and Brit's racial attitudes as intolerant or foreclosed and to interpret their unwillingness to recognize institutional racism as an example of Bell's (2009) "interest conversion," a key element of critical race theory that claims that whites will only speak for racial equality when it advances their own interests; they will not support policies that threaten their status of dominance. For white students like Brit and Kiya, admitting the damaging and persisting effects of structural racism is tantamount to acknowledging their own privileged position as whites, clearly not something these girls and other white students were

prepared to do.[50] As I've pointed out previously, I believe that jockeying for social power did undergird the racial relations at EA. However, researchers have also explained the need to understand the emotional place that white students like Kiya, Brit, Ned, and Bill, speak from when they voice their opinions about race. Beach, Thein, and Parks (2008) explain that the working class white students in their study "understood themselves as marginalized" (p. 48), resenting both the more affluent whites whose parents could support them through college and the students of color who might benefit from scholarships not available to whites. Flynn (2012) found that during a unit on white

---

[50] Interestingly, students did not deny the existence of racism, only its focus. Throughout my interviews with students, when I asked if they could think of examples of present day racism, they consistently mentioned Mexicans and Muslims as targeted groups. However, white and black students referred to these groups to bolster different arguments. Black students acknowledged racism against their own group, but pointed out that blacks can be racist toward Mexicans and Muslims. White students cited Mexicans and Muslims as targets of racism to prove their point that racism has decreased against African Americans; i.e., blacks are not the only group that experience racism, Mexicans and Muslims experience it even more than blacks. Application of Bell's interest convergence theory may shed light on white students' willingness to admit racism toward some groups (Mexicans and Muslims) and not others (African Americans). There were no Mexicans or Muslims in any of Joann's literature classes, and if there were any at all at the school they were very few in number. Therefore, admitting racism toward these groups and showing concern for them did not threaten the status of the white students at EA. White students could adopt antiracist positioning toward Mexicans and Muslims because such positioning was in their interest; through their concern for these groups they elevated themselves to the politically correct not-racist status. Conveniently, the lack of students at the school from either of these backgrounds ensured that white students were in no danger of losing their socially dominant status to them.

privilege, some white middle school students, much like Brit and Kiya, felt that teachers cut them off and "'sided with students of color more'" (p. 107). The white students that I spoke to at EA were not overtly racist. They were respectful to others of differing racial backgrounds. As such, they did not understand Joann's and my claims that racism is still an issue because for them, it was not an issue. Broad conversations about institutional racism made them feel as if they were being blamed for something that they'd had nothing to do with, and they responded defensively.

Moving On or Pushing Down?

While Brit and Kiya maintained a friendly demeanor in class during the days and weeks following the argument over race, their animated responses during our interview made clear that the racial tensions they expressed that day in class were still very much on their minds. However, by the following Monday after the argument took place, Joann said she felt the students had "moved on." Shrugging her shoulders, she said, "They're like little kids. They have a fight one day and are back to being best friends the next." She did not recognize the possibility that rather than having moved on, the students had once again suppressed the racial tensions that existed among them. By not allowing the students to continue their discussion the day after the argument, Joann had unknowingly sent a clear message that she, herself, was not comfortable with what had taken place and that feelings about racism were best handled through the impersonal media of a questionnaire and PowerPoint presentation. In retrospect, I realize that I was complicit in sending this message, agreeing with Joann that it might be better to give the students time to cool off before continuing the discussion. We, like the white pre-service teachers that Haviland studied, focused on "making everyone feel comfortable rather than challenged"

(p. 48). The problem with this strategy was that, while Joann continued to address the topic of institutional racism in her class, she never addressed the raw emotion the students displayed over the topic. Tom pointed out in his questionnaire that conversations about racism "may actually bring heightened tensions," and I believe that was the case for the 10th graders at EA. Rather than helping students to understand and empathize with others' points of view, the argument over race precipitated by discussion of *A Long Way Gone* exacerbated racial tensions and left students with the uneasy confirmation that it's dangerous to talk about race.

The Myth of the Safe Space

Joann's intention was to use multicultural literature to open a space for conversation about the important topic of racism. She hoped that discussion of *A Long Way Gone* would encourage students to consider multiple perspectives and develop ideas about race that would incorporate antiracist understandings. Coupled with her own caring and supportive presence, Joann imagined this space would be a safe one – a place where students could share their feelings freely without fear of ridicule or rejection, and she stressed this to her students as she tried to calm their flaring tempers. However, students' racial identities consisted of a complex blend of racial tolerance (illustrated by the close friendships between students and the usually relaxed atmosphere) and resentments over perceived racial marginalization. White teachers, whose professional life depended on their "not-racist" personas, felt deep anxiety over possible accusations of racism that characterized their identity as whites.

Therefore, classrooms at EA were not safe spaces for students when it came to discussing personal experiences and ideas about race; nor were classrooms safe spaces

for teachers. Instead, classrooms were places where black students noticed when white teachers ignored their history, and wondered if they were singled out for reprimand because of the color of their skin. Classrooms were places where white students and teachers feared accusations of racism. They were places where students believed that blacks cried racism as a ploy to get what they wanted. For one 10th grade class, a literary work, *A Long Way Gone,* acted as a conduit, but not one through which, as Botelho and Rudman (2009) suggest, students are able to see the world in a more enlightened way. Instead, these students used literature as a conduit through which bottled up tensions escaped and exploded when they hit the unrelenting surface of other people's experiences.

While Joann's intentions in proclaiming her classroom a "safe space"[51] for discussions of race were noble, in retrospect I believe that too much emphasis on emotional safety while discussing race may do more harm than good. For example, was it Nakia's desire to keep her white friends emotionally safe that led her to argue that blacks unfairly hold grudges about slavery, even though she, herself, had experienced racism in a present day, localized context? Was it the desire to return to the safety of a "friendly" classroom atmosphere that prevented Joann from helping 10th graders to debrief about their argument? Many researchers have found that race is not often spoken about in school settings (Beach, Thein, & Parks, 2008; Lewis, 2006; Marx, 2006; McIntyre, 1997); perhaps the desire for emotional safety over the topic of racism is part of the reason for this silence. The truth is that race is not a safe topic because it brings up deep-seated emotions, fears, and anxieties that are the product of centuries of broken race relations. As Perry (2008) notes, no student should feel singled out because of race, and

---

[51] A sign on Joann's classroom door read, "No place for hate."

teachers should discuss the effects of racism on all people. Certainly, teachers need to require a respectful environment (Chadwick, 2008) in which all voices are heard when talking about race or any other subject. However, a respectful environment is not the same as a so-called "safe" environment; talking about race is often emotionally risky for both students and teachers, and we should acknowledge that fact from the outset. Pre-service and in-service teachers who are overly concerned with emotional safety when talking about race in the classroom may fail to challenge students to grapple with difficult issues that have no easy answers (Haviland, 2008; Hollingworth, 2009; McIntyre, 1997; Saul and Wallace, 2002). Expectations that students will feel comfortable in talking about race may be inappropriate; De Freitas and McAuley (2008) argue that the final goal of racial identity development for whites should not be comfort, but discomfort, not in talking about race, but in recognizing white privilege and dominance as an unending process that requires a sense of continuing ambiguity that "resists the comfort of closure" (p. 433). Beach, Thein, and Parks (2008) suggest that teachers "recognize the need to create a contested space" (p. 109), and prepare students for the tensions that will inevitably result from their sharing of differing perspectives. Forming opinions about topics such as racism should be a process that takes place over a period of time, and it is more important to help students "accept ambiguity and recognize the limitations of their own perspectives" (p. 220) than to expect them to process complicated issues simply and safely. Adopting such an approach might help students and teachers at Excellence Academy to address the feelings of marginalization, resentment, and anxiety that surrounded the topic of race and might prevent these feelings from festering beneath the surface of "we all get along."

Chapter Four

Discourse Among Friends: The Harlem Renaissance Unit

As we saw in the previous chapter, when 10th graders at Excellence Academy were challenged to think deeply about racial inequity, some responded with anger. The friendly, relaxed atmosphere did not represent the whole story of race relations at the school, and may even have made underlying tensions easier to ignore. Feelings of marginalization complicated students' racial identities, in one case erupting into an argument that the teacher could barely contain. Students in other classes, as well, responded to multicultural literature in ways that revealed the complexity of their constructions of race and their racial identities. In this and the following chapter I will investigate 11th grade honors students' responses to two literature units: the poetry of Langston Hughes during the unit on the Harlem Renaissance, and *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison.

I choose to include a case study at this point in my work for a few reasons. First, the 11th grade honors class[52] stood out for its outspoken and consistent claims of close-knit, cross-racial friendships among students. Early on in my fieldwork, Joann described to me the close friendships that students in this class enjoyed. Many, she told me, had "been together since kindergarten," a situation that, in her view, sometimes made staying on track during class discussions challenging because students were so comfortable with each other. During interviews, Anthony and Anna, both students in this class, confirmed what I'd heard from Joann, as did students' demeanor and body language during class sessions. It was common for students to squeeze together on the couch at the back of the

---

[52] The class consisted of 23 students: 15 white, 7 African American, and 1 Chinese American.

room, sometime whispering or laughing, and other times simply sitting quietly,

comfortable in each others' presence. I also saw students exchange hugs or backrubs and

share snacks on a fairly frequent basis, and these behaviors sometimes crossed racial

boundaries. Racially self-segregated seating arrangements were less common in this class

than in others, and at the beginning of my fieldwork Violet and Juliette (both African

American) often sat with James and Ron (both white), and referred to their group as

"family."[53]

Along with the expressions of cross-racial friendship that emanated from this

class, some students voiced frustration and resentment[54] during discussions of literature

that incorporated the theme of racial oppression, and employed specific discourses to

avoid acknowledging that theme. In the previous chapter I discussed white students' use

of the commonly documented "reverse racism" discourse, wherein whites view

themselves as the new victims of discrimination (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Lewis, 2006; Marx,

2006; McIntyre, 1997; Perry, 2002; Trainor, 2008).[55] Fueled by an ahistorical view of

race that does not take into account centuries of oppression experienced by people of

color, the reverse racism discourse is often used in anti-affirmative action arguments, and

I heard students in every one of Joann's classes argue the reverse racism discourse at one

time or another. Students in the 11th grade honors class, however, also generated

discourses denying the relevance of racism from the unique context of their classroom

---

[53] Once I overhead Violet and Juliette singing the pop song, "We Are Family" in referring to the group.

[54] Although anger was sometimes evident in the responses of students in this class, the quality of their anger differed from those of students in the 10th grade class that I described in the last chapter. There was no one, blowout argument in the 11th grade honors class. Rather, resentment and frustration leaked from students slowly and steadily throughout the literature units that explored the topic of race.

[55] Some of the white 10th graders I described in the last chapter used hypothetical scenarios in their complaints of reverse racism, while others claimed they, themselves, had been targets of racism by African American students.

and school experience. A case study of 11 Honors will allow me to examine these discourses and analyze how they expressed aspects of students' racial identities.

The following case study will also provide opportunity to explore the way that the African American students in 11 Honors responded to the theme of racism within their curriculum. African American students in the class often either agreed with their white friends and classmates in denying the salience of racism, or grew increasingly silent. I argue that their proximity to and friendships with white students informed these responses. Therefore, my hope is that a case study will allow for a deep and fruitful analysis of how students' cross-racial friendships informed and complicated their constructions of race and racial identity as they read and discussed multicultural literature.

The Harlem Renaissance Unit

Background

Although she had to push hard for administrative approval, Joann succeeded in gaining permission to stretch a unit on the Harlem Renaissance from three to nine days during the month of February; however, the school's standardized testing schedule required that Joann ultimately cut the unit to seven days.[56] Factoring in the final essay assessment on the seventh day and an unexpected "day of silence" imposed by another teacher that I will explain later, the time spent discussing the literature of the Harlem Renaissance took place over only five class sessions. As we began the unit I was a month into my fieldwork and had settled into my role of participant observer, sometimes

---

[56] Joann had multiple discussions with other literature faculty and school administrators before gaining this permission. She felt their hesitancy to spend so much time on the literature of the Harlem Renaissance was due to a mix of anxiety over student standardized test scores (i.e., believing she should spend more time in test preparation) and a belief that time spent on the unit would be time away from the "canonical texts" that were traditionally included in the curriculum.

stationed at my computer, taking notes on class discussions, but often involving myself in small and large group discussions. The students, as well, had become used to my presence, and I was beginning to form bonds with some in this class; for example, when I was absent during the essay writing assignment that took place on the final day of the Harlem Renaissance unit, Joann informed me that students had asked for me, and that Violet,[57] especially, had "missed me." From that point on Violet was sure to scold me any time I was absent.

Although the content of the unit consisted of art, music, and literature from the Harlem Renaissance period, its main focus was the poetry of James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, and especially Langston Hughes. Joann began the unit with a PowerPoint presentation that included a brief synopsis of the historical context of the Harlem Renaissance and highlighted the lives of poets mentioned above. During the first two days of the unit, students listened to music and poetry recitations of the era, answering discussion questions and filling in worksheets. Although all of the artists under study were African American, the topic of racism was not specifically addressed until the third day, when Joann asked the class to discuss two poems by Langston Hughes: "I, Too," and "A Dream Deferred." Discussion surrounding the poems soon heated up as Joann tried to take students to a place where some did not want to go: acknowledging the focus of racism in the poetry of Hughes and the overall impact of racism on African Americans.

---

[57] My friendship with Violet first developed through the following circumstance: Joann had left the room for a moment, leaving me in charge while students (supposedly) worked quietly at their desks. Within a minute of her departure several paper airplanes began flying through the air, and one, launched by Violet, hit me lightly in the eye. Violet was mortified and apologized profusely, but I joked about it, holding my eye dramatically as if the plane had done serious damage. When Joann returned we acted as if nothing had happened, and she never found out what had taken place in her absence. For a while the airplane incident became a running joke between Violet and me, and perhaps my silence about the incident earned me a small amount of "cred" in her eyes.

Students resisted addressing these issues through two contextualized arguments that I will name *retrojection* and *this is all we ever talk about.*

"I, Too"

Through her PowerPoint presentation, Joann had described Hughes as "the most well known Harlem Renaissance poet." She'd explained (and the slide stated) that Hughes' work was meant to explore the condition of African Americans of his time through the structure and rhythms of blues and jazz music. She also pointed out that Hughes was "influenced greatly" by the work of another poet the class was familiar with: Walt Whitman.

Joann began class discussion on Hughes' "I, Too" by pointing out Hughes' allusion to a Whitman poem that the class had studied earlier in the school year, "I Hear America Singing." Below are the two poems.

I Hear America Singing
by Walt Whitman

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,
Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it
should be blithe and strong,
The carpenter singing his as he measures his
plank or beam,
The mason singing his as he makes ready for
work, or leaves off work,
The boatman singing what belongs to him in his
boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat
deck,
The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench,
the hatter singing as he stands,
The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's on his
way in the morning, or at noon intermission or
at sundown,
The delicious singing of the mother, or of the
young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or
washing,
Each singing what belongs to him or her and to

I, Too
by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.
Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—
I, too, am America.

none else,
The day what belongs to the day—at night the
party of young fellows, robust, friendly,
Singing with open mouths their strong
melodious songs.[58]

After asking the students to read "I, Too," Joann instructed the class to "discuss

the issues of the poem, and tell why Hughes alludes to Whitman's work." Literary critics

have noted that in "I, Too," Hughes "signifies"[59] Whitman, "challenging American rituals

of incorporation and exclusion while more subtly playing off of Whitman's 'I Hear

America Singing' with a dark minor chord" (Hutchinson, 1992, para. 16). Hutchinson

describes the impact that Whitman's work had on Hughes, stating that Hughes

"considered himself to be following out the implications of Whitman's poetic theory"

(para. 3). Therefore, Joann's instruction to compare the poems was in line with

established scholarship.

Ron, a white student, spoke first, saying, "The two poems are different because

Whitman's poem was talking about occupations, not races. Whitman very well may have

been talking about African American or Puerto Rican construction workers." Anna

(white) and Michaela (African American), sitting at Ron's table, agreed.

Anna said of Hughes, "I think he agreed with Whitman. He used Whitman

because he liked his work."

The students continued in this vein, agreeing that Whitman was part of the canon

and Hughes would have known his poetry. Joann then steered the discussion toward the

content of "I, Too," asking, "What is this poem about?"

---

[58] Poems retrieved from http://www.poetryfoundation.org.

[59] Gates (1988) explains the tradition of "signifying" in African American literature thusly: "To name our tradition is to rename each of its antecedents, no matter how pale they might seem. To rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify" (p. xxiii).

Students called out, "racism," "segregation," and "being sent out."

Violet, who was sitting with her friend Juliette (both African American), said

seriously, "I don't hear America singing, I hear the white man singing."

Joann did not acknowledge Violet's comment, and students continued to discuss

the connection between Whitman and Hughes' work. The following discussion ensued:

> *Laura (white): He [Hughes] used Whitman's poem because people understand the allusion. They can connect to it.*
>
> *MM: What about Ron's point that Whitman was talking about occupations, not races? Can we argue that he wasn't thinking about people of other races?*
>
> *Violet (African American): It's inferred.*
>
> *Juliette (African American): Because at that time African Americans weren't shoemakers or woodcutters. They were on plantations or in the fields.*
>
> *MM: So sometimes what's left out of the text is more important than what's included in the text. Because of the time Whitman's poem was written, can we assume that he wasn't including African Americans?*
>
> *Laura: But I don't think Walt Whitman was racist. He helped black people. He fed them in his kitchen.[60]*

At the beginning of the class discussion of "I, Too," students recognized that

through this poem Hughes was exploring the racism faced by African Americans of his

day; however, Ron's initial comment showed his hesitancy to view the Whitman poem

through the lens of a critical race analysis, and set the stage for the conversation that

followed. Perhaps because of Violet's implicit critique of Whitman's poem (*I don't hear*

America singing, I hear the white man singing), which everyone had heard but no one

had acknowledged, and my follow-up questions, students shifted the focus of their

analysis away from the Hughes poem toward defending Whitman from perceived

---

[60] The class had studied Whitman's poetry earlier in the school year, when Joann had introduced excerpts from "Song of Myself" as autobiographical. Laura referred to a portion of the poem that speaks of welcoming a runaway slave into the house through the kitchen and feeding him there.

accusations of racism. Ironically, in protecting Whitman's reputation (*He helped black people. He fed them in his kitchen)*, Laura nearly quoted a line from "I, Too," "Nobody'll dare/Say to me/'Eat in the kitchen'/Then." Unfortunately, neither Joann nor I noticed this at the time, and missed the opportunity to point out that relegation to the kitchen was exactly the expression of racism that Hughes' poem exposes. We did both state, however, that we were not implying that Whitman was outwardly racist, but were questioning if, as a product of his time, Whitman's view of "America singing" included anyone other than whites. While Violet and Juliette nodded their approval, the rest of the class stared at us blankly. Our discussion of "I, Too" had ended with some white students feeling defensive for the sake of a poet they had come to appreciate, Walt Whitman, and perhaps identifying with him as a white person accused of racism. We saw previously that many whites at EA, students and teachers alike, were anxious about perceived accusations of racism, and since Whitman was not there to defend himself, perhaps students felt they should defend him. While, of course, students are used to responding to questions about a text like the ones Joann and I presented in class that day, in retrospect, I believe that the tenor of the discussion regarding Whitman's poem helped create the student responses that I will explain below.

"A Dream Deferred"

The disagreement over Whitman's views on race that had caused some students to respond defensively seemed to carry over into discussion of the next Hughes poem, originally titled "Harlem," but referred to by Joann and the students as "A Dream Deferred." The students read the following poem from the handout that Joann had provided:

Harlem
by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

> Does it dry up
> like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore—
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over—
> like a syrupy sweet?

> Maybe it just sags
> like a heavy load.

> *Or does it explode?*[61]

Joann then asked the students to "discuss the poem" in small groups at their tables. She

gave no other particular discussion guidelines or questions. The following is an excerpt

from my field notes:

> *I walk around, eventually settling at Violet's table. Violet is up, writing her group's ideas about the meaning of the poem on the board. I ask two white students, Emma and Edward, what they think the poem is about.*

> *Emma: It's about dreams and what happens when they're deferred. I don't think this has anything to do with being black.*

> *Edward nods in agreement. I ask, "So you don't think Langston Hughes was writing about race?"*

> *Emma: No.*

> *I can't think of any response, so I move on. At a table across the room two African American students, Juliette and Alyssa, say that the poem is about civil rights and social equality. Alyssa writes this on the board. However, a few minutes later during class discussion, Alyssa qualifies, "I don't think it [the poem] necessarily* has *to be about civil rights. I think he and lots of other African Americans had dreams about other things, and not just about civil rights."*

> *Joann: So, it's about a human experience, not just about civil rights?*

---

[61] Retrieved from http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/175884.

Alyssa: Yeah.

Joann: What if I tell you that the original title of the poem was, "Harlem, A Dream Deferred"? People have forgotten the original title. Does that change your reading of poem?

Michelle (African American): He's not talking about equality. He's talking about talent.

I ask Michelle to explain further. She says, "He's telling people to pursue their talents, not to give up their dreams."

Ron (white): Word.

MM (evenly): So in this poem Langston Hughes is talking to people who live in Harlem about their talents?

All nod in agreement.

Anthony (African American): He's talking about the place where he resides, like, the people there. He feels like they got shorthanded at times. He's asking the general public why this is.

Emma (white): It's about what people are going through in that neighborhood.

Violet (African American): Just because it's by an African American author doesn't mean that they want civil rights.

Leah (Chinese American): Changing the title doesn't change what we thought the poem was about, how everyone has different dreams...he was pondering what happens to dreams because he saw people having different reactions.

Joann: I'm gonna play devil's advocate with this reading. Hughes is in Harlem. We know that the poem is about Harlem. He uses contrasting imagery like Billie Holiday does in "Strange Fruit." What does it mean that the last line of the poem is italicized?...One critic says it's a threat. Is it? Is it saying that if you ignore this, push away Harlem, segregate us, is this what's going to happen? Is it going to explode?

Ron: You gonna shoot the place up?

Joann: Maybe he didn't mean it literally? A critic can make the argument that it's a protest poem and he is threatening a society that is prejudiced...what do you think of that?

Anthony: I think it's fair. I mean it does make sense because he seems kind of bitter…he's using rotten meat and saying that it's shriveling up like a raisin…one day you're gonna get what's coming to you.

Joann asks the students to comment on why the last line of the poem is italicized.

Ron: Maybe he just did it for a jolly.

Michelle: I italicize just for fun sometimes. I don't think it's a threat.

Perhaps because of feelings of defensiveness that we had helped create during the previous discussion, students were now closed to the idea of acknowledging the topic of race in "A Dream Deferred." White students, Emma, Edward, and Ron had led the charge, but others, including African Americans, had followed along in arguing that Langston Hughes, an author who helped shape the Civil Rights Movement, was not referring to racism in one of his most widely known and vividly worded poems.

While Emma and Edward were adamant in this belief from the start, African American students showed a gradual adoption of their white classmates' opinions as the class period progressed. For example, Alyssa, a light-skinned African American,[62] agreed while in conversation with another African American student, Juliette, that "A Dream Deferred" was a poem about "civil rights and social equality," and wrote this on the board. However, during the large group discussion that followed shortly after, Alyssa qualified this statement with the words, "I don't think it necessarily *has* to be about civil rights. I think he and lots of other African Americans had dreams about other things, and not just about civil rights." Anthony's reflection that the poem was about how people in Harlem had been "shorthanded" (I believe he meant to say, "shortchanged") implied that racism was involved, but Emma mitigated Anthony's implication when she said, "It's

---

[62] The two light-skinned African American females in the class, Alyssa and Michelle, tended to side with white students in class discussions about racism. I will explore this phenomenon more fully in the next chapter.

about what people are going through in that neighborhood," and Anthony did not

disagree. Emma localized Hughes' intended audience to one neighborhood to imply that

it was not meant as a more general critique of racism. Even Violet, who'd earlier

commented, "I don't hear America singing, I hear the white man singing," eventually

agreed that "Just because it's by an African American author doesn't mean that they want

civil rights." Michelle, a light-skinned African American, aligned herself with Ron in

trivializing Hughes' choice to italicize the last line of the poem, "*Or does it explode*."

Juliette, who just two days previously had announced for all to hear, snapping her fingers,

"I'd change Black History Month – I'd make it two months! So there!" and who had been

quite vocal at the beginning of this class, had lapsed into silence by its end. Only

Anthony was willing to admit that a protest reading of the poem was "fair."[63] Thus,

African American students like Violet and Juliette, who had, at first, seemed eager to

explore the themes of racism in the Hughes' poems, found themselves "disabled from

influencing others" (Lueck & Steffen, 2011, p. 49) and simply gave up.

That day at lunch I shared with Joann my surprise at the students' responses to

Hughes' poetry. Of course, teachers encourage students to make their own meanings

from the literature that they read, and I am not suggesting that the Hughes poems we

studied that day were *only* about race, or that broader interpretations of these works are

not valid. However, in their interpretations of "A Dream Deferred," some students in this

11th grade class argued specifically that Hughes' original intent was not to explore the

effects of racism on African Americans during the time period in which the poem was

---

[63] Kanye, an African American male who would become a dissenting voice later in the school year, had not yet enrolled at EA.

written.[64] It was not students' belief that "A Dream Deferred" may be applied broadly to the human experience of disappointment in unfulfilled dreams that surprised me. Rather, it was their insistence that Hughes himself was not writing about race, illustrated by Emma's statement, "I don't think this has anything to do with being black."

During our lunchtime conversation, Joann suggested the term *retrojection* to describe the discourse that students had engaged in that morning. Retrojection is the practice of interpreting past events through the lens of present sensibilities.[65] Joann remembered the term from a college literature course she'd taken, and I thought it an accurate description of what we'd heard from students that day. Students had analyzed a Langston Hughes poem written during the Civil Rights Movement through the lens of their beliefs about present day racism.

A few weeks later I had the chance to talk further with Anthony about the class discussion of the Hughes poem. He had plopped himself down in the cushy green armchair next to my little desk in the corner of the room, and we chatted for a few minutes between activities.

> MM: *Remember when people thought that Langston Hughes wasn't writing about race?*
>
> Anthony: *Yeah, I was one of them.*
>
> MM: *So you think, with the way things were back then, that he wasn't writing about race?*

---

[64] Literary critics have argued the relative significance of authorial intent for decades, and it is not within the scope of this study to explore this issue. Since Joann's unit was tied to the historicity of racism, students' understanding of Hughes' intent in writing these two poems was an important element of her lesson.

[65] "Historical retrojection" is a term used often by biblical scholars to describe interpretation of biblical events based on societal needs or beliefs that come into being long after the events have taken place. Siker (2007), for example, explores "how modern biblical scholarship has contributed to the historicizing and retrojection of a racialized Jesus" (p. 26).

Anthony: (nods) I think he was writing for his hometown, for the people who lived there.

MM: He didn't have a broader audience in mind?

Anthony: (shakes head) Nope. He was just writing for the people around him.

MM: So do you think things were the same then as they are now?

Anthony: (nods) Basically, just like people today, he wanted to be liked by the people around him, in his hometown.

MM: By hometown do you mean Harlem?

Anthony: (nods) Just like today, he knew the people around him, and that's who he was writing for.

MM: You don't think he was writing about race?

Anthony: Nope. He was just writing for his hometown.

Again, I was surprised by Anthony's responses. Although he'd been the only student to agree that a protest reading of "A Dream Deferred" was "fair," during our conversation he pulled back from his position and adopted more fully the interpretations of his friends.

Puzzled and wanting to hear from more students about this, several weeks later during my interview with Anna, a white student, I asked if she thought Hughes had been writing about race in "A Dream Deferred."

Anna: Yeah, but I think that my class doesn't see it as that because of how things are now, and they don't compare it to then and now.

MM: So why do you think that is?

Anna: Cause they're used to (laughs), they're used to just being, like, open, and, especially at this school, because everyone is, like, really ethnically mixed.

MM: Mmhmm.

Anna: Where at, like, a normal public school it's not, so maybe you would think

about it more as a race thing. Rather than here, it's not.

Anna, who had disagreed with other students but had remained silent that day in class, believed that her classmates' understanding of present racial relations hinders them from acknowledging racism in the past (*my class doesn't see it as that because of how things are now*). Further, Anna described the atmosphere at EA as "open," and I believe her use of the term, "ethnically mixed" refers not to individual student's mixed racial or ethnic backgrounds, but to the prevalence of cross-racial friendships at the school. Anna believed that students' cross-racial friendships stop them from needing to think about race, as if these friendships are proof that racism does not exist at the school. At a "normal public school" where, presumably, students are not so friendly toward one another, students might be more likely to explore the theme of racism in the Hughes poetry, but at Excellence Academy students' close cross-racial friendships make this unnecessary.

During our interview, which took place more than three months after we'd discussed "A Dream Deferred" in class, Anthony told me that, after thinking more about it, he'd changed his opinion about the poem.[66] He admitted, "I guess it could make sense that he was, maybe, talking about race." When I asked him why his classmates had been so adamantly opposed to the idea, he offered, "…I guess because we weren't living in that time, so we really don't have a good understanding, that we just believe, ok, he's just talking about everybody, because we see everybody as the same." Anthony speaks of himself and his classmates as a cohesive group that is non-racist and colorblind (*we see everybody as the same*), and that is too far removed from past racism to understand it (*I*

---

[66] In retrospect, I wish I'd asked Anthony why he'd changed his opinion, but I did not ask and he didn't offer a reason.

guess because we weren't living in that time). Like Anna, he believes that students' non-

racist positioning in the present makes them less inclined to discuss racism in the past.

While students remained firm in their use of retrojection that day, when challenged

through the next day's class discussion, they shifted to the use of a new argument.

"This is All We Ever Talk About"

The day after our discussion of the Hughes' poems Joann decided to debrief with

the students about the previous class. White students shifted their argument from

retrojection to complaints of the frequency of discussions about racism.

> *Joann: This is something I want to open up to your class specifically. There's this interesting hesitation, almost resistance to talking about certain issues in here, almost as if, if we don't talk about them they won't exist… We're talking about Harlem, race riots, people who are impacted by race every day. This class doesn't seem to want to look at it from that lens. It's almost like because today it's not an issue,[67] we look back and say that it wasn't an issue then.*
>
> *Emma: I feel like I don't have the historical context, so I can't really talk about it. Also, I want to look at poetry from the point of the issues of the author as a human being and not just a black person.*
>
> *Edward: (sitting across from Emma) We already know the issues, we just keep talking about what we already know over and over…We already know that Harlem had racism problems…we already talk about it so much that there's nothing else to say.*
>
> *Joann: Is that how everyone feels? I really am interested. I really want to hear your voices.*
>
> *Lots of nodding and murmuring in agreement. Juliette and Anthony are silent and Violet is absent.*
>
> *Cathy: I've gone over and over this again and again. We understand that there was racism. We're just tired of talking about it over and over again.*
>
> *Joann: So you've talked about it so much that it's lost its value?*

---

[67] Thus, Joann introduced this discussion by reinforcing the idea that racism no longer exists, an idea that, through my many conversations with her, I know she did not believe. Yet, perhaps because of her own discomfort with the topic, in this instance she adopted this softer approach.

Again students nod in agreement, murmuring, "Yes."

Emma and Edward (who were sitting together) objected to discussions of racism through contradicting arguments: Emma stated that she doesn't know enough about the historical context of the poems to explore themes of racism within them, while Edward implied that he knows about the issue of racism so thoroughly that there is nothing left to talk about.[68] Emma employed colorblind ideology in her argument as well; she wanted to look at Hughes as a human being, she said, and not just as a black man. In separating Hughes from his blackness, Emma normalizes whiteness,[69] wanting to ascribe Hughes the same raceless status that whites often ascribe themselves (Marx, 2006; McIntyre, 1997). Ignoring Hughes' racial background as she analyzes his poetry will allow Emma to avoid discussing the racism that was so prevalent during the time that the poet wrote. Therefore, Emma's attempt to remake Hughes in her own likeness (as raceless) enables her to avoid thinking about racism.

Although the previous day was the first time they'd discussed racism during this unit and only the second time in the month that I'd been at the school, other students aligned themselves with Edward's complaint and maintained that the class had talked too much about racism. When Cathy restated Edward's argument, most of the white students in the class nodded their agreement. The students' shift in discourse from retrojection to a new argument *(this is all we ever talk about)* is significant because it makes clear that students do, actually, know that racism existed during the time that Hughes was writing; both Edward and Cathy readily admitted this and at other times later in the school year

---

[68] Joann confirmed to me that Emma and Edward had been in the same honors history classes throughout high school, and had both studied the same historical facts regarding the history of race in the U.S.

[69] I wondered if Emma would have thought of saying of Walt Whitman, "I want to look at poetry from the point of the issues of the author as a human being and not just a white person."

Emma argued that she "knows all this" regarding the history of racism in the U.S.

Anthony confirmed in our interview that students had studied slavery and the Civil

Rights Movement in other classes during previous years. Students' use of retrojection

was not born of lack of factual information. When Joann challenged this discourse (*It's*

almost like because today it's not an issue, we look back and say that it wasn't an issue

then) students took up a new argument to bolster their resistance, complaining they'd

been overexposed to the topic of racism. However, I was to discover that students'

complaints of overexposure did not apply to another subject within the school's

curriculum: the Holocaust.

Privileging of the Holocaust

The next day, a Friday, the 11th grade students were buzzing about the "day of

silence" activity scheduled by their history teacher for the coming Monday. Mr. Jay, who

according to school policy was supposed to be aligning his American history curriculum

with Joann's American literature course, had explained the activity in an email to faculty:

> *Some of my 11th grade students have recently begun their study of the*
> *Holocaust. Because of their strong interest in the subject matter, I have decided*
> *to take things a step further. On Monday, all of my 11th grade students will have*
> *a day of silence. This silence will give them a better idea of what Anne Frank and*
> *her family went through (not to mention the countless others that hid too).*

Joann told me that she was "stunned" by this email, since the 11th grade students had

studied the Holocaust the year before and were supposed to be studying American history

this year. In light of students' complaints that they were sick of discussing the same

issues over and over again, I wondered how they felt about repeating their study of the

Holocaust for the second year in a row. I floated from table to table that morning, asking

students how they felt about observing the day of silence. Surprisingly, most students felt

positively about the assignment.

I asked, "So you've studied all this before, right? You don't mind doing it again?"

Edward acknowledged that they'd learned about the Holocaust the previous year, but was willing to participate in Mr. Jay's activity because, "It's the respectable thing to do."

Ruthie (a white student and a close friend of Edward) explained, "Every time you do it you see it from a different angle. You go into it deeper."

Emma and the other white students at her table were also very positive about the day of silence activity. They, too, admitted that they'd studied the Holocaust before, but said, "It's fine because this will be a deeper experience." Therefore, the very same students who had complained that they were tired of talking about racism toward African Americans were not at all tired of discussing the Holocaust, and were even willing to forego communicating with their friends for an entire school day in order to "go deeper" into the topic. Apparently these students did not feel that revisiting the subject of racism within the experience of African Americans had the same benefit. Students revisited the subject of the Holocaust again later in the school year during *The Bluest Eye* unit, again privileging study of anti-Semitism above that of racism toward African Americans. The next chapter will explore possible reasons for this response.

Preliminary Thoughts

As I tried to make sense of students' responses, it seemed unlikely that 11th grade honors students' resistance to discussing racism was due only to boredom or annoyance at redundancy in the curriculum; neither was lack of historical context at the root of their wish to avoid the theme of racism in the Hughes poetry. Rather, their responses to the

Hughes poems may have indicated the workings of simultaneous processes in students'

thinking. It seems likely that some students were annoyed at Joann and me because they

perceived our comments about Walt Whitman as accusations of racism. However,

inseparable from their irritation with us (and perhaps partly the reason for that irritation)

was a racial identity that was uncomfortable acknowledging past and present racism. It is

impossible to tease out how much of students' denial of the racism theme in Hughes'

work was about resisting the voices of the two adults in the room, and how much was due

to efforts to avoid grappling with the challenging subject of racism.[70] In any case, by the

time we began discussing the Hughes poem, "Harlem," students were actively developing

discourses that were specific and contextualized to their school environment to help them

evade acknowledging the subject of racism in that poem. Inextricably linked to those

discourses were feelings of frustration and the seeds of resentment that would bloom later

in the school year when the topic of racism was explored again.

When the Harlem Renaissance unit was completed, 11 Honors did not discuss

race or racism again for several months, but the feelings students revealed during the few

days spent on that unit did not dissipate. The next chapter will show how months later,

during discussions of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye,* students revisited some of the

discourses they'd developed during the Harlem Renaissance unit. Further, the frustration

that began during analysis of the Langston Hughes poems grew steadily as students

discussed Morrison's work; perhaps Joann's assurance, "I really am interested. I really

want to hear your voices" had given students the false impression that their opinions

---

[70] In fact, by the end of my fieldwork Joann and I had both come to believe that some students resented us because, in their eyes, we represented the challenge of acknowledging racism as a present and persisting issue. Joann reported that even during the following school year, Ron, James, and Edward, who had once been friendly with her, refused to make eye contact with her when they passed her in the hallway.

would be respected and the class would not discuss racism through the study of literature again. By the time we reached the end of *The Bluest Eye* unit, for many students frustration had developed into resentment and anger.

The discourses that I've described in this chapter were not the only student responses that began during the Harlem Renaissance unit and grew stronger through the coming days; some of the African American students, including Juliette and Violet, who were quite vocal at the beginning of the study of the Harlem Renaissance, developed the habit of silence in the face of their friends' resentment that continued through much of *The Bluest Eye* unit, as well. The next chapter will also explore the growing reticence of African American students regarding the subject of racism and the careful manner in which they ultimately expressed their dissenting views to their white friends.

Chapter Five

Resistance Among Friends: *The Bluest Eye*

We began studying Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Bluest Eye*,

at the end of April, approximately ten weeks after we'd finished the Harlem Renaissance

unit. By this time I was nearing the end of my fieldwork and had become somewhat of a

semi-permanent fixture in Joann's classes. While most students felt comfortable enough

to include me in their jokes when they were in the mood and ignore me when they

weren't, an interesting dynamic had developed in my relationships with some of the

students in 11 Honors. Some of the white students who had worked to avoid discussing

race in our analysis of the Hughes poems now seemed to steer clear of me as much as

possible, interacting with a cool but polite detachment when I joined their small group

discussions. Ron and James, for example, no longer bantered with me about being Italian

American, and now and then exchanged glances when I commented during class

discussions. At the same time, I'd established a warm friendliness with Violet, Juliette,

and Anthony.[71] Violet and Anthony, in particular, often sat near me or motioned for me

to join their group, and one day I returned from the ladies' room to find the two of them

hovering near my desk, looking around with confused expressions. They seemed relieved

when they saw me, and explained their confusion: they knew I was present because they

saw my belongings, but they didn't know where I'd gone. We laughed and I told them

that next time I'd ask them to sign my agenda book before leaving the room.[72]

---

[71] The spring after I'd completed my fieldwork at EA, when the class I'd known as 11 Honors would be graduating seniors, Joann asked me several times on Violet's behalf if I would attend graduation. When I arrived at the auditorium, Violet, Juliette, and Anthony greeted me with hugs as they lined up in their robes.

[72] The school provided all students with a dated agenda book, which they were required to have with them at all times. Students were not allowed to leave any classroom for any reason unless the teacher in charge had indicated written permission in that book.

Although the class had not discussed racism at all since the final day of the Harlem Renaissance unit, many of the same contextualized arguments that students developed during that unit resurfaced with greater potency in our discussions of *The Bluest Eye.* Set during the Great Depression, the novel tells several interconnecting stories of African American characters through the eyes of child protagonist, Claudia. Claudia and her older sister, Frieda, watch helplessly as their good friend, Pecola, victimized by a racist society and abused by her father, eventually descends into madness. We studied *The Bluest Eye* for one month, missing some days for standardized testing and a field trip. The bulk of the unit focused on the damaging effects of "white beauty standards" on the characters; this was the topic of both a final collage and essay assignment. During the last few class sessions of the unit, Joann, borrowing course materials that I'd used over the years with college students, showed the students chapter three of the California Newsreel video, *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, which details housing discrimination after World War II. On the final day of the unit students discussed the widely used Peggy McIntosh (1989) essay, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack."

Reemergence of Discourses

From the outset, students' responses to *The Bluest Eye* were divided along the lines of race. The same white students who were vocal in their displeasure at discussing racism in the poems of Langston Hughes were equally vocal in their dislike of Morrison's text. In fact, dissention over the novel started even before we began the unit. While Violet and Juliette told me that they were excited about reading *The Bluest Eye,* some white students were upset from the outset that, unlike the 11th grade on level class, they

would not be reading *The Catcher in the Rye.*[73]

"Why can't we read a book that everyone has heard of?" Cathy complained.

"People have heard of *The Bluest Eye*!" Juliette responded indignantly.

Thus, the stage was set, and this initial resentment grew in many students as we progressed through the reading of the novel.

***This is all we ever talk about* returns.**

A few days into the unit, I settled at a discussion group where white students Ron, James, Emma, and Edward sat on one end of the table and African American students Alyssa, Violet, and Kanye, who remained silent for almost the whole discussion, sat at the other. A conversation ensued about how much students disliked *The Bluest Eye*.

> Ron: This is my least favorite book ever. I'd like to deconstruct[74] the text (makes motion like he is ripping a book in half and throwing it away). All of this happened long before we were born. We can't relate to it. How are we supposed to get past racism if we keep talking about it?
>
> Violet: (quietly) Calm down, best friend.

Violet and Ron often greeted each other with a warm, "Hello, Best Friend," sometimes followed by a hug. Yet, throughout the unit Ron seemed completely unaware of how his words might impact his African American "best friend." The conversation continued:

> MM: So you don't like this book?
>
> James: (motioning at Ron) He doesn't like books that deal with these kinds of issues.
>
> Ron: Why don't we talk about more modern issues of oppression?
>
> MM: Like what?

---

[73] As I noted in the previous chapter, students who had clearly stated that they were tired of talking about race during the Harlem Renaissance unit may have felt the added frustration of having their opinions ignored when Joann announced they'd be reading *The Bluest Eye*.

[74] Ron's comment referred to a PowerPoint lesson on deconstruction theory that Joann had presented a few days previously.

Ron: Well, like gay rights. That's more relevant in today's world.

Edward: I don't understand why we have to keep talking about this over and over again. I'm tired of talking about things that happened in the past that don't affect us. It's not preparing us.

MM: Preparing you for what? For college? For life?

Edward: For college or for life.

MM: If you had your choice, what kinds of things would you read in school?

Edward: Stephen King.

Emma: This is all we ever talk about in lit class. Talking about it just makes it worse. Why can't we ever just read a book for the story? Why do we always have to talk about these issues? Why can't we just talk about what the book is actually about?

Violet: But racism is *what this book is about.*

Students ignore Violet's comment. They continue to complain about the text.

Emma: Talking about racism and sexism makes it worse. We can't get past it if we keep talking about it. Why do we have to talk about sexism if it doesn't exist any more?

Edward: It's ironic. They want us to stop being racist but they keep talking about it. The way to stop something is to stop giving it attention.

Emma: I, personally, have never experienced sexism. I have never been kept from doing something because I'm a girl.[75]

James: Yeah, women make a little less money than men, but other than that, sexism doesn't exist, unless I'm misinformed. And Ron, Edward and I are white males. We've never experienced anything like this, so we can't relate to it at all.

Once again, the idea that racism no longer exists (an idea that Joann had

inadvertently reinforced during the Harlem Renaissance unit) acted as a springboard for

---

[75] Emma and other students had shown impatience with Joann's feminist reading of *The Scarlet Letter* earlier in the school year. She and others had claimed that there was no longer any need to talk about the oppression of women in the past because women had fully achieved equal rights in the present. Thus, these students conflated sexism and racism as issues that no longer affect them.

students' complaints. Leonardo (2002) describes two essential features of whiteness discourse:[76] "an unwillingness to name the contours of racism" and "the minimization of racist legacy" (p. 32). These two characteristics were evident in the arguments the 11th grade honors students employed throughout their discussion of multicultural literature.

During this conversation, students expanded their *this is all we ever talk* about argument in several ways. Ron noted that the topic of racism isn't relevant the way a more up-to-date topic, such as gay rights, might be. His desire to discuss "more modern issues of oppression" illustrates his construction of racism as an issue of the past. Edward agreed with and elaborated on Ron's view by adding that the issue doesn't affect them; his view of racism as individual acts of discrimination allows him to avoid thinking about himself or his white friends as the beneficiaries of a racist system (Flynn, 2012). Although they'd studied slavery and the Civil Rights Movement in previous years, Edward and the other white students in this class had never been asked to consider their privileged position as whites and were, therefore, able to think of themselves as unaffected by the issue of racism. Lewis-Charp (2003) studied white students at six multiracial high schools and found that, since school curriculum centered on slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, the treatment of Native Americans, and the Holocaust, students were "not exposed to a complex examination of movements for social change" (p. 283). Therefore, students developed a narrow, ahistorical outlook that viewed racism as an individual problem of the past, not connected to present day issues. Edward's argument is very similar to the racial discourse used by these and other white students who showed a "lack of self-reflection about being a white person" that "prohibits a critical examination

---

[76] Gillborn (2009) makes an important distinction between "whiteness" as a discourse and white people as a socially construction identity group. White people may or may not espouse the discourse of whiteness, just as heterosexual people may or may not be homophobic.

of the individual, institutional, and cultural forms of racism" (McIntyre, 1997, p. 14).

What's more, in Edward's view, a text that deals with the topic of racism, which he finds irrelevant, does not help to prepare students for the future.[77] James extends Edward's argument that the Morrison text is irrelevant when he comments that white males cannot be expected to relate to a text that does not explore the experience of white males (Beach, Thein, & Parks, 2008). In a variation on the colorblind argument known as "racial evasion" (Bucholtz, 2011, p. 169), Edward and Emma agree that talking about racism makes it worse, and that the way to end racism is to ignore it. All of these arguments were made quite loudly while the African American students at the other end of the table remained silent, with the exception of Violet's quiet defense, "But racism *is* what this book is about." I will explore possible reasons for this silence later in this chapter.

Making a *Night* of it.

As the discussion continued that day, James reminisced about a book they'd read last year that he'd really appreciated, the Elie Wiesel memoir, *Night*. He enjoyed that one, he said, and didn't mind talking about race in that book. He felt that *Night* was a book he could relate to. Ron agreed, stating, "Yeah, if I'd realized earlier that it was an actual experience, I could have related to it even more. By the time I realized it we were almost finished with the book. We need to read more books about real experiences."[78]

Of this very vocal group of white students, only James agreed to be interviewed by me. Our interview took place a few days later, and I asked James about his feeling

---

[77] Edward's desire to read Stephen King novels in school may also reflect a wish for less challenging, more entertaining curriculum that would likely not be uncommon among students.

[78] Space prohibits me from exploring another argument some students employed to complain about several of the books they'd been assigned – *it's only fiction*. Ron, James, and others devalued fiction, failing to see it as "truth" when compared to nonfiction.

that he couldn't relate to the Morrison text as a white male. I suggested that perhaps literature is important because through it we can experience situations that we will never experience in real life. James (diplomatic as always) replied that, although I'd made a good point,

> *...the huge difference in life between me and the main character, from what I'm seeing in the first couple of chapters, is substantial to the point where I'm having a hard time, you know, not even relating to it, just, you know, believing it. Because, you know, the way that she's treated by these people is something that, you know, I, I didn't know people could be treated that badly. So, I guess one of the big reasons why I can't relate to it as well is because, you know, I'm not seeing the reality in it.*

Here, James expands his argument; the problem is not just that he, as a white male, cannot relate to the racism faced by the characters in the novel, the problem is that he doesn't actually believe that the story could have happened to anyone. In another moment of retrojection, James sends his belief that racism is over back through time, stating that he's *not seeing the reality* of the text: i.e., the depictions of racism in the text cannot possibly be thought of as real. James then clarified his point by mentioning *Night* again, explaining why he enjoyed it so much more than *The Bluest Eye*:

> *It's a first hand account, written by a Holocaust survivor of, you know, the concentration camps, uh, used by the Nazis. It was kind of hard to, you know, not believe in that, because the guy lived it, you know. Which is why it's easier to believe in the truth than it is to believe in realistic fiction.*

I came away from my interview with James perplexed. Why did he have so much trouble believing a story that depicted white racism toward African Americans, yet value so deeply accounts of European Anti-Semitism? Was his fiction/nonfiction dichotomy solely responsible? While I cannot know definitively, James's disbelief of the likelihood of the events of *The Bluest Eye* may indicate that he finds himself in an uncomfortable place of conflict through the reading of this text. Helms (1990) posits that when whites'

beliefs of racial equity are first challenged, they become aware of the moral dilemmas

associated with being white and may experience guilt and anxiety. Not wanting to believe

in whites' societal advantage, they experience cognitive dissonance, an uncomfortable

state that they will attempt to reduce. One method of reducing dissonance, according to

Helms, is to seek confirmations that "either racism is not the White person's fault or does

not really exist" (p. 59). James's admission, "I didn't know people could be treated that

badly" shows the dissonance the events of the story caused him; his response, "I'm not

seeing the reality in it" shows his attempt to reduce that dissonance by invalidating the

text.

"I'm not German"

During my interview with Anthony I asked him why he thought his white

classmates complained that they'd talked about racism toward blacks too much, but never

seemed to tire of talking about the Holocaust. Anthony replied, "…maybe it's because

they weren't directly responsible." When I asked him to clarify, he role-played the

position his white friends might take:

> *…I'm not German. It's not my fault…I can look at it objectively and analyze exactly what's going on here. But, I mean, if we're talking about slavery, I, I mean, I wouldn't want to talk about slavery all the time if I was white, because I would feel, well, like, these are my ancestors that did this, and I feel kind of bad about this…*

Anthony believed that his white friends were defensive about the topic of American

slavery because they felt guilty (Helms, 1990), knowing that their ancestors were

responsible for the atrocities committed against African Americans. No such guilt existed

regarding the Holocaust, which freed white students to fully explore the topic objectively.

Again putting himself in the place of his white classmates, Anthony explained, "I'm not

German, and this [the Holocaust] is actually interesting, what happened. Like, the thing is interesting." Therefore, James's choice to distrust the story of *The Bluest Eye*, brushing it off as merely fiction, absolves him of the guilt he and whites may experience as they grapple with the stark reality of racism in their own country, while his affinity for the victims of the Holocaust allows him to adopt the position of a caring, empathetic, and non-racist person.

"White Beauty Standards": Patterns of Interaction

Much of the class discussion that took place over the next few weeks focused on the damaging effects of white standards of beauty experienced by the characters in *The Bluest Eye.* Throughout curricular activities and the discussions that accompanied them, a pattern of student interaction emerged. My overall impression as we lived through class discussions was that many of the white students in the class actively resisted the themes of the novel regarding racism, while African American students either agreed with them or, for the majority of the unit, were silent. Leah, a Chinese American student, sat with white students and rarely spoke in a large group setting on any topic; therefore, it is difficult to know if her silence regarding racism was indicative of her racial identity or a product of a quiet personality. Alyssa and Michelle, the two light-skinned African American females in the class, almost always aligned themselves with the vocal white students both physically (in terms of seating) and attitudinally (in denying the existence of racism and white privilege). White students who held differing perspectives from the vocal whites also chose to remain silent. Until the last day or two of the unit, Anthony, Violet, Juliette, Kanye, and Karla, the darker skinned African Americans, were either silent or incredibly diplomatic in their comments.

The tendency for light skinned African Americans to side with whites might be seen as a form of colorism, discrimination based on skin color among members of the same racial group. Ironically, this tendency became most evident during the unit on *The Bluest Eye* when students viewed "A Girl Like Me*,*" a documentary by teen filmmaker Kiri Davis that explores the harmful emotional effects of white beauty standards on black girls. Some students responded to the documentary by reinforcing, rather than problematizing (as the film meant to do) the message that when it comes to hair and skin color, the closer the approximation of whiteness, the better. For example, Alyssa commented that the film was "true," but rather than explore the film's theme of discrimination, she simply stated, "That's why I relax my hair." About her skin color she said, "I'm light skinned, so that's not an issue." Neither Joann, nor I, nor any of the other students challenged Alyssa's normalization of the potentially emotionally damaging situation that Davis portrayed in the film. As the class discussed the absence of dark-skinned African American models in beauty advertisements, Michelle commented, "It depends on the person – how much the person wants to work toward that. It's not a gender or race thing." Relying on earlier models of black racial identity,[79] Helms (1990) explains that due to "advantaged status in their own racial group" (p. 23) some African Americans may, without fully realizing it, align themselves with whites in minimizing the impact of racism in order to maintain their higher status within their own group. For some, this status may come through lighter skin or straighter hair. Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, and Freeman (2010) note that "colorism affects both psychological and socioeconomic outcomes" (p. 453) and impacts socialization processes within families as

---

[79] Nigrescence or black racial identity models (NRID) have been developed by a variety of theorists over the past three decades. Helms relies heavily on Cross's stage model of black identity development, first published in 1971 (Helms, 1990).

much as traits like birth order or gender. Because of attitudes of colorism that have existed in the U.S. and around the world for centuries, Alyssa and Michelle's light skin grants them advantage that they are likely not aware of and makes their alignment with the white students in the class in resisting acknowledgment of racism understandable. Perhaps this in part explains why Michelle did not state her belief that "Racism will always exist because it's such a huge part of society" until the final day of *The Bluest Eye* unit.

The darker skinned African American females in the class agreed with the perspective of the filmmaker, but did not elaborate on their feelings about the topic. Karla, for example, said of the Davis video, "It's true," but did not further express her opinion. Some of the white students, however, had more to say. During a small group discussion, Edward talked about having "Jewish features," and "the Jew curl," stating that he "wasn't crazy about" this look. Edward's point was that white people, too, might be dissatisfied with their "ethnic" appearance; through his comments he identified himself as a victim of white beauty standards and minimized the effect that these standards have on people of color. From there students discussed what it meant to "look Italian," and the irony that whites tan to make their skin look darker. Beach, Thein and Parks (2008) found that during class discussions about race, "those with power or agency to act often assume center stage, positioning those with less power or agency to the margins" (p. 39); this was the case during this section of the class discussion. Edward and the white students at the table dominated the group discussion, turning the focus on themselves and appropriating the struggle the girls in the film had expressed. Violet sat with them and listened quietly as the focus of the group discussion shifted away from her experience.

On one particular day at the beginning of the unit, Joann asked the class to discuss

The Bluest Eye's main character, Claudia's violent response to a Shirley Temple doll.

Rather than treasuring the doll as other girls in the novel do, Claudia destroys it. The

class discussed Morrison's association of physical beauty with whiteness, a main theme

of the novel. Ron had this to say on the topic:

> *There was nothing intentional. I doubt that Shirley Temple was being raised as a*
> *child star just to spite the minorities. It seems like they're mentally putting that*
> *upon themselves. They just can't get over it.*

To Ron, the characters in the novel who "just can't get over it" are at fault, not the

system of oppression under which they suffered. When Joann answered that the damage

of white dominated beauty standards may not have been intentional, but, nevertheless,

did happen, Ron continued sarcastically:

> *Well, pardon me for not being from that time period, and not being a little African*
> *American girl. Where's their pride? Can't they just look in a mirror or something*
> *and say, "I'm beautiful?"*

Here, Ron revisits the idea that as a white male he cannot be expected to relate to

the experience of "a little African American girl" from a past time period. However, at

the core of his comment is an impatience and intolerance toward the novel's African

American characters. Naidoo (1992) noted white students' lack of sympathy for African

American characters during a unit on *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, and Lewis-Charp

(2003) found that white students' inclinations to view racism as a past problem "were

often accompanied by a tendency to dismiss the experiences of other groups and, in some

cases, blame people of color for their own social position" (p. 283). Like Ron and the

10th graders I've described in a previous chapter, white students believed that people of

color want to be seen as victims. Lewis-Charp describes a narrow, ahistorical view of

racism that resulted in a lack of empathy very much like that displayed by Ron, who showed no awareness of the impact his harsh words might have of the students of color in his class, among them his friend, Violet.

After exchanging looks with Juliette, Violet, who was sitting at Ron's table, responded to Ron's questions, "Where's their pride? Can't they just look in a mirror or something and say, "I'm beautiful?" with the quiet but serious statement, "I'm black and I'm proud." She did not directly address Ron's attack of the black character in the novel, nor did she acknowledge his impatience and insensitivity. Although, by her statement, Violet expressed pride in her heritage, by not defending Morrison's text directly she avoided challenging Ron's insensitive rant. Further, she separated herself from the characters, implying, *yes, those characters should be black and proud like I am.* From her comment one might infer that Violet is not one of those blacks who, in Ron's view, "just can't get over it." By her words Violet positioned herself as an African American who would be a safe friend for a white person like Ron who prefers to deny the existence of racism. Reciprocally, Ron's construction of how African Americans should respond to racism is informed by Violet's positioning. If Violet, who is black and proud, is able to "get over" the racism inherent in beauty standards that elevate whiteness, why can't other blacks do the same?

Of all the African American students in the class, Kanye, who had only been a student at EA for a few months and did not boast close friendships with others in the class, was the most outspoken on the topic of racism in general and of white beauty standards in particular. But even he mitigated the effects of present day racism in discussing the child character Claudia's rage toward the Shirley Temple doll. Kanye

explained:

> *She grew up witnessing the effect of white beauty standards on the two older girls, and that's what makes her angry. It's not like for us…we haven't experienced racism.*

As I've mentioned previously, during our interview a few weeks later, Kanye again claimed he'd never experienced racism, but then changed his mind when he thought about it more deeply. At that point he named specific examples of how he, his family members, and other African American students at the school had experienced racism. During class discussions, Kanye's stance on the issue was often conflicted. He did speak up at times, as when, a few days later, he disagreed with Edward's statement that "If you're a minority among a group of others who are the majority, discrimination is just natural. All people have experienced discrimination in some form," with the reply, "White people aren't going to be followed around in Abercrombie." However, at other times Kanye claimed he'd never experienced racism or took a low profile during class discussions.

Perhaps because he had attended EA for several years and considered himself to be a close friend of many white students in this class, Anthony's comments during class discussion were usually measured and diplomatic, and he seemed to take pains to appear fair in his responses. For example, instead of objecting to Edward's claim that all people (including whites) experience racism, as Kanye did, Anthony agreed with Edward, saying, "Some people may think they're the only cool ones, and that if you're not like them, you're not cool." Anthony did not mention race in this response, but it was clear that he, like white 10th grader Tom, viewed exclusion from "coolness" status to be a form of discrimination toward whites. Similarly, it was during class discussion of white beauty

standards that, in response to James's statement, "Some people are too sensitive,"
Anthony tried to explain why black students might be "sensitive" about race through the
"yellow posters" analogy described in a previous chapter. By talking about posters
instead of people, Anthony avoided mentioning the specific racial backgrounds of the
people in the room, and his use of humor broke the tension that was building during class
discussion. Through this and other interactions, Anthony made it a point to show
sensitivity towards his white friends, while still working to help them to see racism from
his and other African American students' perspectives. While most of the class showed
appreciation for Anthony's humor with laughter and smiles, based on their angry
responses over the remaining classes in *The Bluest Eye* unit, it did not seem that they
incorporated his perspective into their understanding of race relations.[80]

The same patterns of student interaction persisted on the day that students viewed
each other's culminating "Beauty Standards Project," collages they'd made of internet
and magazine ads that showed the representation of beauty in advertisements. Almost all
students had included images of African Americans in their collages, but not one of them
was dark-skinned, and all had straight or loosely curled hair. Joann asked the students if,
based on their projects, they felt we have now overcome the racialization that the
characters in the novel faced because of the internalization of white standards of beauty.
Students responded thusly:

> *Emma (white): Yes. Look at Beyoncé. No one would ever say she's not beautiful.*

---

[80] During the discussion that continued after Anthony's example of the "yellow posters," Joann told me
that she'd been standing near Ron, and decided to count how many times he murmured, "Oh, God," with
his head down in his arms. She said she stopped counting at number eleven.

Edward (white): I think there's an equal representation. In magazines, on billboards, there's not only white people. It's not necessarily equal representation, but it's not totally unequal.

Alyssa (light skinned African American): It's just that there are more white people that are models.

MM: Why do you think that is?

Alyssa: If more African Americans wanted to be models, then they would be. It's their choice.

Emma: There's plenty of representation.

Dana (white): If you look at the global world, there's equal representation.

While none of the students recognized the absence of dark-skinned African Americans in their collages, I found most significant the responses of Alyssa, a light-skinned African American, and Dana, a close friend of Juliette and Violet who, according to Joann, by her own admission, "only dated black guys." In the case of these two females, neither insider status[81] nor close friendship ties with African Americans allowed them to consider that racism might be responsible for the absence of dark-skinned models in media. At the heart of their statements lie the essential discourses of whiteness that critical race theorists have been describing for many years: reluctance to acknowledge the existence of racism in the present and a tendency to underestimate the lasting effects of racism that occurred in the past (Frankenberg, 1993; Gillborn, 2009; Leonardo, 2002; Roediger, 1992).

And so it went. Day after day the same white students dominated class discussions,[82] becoming more and more angry and resistant to the notion of present day

---

[81] One might argue that Alyssa's light skin kept her from being an "insider" to the racism described by the dark skinned girls in the Davis video.

[82] Not all white students who agreed with Ron and the other vocal white students spoke up during class discussions. Tammy waited until after class to express reverse racism discourse. She approached me after

racism. Other white students remained silent, and the African American students, with a few exceptions, either agreed with the vocal white students or also remained silent. Ron took to carrying a metal kitchen teaspoon with him, waving it around during class discussions and motioning as if he were feeding himself. He exclaimed often and loudly, "I have a spoon. I'm ready to be fed my daily dose of liberal nonsense." Even when Joann shared income, housing, or incarceration statistics that evidenced institutional racism, students remained silent or stubbornly opposed. Joann and I hoped that two vehicles that had prompted productive discussion over many years with my college students, the California Newsreel video on race and the McIntosh essay, might help to broaden students' perspectives about the history of discrimination and white privilege in the U.S. These were the topics of the final two days spent on *The Bluest Eye* unit.

"The House We Live In"

Episode Three of the documentary, *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, titled, "The House We Live In" (Pounder et al., 2003) describes the complicity of the U.S. government and the mortgage industry in creating discriminatory housing policy after WWII, and the devastating effect this policy has had on African Americans. Critical race theorists Bell (1987) and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) argue that attaining rights for African Americans has been an uphill battle because, from its inception, the U.S. has based individual rights on property ownership and not on human rights. They explain that since the signing of the Constitution, social benefits have always been given to property

---

class and asked if I planned to "write a report and, like, give it to someone that's going to do something about it." She seemed anxious to express her opinion to someone in power, and a bit disappointed when I assured her I had none. She further explained that her mother had told her that the media is racist because everyone "made a big deal about the Trayvon Martin case," but when the same thing happened in reverse – a white person was killed by black people – "no one cared, and it wasn't in the news." I responded that I see news reports about blacks committing crimes every day – just that morning there'd been a report about a young black male who'd killed a white woman. Tammy shook her head and said, "I don't watch the news. I only know what my mother said."

owners. "The House We Live In" details how, more recently, whites were encouraged to purchase property and granted low interest mortgages, while African Americans were kept out of suburbia and relegated to public housing in urban centers. When blacks did purchase suburban homes, whites swiftly left, creating lower property values and a lower tax base in African American neighborhoods, and, since public schools are largely funded through real estate taxes, a lower quality education for African American children. Ironically, Excellence Academy owes its existence partly to these past policies, since many of its students travel over an hour each way by bus to avoid attending their underachieving local public school.[83]

As the video played, some of the white students who had been the most resistant to conversations about racism showed their disinterest by whispering and laughing. When the video ended, Joann asked the students to share their gut reactions. Violet spoke first, saying that she was not surprised, because her grandparents had experienced housing discrimination and had talked to her about it. After a long silence, Emma, Cathy, and Edward said that they, too, were not surprised by the facts of the video because they'd learned about it in history class. More silence followed. Ron motioned as if being fed with his spoon (which he had drilled a hole in and now wore around his neck every day). Then Joann asked a question: "Do you feel that the purpose of the video is to blame you?"

Many of the white students in the class exclaimed a resounding "Yes!" They continued, speaking over each other in rapid fire:

I feel like we're being blamed!

---

[83] Approximately one third of the school's population lives in Carltonville, where the local high school's standardized test scores in all curriculum areas, as well as the school's graduation rates, are below state averages. Perhaps to avoid making any particular students feel singled out, Joann and I did not specifically name Carltonville or its high school as examples of the results of racist housing policies depicted in the film.

It's saying that we're all racist!

So this is all our fault!

Ron: Am I supposed to take the blame for my ancestors being allowed to buy a house?

I pointed out that one of the speakers in the video, Beverly Tatum, stated that none of us is to blame for this because we've all inherited this system. Students did not respond directly to my comment. Joann then found a map online that illustrated how racially segregated the areas surrounding EA continue to be. Dana stated flatly, "I don't agree with that" with no further explanation. When Joann pressed her, she refused to answer. Grace and Emma, both white, left their spots at a table and squeezed over to the couch to be closer to Edward and other white students, creating a physically segregated classroom space.

As the discussion continued, disagreement among students escalated. Finally, after almost a month of near silence, Violet, Juliette, and Kanye[84] began to speak out.

Emma: I'm just so sick of this conversation! I'm done with it!

Violet: We sit here all year and listen to your history, and the minute we get some of ours, you don't want to hear it! We talked about the Harlem Renaissance for nine days!

Violet's last comment was in response to the many times her white friends had complained, "This is all we ever talk about" regarding class discussions of race. She'd expressed a similar feeling to me during our interview, when we talked about the negative response many of her classmates were having toward *The Bluest Eye*. She said:

A lot of people didn't like the Harlem Renaissance either. That, that was the, I think that was the one actual time that it kind of bothered me, 'cause that's the

---

[84] Anthony was absent that day.

one thing that's like centered around African American history, and I was like, that one thing, people couldn't stand it. It's like, we talk about your kind all the time, but the one time we get to talk about something that kind of relates to me, you want to have a hissy fit.

More than two months after the fact, Violet admitted to me privately that her friends' negative responses to the Harlem Renaissance unit had bothered her. Yet, during that unit she'd endured the complaints of the white students patiently, largely without comment. If Violet's white friends knew she'd been bothered by their remarks, this knowledge did nothing to stop their complaints.

Class discussion about "The House We Live In" continued:

Emma: It shouldn't be separated. History is history…I don't think it should be called racism. Segregation is not racism. I didn't enslave anybody. I didn't do any of these things or cause inequality. What's happening today is not racism.

Edward and other white students agree with her.

Violet, Juliette, and Kanye: Yes it is racism!

They go back and forth this way several times:

No, it isn't!

Yes, it is!

Juliette: What else would you call it?

Kanye: If you have people separated by race, it is racism.

Emma (insisting): No, it's not racism!

Juliette (to Emma): Why are you so angry?

Ron (shaking his spoon at Joann): Now you're at the point of force-feeding!

Again, the discussion erupted into many people talking at once.

Dana: What is the point of talking about this? So what if neighborhoods are segregated? Why does it matter?

In response to Dana's question I explained that, as a direct result of the policies described in the video, real estate values are still higher in white neighborhoods (Anacker, 2010). "Oh," she replied. Two white students, Anna and Tammy, wanted more information about how race affects the housing market. Joann explained that in areas where homes are worth less money, people pay lower taxes, which can affect the services they receive, including the amount of tax dollars allocated for education. James asked, "Why would that matter anymore, since people can go to any school they want?" Joann answered that students cannot go to any public school they want; in our area, unless they choose a charter school like EA, they are assigned their public school according to where they live. At that point Ron shifted his anger, calling out, "It's the bank's and the government's fault!" He demanded of Joann, "How can we fix this?" Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to answer Ron's question in depth, since time had run out and class was over.

Tatum (1997) warns, "poorly organized antiracism workshops or other educational experiences can create a scenario that places participants at risk for getting stuck in their anger" (p. 105). She suggests that whites need to be given concrete tools to help them move beyond guilt and anger and toward antiracist thinking and action. Unfortunately, the hourly starts and stops of secondary school scheduling made it difficult to end classes on a constructive note and may have left students festering in feelings of anger and guilt. I wonder now if a different class structure, perhaps one in which students had been given more opportunity and time to reflect in writing about their feelings, might have been beneficial here.

White Privilege Essay

Joann and I hoped to continue the discussion that had been so intense and had ended so abruptly the next day (and the last of *The Bluest Eye* unit) through analysis of Peggy McIntosh's seminal essay on white privilege. First published in 1989 but reprinted many times, McIntosh's highly respected and often quoted essay describes white privilege as the unearned, unrecognized advantages that work for whites in large and small ways in everyday life. The most famous and widely used[85] portion of the essay is McIntosh's list of the unearned benefits of whiteness. Students were asked to read and discuss the essay at their tables, and I listened as Alyssa, Edward, Emma and others read McIntosh's list of privileges aloud, making fun as they read. Alyssa was especially amused by the item, "I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed" (McIntosh, 1989, p. 10). Alyssa laughed and said that she'd never been followed around in a store. Edward, Emma, and Grace supported her claim by saying, "It's just about age, not race." These white students said they *had* been followed around in stores, but believed it was because they are teenagers. They insisted adamantly that if store employees follow a black youth, it is due to age and not race. Alyssa agreed, but then added, "It depends on how they're dressed, like if they look suspicious." The others agreed. Thus, ironically, as these students attempted to refute McIntosh's example of white privilege, the black student in the group claimed she'd never been followed by store employees, while the white students claimed they had. They all agreed that age, and not race, was the reason that teens might be profiled in this manner, but then shifted their argument to place blame on the way the teens in question

---

[85] McIntosh's list of benefits to whites is often used in racial diversity training sessions.

might be dressed; they might look "suspicious," in which case this treatment by store personnel would be understandable. Significantly, this conversation took place during the height of the Trayvon Martin controversy. Martin, a black teen, was followed and, after engaging in a physical conflict, ultimately shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a white Hispanic adult, in a gated Florida community.[86] Alyssa's argument aligned with those that claimed that Martin's hoodie had made him look suspicious.

As we talked, Anthony wandered over to our table. I filled him in on the conversation, asking if store personnel had ever followed him.

"Tons of times," he shrugged. Then, laughingly, he added, "DeSean Jackson[87] gets followed around in stores!"

Joann then began the large group discussion by once again trying to create a "safe space" for students. Echoing Tatum's words from the video she'd shown the day before, she stressed, "This is not anybody's fault in this room, it's the world you've inherited. This is hard and controversial to talk about, especially if you think you're being blamed for something that you had nothing to do with." She continued, "So, being aware that we're not to blame, what can we pull out of this article?" As on the previous day, student opinion was divided along racial lines:

> Laura (white): As AP students we're taught to look at background. This article was written in 1988, it's outdated in 2012. Number eighteen says, "I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the "person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race." We have Obama now.

> Dana (white): This article is probably one of the stupidest things I've ever read in my life. This lady sounded completely insane. It's irrelevant today. Maybe a few points are true, but most of them I don't see today.

---

[86] More than a year later, Zimmerman was found not guilty of all charges.

[87] Philadelphia Eagles football player.

Anthony (African American): That's not fair. She made points that make sense. You might not agree, but it does make sense. She does make some points that are true.

Edward (white): It's hard to understand because I keep being told I have privilege. I don't see that, but okay. But I don't understand what I'm supposed to do as a white male. Because there's nothing I can do.

Emma (white): Besides being a decent human being.

Edward: I don't feel I use this advantage. This makes me feel I'm being blamed, but I can't help it.

Joann: So do you think this problem is unsolvable?

Anthony: It takes time, and the gap is getting smaller. It's not fair to blame all white people for what's happening. They were born that way.

Joann: So how could we have a conversation about race today?

Dana: I don't believe in inequality.

Joann (ignoring Dana's comment): How do you talk about racism without white people feeling blamed?

Michelle (African American): No one is to blame, but when an institution has been an integral part of society, someone always feels guilty. Racism will always exist because it's such a huge part of society. We can't help hard feelings.

Evie (white): I personally don't feel to blame. It depends on the person, how you attach your feelings to this.

Kanye (African American): We're not personally attacking anybody, or the white race overall. But white privilege is dominant.

Joann (to Kanye): So do you think the list is relevant?

Kanye nods his head in agreement.

Ron: Only half of these apply.

Ron makes fun of "the bandages one,"[88] rolling his eyes and laughing.

MM: But do you see the deeper meaning of this?

---

[88] "I can choose blemish cover or bandages in 'flesh' color that more or less matches my skin" (p. 111).

Juliette (making eye contact with me and nodding): As African Americans, we're not recognized. Who built this country? If y'all didn't have us, where would y'all be?

James (white): I disagree that it's not as mentioned in the educational system. We spent a whole month on the Harlem Renaissance.

Juliette and Violet (interrupting forcefully): Oh no, we spent less than nine days on it!

Violet: Philly schools have a whole course on African American history!

The argument spiraled around in this fashion until Joann, realizing that class time was almost up, asked, "How does it get better?"

As the students stared silently at Joann, I took the opportunity to share some insights from Tatum's (1997) work that I'd often used in college classes. Tatum explains that individuals can choose three states of being regarding racism: active racism, passive racism, or antiracism. I explained that people who say blatantly racist things are actively racist, while those who don't initiate racist comments, but who go along with them, might be considered passively racist. I then explained that, according to Tatum, we can all be antiracist within our own surroundings. "For example," I continued, "not laughing at racist jokes is a way to be antiracist, or serving on a school board or a hiring committee some day, or even voting is a way to be antiracist." While Flynn (2012) found that white middle school students expressed the desire toward antiracist activism after participating in a week long unit on racism and white privilege, to my surprise, what'd I meant as words of encouragement offended some of my white listeners.

Ron: So you're basically saying everyone in this room, except for Laura and a few people, are racist.

James: Almost everyone is passively racist.

MM: But isn't it a matter of choice? The point of this conversation is to raise awareness so that people can choose not to be passively racist.

They shook their heads sadly, insisting that change is impossible, because, said Ron, "this is the way we were brought up." Dana agreed, arguing, "This is what we're comfortable with." Although I protested, these white students insisted dismally that no one can measure up to Tatum's standard of antiracism, and that, for them, change in this direction would be impossible. Violet, who was sitting at their table, looked at me but said nothing.

Students' Written Responses: A More Complete Story

Part of Joann's daily routine with all of her classes involved the use of "Do Nows," brief written exercises that changed each day. Students picked up their Do Nows from a plastic tray as they entered the room and were expected to complete them immediately after finding their seats.[89] To help me in my research, Joann allowed me the opportunity to write Do Now questions when I was especially interested in students' responses to the literature under study. The Do Nows were collected immediately and entered as part of students' class participation grade; Joann would then give them to me several days or even weeks later among other piles of students' written work. Therefore, I did not usually see the responses students had written until well after the fact.

At the end of *The Bluest Eye* unit (but before the showing of the *Race* video and discussion of the McIntosh essay) students completed the following Do Now that I had written: "Take a few minutes to think about the themes of oppression or marginalization in *The Bluest Eye*. Did your ideas about race or racism change in any way through the

---

[89] This was school wide practice at EA.

reading of this book?"[90] In the analysis that follows I want to emphasize how students'

responses showed the complexity of their thinking about race and racism. Of course, I am

not suggesting we gain a complete picture of how students' ideas are influenced by their

readings through their answers to a single question. Rather, the Do Now assignment was

limited in several ways. Students' responses to one given question on one given day may

only represent a snapshot of how they think or feel about any topic, if these responses

represent anything at all – some students may simply go through the motions of

responding in order to meet classwork requirements. In fact, the use of Do Nows in

general represents one more teacher-initiated pedagogical tool that requires students to

respond if they want credit for classwork. Students' participation in the Do Now activity,

therefore, was not born of their desire to reflect on their ideas about race. Like most of

what we did in class, my Do Now question reflected the lack of student-initiated learning

upon which our educational system is founded. Still, I hoped that since students would

not be graded on the content of their response, students' answers to my Do Now question

might add further perspectives on themes explored in class.

While some students' responses were closely in line with the ideas students had

expressed during class discussions, others surprised me. I discovered that several white

students who had not voiced their opinions during group discussions had appreciated and

learned from the themes of the Morrison text.

The majority of students in the class, both white and students of color, stated that

their ideas about racism had not changed through the reading of Morrison's novel. This,

---

[90] In retrospect, use of the word, "change" in this question may not have been the most appropriate word choice. For some students, admitting to changing their views on racism may have been akin to admitting they were racist before reading the text. If students perceived the question in this way, it is no wonder that they would feel defensive. Had I to do it over again, I might ask, "Did reading this novel influence the way you think about race and if so, how?"

in itself, is not surprising; Naidoo (1992) notes the possibility that antiracist pedagogy "is likely to have a positive effect only on those who are already more open-minded, and likely to deepen the negative reactions of those with already closed minds" (p. 139). While I believe that all of the students in 11 Honors would consider themselves to be non-racists, as I've shown, the verbal responses of some illustrated a lack of understanding of the deep and lasting wounds that racism has inflicted on individuals and on society. Students who had most consistently expressed their dislike of the unit reiterated their feelings in the Do Now response. James, Emma, Alyssa, and Dana were among these:

> *James: No, I still do not believe that racism is a prevalent/common issue, especially in our school. I feel throughout this book I was spoon-fed liberal nonsense that targets white males as the source of the world's problems.*
>
> *Emma: Nope.*
>
> *Alyssa: No; my ideas on race and racism have NOT changed.*
>
> *Dana: NO.*

Again, it is important to stress that I believe these students' presuppositions were that they were always against racism, and so felt no need to change their views. Their responses do show, however, that they were not open to deepening their understandings of the devastating effects of past or present forms of racism. James' response echoes the sentiments that he and his close friend, Ron, had shared quite vocally throughout the unit, and that Ron had represented physically by the spoon he wore around his neck (with which he was "spoon-fed liberal nonsense") for the remainder of the school year. James specifically states his belief that racism is not common and that books like *The Bluest Eye* are purposely used to make white males, like himself, feel unjustly accused of racism.

Alyssa and Dana's deliberate use of caps show their frustration with the topic, as does

Emma's use of slang and the brevity of her response (while the assignment did not

specifically state that students should give more than a one word answer, these honors

students understood that Do Now questions were meant to illicit some degree of

reflection).

Along with Alyssa, other African Americans in the class stated that their study of

The Bluest Eye had not changed their views about race and racism, but the content of

their responses showed deeper reflection:

> *Karla: The way I thought of racism didn't change [because of] the book, it just kind of laid out how people deal with it. Like how people would react to seeing black girls and how they're portrayed/perceived. In a way it made me think of not judging people so quickly because it could have a bigger effect on people then necessary. But nothing really about race.*

> *Violet: No my ideas of race did not change after reading 'The Bluest Eye'. I was already exposed to racism and things like that, that happened during that time period.*

> *Michelle: Not really. I have always had a wide range of knowledge on racism, so nothing in the novel inspired me to change my ideas on the subject.*

> *Kanye: No but it make me think of the way racism exist without even existing.*

Like the students mentioned above, Violet and Michelle note that their views

regarding racism remained unchanged through the reading of *The Bluest Eye*. However,

in their responses they took the time to explain that they had thought about racism in the

past. Michelle usually agreed with white students during class discussions or remained

silent; however, this written response and her comment during discussion of the

McIntosh essay, "Racism will always exist because it's such a huge part of society,"

show that she did not align herself completely with the opinion of her white friends.

Kanye's response, "No but it make me think of the way racism exist without even existing" indicated that his understandings of racism were deepened through the reading of the novel in that he was challenged to think about the many hidden ways that racism still exists. Perhaps this explains why on a few different occasions Kanye stated he'd never been exposed to racism, but then later named specific incidences through which he or others he knew were targeted by it. Hence, Kanye seemed to be actively constructing a deeper understanding of racism and of its impact on him as an African American male (i.e., how racism "exist without even existing") as he progressed through *The Bluest Eye* unit.

Of this group, Karla's answer to the Do Now question was most puzzling to me. Her reflection related directly to the unit's emphasis on the damaging effects of white beauty standards. Karla's quiet personality made it difficult to ascertain if her silence during class discussions was indicative of anything other than her individual temperament, but as one of the dark-skinned African American girls in the class, she did comment that the themes explored in the video, "A Girl Like Me" were "true." Interestingly, in her Do Now response, rather than identify with dark-skinned females, Karla takes an impersonal approach. While I cannot know for sure, I wonder if this is Karla's way of distancing herself from the painful experience of being one of the "people" who are judged "so quickly" because of physical appearance. What puzzled me most about Karla's answer was her last statement, "But nothing really about race." Does Karla not consider judgmental attitudes toward black girls to be a form of racism, or does she mean that her factual understanding of racism did not change through the reading of this

novel? Unfortunately, Karla did not agree to an interview, so I had no opportunity to explore her ideas in depth.

White students who had not spoken out during group discussions wrote the most surprising Do Now responses. Their silence and, in some cases, their close friendships with those who had expressed resentment and anger during the unit had led me to believe, falsely, that they agreed with these friends. As I read these privately written responses I saw how wrong I had been:

> *Anna: My ideas about racism didn't change, but I saw how people were actually effected[91] by it. Also it made racism seem more real than it seems in History class and places like that.*

> *Harry: The discussions/activities we have done have changed my views. I can see how much more racism goes on in the world secretly through media.*

> *Evie: Yes because it makes you realize just how deep racism can actually go, intentional or otherwise.*

> *Stephanie: Slightly. It surprised me as to how racism still effects people today, it surprised me as to how much it does effect people still/the extent.*

Most surprising to me was Ruthie's response. Because of her close friendship with Edward,[92] I had assumed that Ruthie shared his views and possibly even his frustration. But when given the opportunity to express her opinion privately, Ruthie wrote:

> *After reading this book I realized that racism can be found every where and even unintentional racism still exists and is an issue.*

These responses show that some students' understandings of the damaging and continuing effects of racism had been challenged or broadened through their participation in the unit on *The Bluest Eye*. As Anna stated, Morrison's novel made racism seem more

---

[91] Do Now responses are recorded here verbatim, with no correction of spelling errors.

[92] Their close physical proximity during classes indicated to me that they were dating, but Joann, who of course knew the students better than I, wasn't sure if this was true.

real than what she'd learned in previous history classes. Yet, these white students never

expressed their views during either small or large group class discussions. Naidoo (1992)

notes, "students who are intolerant tend to dominate classroom space" (p. 140); this was

certainly the case in the 11th grade honors class at EA. Ron, James, Emma, and others had

dominated class discussion and other white students who may not have agreed had not

contradicted or challenged them in any way. Based on their written responses, it is safe to

say that the silence of these white students did not represent tacit agreement with those

who reacted to the Morrison text with anger or resentment. Rather, it may have indicated

a trend toward conformity that is not uncommon among adolescents (Lashbrook, 2000).

The Do Now question, while limited, did allow some students the opportunity to express

their opinions in a way that was free of the potential social risk of disagreeing with their

more vocal friends.

Laura, one of the white students who had most vehemently defended Walt

Whitman against the perceived accusation of racism in the previous chapter, also showed

that her understanding of race had been challenged during the weeks we spent on the

Morrison text. She wrote:

> *While reading the Bluest Eye, my ideas and feelings about race did not change at all. I still feel the same, sad way about racism and how it's utterly stupid and foolish…to think any different of someone because they're different from you. I've always felt this way. Actually, reading this book and having these same, circular discussions daily has pointed out differences and race to me when before, I was happily oblivious. Before, I was happily getting along with anyone. Now, I notice color differences and, in all actuality, it bothers me that all of this was pointed out to me, because now I cannot get that annoying back thought out of my head that I'm different. I used to believe that we were all the same. I still want to, but now I feel that I can't.*

On the surface, Laura resisted acknowledging present racism and white privilege;

a few days after she wrote this response, she argued that the McIntosh essay was outdated

and invalid. However, this written response signifies an important development in Laura's racial identity. Although she states that she has always been against racism,[93] Laura preferred to think that everyone was the same. Now, however, reading and "circular" class discussions of the Morrison novel had caused Laura to question this colorblind approach, through which she'd been "happily oblivious" about racial differences. Laura was beginning to denormalize whiteness: she complained that she could not "get it out of her head" that she, herself, is "different." These feelings created a sense of anxiety in Laura that often accompanies the dissonance whites experience when first challenged with more profound understandings of racism and of their own position of privilege (Helms, 1990, Tatum, 1997). As uncomfortable as these feelings may be for Laura, they represent a crucial step in developing a more complete understanding of the role of race in her life and in the lives of her African American friends.

Therefore, unbeknownst to me, several white students who had either remained silent throughout class discussions, or who, as in the case of Laura, seemed to resist the antiracist ideas that Joann and I presented, showed through these written responses that *The Bluest Eye* unit had, in fact, been meaningful to them. Further, students' written responses, recorded within the first few minutes of one particular class, illustrate the complexity and diversity of thinking that students were engaged in during the unit. Such complex student responses require analysis that is equally complex.

---

[93] During discussion of the McIntosh essay, Ron referred to Laura as one of the only people in the room who was not passively racist.

Making Sense of Students' Responses

From Anger to Helplessness

Although localized and contextualized, the angry and resistant responses of some white students in this class were not surprising. Many researchers have documented use of similar discourses by whites (Leonardo, 2002, Gillborn, 2009, McIntyre, 1997, Perry, 2002, Bush, 2004, Bonilla-Silva, 2006, Marx, 2006, Trainor, 2008). What is somewhat unique, however, is that in the case of the 11th grade honors class at EA, these responses took place within the context of warm and consistent friendships among students. Rude and Herda's (2010) finding that cross-racial friendships are less likely to be long lasting than same-race friendships did not seem to hold true at EA, at least on the surface, where everyone agreed that many long-lasting cross-racial friendships flourished. As Anthony said, "…a lot of people have been here for a long time...I mean…we know each other."

Others have described the positive effects of cross-racial friendships such as those found at EA among students of various ages. Killen, Kelly, Richardson, Crystal, and Ruck (2010) found that white students in racially diverse schools were not only more likely to have cross-race friends than those in non-diverse schools, but also showed greater racial sensitivity in that they "used fewer stereotypes to explain interracial exclusion" (p. 294). These students were also more apt to describe race-based exclusion as wrong. Similarly, Page-Gould, Mendozo-Denton and Tropp, (2008) found that racially biased college students who expressed anxiety in racial relationships showed a decrease in anxiety over this issue when they engaged in a cross-racial friendships.

In light of the benefits of cross-racial friendship, one might have expected the white students in the 11th grade honors class to show greater understanding of the

perspectives of their African American friends. And, in fact, if I were to use similar measures of racial understanding as were used in the studies mentioned above, the white 11th graders would have scored well. In class discussions they stated that racial stereotyping and exclusion were wrong, and showed no anxiety regarding their proximity to students of color; on the contrary, they counted these students as friends. Yet, many of them seemed unaware of how their statements would be perceived by these friends. They harshly criticized and even made fun of serious works such as *The Bluest Eye* and the McIntosh white privilege essay. Several possible explanations for the resistive and sometimes insensitive behavior of white students in the 11th grade honors class exist.

Utilizing Bell's (2009) theory of interest conversion, one might simply posit that, like many whites, Ron, James, Emma, Edward, and others will only adopt antiracist positions when it is in their own interests to do so. These students believe in equal rights for people of color, but resist deeper notions of white privilege because, as Bell describes, "they simply cannot envision…that true equality for blacks will require the surrender of racism-granted privileges for whites" (p. 75). According to this theory, it is crucial that whites who wish to give up racial dominance acknowledge the benefits of whiteness within a continuing system of racism. Not willing to recognize this, some of the white students in 11 Honors employed a variety of discourses, some standard and others contextualized, to avoid conversations about race that might challenge their belief in a "post racial" society. While white students valued their friendships with African Americans at school, they also, albeit unknowingly, valued protecting their interests as whites and were not open to the idea that they retained a privileged status. Instead of allowing their cross-racial friendships to inform their attitudes about racism, these

students did the opposite; they expected their African American friends to understand and accept their points of view while they made little attempt to do the opposite.

Once again, it would be easy to label these white students and others like them as intolerant at best, case closed. While I do believe that Bell's interest conversion is a factor in white students' responses, it by no means tells the whole story. Again, we must also consider the emotional place that the students spoke from as they resisted discussing racism and acknowledging its salience. As Flynn (2012) points out, white students may resist talking about race "out of a genuine desire to see racial equality in the world—a wish that things were more just" (p. 105). For some students the claim that racism is over reflects their desire for it to be over. Perhaps Edward, for example, employed "racial evasion," a strategy that "holds that eliminating talk about race will eliminate racism" (Bucholtz, 2011, p. 169), out of a sincere desire to see racism eliminated once and for all. Leah, the only Asian American student in the class, had similar feelings. She wrote in her Do Now response, "I think the best way to stop racism is to stop distinguishing between the 'races'...." Dana's pronouncement, "I don't believe in inequality," which was passed over too quickly to unpack, may sound like a blatant denial of present day inequity, but within the context of her friendships with black students might also be interpreted to mean that she doesn't accept inequality, as in, *I don't believe in treating people unequally.*

The emotional dejection, bordering on fatalism, with which students responded to my pep talk on antiracism showed that they cared about racism, but felt powerless to affect real change, even within themselves. Cathy, one of the constructors and main users of the *this is all we ever talk about* argument, expressed this sense of fatalism in the Do

Now assignment that asked if her reading of *The Bluest Eye* had changed her views on

racism:

> *Cathy: No not at all. If anything they reinforced my views & ideas of racism. It will always be prevalent or apparent in our society, no matter how far we come. Humans, by nature, are a judgmental and hateful species.*

Likewise, Edward's statement, made a few days later during a large group

discussion, "… I don't understand what I'm supposed to do as a white male. Because

there's nothing I can do" shows the helplessness he feels about racism. Since Edward

feels there's nothing he can do about his position of privilege, he feels unjustly blamed

for something over which he has no control (*I don't feel I use this advantage. This makes

me feel I'm being blamed, but I can't help it*). Ron's shifting of anger toward the

government and banks, along with his demand to be told how to fix the problem, show

that he did care about the forms of racism described in the California Newsreel video, but

felt frustrated and helpless to do anything about them. Ron and James's belief that

"almost everyone is passively racist," could be read as a refusal to change, or could

signify a discouraged realization that racism does, in fact, exist. The latter indicates an

important first step in adopting an antiracist outlook, since one cannot begin to move

toward antiracist action until one recognizes that racism is a problem.

Along with feelings of helplessness, white students in the 11th grade honors class

experienced feelings of blame when presented with the idea of white privilege.[94]

Although Joann was careful to begin class by telling students, "No one is to blame,"

many of the white students did feel blamed and as if they were being made to feel guilty.

During our interview, Anthony explained his white classmates' resistance to

---

[94] Not all students felt blame over the McIntosh essay. Evie, a loner who was not a close friend to any in the class, was able to separate her personal feelings from the issue of racism and view the essay objectively. She stated, "I personally don't feel to blame."

acknowledging racism by stating diplomatically, "I don't wanna say it's guilt, but it's kind of like that." Perhaps partly because of their friendships with black students, these white students had incorporated an identity of "non-racist"; their responses to the Do Now show that this was true for most. It is therefore not surprising that they had difficulty reconciling this identity with the new information about racism and white privilege that Joann and I presented to them, and the dissonance they experienced may explain why some were so dejected at the idea of passive racism (Tatum, 1997). As 10th grader B.K. said, "You don't want people to think you're racist. It's just not how you want to be seen or viewed." Helms (1990) argues that the feelings of guilt, helplessness, and anger whites may experience when first faced with the reality of racism are products of the cognitive dissonance that is a necessary step leading to a redefinition of white identity. From this perspective, students' honest responses indicate movement toward deeper reflection about race that may eventually result in a clearer antiracist stance.

Therefore, while white students employed discourses, sometimes quite creatively, to resist the acknowledgement of present day racism, and, specifically, to mitigate the role of white privilege in their own lives, their reasons for doing so may have been informed by a complicated mix of denial, guilt, and wishful thinking. It is also conceivable that their long-lasting friendships with students of color led to the formation of a comfortable "non-racist" identity that was challenged by the course materials and discussions on race. That being the case, students' angry responses reflected the uncomfortable nature of the identity work that was triggered through their reading and discussion of multicultural literature and accompanying material.

Students' Silence

Schultz (2008) notes, "students' silences can have a range of meanings" (p. 217), and it is likely that students in the 11th grade honors class were silent during class discussions of *The Bluest Eye* for varied and complex reasons. Schultz (2009) suggests that students may choose to be silent in class as "an act of refusal to be dominated" (p. 31). She explains, students may "resist verbal participation because the possibility for speech or contributions to a discussion appear too limiting. If only certain discourses are allowed, it may not be worth speaking" (p. 31). Silence does not necessarily indicate agreement; it may suggest just the opposite. In this light, the silence of students from varied racial backgrounds in 11 Honors may be seen as a method of active resistance to the dominating voices of Emma, Ron and the other vocal white students whose complaints about discussions of racism seemed to overtake the class dynamic on many days.

However, there are other possible explanations for students' silence. As I noted above, some white students were silent during class discussion, but when given the opportunity to express themselves in writing they showed that reading the Morrison text had helped them to think about racism in new and different ways. Along with resistance to the dominant voices in the class, pressure to conform might have played a part in the silence of these white students. In addition, their silence might suggest that their ideas about race were still in nascent form and that they needed time to process new information. The Do Now assignment that asked students if their views about race or racism had changed through reading *The Bluest Eye* provided students the opportunity to

reflect on this process, and elicited students' views not expressed through class discussion.

What of the silences of African American students during Joann's multicultural literature units? The patience and restraint that Anthony, Kanye, Juliette and Violet, the African American students who did, finally, speak out during the last few classes of *The Bluest Eye* unit, reflect the complicated processes at work in these students as they positioned themselves on the topic of racism in relation to their white friends. Like the white students who remained silent during group discussion, these African American students may have used silence to resist the dominating voices of the vocal white students in the class. However, since they likely had a deeper emotional investment in group discussions about racism than white students who chose silence, it is conceivable that Violet, Anthony and the others used silence to protect themselves from the hurt they may have experienced because of their white friends' insensitive comments. Schultz (2009) describes this response in a Mexican American student, Luis, who, she believes, used classroom silence "as a self-protective refusal to engage in the complicated racial and cultural dynamics of the classroom" (p. 34).

In order to discover the multiple meaning of silence in the classroom, Schultz (2009) suggests teachers take an "inquiry stance toward silence" (p. 121); in other words, teachers and students can collaboratively investigate the role of silence in the classroom. While Joann and I did not address the role of silence in 11 Honors with the class as a whole, during our interview I did ask Anthony why he and the other African American students in the class were so quiet during most of the class discussions about racism. Anthony's response was enlightening. He explained:

I think, one, because we don't want to make people feel bad. I know that's one big thing. Like we don't want to, you know, blame everything on, like, because we, in this school, particularly, we've been, a lot of people have been here…for a long time…we know each other. We're not trying to blame each other for, you know, like, something like that…it's a touchy-feely subject. You don't want to blame your friends for some things like racism.

Anthony's explanation made me wonder if, ironically, as they participated in the unit on *The Bluest Eye,* he and other black students were fulfilling a deeply ingrained societal role that Morrison (1993) explores in her well-known work of literary criticism, *Playing in the Dark*. Morrison examines the character of Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*, the "unassertive, loving, irrational, passionate, dependent, inarticulate" (p. 57) slave whose function in the novel is to serve the white children, Huck and Tom, at the expense of his own freedom and dignity. Anthony explained that he and other African American students in the class disagreed with their white friends, but for the greater part of the unit kept silent in order to spare their friends' feelings. They were, Anthony said, "holding their tongues" in order to protect their white friends from feeling blamed for racism, and when they did speak out, they were careful to state that their white friends were not to blame for racism. One might argue that in the same way that, as Morrison describes, black characters in literature often function to service white characters, African American students in 11 Honors suppressed their own voices in order to protect the feelings of their white friends. The loyalty these students felt to their white friends put them at risk of adopting a subordinate position in the dynamics of the classroom. Thus, although I did not recognize it at the time, through their patience African American students inadvertently created the "safe space" for their white friends that Joann believed to be so important. And, while the resistance and anger of some white students was sometimes painful to witness, the conversations that took place in that classroom represented a

crucial step in racial awareness for those students. Nevertheless, while African American 11th graders showed the same "strong self-concept and a strong sense of identity" (p. 231) that Matrenec attributes to the black males in his study, I worry that the dynamic that existed among these students, partly informed by their cross-racial friendships, may ultimately reproduce the white hegemony that has existed for centuries past, wherein the role of African Americans is to service the needs of the whites around them. As we think about possible responses to this study, it's important that the voices and silences of all students be taken into account as equally deserving of respectful consideration.

Close relationships with whites may have informed African American students' responses on another level, as well. Matrenec (2011) found that African American males who attended a mostly white suburban school felt that they had "something to prove" (p. 231) to the white students and teachers that surrounded them. In order to combat racist stereotypes about black males, the African American males who had grown up in the suburban context of the school felt they needed to behave well and not associate with the more newly arrived black students who, they felt, made a "commotion" (p. 233): i.e., got into fights and showed otherwise disruptive behavior. Matrenec explains that in "a reverse of self-fulfilling prophecy" (p. 231), these students felt they needed to prove to others and to themselves that they did not fulfill the stereotypical image of the trouble-making, underachieving African American male. With the same "double consciousness" that Du Bois (2005) described in 1903, African American students who attend white suburban schools may experience a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (p. 7). Anthony, Kanye, Juliette, Karla, and Violet's silence may partly be explained by their double consciousness; perhaps they were aware of how their opinions

would be perceived by their white friends and classmates. Violet's "I'm black and I'm proud" assurance, given in response to Ron's insensitive remarks, illustrates the pressure she and other African Americans experience in "measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (p. 7).

Violet, Anthony, and Juliette, in particular, had been students at EA for several years. They were invested in their relationships with their white friends and were careful to present themselves in a way that rejected the racial stereotype of the angry black militant. Instead, they presented calm, reasonable personas that would not provoke fear or discomfort in whites. It was clear, however, that Juliette and Violet cared deeply about unpacking racism in class: one day, after listening quietly to their white classmates complain that racism "is all we ever talk about," the two girls approached Joann privately and thanked her for including racism in the curriculum. "We got your back," they told her. Although the girls may have felt cautious about opposing their friends' ideas openly, they appreciated Joann's willingness to deal with a topic that they felt was important and relevant to their lives.

Before we leave the topic of student silence, it is important to note that eventually Anthony, Violet, Juliette and Kanye did speak out in disagreement with their white friends; their choice to wait until the end of the unit might be seen as an exercise in power. Schultz (2009) notes that "Whether intended or not, holding on to silence before speaking often allows a person to be heard" (p. 38). Rather than refuting the comments of white students who spoke against the salience of racism at every turn, these African American students listened patiently. Toward the end of the unit, when they were ready, they spoke up collaboratively and forcefully, perhaps finding strength in their careful choice of

words. As Schultz (2009) describes of Mexican American student, Luis, "The silence that preceded and followed his talk often highlighted what he said, attracting his classmates' and teachers' attention" (p. 29). In the same way, the enduring silence that Violet, Anthony, and the others had exercised as they listened to their white friends' complaints may have made their words more compelling when they did, finally, express their opinions. Schultz encourages teachers to see silence as a mode of participation that can support student engagement when they do choose to speak.

"How Can We Fix This?"

Ron's frustrated question was an important one and can be applied broadly to the findings of this study. A school like Excellence Academy, more racially diverse than many suburban high schools, provides opportunity for students to form long-lasting cross-racial friendships that, given the segregated nature of many suburban neighborhoods, students may not otherwise have opportunity to form. Students at this school will, in one sense, be prepared to enter diverse college and career environments without the anxiety that young people who did not mix with peers of diverse backgrounds expressed (Page-Gould, Mendozo-Denton & Tropp, 2008). However, this study has shown that conviviality does not necessarily indicate the absence of racial tensions in a high school setting. While, of course, there are no easy fixes, my concluding chapter will explore some possible approaches to help students and teachers grapple with an often difficult subject in a way that fosters understanding of all perspectives.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

Decades have passed since Bell, Ladson-Billings, and others established the foundational concepts of critical race theory, and since then many studies have examined students' ideas about race and their behaviors as racialized beings. The list of scholars stressing the importance of students engaging directly with race and urging schools to rethink practices entrenched in institutional racism is too long to name and continues to grow. Despite the insights gained through scholarly examination of the role of race in education, little has changed about the way race functions in schools like Excellence Academy. Race is still not often discussed, and many teachers and administrators adopt the "heroes and holidays" approach to multicultural education, ignoring the role of race in maintaining power hierarchies. In many classrooms, racism is presented as a historical phenomenon with little connection to students' everyday lives.

While the close cross-racial friendships and lack of racial antagonism at EA do represent progress in a general sense, this study has shown that cross-racial friendship alone will not ensure youth are developing racial identities that incorporate antiracist understandings. In fact, these very friendships may produce unexpected consequences, as the outwardly friendly environment at EA made the frustration and feelings of marginalization many students and faculty experienced less visible. What's more, students silenced their own voices because of unwillingness to contradict their more vocal friends. Through the following discussion I suggest ways for schools like Excellence Academy to help students deepen their understandings of the salience of race in their lives and the lives of their friends.

Institutional Practices

The Ethos of Excellence

If schools are to engage students in critical thinking regarding racism, they must take into account how their own institutional processes may work against students' incorporation of antiracist understandings. Trainor (2008) suggests that discussions of systemic white privilege will do little to impact racist beliefs in white students if they do not address the "emotioned rules" (p. 12) that tacitly help to perpetuate these beliefs. She found that white students categorized Angelou as "a whiner" (p. 90) for her depictions of racism in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,* and expressed stereotypical beliefs about the "laziness" of African Americans, comparing them to whites the students viewed as more industrious. Trainor argues that school slogans, posters, and other such motivational exhortations to "focus on the positive" (p. 90) strengthened the inclination in white students to believe that black authors, like Angelou, who wrote about their experiences with racism, were whining or complaining. Lewis (2006) found that belief in American meritocracy was deeply imbedded in school culture at a white dominated school and, therefore, utilized by students to explain economic disparities among people. Students attributed wealth and poverty to people's hard work or laziness.

Therefore, while it is commendable that teachers and administrators at Excellence Academy worked hard to promote an ethos of academic excellence at the school, this ethos may inadvertently foster the disposition within students that people who suffer under oppression have it within their power to "stop whining" and simply do something about their oppressed state. Students, in fact, are warned against whining through the following "classroom norm," displayed on a poster in Joann's classroom: "Remember

that <u>academics</u> are <u>your current job</u>: whining, complaining and arguing are inappropriate and unprofessional."[95] Teachers reinforced the idea that "complaining" is unprofessional and childish through personal interactions with students, as well. For example, when 11th grader Jack complained to Megan (the curriculum coordinator) that he could not focus on an in-class assignment because students seated near him were talking and singing, she told him, "You need to ask the adults at your table to stop talking."

"What adults?" Jack asked incredulously. "They're all talking! They're acting like five year olds!" In spite of Jack's protests, Megan did not intervene. The noise level increased, and Jack became involved in a heated exchange with a female student that disrupted the writing activity further until they both finally trailed off into frustrated silence. "Classroom norms" such as the one posted on Joann's wall and interactions like the one which took place between Megan and Jack may have fostered students' belief that oppressed characters in literature were, themselves, at fault for not taking action. If students were expected to be fully responsible for their success, why weren't others held up to that same standard of behavior? Perhaps this explains why many 11th graders showed impatience with Hester Prynne, the oppressed female protagonist of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Students referred to Hester as "stupid," and "passive," and didn't understand "why she didn't just leave."[96] Thus, as Trainor (2008) and Lewis (2006) suggest, the hidden curriculum of individual responsibility at schools like EA may inform a racial identity in some students that does not encourage understanding or empathy for people who are not part of the privileged, dominant racial group.

---

[95] See Appendix D for a complete list of "Classroom Norms."

[96] Students showed a lack of empathy for people who had suffered under both sexist and racist oppression. Some, like Emma, often conflated the two in her claims that neither were salient social issues.

The ethos of excellence at EA was also responsible for the "classroom norm" that outlawed all but "formal conventions" of language from Joann's classes. As noted, strict adherence to such policies normalizes whiteness and acts as a symbolic boundary (Carter, 2012) to maintain insider status for whites and outsider status for those whose oral language practices differ from this "norm." For some students, low academic achievement may reflect their feelings of outsider status (Carter, 2005). While, as Delpit (2004) explains, for most students some direct instruction in speech, grammar, and writing style is a necessary component of academic success, students should also be taught to think critically about the power structures that make use of certain dialects unacceptable in formal settings. As an alternative to outlawing students' home language practices from the classroom, Ladson-Billings (2009) suggests that teachers employ culturally relevant pedagogy: i.e., pedagogy that challenges students to excel academically while empowering them "intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically" (p. 20). Culturally relevant teaching helps students to make connections between academic content and their home contexts. Students' home dialects, language practices, and communication styles can be affirmed and welcomed into the classroom even as students are equipped with the reading, writing and speaking skills they will need to succeed in their future academic and career endeavors. Durden and Truscott (2013) argue that culturally relevant pedagogy requires that college students in teacher preparatory programs learn to continually reflect on how to "support the languages, literacies, and cultural tools of students who represent the dominant and marginalized sectors of our society" (p. 74). If teachers are offered the proper tools and training,

schools like Excellence Academy do not need to give up their goal of academic

excellence in order to create an environment where all students feel a sense of belonging.

The Prevalence of Uncritical Multiculturalism

The administration at Excellence Academy may have attempted to foster a sense

of belonging for African American students through the schools' recognition of Black

History Month, but, unfortunately, shallow, tokenistic celebrations are no substitute for

critical examination of important social issues. The persistence of uncritical forms of

multiculturalism in education supports students' constructions of race as cultural

difference that has little connection to past and present injustices or to their daily lives.

Uncritical multiculturalism essentializes cultural characteristics and may reinforce rather

than dispel stereotypes. Said (1978) famously coined the term *Orientalism* to describe the

Western construction of knowledge about the Middle East (aka, "the Orient") that

positioned the West as the dominating standard of normalcy and the Middle East as the

exotic, inferior "other." Schools and classrooms that "celebrate diversity" through an

uncritical approach to multicultural content ignore social inequities and, in a modern

version of Said's Orientalism, focus instead on difference through cultural customs.

Uncritical multiculturalism normalizes whiteness and places students of color in the

position of "other": the exotic "minorities" whose racial or ethnic backgrounds place

them outside the norm of the dominant culture. Sleeter (2005) explains that curriculum

steeped in uncritical multiculturalism implies "by omission…that race no longer

structures access to resources, and that race is significant only in terms of customs in

which anyone can participate" (p. 252). Teachers and the curriculum they use must

engage students in critical multiculturalism that addresses specific issues of power,

privilege, and structural inequity based not only on race, but also on social class, gender, sexuality, religion, and other relevant factors.

The administrative decision at EA to celebrate Black History Month through a performance by the (white) West African dance troupe is an example of "'add-on'" (Perry, 2002, p. 196) uncritical multiculturalism that positions race as an exotic quality to be "celebrated" and not as a socially constructed hierarchal system that has maintained the social power of whites over people of color for centuries. As McCarthy and Dimitriadis (2005) point out, schools and classrooms that adopt this approach to multiculturalism fail to explore in any depth the realities of class struggle, poverty, and disenfranchisement experienced by groups outside of the white, middle class experience. Instead, through uncritical multiculturalism, teachers and administrators present students with "imaginary solutions" (p. 326) to the injustices faced by those outside of the dominant cultural group. Through add-on multicultural celebrations, teachers and administrators perpetuate the idea that appreciating cultural difference is all that is needed to achieve equitable race relations.

Attempts at uncritical multiculturalism did not only originate with the administration at EA; students, too, attempted to incorporate multiculturalism into their school program through the formation of the "cultural foods club" that met once a month during lunch period in Joann's classroom. The club organizers were the female "artsy nerds" I've described in previous chapters, and the purpose of the club was simply to eat "ethnic" foods, provided by club members. While I enjoyed the pizza, tortilla chips and salsa that appeared during these sessions as much as everyone else, as Nieto (2005) points out, "multicultural education without an explicit antiracist focus may perpetuate

the worst kinds of stereotypes if it focuses only on superficial aspects of culture and the addition of ethnic tidbits to the curriculum" (p. 405). The defining of ethnic difference through food consumption by students at EA seemed an apt reflection of how multiculturalism had been presented to them throughout their educational experience. I add my voice to the chorus of researchers and advocates who insist that multicultural school curriculum focus on helping students to think critically about race, and not on tokenistic celebrations, events, or activities.

Academic Tracking and Racial Identity

While tokenistic multicultural celebrations exoticize the cultural backgrounds of some students and normalize those of others, academic tracking practices have the potential to influence students' racial identities in an even more profound way. Meant to improve instruction through homogeneous ability grouping, academic tracking often creates de facto racial segregation even in racially diverse schools (Dickens, 1996). In her study of six multiracial schools, Oakes (2005) notes that African American and Latino students "were found in disproportionately small percentages in high-track classes and in disproportionately large percentages in low-track classes" (p. 67). For this reason, desegregation does not necessarily guarantee integration (Carter, 2012). As EA 11th grade honors student, Anthony, explained, "…in our school in general, most of the white kids are in excelled classes and most of the black kids are in unexcelled classes, so there's not much time for each other to get to know each other."[97] Mixed-race classrooms are potential "contact zones," described by Pratt (1998) as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of

---

[97] As noted in chapter 2, students of color comprised the majority of the 11th grade on level class, while Anthony's class, 11 Honors, consisted of a majority of white students.

power" (p. 173). The racial segregation caused by academic tracking makes the contact zone experience impossible, blocking students of diverse racial backgrounds from hearing each other's perspectives (Luther, 2009, Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005, Kubitschek & Hallinan, 1998). While the class discussions that took place in 11 Honors surrounding *The Bluest Eye* were difficult and, at times, even painful for some students, the fact is that these conversations *did* take place, and students were, eventually, able to hear each other's opinions. I cannot help but wonder how the presence of African American students from the 11th grade on level class, students like Daniel, Samar, and Rihanna, might have enhanced and deepened these discussions about race. Sadly, by blocking the opportunity to study Morrison's text from some students, academic tracking practices limited the educational experience of all 11th graders at Excellence Academy.

Drawing on the work of Bowles and Gintis, Oakes (2005) describes the effect that tracking has on student identity as the process of "legitimating inequality" (p. 144). Because schools act as powerful socializing agents, students receive messages about themselves through their many daily school experiences. High-tracked students receive the message that they can achieve, and low-tracked students receive the message that they cannot. Hence, students who are academically tracked internalize the legitimacy of an academic pecking order without fully realizing the effect it is having on their identity (Stoughton & Sivertson, 2005). Carter (2012), who studied the relationship between students' race/ethnicity and their sociocultural experiences at South African and U.S. schools, explains that students and teachers make meanings of the way certain groups tend to dominate in specific settings. She explains, "various school settings acquire meanings as the specific 'turfs' of one group or another. That is, an implicit belief

emerges that certain individuals or groups belong to a particular academic or extracurricular program" (p. 4). Aware of classroom demographics, students may naturalize academic achievement as a function of race. My findings show that even though African American students at EA did not accuse their higher achieving black friends of "acting white" because of their academic success, they did recognize the racial segregation caused by the school's tracking system. Some believed that race played a part in maintaining the school's academic hierarchy. As 11th grader Samar said in a moment of frustration, "My skin color stops me from leading."[98] Though frustrated by their lack of academic success, these students incorporated the disposition that their race and their academic placement were connected. Carter (2012) argues that academic tracking promotes cultural meanings that "neutralize the effects of resourceful schools as a conduit for equal educational opportunities" (p. 161).

The Role of Proximity and Friendship

Perry (2002), too, notes that academic tracking allows schools to desegregate without ensuring that students attend racially integrated classes. However, she found that in spite of the tracking system in place, the presence of students of color at a racially mixed high school created an awareness of race in the white students that was not present at a comparison white dominated school. Instead of viewing themselves as entirely race "normal," students at the mixed-raced school saw whiteness as a racial identity juxtaposed against the racial identities of the other students at the school. Perry argues

---

[98]Nowhere were students' dispositions regarding race and leadership more clearly displayed than at the high school pep rally. An eardrum shattering experience, the highlights of the rally were the dance numbers, recognition of sports teams (both dominated by African American students) and the announcing of the "Home Base kings and queens." For a few weeks preceding the rally, students in each Home Base were asked to elect a male and female "leader" to receive this honor. Of the 25 students elected, 20 were white, three were African American, one was South Asian and one was Latina.

that white racial identity is influenced by its proximity to other races, and while problematic institutional practices such as the use of Eurocentric history texts, academic tracking, and school-wide "multicultural celebrations" were present, the construction of white as normal was less fixed at the mixed-race school. Although the white students who attended the mixed-race school struggled to define what it meant to be white, they were less likely to identify themselves as race-neutral, and showed more variety in their beliefs about race than the students at the all-white school. Attending a school where they were not the majority and, most importantly, where issues of race were freely discussed created awareness about race in these white students that Perry did not find among the students at the white majority school.

Therefore, Perry stresses that integration, long known to be an important factor in raising the academic achievement of students of color, is also important to the racial identity formation of white students. She argues that white students in her study "became 'white' only when they saw themselves through the eyes and minds of African Americans" (p. 185). Perry's findings confirm those of racial identity theorists who view "awareness of the social implications of race" (Helms, 1990, p. 68) as a vital step toward a white racial identity that acknowledges and works against racism. However, as Perry clarifies, proximity among racial groups alone is not enough to encourage antiracist beliefs in white students. She admits that, while the racial identity of white students in a racially mixed environment was more complex and fluid than that of students in a predominately white school, white students at both schools were involved in "covertly reproducing notions of white superiority" (p. 192).

Like the white students at Perry's racially mixed school, white students at EA

seemed aware of their status as a racial group in juxtaposition to their African American

schoolmates. Students would have been unable to so freely label each other's behavior as

"acting white" and "acting black" had whiteness not been constructed as a distinct racial

category in opposition to blackness. However, many of these same white students, not

withstanding their friendships with African Americans in their classes, resisted talking

about race, claimed that they were victims of racism, and/or argued that racism

(especially against African Americans) is no longer a salient social problem. My study

shows that proximity to students of color will not necessarily broaden white students'

constructions of race to include antiracist understandings.

As I've noted throughout this study, at Excellence Academy proximity among

students of varying racial groups often led to close cross-racial friendships. In some cases

these friendships allowed students to traverse racial boundaries that may have otherwise

held firm. Certainly, cross-racial friendships helped to create the calm, safe environment

that students and staff enjoyed, thereby increasing learning opportunities for all. Students

at EA did not experience the overt tension described by this student at Perry's (2002)

mixed-race school:

> 'You're kind of playing a game to get through the day and not offend
> anybody. Everything is so, you know, tense, usually, in a way…Like,
> walking down the hall, the people that will usually tease me or yell at me
> or call me a bitch or will stand in my way and not let me down the
> hallway, tend not to be white.' (p. 158)

I observed none of this type of behavior at Excellence Academy; instead, teachers

were able to focus on the business of teaching and not on maintaining order among

warring factions of students. However, the very friendships that contributed to the safe

learning environment also had unexpected and unexamined consequences among students and staff. For example, the friendly atmosphere at the school made racial tensions among students and staff easier to ignore. As a result, in one class students took part in an explosive argument about race that was never resolved. Further, teachers and administrators did not fully recognize or understand how race influenced their pedagogical choices and student placement within their academically tracked system. Cross-racial friendships did not necessarily help white students to understand their African American friends' perspectives regarding racism, or to show sensitivity toward students whose experiences as racialized beings differed from their own. White students gave no indication that proximity to or friendship with black students developed within them a "double consciousness" (Du Bois, 2005); i.e., the inclination to view themselves through the eyes of their African American counterparts, as Perry (2002) states white students in her study did. On the contrary, it seemed from the insensitive way that some white students expressed their opinions that they expected their African American friends to understand and even agree with their perspectives. Students' silences, too, were the unexpected and unexamined result of close friendships among students, as both white and African American students hesitated to share opinions that would contradict those of their more vocal white friends.

Making Space for All Voices

Understanding Silences

Pedagogy that encourages participation on the part of all students must also take into account the role and meaning of students' silences in the classroom. Schultz (2008) reminds us that teachers must not make assumptions about students who choose to

remain silent during class discussions. White teachers, in particular, may interpret students' silences through a lens of racial supremacy, assuming that white students are silent because of individual style, while Asian Americans may be "naturally quiet" and African Americans disengaged. Instead, Schultz recommends that teachers interrogate students' silences and learn from them. Silence in the classroom can tell us much about individual student's responses and can help us to understand the racialized group dynamic of the classroom.

Although I participated in four of Joann's literature classes, student silences were most evident in the 11 Honors literature class. Generally speaking, this was not a quiet group. As I've mentioned, due to the close friendships in the class, Joann often felt she had trouble keeping their private conversations to a minimum and keeping them on track during her lessons. Many entered the room singing, talking, and laughing, and often Joann used her own silence to quiet the group, staring at them motionlessly as she waited for them to notice and settle down. Only a few students in the group, including Harry (white), Leah (Chinese American), and Karla (African American), seemed to be quiet as a function of personality.

In spite of the general boisterous nature of this group, silence in the 11 Honors class operated in two distinct ways. At times total group silence would follow a pointed question about the class material. For example, when Joann instructed the class to "do a political reading" of the Langston Hughes poem, "Dreams," as they had done the day before in analyzing "A Dream Deferred," silence followed.

"Nothing political in here?" she asked. "No issues? What was the author's motivation for writing the poem?"

More silence followed. Finally, a student (I did not record who) offered, "I don't understand the question."

Later in the school year, students initially responded to the California Newsreel *Race* video with silence, as shown in this excerpt of my field notes:

> *When the video is over, Joann asks, "What is your gut reaction?"*
>
> *After a few seconds of silence, Violet (African American) is the first to speak. She says she's not surprised because she knows this information (the way blacks were excluded from housing market) from her grandparents. They went through all this and talked to her about it.*
>
> *The rest of class is silent. Finally, Emma, Cathy, and Edward (all white) say they are not surprised by the content of the video, since they learned all this in history class.*
>
> *MM: So what was the video saying about the difference between income and wealth?[99]*
>
> *Silence.*
>
> *Tammy (white): Income is what you earn and wealth is what you own, like your house.*
>
> *MM: Yes. So what does that have to do with racial inequity today?*
>
> *More silence. I ask again, because I'm not sure they actually got the connection, even though many of them claimed they already "learned all this."*
>
> *Ron (white) makes motions with spoon as if he is being fed.*
>
> *Joann: Do you feel that purpose of video is to blame you?*
>
> *Most of the white student answer loudly: Yes!!*

At this point the floodgates opened and the conversation noted in the previous chapter ensued. Joann and I both assumed that, for many students, this group silence was a

---

[99] The video explains in detail how past housing policies, whereby African Americans were kept out of the newly built suburbs after WWII and relegated to urban project areas, prevented them from accumulating the wealth that real estate investment brought to many whites. The video notes that the legacy of these racist policies continues to affect African Americans and whites today.

method of resistance to discussing a topic with which they were not comfortable. In retrospect, I believe that, as Schultz (2009) notes, group silence can signify many levels of student response, and likely did so in the above scenario. Silences that followed difficult or challenging information may have indicated that students were processing the information they'd just been exposed to, and that they needed more time to think about issues before responding. Joann and I, perhaps unfairly, pressed students for immediate responses. Unfortunately, this is the way group discussions in classrooms are often structured: teachers ask questions and students are expected to answer. This method allows little time for deeper thought about important subjects. Below I will suggest ways to give students more time to process difficult information and to respond more reflectively.

At other times, as my data has shown, a very vocal group of white students dominated both large and small class discussions about race, while African Americans and other whites remained largely silent. In previous chapters I've analyzed these silences and suggested possible reasons for them. I've argued that, at times, students used silence to both resist and protect themselves from the dominant classroom discourse through which their friends refused to acknowledge the salience of racism. At other times, the desire for conformity and hesitancy to contradict their friends may have functioned simultaneously to create students' silences during class discussions about race. Schultz (2008) recommends that teachers ask students privately and directly about their classroom silences, as I did in my interview with Anthony, which took place during my last week of field research. By then I'd had ample time to notice and think about the

silences that I'd witnessed in his class, and Anthony's perspective of the class dynamic was crucial in helping me to form the analysis in the previous chapter.

The Strength of Silence

Students' silences in 11 Honors were significant indicators of their feelings about the multicultural literature and supporting materials that constituted class curriculum. Of course, there was the occasional student who came to this class tired and disengaged, and, as in most classes, intermittent moments of boredom overtook us all. However, Schultz (2008) explains that silence can also be a useful tool in the classroom, if used to allow students time to reflect on their readings and to respond with thought and care. She suggests that teachers "redefine participation in classrooms to include silence" (p. 220).

Sadly, neither Joann nor I realized the strength of silence as a participation structure during our discussions of race with 11 Honors students, and I believe that our pressing of students to respond verbally and quickly to challenging issues may have added to the lopsided group dynamic that became the pattern of interaction in that class. Our need for immediate response fed some students' tendencies to answer too quickly, and in so doing may have exacerbated their insensitive approach. Other students may have felt shut down by our attempts to lead group discussions, not feeling comfortable enough to comment on information to which they had only recently been exposed. Below I suggest specific ways for educators to encourage more reflective responses to curricular materials from students.

Attending to Students' Writing

Allowing students more time to write out their thoughts when challenging issues emerge in school curriculum might help to encourage deeper, more thoughtful reflection

for some students. While students are regularly bombarded with content and analysis questions (often in the form of literature "packets") that they must complete for a classwork grade, rarely are they asked to share the ideas and feelings texts generate in them in a sustained, private way. In the 11th grade honors class, the silence of some students opened up space for the vocal white students to dominate class discussion with resistant discourse, some of which may have been as much a function of resisting adult authority (Joann's and mine) as resisting ideas about racism and white privilege. Daily student journaling throughout *The Bluest Eye* unit, in particular, may have defused some of this resistance and helped students to move beyond their initial responses and think more deeply about why this unit elicited the feelings or silences in them that it did. The journaling process used in classrooms usually does not require students to share their writing with others in the class, but journals may be collected for teacher feedback. Through this method teachers have opportunity to ask probing questions in a private context, and, if the student is willing, a continuous, meaningful conversation between student and teacher may develop. Later on, once students have had time to establish their ideas and work through their feelings, they may be invited (but not forced) to share some of their writings with others in the class or to express their feelings through artistic or other sensory modalities (Schultz, 2009). While my Do Now question regarding students' responses to *The Bluest Eye* was a small attempt to encourage students to express their ideas in writing, the exercise was limited in both its lack of process and in our failure to offer the students feedback on their responses. Ongoing journaling would provide a sustained method of reflection with the benefit of immediate feedback that may help students to process challenging ideas about race.

Incorporating Technology into Pedagogy

Technology may provide another method for students to communicate their ideas and feelings in a manner that does not privilege the extroverted or more vocal members of the class. As I noted in my study of religiously conservative college students' constructions of race (Modica, 2012), web platforms that allow students opportunity to post in a discussion board, blog, or wiki format may help generate fruitful conversation among students for a few reasons. First, while this may not be true of all, many students spend hours daily online outside of school and are comfortable with this venue. Second, students who are not comfortable sharing their opinions in person may find that posting their ideas electronically allows them a freedom of expression they haven't experienced during class sessions. Third, when postings are asynchronous (i.e., not synchronous or "live"), students have opportunity to read and think about others' postings before responding with their own, and to edit their own comments before posting, perhaps allowing for deeper and more careful reflection. Ironically, EA was initiated several years ago under the charter of technology; use of technology was meant to make the school stand apart from the "regular" district run public schools in the area. Since then, the school has dropped the extended use of technology from its charter, and while students sometimes have access to computers in the classroom, technology is used mainly for research; hence, its potential as an effective participation methodology is greatly under realized. Since college level courses often use chat rooms and discussion boards to encourage student participation, schools like EA that purport to be college preparatory in nature should think seriously about encouraging student use of technology that would provide students the opportunity to speak and be heard in a variety of formats.

Curricular Considerations

Defining Racism and Privilege

Finding ways to encourage students' participation in conversations about race involves pedagogical considerations on more than one level. While reflective writing and discussion forums may be helpful in circumventing an unbalanced group dynamic, choice of curricular materials is also crucial. Inclusion of texts and supplementary materials that help students incorporate a definition of racism as a contemporary and institutional social problem is vital to a critical approach to multiculturalism. Greene (2003) suggests that whites tend to view racism as individual prejudice, ignoring institutional racism, because this tangible definition is more easily set aside as someone else's problem. As Nieto (2005) notes, focus on individual racism "conveniently skirts the issue of how institutions themselves, which are more powerful than individuals, develop harmful policies and practices that victimize…people from powerless groups" (p. 406). Lewis (2006) reminds us that when teachers and schools ignore structural racism, students will not receive help in constructing understandings of race relations that are relevant to their time and place. The problem at EA was not that students condoned racism; on the contrary, the cross-racial friendships at the school allowed many students to view themselves as progressive in their thinking about race. Rather, the problem was that students' conventional definition of racism as "individual bias toward members of other groups" (Nieto, 2005, p. 406) was too narrow. Students did not incorporate institutional forms of racism within their definition, nor did they recognize racism as a contemporary social problem affecting their lives. It was this narrow and ahistorical definition of racism that enabled some

students to produce contextualized discourses to avoid discussions of race in the classroom and others to view themselves, as whites, as the targets of racism.

Inclusion of texts that explore past oppression in school curriculum is not enough to foster antiracist awareness; the study of multicultural curriculum must offer students the tools to critique past *and* present power systems that work to perpetuate racism (Schultz, 2009). While teachers may hope that multicultural texts will be effective tools in broadening students' thinking about important social issues such as racism, they must also consider how students' ideas about race will influence their analysis of the texts. Students who view racism as individual discrimination that was largely resolved by the Civil Rights Movement will likely interpret the texts they read through the lens of that definition. Although Joann's inclusion of multicultural texts into her curriculum was meant to broaden students' thinking about race, it also, in some cases, reified students' already limited definition of racism.

The responses to *The Bluest Eye* that I've described in this study serve as an important example of how students' understandings of racism influenced, and in some cases limited, the benefit that their teacher hoped they would derive from reading this text. Set before the Civil Rights Movement, the text depicts racism that was blatant, and students would be hard pressed to find that degree of racially motivated hatefulness in their modern, localized contexts. Therefore, while condemning the racism in the novel, students could easily dismiss it as the abhorrent behavior of select individuals and as something that no longer exists. Likewise, Joann's use of "The Class Divided" video, which depicts racist sensibilities from 1968, may have confirmed the idea for students that racism is a thing of the past.

Of course, along with examples of individual racism depicted in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison also explores institutional racism and the privileging of whiteness; her exposé of the damaging effects of whiteness as the standard of beauty is a clear critique of racism that reaches far beyond the behavior of individuals. The time setting of the novel, though, again allows students to dismiss Morrison's critique as no longer applicable to the state of race relations today, and allows students like Emma to claim, "There's plenty of representation" of people of color in beauty advertisements. Luther (2009) found a similar response from a white student after reading Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*; while recommending that the text be kept in the curriculum to foster understanding of the past, this student wrote, "'Today's United States, does not have racism and all men are created equal…In modern culture, racism is nearly non-existent" (p. 214). Carter (2012), too, found that white students objected to discussing racism in class because, as one white student said, "'We're past that…'" (p. 134). The belief that racism is no longer a relevant issue is, of course, what fueled the sentiment in Ron and other students at EA that African Americans should "get over" racism. Ironically, works of literature meant to expose racism may, instead, confirm students' belief that racism is over since, from students' perspective, race relations are far improved from the situations depicted in these texts.

White students, especially those of working class backgrounds who do not consider themselves to be privileged, may also misunderstand the phenomenon of white privilege. Students who define privilege as wealth or immediate opportunity may more readily dismiss the idea of white privilege as not applicable to their context. Perry (2002) found a variety of responses from white students regarding white privilege: some used reverse racism arguments to insist that blacks received more privileges than they did,

while others recognized historic white privilege but argued against its salience in modern

life. Students in all of Joann's classes mentioned affirmative action in hiring practices and

scholarships to argue that blacks are now more privileged than whites. Therefore, it is

essential to help students explore white privilege as a legacy created by past racist

policies, not as a guarantee that all whites will live privileged lives. As Tatum (1997)

explains, "It is important to acknowledge that while all Whites benefit from racism, they

do not benefit equally" (p. 12). Many white students who attend EA live in Carletonville,

an economically depressed area, but because of past racist housing policies that created

segregated neighborhoods, they live in the safer, mostly white section of Carletonville,

where property values are higher and where gun violence is not a common occurrence, as

it is in Anthony's part of town.[100]

Therefore, using works of historical fiction that depict the cruelty suffered by

people of color at the hands of whites may not help white students understand themselves

as the recipients of white privilege. Students like Edward and James, who saw themselves

as decent people and who were friendly with students of color, related neither to the

African Americans in *The Bluest Eye*, nor to their white oppressors. If the goal of

incorporating multicultural literature into school curriculum is to help students

understand their own positioning as entrenched members of a racial hierarchy, educators

need to use literature and supplementary materials that more closely depict that position

for all students. White students who have not been challenged to think critically about

their own racial identity will likely have difficulty understanding racism "in a social and

---

[100]Anthony told me that during the previous school year he'd lost a friend to gun violence just a block away from his home. During my time at EA, Adana, an African American 10th grader, also mentioned that a relative of hers had been shot, and one morning before school I heard of a shooting involving African Americans in Carletonville on the news. I wondered, anxiously, if any of Joann's students had been involved. Thankfully, they had not.

historical context to which they themselves are inextricably connected, even if they do not personally harbour feelings of hostility" (Naidoo, 1992, p. 141). In other words, along with important works of historical fiction like *The Bluest Eye* that may help students to understand past racism, students need to read texts that depict racism in the present and that contain characters to whom all students can relate. White students need to read about other whites who incorporate antiracism into their racial identity and become allies to people of color. The fact that such texts may be hard to locate points out not only the need to expand the canon of multicultural literature currently in use in schools, but perhaps even the need for publishers to seek out and encourage authors of such works.[101]

Given students' feelings that fiction is a less than reliable account of human experience, teachers might consider incorporating more memoirs by authors in contexts similar to students' into their curriculum.[102] Almost a year after I'd completed my fieldwork, Joann wrote to ask for my help in choosing a contemporary memoir that depicted racism from the perspective of a person of color in the U.S. Sadly, we had difficulty finding more than a few titles that fit that description. However, while there seems to be a lack of both memoirs and realistic fiction that explore racism in a contemporary setting, there is no lack of ethnographies that do the same. Perhaps secondary school educators would do well to add scholarly works of ethnography to their curriculum. Likewise, ethnographers and academic publishers need to view high school students as a viable market for these scholarly works.

The *Childist/Critical Race* Approach

---

[101] This presumes that publishers, most of whom are white, are aware of the modern manifestations of institutional racism and white privilege and do not favor a colorblind approach to race.

[102] While Joann did use the memoirs *A Long Way Gone* and *Night* with her 10 grade classes, both of these works were distant from students in either time or space. Perhaps this explains why both were received with very little resistance from students.

As described in Chapter One, one of my originals goals for this project was to see how students would respond to lessons I'd constructed combining critical race and *childist* approaches to literary criticism. I saw this as another way to blend the theoretical frameworks of childhood studies and critical race theory through my project. The childist approach to literary criticism incorporates constructions of children and childhood, adult-child relationships and boundary crossing, and emphasizes child characters' voices in the text, while a critical race approach examines the interaction of race and ethnicity with power, marginalization, and oppression in texts. Because of its focus on childhood as a possible space of marginalization, I believed that a childist approach to literary criticism would complement and intersect with a critical race approach to the texts under study, and I hoped to discover if this approach, which is not commonly found in school curriculum, would be helpful to the students in relating more deeply to the characters and situations in the texts. Hence, I constructed lesson plans and Do Now questions with the aim of helping students critique texts from a combined childist/critical race prospective.[103]

Joann was more than willing to give me opportunity to teach my lessons, usually asking me to fill in for her when she needed to be out of the room to proctor standardized tests or attend meetings. Although I constructed lesson materials for 10th grade classes reading *The Woman Warrior*, *A Long Way Gone*, and *The Kite Runner*, space prohibits me from analyzing student responses to these works. Therefore, I refer now to my experience in sharing the curricular materials I'd developed during *The Bluest Eye* unit for 11 Honors.

---

[103] See Appendix A.

Due to shortened class periods because of standardized testing, my lesson actually took place over three class sessions at the very beginning of *The Bluest Eye* unit. Students seemed most interested in the early parts of the lesson that asked them to reflect on their views about childhood, and whether or not children are treated as full citizens in our society. We then discussed ways in which the child characters of *The Bluest Eye* were marginalized during the opening pages of the novel. Students were engaged and polite during these class discussions, and did not express the resentment or frustration that would come later during the unit.

Although I believe my lessons may have increased students' understandings of the events of the story and of the motivations of the characters, in the end they represented just one more adult led activity through which students were expected to answer questions that would be counted toward their class participation grade. I'd found that these honors students, concerned with keeping their grades high, were quite adept at the question/answer participation structure that is prevalent in our educational system. Unfortunately, students' answers to my discussion questions revealed little about their understanding of racism as a current issue or of their own racial identities. They simply answered questions about a story that took place many decades ago and had little to do with their present context. Students' responses during my lessons did show that they were interested in thinking about childhood differently than they had done before, and in viewing it as a possible site of marginalization, but later on in the unit both James and Anthony mentioned "the childist thing" and "kids' rights," respectively, as topics that students were tired of talking about. I felt that my lessons did little to "draw on students' hearts and give those feelings of human connection combined status with the head"

(Naidoo, 1992, p. 144). Of course, I'm not implying that students should be required to respond emotionally to curriculum, or that teachers should purposely provoke an emotional response from students in order to judge the effectiveness of their lessons. However, in the case of 11 Honors, students' later responses to *The Bluest Eye* showed that they did harbor deep and complicated feelings about race, but it wasn't until Joann presented supplementary curricular materials that intentionally pointed out how racism exists today, specifically the California Newsreel video and the McIntosh essay, that students allowed those emotions to surface through passionate class discussions. Perhaps the effectiveness of these curricular tools in promoting discussion above the lessons I constructed points, again, to the need to offer students texts that explore racism in their present context.

Participatory Action Research

Hence, while works of historical fiction are important to help students understand our nation's racist history, teachers also need to adopt methods and curriculum that will intentionally challenge students' ideas about the role of race in their everyday lives. For example, coupling the reading of multicultural texts with youth participatory action research would provide an effective way to bridge the gap between literature about the past and present race relations. We can learn much in this regard from researchers Torre and Fine (2008), who brought youth of advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds together through a program called *Echoes*, creating a contact zone in which youth researched educational inequity and turned their findings into performable literary art. The authors report, "a number of youth performers, particularly White students from the suburbs, used the *Echoes* space to work through their own questions about privilege" (p.

38). Their experiences with the group challenged them to think deeply about their roles as white Americans, and their writings and reflections showed an awareness of racism that may not have developed had they not participated in the *Echoes* program. Schultz (2009) suggests that teachers find ways to partner with the community to draw in "funds of knowledge" (p. 134) that will connect curricula with students' lived experiences. Welcoming students' home worlds into the classroom through interviews and neighborhood observations, for example, will encourage participation and engagement in issues of race and identity that are meaningful to students.

Offering Support

Supportive Confrontation for Students

Innovative pedagogy and more inclusive curricular efforts are crucial elements in creating a school environment that encourages youth to consider the ongoing role race plays in all of our lives. These efforts, though, must be offered in a classroom environment that simultaneously promotes an atmosphere of trust *and* challenge (Naidoo, 1992). Teachers like Joann must be willing to partake in a balancing act: they must understand the emotional place their students speak from (Trainor, 2008) and at the same time push those students to think beyond their comfort zone about race and other important social issues. They must respect the voices of all students, even those with whom they do not agree. However, while respect is essential to any productive discussion, respect without challenge will not lead to broader perspectives for students, and too much emphasis on emotional safety can hamper critical analysis of race relations. McIntyre (1997) warns that attempts to maintain a "culture of niceness" (p. 40) on the part of white discussion participants can impede genuine critique of white privilege. If students expect

to be emotionally comfortable at all times, they may not be prepared for the challenge of discussing racism.

Leonardo (2002) describes several incidences when white women responded to critiques of whiteness with tears, sometimes disrupting discussion by leaving the room. Recently, during one of my own college classes, a female student responded in this way. The student had suggested her mother as an example of someone who "isn't really racist, but is just older and so thinks a certain way." When I noted kindly, but firmly, that the student's mother was likely younger than I am, and that age is not an excuse for intolerance, the student's eyes welled with tears and she fled into the hallway.[104] Leonardo explains that through such behavior whites refocus attention from oppressed people to themselves, positioning themselves as victims and winning the sympathies of those around them. Whites who behave in this way shift the group focus to themselves, highlighting their own feelings of discomfort in order to avoid dealing with the difficult subject at hand.

Educators must be willing to press through students' tears, sarcasm, or anger and provide an atmosphere of supportive confrontation in which students are both respected and challenged to think beyond their own experiences. While validating students' opinions and feelings, teachers must also be willing to challenge students by providing multicultural materials that invite critical analysis. While multicultural texts remain an important tool in helping students think about race, they must be coupled with pedagogy

---

[104] Through this incident I experienced the same fear of accusation that I found to be present in white teachers at Excellence Academy. What if this student reported me to the college administration? Would I be able to explain my response in a way that administrators, all of whom are white, would understand? Fortunately, I was able to resolve the issue with the student with no need for administrative involvement, but I must admit that the incident did cause me stress and made me wonder, just for a second, "Is it worth it?"

that asks challenging questions and that does not back down from difficult or uncomfortable class discussions.

Supporting Teachers

If teachers are to provide an environment that addresses racial power and privilege, they, too, will need support. Bonilla-Silva and Embrick (2008) warn that schools have not traditionally challenged oppressive systems; schools and educators have more often functioned to "maintain racial hierarchy rather than to challenge it" (p. 335). Educational systems that offer unequal educational experiences to students, be it through failing schools populated by students of color on the state or district levels, or through academic tracking within schools, are at risk of reproducing social and racial inequity. Teachers must recognize that they are part of this system, and that they will need both school wide and system wide support in order to pursue an antiracist agenda.

Almost a year after I'd finished my fieldwork at Excellence Academy I received an email from Lisa, the social studies teacher who'd spoken of her discomfort over "racially charged" situations in her classroom. Lisa asked me for "suggestions on any articles or great reads on reaching low economic and African American sub groupings." She explained, "Several teachers are interested in digging into the subject." Of course, I was happy to provide suggestions for Lisa and the other teachers, and glad that she viewed me as a resource. However, I was struck by the fact that Lisa and most of her colleagues at EA had been teaching for many years, and knew where to find resources to help them prepare lessons. Yet, her request for help showed that the white teachers at EA sensed their own lack of preparedness in educating black students. Further, the kind of resources Lisa sought were not readily available from her school or district administration.

Over the years, state departments of education have undergone many changes in their teacher preparation programs, and, sadly, those changes have not always included training for pre-service teachers in critical multicultural education. Where at one time training in teaching diverse student groups was included in state teacher candidate competencies, in more recent years, emphasis in teacher preparation guidelines has tended to focus on "family and community," a heading which incorporates a broad range of subjects and may or may not address racism and other societal inequities. Thus, it is entirely possible for pre-service teachers in Excellence Academy's home state to graduate from education programs never having discussed racism or engaged in critical pedagogy of any kind. While I commend the teachers at EA for their desire to learn how to address race in their classrooms, I also must note that these teachers were inadequately prepared for this task in their teacher education programs, and that professional training in this area is not available through their school.

Teachers also need support in order to engage in the self-reflection that should form the foundation of critical multiculturalism in their classrooms. This is crucial for white teachers, especially (Naidoo, 1992). Bonilla-Silva and Embrick (2008) remind us that educators are part of a hierarchically racialized system and must, therefore, be vigilant in examining how they may play a part in reproducing racism in the classroom. I must ask myself, as a white teacher, what assumptions do I make about my students? Do my expectations of students' achievement vary based on their racial background, gender, socioeconomic status, or other factors? Do I affirm the cultural and language styles of all students, or do I view those of white students as "normal" and all others as exotic or as culturally and intellectually inferior? Do I engage all students in critical thinking? Are my

assessment practices fair or are they biased toward those of the dominant group? Perhaps most importantly, do I recognize the multitude of ways in which my whiteness worked for me when I, myself, was a student, and the invisible but powerful way it works for me still? Or do I believe that my effort and merit alone are responsible for my career success? Without careful and consistent reflection of how our own racially privileged status may affect our interactions with students, white teachers may "unwittingly assist in the reproduction of the racial order" (Bonilla-Silva & Embrick, p. 335).

Teachers who do engage in critical self-reflection position themselves as models of the process of constructing racial identities that incorporate antiracism. While recognizing that teachers will approach multicultural literature in their curriculum from differing levels of racial awareness, Naidoo (1992) encourages white teachers, especially, to "acknowledge themselves as co-learners in the process of reperception" (p. 148). Teachers can model the process of racial identity construction by talking with their students about their experiences as racialized people and by openly describing how their own thinking and feelings regarding race continue to develop and be refined throughout life. Unfortunately, teachers often think of themselves as experts whose job is to impart knowledge, and of their students as novices waiting to be filled with information. When applied to exploring race in the classroom, this "banking" model of education (Friere, 1970) ignores the process of identity construction and assumes that learning information about racism is all that is needed for students to incorporate antiracist attitudes. As we saw, EA students had learned about racism in previous school years, but that knowledge did little to help white students understand the perspectives of their African American friends. Naidoo reassures us that "when students see their teacher involved in the same

process of questioning and self-scrutiny," those students are better prepared to "combine affective with cognitive knowledge" (p. 146) about race. Teachers who engage in self-reflection with their students model a process of growth that combines cognitive understandings with affective dispositions in the construction of racial identity.

From the beginning of my fieldwork, Joann had been committed to ideals of social justice. However, over the months I witnessed a progression in her understandings and feelings about race. I heard her go from claiming colorblindness in our initial meeting ("I don't notice my students' racial backgrounds") to telling a group of Flex students early in my research, "There are no races. There is only one human race," to a frustrated admission to me privately, "I still hate the idea of races. We should all be just the human race. But I know now that race is a social construct and that racism is real and we have to deal with it." Joann and I had many private conversations in which her questions to me showed that she was working hard to construct a white racial identity that was thoroughly antiracist. However, through the stories she told students about her experiences with race, Joann was always careful to present the persona of one who had "arrived" at antiracism. She did not reflect on her process of "figuring it out" with students. Likewise, I said nothing about my own process of racial identity formation as a white person, but instead came across as an "expert" whose goal it was to convert students to my way of thinking. Joann exacerbated this image of me by commenting to her classes from time to time how "lucky" they were to have a college professor to participate in their literature units. Although I was uncomfortable with the image of myself Joann projected to the students, I said nothing to correct her. By not modeling ourselves as whites in the process of coming to terms with our whiteness, Joann and I

inadvertently denied white students the role models that may have been helpful to them, and denied students of color the opportunity to understand white racial identity formation through our eyes.

Sadly, fear of student accusations of racism may hinder Joann and other white teachers from engaging in honest self-reflection with students regarding their own evolving ideas about race. It was difficult enough for teachers to talk about race in the classroom, and Joann was one of the only teachers at EA who persisted in her efforts to do so in spite of student and administrative resistance. The one other teacher who was known to talk about race with her students *was* accused of racism by a student and was either fired or resigned abruptly (no one knew for sure) later in the school year for undisclosed reasons. Teachers like Joann would very likely fear professional ramifications were students to perceive self-reflection as admission of racist thoughts or feelings, making such self-reflection highly risky business. Therefore, along with encouragement to include the topic of race in their curriculum, teachers need support in the form of assurances that honest self-reflection about one's own racial identity development will not leave one vulnerable because of possible accusations of racism.

Concluding Thoughts

When I began this project my goal was to ascertain how students constructed ideas about race as they read multicultural literature in the classroom. I wanted to discover how these works of literature affected students' thinking about race and racism, and if these readings helped students to incorporate antiracist understandings into their construction of racial identity. I wondered if studying works of multicultural literature would help students to broaden their understandings of how race worked and continues to

work as a stratifying agent in society. I found that engagement with multicultural literature did create opportunity for students to think, feel, and talk about race. However, during my time at Excellence Academy I also observed students' working through racial identity through language, cultural group membership, and physical appearance: aspects of their daily lives that had little to do with the texts they studied. It was clear to me that proximity to students of racial backgrounds other than their own made race visible to students every day (Perry, 2002, Lewis, 2006). Most importantly, the mixed-race setting at Excellence Academy gave students the opportunity to form consistent cross-racial friendships. These friendships engendered a feeling of group unity and of safety that made for a peaceful and productive educational experience for students.

The existence of cross-racial friendships, however, is not enough to ensure racial equity on a system wide level, nor are those friendships a guarantee that students' racial identities will incorporate antiracist understandings. Indeed, at this friendly, racially harmonious school I found that racial tensions thrived. Both white and African American students felt that their points of view were not acknowledged and, therefore, harbored feelings of marginalization, anger or frustration over perceived racial favoring. White students and teachers feared accusations of racism that, for teachers, might threaten job security. Students of color were kept from important curricular content because of racially biased judgments on the part of school administrators. Cross-racial friendships may have played a part in encouraging silence for some students, while giving others the confidence to deny the salience of racism and their own position of racial privilege. As desirable as cross-racial friendships are, the notion that they, alone, are indicators of racial equity is problematic. Unless schools like Excellence Academy examine how race

functions in their environment they run the risk of reproducing racial inequity. Cross-racial friendships, while important, are not a guarantee of antiracist belief in students, and a racially harmonious atmosphere is not necessarily an indication that all students are receiving the same quality of educational experience. Without a doubt, teachers and administrators should foster an environment where cross-racial friendships flourish. At the same time, we must not neglect the deeper analysis of how race functions to create and maintain power structures in the midst of, and perhaps because of, those friendships.

Appendix A

The Bluest Eye
Lesson for 11 Honors
April 19, 2012

Objective:

Students will describe three historical/philosophical constructions of childhood.
Students will analyze various depictions of childhood in the opening sections of text.

Motivation:

In groups of four, describe your favorite childhood memory. Why is this memory important to you? Then name your favorite TV show or movie in which children are the main characters. Why is this your favorite?

Development:

We all have favorites that we can remember from childhood. Memories of our own lives or from popular culture often stay with us because they symbolize something to us. You may remember some things from childhood and not others because they symbolize something important about childhood.

Brainstorm in groups: what is childhood? What adjectives pop into your mind when you think about children? Then add to board. *(Read these out)*

Talking and thinking about childhood is nothing new. People's ideas about childhood have shifted a great deal over the centuries. (*Give handout)* Scholars such as John Wall (RU prof) talk about three basic views of childhood that have existed since ancient times.

1. *Top-down* (Plato, Augustine, Calvin) – children are "irrational animals in need of training." The job of adults is to control and train children. Example – Bible verse, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." Puritan approach – children as sinful.

2. *Bottom-up* (Rousseau) – children demonstrate humanity's goodness; they are innocent and pure. The job of adults is to protect children and keep them innocent as long as possible. Advertisements capitalize on this view of childhood all the time, as in this pic:

[See Figure 1)

3. *Developmental* (Aristotle, Aquinas, Locke) – children are "blank slates." They will become whatever their environment makes them. The job of adults

is to teach them and help them develop in healthy ways. This is the idea behind the famous poem:

Children Learn What They Live
by Dorothy Law Nolte

If children live with criticism, they learn to condemn.
If children live with hostility, they learn to fight.
If children live with fear, they learn to be apprehensive.
If children live with pity, they learn to feel sorry for themselves.
If children live with ridicule, they learn to feel shy.
If children live with jealousy, they learn to feel envy.
If children live with shame, they learn to feel guilty.
If children live with encouragement, they learn confidence.
If children live with tolerance, they learn patience.
If children live with praise, they learn appreciation.
If children live with acceptance, they learn to love.
If children live with approval, they learn to like themselves.
If children live with recognition, they learn it is good to have a goal.
If children live with sharing, they learn generosity.
If children live with honesty, they learn truthfulness.
If children live with fairness, they learn justice.
If children live with kindness and consideration, they learn respect.
If children live with security, they learn to have faith in themselves and in those about them.
If children live with friendliness, they learn the world is a nice place in which to live.*

*Retrieved from http://www.empowermentresources.com/info2/childrenlearn-long_version.html.

Which of these views of childhood were evident in The Crucible? *Children as sinful and children as innocent.*

What are some other views of childhood that we can add to this list? *Examples – children as property, children as vulnerable, children as sensual, children as competent, children as supernatural/magic, children as our future.*

Another way that some scholars think about childhood is as a time of **marginalization** *(define term).* Suppose you were an attorney representing not one person, but childhood. How might you argue that children are not full citizens? What specific aspects of childhood would you point out in a court of law? *(Ask someone to scribe on board.)*

Children have no say in how they are educated
Children are not allowed to make decisions for themselves
Children can't vote
Children can decide on their own medical treatment
Children aren't allowed to work and earn money
Children can't drive
Children can't see whatever movies they want.
Etc.

Therefore, in some ways we might compare children with other groups who have been marginalized throughout history, such as women, African Americans, etc. (can you think of others?). Part of my research is to introduce a specific way of critiquing texts to you and to get your opinions about this critique. I call this a combined childist/critical race critique – I look at how both race and childhood are depicted in the text, and how both of these work together to impact characters in the text.

Discussion questions:

1. What does Claudia tell us about her childhood in the first few pages of the novel? What views of childhood are depicted here?

2. In what ways are Claudia and her sister marginalized within their family?

3. We know that Claudia is looking back at her childhood as an adult as she relates the incidents that take place at the beginning of the novel. Is that important, and if so, why?

Appendix B

Student Produced Map of Carltonville

[See Figure 2]

Students' Color Coded Key (from margins of map):

Red: high crime/violence area
- Streets near alleyways are very unpredictable
- Crime and activity increases at night and especially during summer months
- Shootings & crime can happen in broad daylight on streets colored in red

Blue: medium crime/violence
- Be aware of certain hangout hotspots for crime such as the McDonalds on Main St., and local outside basketball courts

Green: low violence area

*No color indicates not much violence at all, but still be cautious

Appendix C

Excellence Academy's Code of Conduct

I am here to learn

Therefore I will

- Respect myself, others and the environment

- Cooperate with all school personnel.

- Do nothing to keep the teacher from teaching, or keep anyone, including myself, from learning.

Appendix D

Classroom Norms:

1. <u>Be prepared</u> with ALL necessary materials at the start of the class.

2. Begin your <u>Do Now</u> as soon as you enter the classroom.

3. Recognize that <u>class time</u> is for <u>class work</u>.

4. Follow the <u>Dress Code</u> and <u>Code of Conduct</u> at all times.

5. Demonstrate <u>respect</u> (including body language and eye contact) when others are speaking.

6. Wait until an <u>appropriate</u> transition to go to the bathroom, ask a question or get something.

7. Use <u>formal conventions</u> for ALL oral and written responses.

8. Remember that <u>academics</u> are <u>your current job</u>: whining, complaining and arguing are inappropriate and unprofessional.

References

Abound, F. E., Mendelsen, J. M., & Purdy, K. T. (2003). Cross-race peer relations and friendship quality. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 27*(2), 165-173.

Abrams, L. & Trusty, J. (2004). African Americans' racial identity and socially desirable responding: An empirical model. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 82,* 365-374.

Anacker, K. B. (2010). Still paying the race tax? Analyzing property values in homogeneous and mixed-race suburbs. *Journal of Urban Affairs, 32*(1), 55-77.

Anzaldua, G. (1999). *Borderlands: The new mestizo* (3rd ed.). San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.

Beach, R., Thein, A. H., & Parks, D. (2008). *High school students' competing social worlds.* NY: Routledge.

Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism.* NY: Basic Books.

Bell, D. (2000). Property rights in whiteness: Their legal legacy, their economic costs. In R. Delgado & J. Stefancic (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The cutting edge* (71-79). Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Bell, D. (2009). *Brown v. Board of Education* and the interest convergence dilemma. In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings, (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (73-84). NY: Routledge.

Bonilla-Silva, E. & Embrick, D. G. (2008). Recognizing the likelihood of reproducing racism. In M. Pollock (Ed.), *Everyday antiracism* (334-336). NY: The New Press.

Botelho, M.J. & Rudman, M.K. (2009). *Critical multicultural analysis of children's literature.* NY: Routledge.

Bucholtz, M. (2011). *White kids: Language, race, and styles of youth identity.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Burton, L.M., Bonilla-Silva, E., Ray, V., Buckelew, R., and Freeman, E.H. (2010). Critical race theories, colorism, and the decade's research on families of color. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 72*, 440-459.

Carter, P.L. (2005). *Keepin' it real: School success beyond black and white.* NY: Oxford University Press.

Carter, P.L. (2012). *Stubborn roots: Race, culture, and inequality in U.S. and South African Schools.* NY: Oxford University Press.

Carter, R.T., Helms, J.E., & Juby, H. L. (2004). The relationship between racism and racial identity for white Americans: A profile analysis. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 32,* 2-17.

Chadwick, J. (2008). Teaching racially sensitive literature. In M. Pollock (Ed.), *Everyday antiracism* (195-198). NY: The New Press.

Chalmers, V. (1997). White out: Multicultural performances in a progressive school. In M. Fine, L. Weis, L. C. Powell, & L. M. Wong (Eds.), *Off white: Readings on race, power, and society* (66-78). NY: Routledge.

Christerson, B., Edwards, K.L., & Flory, R. (2010). *Growing up in America: The power of race in the lives of teens.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Cochran-Smith, M. (2004). Blind vision: Unlearning racism in teacher education. In S. Anderson, P. F. Attwood, & L. C. Howard (Eds.), *Facing racism in education* (277-309). Cambridge: Harvard Education Publishing Group.

Davis, K. (2007, May 4). *A girl like me.* Retrieved from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YWyI77Yh1Gg

DeCuir, J. T & Dixson, A. (2004). So when it comes out, they aren't that surprised that it is there: Using critical race theory as a tool of analysis of race and racism in education. *Educational Researcher*, *33*(5), 26-31.

Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (2000). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Delpit, L. D. (2004). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. In S. Anderson, P. Attwood, & L. Howard (Eds.), *Facing racism in education* (123-143). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group.

Dickens, A. (1996). Revisiting Brown v. Board of Education: How tracking has resegregated American's public schools. *Columbia Journal of Law and Social Problems, 469*, 469-506.

Du Bois, W.E.B. (2005). *The souls of Black folk.* (Annotated ed.). NY: Simon and Schuster.

Durden, T. R. & Truscott, D. M. (2013). Critical reflectivity and the development of new culturally relevant teachers. *Multicultural Perspectives, 15*(2), 73-80.

Emond, R. 2009. Ethnographic research methods with children and young people. In S. Greene & D. Hogan (Eds.), *Researching children's experiences* (123-139). Los Angeles: Sage.

Erickson, F. (1987). Transformation and school success: The politics and culture of educational achievement. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 18*, 335-356.

Fine, M. (1997). Witnessing whiteness. In M. Fine, L. Weis, L. C. Powell, and L. M. Wong (Eds.), *Off white: Readings on race, power, and society* (57-65). NY: Routledge.

Forsey, M. (2009). "He's not a spy; he's one of us": Ethnographic positioning in a middle-class setting. In L. Hume and J. Mulcock (Eds.), *Anthropologists in the field* (59-70). NY: Columbia University Press.

Frankenberg, R. (1993). *White women, race matters: The social construction of whiteness.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Freier, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

Gallagher, C. A. (2003). Color-blind privilege: The social and political functions of erasing the color line in post-race America. *RGC Journal Special Edition on Privilege, 10*(4), 575-588.

Gates, H. L. Jr. (1988). *The signifying monkey: A theory of African American literary criticism*. NY: Oxford University Press.

Gillborn, D. (2009). Education policy as an act of white supremacy: Whiteness, critical race theory, and education reform. In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings, (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (51-69). NY: Routledge.

Greene, S. and Abt-Perkins, D. (2003). *Making race visible: Literacy research for cultural understanding*. NY: Teachers College Press.

Hammersley, M. (1992). *What's wrong with ethnography.* London: Routledge.

Haviland, V. S. (2008). "Things get glossed over": Rearticulating the silencing power of whiteness in education. *Journal of Teacher Education, (59)*1, 40-54.

Hays, D., Chang, C., & Havice, P.A. (2008). White racial identity statuses as predictors of white privilege. *Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education & Development, 47*(1), 234-246.

Helms, J. E. (1990). *Black and white racial identity.* Westport, CT: Praeger.

Helms, J.E. (2007). Some better practices for measuring racial and ethnic identity constructs. *Journal of Counseling Psychology (54)*3, 235-246.

Hollingworth, L. (2009). Complicated conversations: Exploring race and ideology in an elementary classroom. *Urban Education, (44)*1, 30-57.

Hutchinson, G. B. (2004). Langston Hughes and the 'Other' Whitman. In T. J. Sisler (Ed.), *Poetry Criticism* (Vol. 53). Detroit: Gale. (Reprinted from *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman*, pp. 16-27, by R. K. Martin, Ed., 1992, Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press) Retrieved from http://go.galegroup.com.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420055641&v=2.1&u=new67449&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w

James, A. (2007). Giving voice to children's voices: Practices and problems, pitfalls and potentials. *American Anthropologist, 109*(2), 261-272.

Johns Hopkins University. (2004). *Locating the dropout crisis.* Baltimore, MD: Balfanz, R. & Legters, N. Retrieved from http://www.csos.jhu.edu/crespar/techReports/Report70.pdf.

Kao, G. & Joyner, K. (2004). Do race and ethnicity matter among friends? Activities among interracial, interethnic, and intraethnic adolescent friends. *The Sociological Quarterly, 45(3),* 557–573.

Katz, J. H. (1978). *White awareness: Handbook for anti-racism training*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.

Killen, M., Kelly, M. C., Richardson, C., Crystal, D. & Ruck, M. (2010). European American children's and adolescents' evaluations of interracial exclusion. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 13*, 283-300.

Kumasi, K. (2011). Critical race theory and education: Mapping a legacy of activism and scholarship. In B. A. Levinson (Ed.), *Beyond critique: Exploring critical social theories and education* (196-219). Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

Kromidas, M. (2012). Affiliation or appropriation? Crossing and the politics of race among children in NY City. *Childhood, 19*(3), 317-331.

Kubitschek, W. & Hallinan, M. (1998). Tracking and students' friendships. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 61*(1), 1-15.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2009). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Wiley.

Ladson-Billings, G. & Tate, W.F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record, 97*(1), 47-68.

Lashbrook, J.T. (2000). Fitting in: Exploring the emotional dimension of adolescent peer pressure. *Adolescence, 35*(140), 747-757.

Leonardo, Z. (2002). The souls of White Folk: Critical pedagogy, whiteness studies, and globalization discourse. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 5*(1), 29-50.

Lewis, A. (2006). *Race in the schoolyard.* NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Lueck, K. and Steffen, H. (2011). White kids: Identity construction, critical mass, and symbolic exclusion in high school cliques and other groups. *Berkeley Review of Education, 2*(1), 46-67.

Lukes, S. (2005). *Power: A radical view* (2nd ed.). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Marx, S. (2006). *Revealing the invisible: Confronting passive racism in teacher education.* NY: Routeledge.

Matrenec, R. H. (2011). The struggle for identity for African American adolescent males in a predominantly white, affluent school. *Journal of Poverty, 15*(2), 226-240.

McCarthy, C. and Dimitriadis, G. (2005). Governmentality and the sociology of education: Media, educational policy, and the politics of resentment. In C. McCarthy, W. Crichlow, G. Dimitriadis, & N. Dolby (Eds.), *Race, identity, and representation in education* (321-335). NY: Routledge.

McIntosh, P. (1989). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. *Peace and Freedom,* July/August, 9-12.

McIntyre, A. (1997). *Making meaning of whiteness: Exploring racial identity with white teachers.* Albany, NY: State University of NY Press.

Modica, M. (2012). Constructions of race among religiously conservative college students. *Multicultural Perspectives, 14*(1), 38-43.

Morrison, T. (1993) *Playing in the dark.* NY: Random House.

Morrison, T. (1993). *The bluest eye.* NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Munniksma, A. & Juvonen, J. (2012), Cross-ethnic friendships and sense of social-emotional safety in a multiethnic middle school: And exploratory study. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 58*(4), 489-506.

Naidoo, B. (1992). *Through whose eyes? Exploring racism: Reader, text and context.* London: Trentham Books Ltd.

Nakkula, M.J. & Toshalis, E. (2008). *Understanding youth: Adolescent development for educators.* Cambridge MA: Harvard Education Press.

Oakes, J. (2005). *Keeping track* (2nd ed.). New Haven: Yale University Press.

Ogbu, J. U. (2004). Collective identity and the burden of "acting white" in Black history, community, and education. *The Urban Review, 36*(1), 1-35.

Page-Gould, E., Mendozo-Denton, R. & Tropp, L. (2008). With a little help from my cross-group friend: Reducing anxiety in intergroup contexts through cross-group friendship. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 95*(5), 1080-1094.

Perry, P. (2002). *Shades of white: White kids and racial identities in high school.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Perry, P. (2008) Creating safe spaces in predominantly white classrooms. In M. Pollock (Ed.), *Everyday antiracism* (226 – 229). NY: The New Press.

Pettigrew, A. (2012). Confronting the limits of antiracist and multicultural education: White students' reflections on identity and difference in a multiethnic secondary school. *Sociological Research Online, 17*(3), 1-11.

Pollock, M. (2004). *Colormute: Race talk dilemmas in an American school.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Pounder, C. C. H., Adelman, L., Cheng, J., Herbes-Sommers, C., Strain, T. H., Smith, L., Ragazzi, C. (2003). The house we live in. In *Race: The power of an illusion*. San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel.

Pratt, M. L. (1998). Arts of the contact zone. In V. Zamel & R. Spack (Eds.), *Negotiating academic literacies: Teaching and learning across languages and cultures* (171-186). NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Assoc.

Qulllian. L. & Campbell, M.E. (2003). Beyond black and white: The present and future of multiracial friendship segregation. *American Sociological Review, 68*(4), 540-566.

Roediger, D. R. (1992). *The wages of whiteness: race and the making of the American working class.* NY: Verso.

Roediger, D.R. (1994). *Towards the abolition of whiteness.* NY: Verso.

Rowe, W. (2006). White racial identity: Science, faith, and pseudoscience. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 34,* 235-243.

Rude, J. & Herda, D. (2010). Best friends forever? Race and the stability of adolescent friendships. *Social Forces, 89*(2), 585-607.

Saul, W., & Wallace, K. (2002). Centering the margins: White preservice teachers' responses to *Roll of Thunder. Teaching Education, (13)*1, 41-53.

Shankar, S. (2008). *Desiland: Teen Culture, class, and success in Silicon Valley.* London: Duke University Press.

Schultz, K. (2008). *Interrogating Students' Silences.* In M. Pollock (Ed.), *Everyday antiracism* (217-221). NY: The New Press.

Schultz, K. (2009). *Rethinking classroom participation: Listening to silent voices.* NY: Teachers College Press.

The Sentencing Project. (2000). *Racial disparity in the criminal justice system.* Retrieved from http://www.sentencingproject.org/doc/publications/rd_reducingracialdisparity.pdf.

Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. NY: Vintage Books.

Seitles, Marc. (1998). The perpetuation of residential racial segregation in America: Historical discrimination, modern forms of exclusion, and inclusionary remedies. *Journal of Land Use & Environmental Law, 14*(1). Retrieved from http://www.law.fsu.edu/journals/ landuse/141.htm.

Silvestri, T. J. & Richardson, T. Q. (2001). White racial identity statuses and NEO personality constructs: An exploratory analysis. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 79,* 68-76.

Sleeter, C. (2005). How white teachers construct race. In C. McCarthy, W. Crichlow, G. Dimitriadis, & N. Dolby (Eds.), *Race, identity, and representation in education* (243-256). NY: Routledge.

Solorzano, D.G. & Yosso, T. J. (2009). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for educational research. In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings, (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (131-147). NY: Routledge.

Stoughton, E.H. & Sivertson, C. (2005). Communicating across cultures: Discursive challenges and racial identity formation in narratives of middle school students. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 8*(3), 277-295.

Sue, D. W., Capodilupo, C. M., Torino, G. C., Bucceri, J. M., Holder, A. M., Nadal, K. L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life. *American Psychologist, 62*(4), 271-286.

Tarca, K. (2005). Colorblind in control: The risks of resisting difference amid demographic   change. *Educational Studies, (30)*2, 99-120.

Tatum, B. D. (1997). *"Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" and other conversations about race.* NY: Basic Books.

Tavares, C. D. (2011). Why can't we be friends: The role of religious congregation-based social contact for close interracial adolescent friendships. *Review of Religious Research, 52*(4), 439-453.

Taylor, E. (2009). The foundations of critical race theory in education: An introduction. In E. Taylor, D. Gillborn, & G. Ladson-Billings, (Eds.), *Foundations of critical race theory in education* (1-16). NY: Routledge.

Thomas, M. (2011). *Multicultural girlhood: Racism, sexuality, and the conflicted spaces of American education.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Thomas P. & Ryan, J. (2009, Feb. 18). Stinging Remarks on Race from Attorney General. *ABC News.* Retrieved from http://abcnews.go.com/TheLaw/story?id=6905255&page=1#.UBEoRI51rbw

Torre, M. E. & Fine, M. (2008). Participatory action research in the contact zone. In J. Cammarota & M. Fine (Eds.), *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion* (23-44). NY: Rutledge.

Trainor, J. S. (2008). *Rethinking racism: Emotion, persuasion, and literacy education in an all-white high school.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

U.S. Department of Justice. (2012). *Prisoners in 2011.* Washington, DC: Carson, E. A. & Sabol, W. J. Retrieved from http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p11.pdf.

United States Census Bureau. (2012). *Income, expenditure, poverty & wealth.* Retrieved from http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/cats/income_expenditures_poverty_wealth/poverty.html.

Wall, J. (2010). *Ethics in light of childhood.* Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University.

Waters, M. C. (2001). *Black identities: West Indian immigrant dreams and American Realities.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wong, P., Lai, C. F., Nagasawa, R., & Lin, T. (1998). Asian Americans as a model minority: Self-perceptions and perceptions by other racial groups. *Sociological Prespectives, 41*(1), 95-108.

Youdell, D. (2004). Identity traps or how Black students fail: The interactions between biographical, sub-cultural and learner identities. In G. Ladson-Billings & D. Gilborn (Eds.), *The RoutledgeFalmer reader in multicultural education* (84-102). London: RoutledgeFalmer.

MARIANNE MODICA

Home:	**Work:**
1025 Edwin Drive	**Valley Forge Christian College**
Phoenixville, PA 19460	**1401 Charlestown Road**
(610) 935-0802	**Phoenixville, PA 19460**
	(610) 917-1495
	m_modica@vfcc.edu

EDUCATION

Rutgers University
Camden, NJ
2008 – 2014
Degree: Doctor of Philosophy in Childhood Studies
Dissertation Title: "Race Among Friends: Race, Friendship, and Multicultural Literature in a Suburban School"

Eastern University
St. Davids, PA
2004 - 2006
Graduate Studies, Multicultural Education

Queens College of the City University of New York
Graduate 1989, Honors, Department of Early Childhood Education
Degree: MS, Early Childhood Education

Queens College of the City University of New York
Graduate 1981, Cum Laude
Degree: BA, Early Childhood Education
        Certificate of Merit, Department of Early Childhood Education

EXPERIENCE

<u>1996 - Present</u>

Valley Forge Christian College
Phoenixville, Pennsylvania
Assistant Professor, Early Childhood Education
Responsibilities:
Conduct classes in Foundations of Early Childhood Education, Early Childhood Methods, Educational Technology, Child and Adolescent Development, and Multicultural Education
Supervise student field experiences

Faculty representative to President's Cabinet – 2006 academic year
Faculty representative to Academic Affairs Committee – 2003 and 2004 academic years
Contributed to development of PDE program approval in Early Childhood, Middle
        (pending), and Secondary Education

<u>1994 - 1997</u>

Valley Cooperative Preschool
Wayne, Pennsylvania
Director/Teacher

<u>1994</u>

Good Samaritan Day School
Paoli, Pennsylvania
Teacher, Toddler Circle
Substitute Teacher, Nursery Grades

<u>1991 - 1993</u>

Calvary Christian Academy and Happy Day Child Care Center
Wayne, New Jersey
Program Coordinator
Director of Summer Program

<u>1990 - 1991</u>

Huntington Learning Center
Livingston, New Jersey
Teacher, Ages K - Adult

<u>1983 - 86</u>

Korean Alliance Church of Northern New Jersey
Cresskill, New Jersey
Religious Education Leader, Grades 1 - 6

<u>1981-83</u>

Flushing Christian School
Flushing, New York
Teacher, Grade 3

<u>1981</u>

Calvary Child Care Center
Seattle, Washington
Teacher, 3 year olds

PUBLICATIONS

"Constructions of Race Among Religiously Conservative College Students."
Multicultural Perspectives 14.1 (2012). 38-43.

The R Word, 2011, Spring City, PA: Morning Joy Media.

"How Do Children Grow Spiritually?" *Christian Educators Journal*, October 2000.

"Involve the Children in the Process." *Christian Education Counselor,*
September/October 1999.

"The Death of a Preschool." *Focus on Pre-K and K, ACEI Quarterly Newsletter,* Winter
1998.

"Kids & Television - One Mother's Quest for Sanity." *Kids*, June 1994.

"I Dress Up – I'm Still Me." *The GIANT Encyclopedia of Theme Activities for Children 2
to 5*, Gryphon House, Inc., 1993.

"We Are Changing/We Are Growing." *The GIANT Encyclopedia of Theme Activities for
Children 2 to 5*, Gryphon House, Inc., 1993.

"A Positive Approach to Discipline in the Early Childhood Setting." *Day Care and Early
Education*, Volume 19, No. 4, Summer 1992.

"How to Prepare Your Child for College." *Children Today*, January-February 1991.