There Is No "Race" in the Schoolyard: Color-Blind Ideology in an (Almost) All-White School

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This article examines the racial messages and lessons students get from parents and teachers in one suburban school community. I examine the explicit and "hidden" curriculum of race offered in the school as well as exploring community members' racial discourse, understandings, and behaviors. During a yearlong ethnographic study, all community members consistently denied the local salience of race. Yet, this explicit color-blind "race talk" masked an underlying reality of racialized practices and color-conscious understandings—practices and understandings that not only had direct impact on students of color at the school, but also have implications for race relations more broadly. I argue that this apparent paradox is related to the operation of new racial ideologies becoming dominant in the United States today, and conclude with suggestions for how this racial logic might be challenged.

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Although much research has been done with regard to race in urban educational settings or in schools populated predominantly by students of color, much less work has examined how race operates in all-White or almost all-White settings.[1] Schofield (1982), Peshkin (1991), and others (see also Patchen, 1982; Wells & Crain, 1997) provide some of the best examples of work in multiracial or desegregated settings. Although there is much we can learn from these studies, such research is primarily interested in interracial relations rather than in the production of racial meaning. Furthermore, although the findings are quite important, these studies are also part of a tradition of acknowledging the importance of race only in settings where racial minorities are present. As Hazel Carby (1992, p. 193) argues, too much work has marginalized the processes of racialization and given them meaning only "when the subjects are Black." As she and many others (Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong, 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Lewis, 1998) have recently suggested, "We should be arguing that everyone in this social order has been constructed . . . as a racialized subject" (Carby, 1992, p. 193). In this sense it is important to study the construction of Whiteness and White racial identities (perhaps especially in White settings). Most White students in the United States are still attending schools that are almost entirely White (Orfield, 1993; Orfield & Monfort, 1992). In fact, most live in highly racially segregated neighborhoods and have little regular, substantial contact with people of other races (Massey & Denton, 1993). As much of the recent literature on Whiteness has pointed out, it is often Whites' lack of understanding of their own roles as racial actors that stands as a roadblock to further progress toward racial justice (Feagin & Vera, 1995; Fine et al., 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; Jackman, 1994; Lewis, 1998). Understanding how White students develop their racial subjectivities and understandings is crucial to understanding future possibilities for greater racial equity in the United States.

In this article, I examine the racial messages students receive from adults in one (mostly) White suburban school community. I examine not only the explicit curriculum in the school, but the multiple lessons about race, racial difference and racial sameness, and racial equity offered in both overt and implicit ways by staff, parents, and peers. Whereas Wills (1996) and others have made a case for paying attention to the specific multicultural curriculum in White schools, few have examined the "hidden" curriculum of race in relation to content, discourse, and practices. Uncovering the many implicit and explicit racial lessons that are "taught" and learned in schools involves not only studying the curriculum, but also studying the explicit racial discourse of the community and the implicit logic that shapes practices. In this way it is as important to study what people do as it is to study what they say (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Dennis, 1988; Lewis, 1998)—to pay attention not only to how people talk about race, but to the multiple ways that racial boundaries get produced and reproduced.

Moreover, too often our research treats race only as a variable, used to partially explain variance in school outcomes, but ignores race, as itself, as part of the product and process of schooling (Almaguer & Jung, 1999;

Zuberi, 2001). Schools are arguably one of the central institutions involved in the drawing and redrawing of racial lines. Not only are many lessons learned and taught in the actual curriculum, but schools (and school personnel) also serve as a source of racial information, a location (and means) for interracial interaction, and/or a means of both affirmation of and challenge to previous racial attitudes and understandings. Although clearly not the only social institution concerned, they are involved in framing ideas about race and in struggles around racial equity.[2] We thus need to understand not only the role schools have too often played historically and contemporarily in exacerbating racial stratification, but their potential for doing otherwise. To that end, I conclude by making a case for broadening our focus on transforming schools beyond multicultural curriculum to include all racial practices and racial lessons conveyed in both explicit and inexplicit ways by all members of a schools' community.[3]

For this study, I purposefully selected a suburban school situated within a larger multiracial metropolis within one of the most diverse states in the union. Although I had selected a "typical" mostly White suburban school, I selected one in which, due to the larger social and demographic context, race was likely at least to be on the radar.[4] Thus, although I did not begin this research expecting to find far-reaching critical race discourses or unusually progressive racial politics dominating the scene in the mostly White suburban setting, neither did I expect to find what was there—namely, widespread denials of the salience of race. I began wanting to understand how local community members believed race mattered, what racial lessons were being passed on, and in what ways those messages were conveyed. As I will describe in what follows, I came to find out that most believed or claimed that race did not matter, despite much evidence to the contrary. This article represents an attempt to describe these patterns, their consequences, and their origins.

Methods and Setting

Data for this article were collected in an ethnographic study of one elementary school community: Foresthills Elementary. Ethnography enables us to examine "how the social world is constructed by people, how they are continually striving to make sense of the world, and assigning meanings and interpretations to events" (Wood, as quoted in Apple & Weis, 1983, p. 13). In this case, I was interested in how members of the Foresthills school community made sense of the concept of race, their own racial identities, the role of race in their daily lives, and the impact of race on opportunity structures.

Foresthills Elementary is located in Sunny Valley, a White suburb like many others. Situated in an extremely diverse metropolis, Sunny Valley and the neighborhood surrounding Foresthills are notably homogeneous (see Table 1). Families in Sunny Valley are mostly middle and upper-middle class—the median family income for households with children in residence is over $50,000 and only 2% of families live below the poverty line. The

Table 1

Racial and Ethnic Makeup of Sunny Valley (City From Which Foresthills Elementary Draws)

Total Population	31,585
Non-Hispanic White	82%[a]
Asian American	9%
Native American	1%
African American	1%
Hispanic	8%
Median family income[b]	$53,641
Poverty rate[b]	2.1%

Note. From 1990 and 2000 Census.
[a]Total equals more than 100% due to rounding.
[b]Median family income and poverty rate are from 1990 Census; 2000 data have not yet been released.

demographic composition of the school mirrors that of the surrounding town (see Table 2).

The Foresthills Elementary School building was constructed in 1955 for a maximum of 666 students; the school currently accommodates closer to 480 students. The school facilities are spread out on spacious grounds; they consist of four long rows of single-story classroom structures and two separate buildings—the multiuse room (cafeteria/auditorium) and a childcare center—set off to the right and left. Hallways are open to the air but covered by awnings extending from the buildings; these corridors are decorated with hanging plants and planters. The school is flanked on the back and sides by parking lots, playgrounds, and fields. The grounds include four full-size basketball courts, a soccer field, a baseball field, multiple tetherball and four-square courts, several volleyball courts, a large play structure for the upper grades, and a separate smaller play area with its own structure for the kindergarten classes.

Data were collected during the 1997–1998 school year. I spent 2 days a week conducting participant observation in a fourth- to fifth-grade classroom (and on the school yard, in the staff lunch room, in the main office, and other parts of the school grounds) and attended multiple staff meetings, Parent–Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and other school events. In addition, I conducted formal and informal interviews with parents and students from the fourth- to fifth-grade classroom and with school staff. Over the course of the year I informally interviewed most students in the class and then conducted additional formal interviews with 40% of the students (12 of 30) and parents from the classroom where I was primarily located.

For the formal interviews, respondents were chosen using one of several sampling techniques. First, for theoretical reasons, I deliberately interviewed students who were in one way or another on the racial margins of the class—students of color, who were predominantly biracial students.

Table 2
Racial and Ethnic Makeup of Students and School Personnel at Foresthills Elementary

Race	Students (n = 489)	School personnel
Caucasian	90%	88%
Hispanic (of any race)	7%	—
Asian American	7%	9%
African American	1%	3%
Filipino	2%	—

Note. From School Report Card, January 1997, Foresthills Elementary.

Here I was trying to assess, for these students for whom race was likely to be more salient in the everyday, their general experiences in the school as well as their understandings of whether racial differences mattered in their daily lives. Whenever possible I also interviewed their parents. Second, I interviewed a random selection of White students in the class, and when possible, interviewed the selected students' parents.[5] I also conducted formal and informal interviews with staff and teachers and collected numerous site documents and school materials.[6]

Findings

The (Ir)Relevance of Race and Multiculturalism at Foresthills Elementary

From the very beginning of my time at Foresthills it was clear that people were confused about why I wanted to conduct research on race there and also wanted to make sure I did not misread anything I saw.[7] When I first contacted the school to ask about doing research in the school, the principal clarified for me, "You understand that this is a pretty homogenous school. We don't have much diversity here." She was not the only suburban principal I spoke to who felt the absence of students of color (or the presence of only White children) in their school would make it a less than interesting place to conduct research on race.

In regard to the few people of color in residence, I was warned not to give too much credence to racial claims. For instance, on my first day in the classroom, the teacher, Mrs. Moch pulled me aside before the children arrived and explained,

> You should know one thing. We have one mixed-race child whose father is Black and mother is White. She's a fourth grader, this is her first year in the school and she is having some adjustment difficulties. She's dealing with a lot of fourth-grade girl stuff but she tends to play "the race card" a lot. We have a Black reading specialist in the school

> and she says to her, "Now Sylvie, that's just fourth-grade," Pam tells me I can't say that to her, which I know. Sylvie goes home and complains a lot about stuff and the mom calls.

Even as Mrs. Moch explained to me that Sylvie was misreading the significance of race in her daily experience at the school, she explained her practice of going to get the one Black staff member in the school to explain this to Sylvie. These were early signs of what became clear throughout my time at Foresthills—that race was not perceived or understood to be important there, even as there was evidence that it was.

When local community members did talk about race, it was primarily in relation to "others"—people of color, and primarily Blacks.[8] For example, during an interview, I asked a mother from the school what the school does in terms of teaching issues of diversity and multiculturalism. She responded,

> Well, I think that a—a certain part of that they don't have to deal with, because the school's not extremely multicultural. You know. It's not—uh there's not a—a lot, a lot, a lot of Black people that go there. So I think maybe they don't have to address it too much.

As these quotes demonstrate, when I raised the subject of race in my first encounters at Foresthills, its salience was downplayed, trivialized, or challenged: the principal was unclear about why I would want to do research on race in her White school; a teacher explained to me that the one Black child in her class was *misreading* what she was experiencing as being racially motivated (either innocently or because she knew it would bring attention); and a parent explained that multicultural education was not necessary at Foresthills because there were not too many Black kids there.

When asked about examples of multicultural curriculum at Foresthills, the principal of Foresthills listed the state-mandated textbooks[9] and activities such as Black History Week or the practice of counting to 10 in multiple languages during physical education class. As at many other schools in the United States, multiculturalism at Foresthills is very limited. When asked about how she dealt with issues of race and multiculturalism in her classroom, one teacher immediately started talking about demographics rather than curriculum. She stated the following:

> Haven't had a whole lot of it, uh uh um . . . other than Asian/ Caucasian, uh . . . Have—sometimes have one Black child, in a year like we did this year. (coughs) Um, my own attitude is, people are people, and . . . we treat people with respect, and that's what you get back.

When pressed on what kind of multicultural classroom activities went on, she explained that the district mandated they do something for Black History Month. Her class had done a skit. Mrs. Moch's class constructed posters about famous African Americans. Even for these somewhat limited activities,

however, they did not have the proper materials available in the school. As Mrs. Moch reported,

> The reading specialist was wonderful, because she knew my kids were researching and were having a hard time finding books at the school. She went to this Black bookstore. She went there, she came in one day and she had bought . . . must have been over a hundred dollars' worth of books—brought them into my classroom, for my kids to use.

In this case, the one Black member of the staff took it upon herself to go out and purchase the books students would need to do even the most cursory of activities the school took on. For their participation in the activity, students drew on their available knowledge of African Americans and reported on those they were familiar with—athletes and, in one case, Oprah Winfrey. Even so, the posters they produced (along with the teacher's store-bought posters about famous African Americans) all came down March 1st, as soon as Black History Month was over. For Foresthills community members "race" and "multiculturalism" seemed to serve as code words for "Black" and, without a significant presence of African Americans, most seemed to feel like there was little if any need to "deal with" either, outside of the district-mandated Black History Month activities. In this White space, both race and multiculturalism were understood as not being particularly relevant.

   During my time at the school I saw some efforts on the part of Mrs. Moch to offer a multicultural history of the state. For example, as she explains it:

> Well, let's see, we start off with things like California Native Americans, and I do not have a high opinion of Junipero Serra . . . You know. I talk about genocide, I talk about whether it was deliberate genocide, or it was because the Spanish knew that they had a higher moral . . . sense. And therefore were going to use force, but that it still was wrong. But it was right in their eyes historically, and therefore, you know you have to look at it that way. I do look for and purchase as many books as I can that have representations of color, in California. Particularly in California, but in general . . . and have them available for kids, so that they see it was, was not a state or country that was ever really White. It never was. It never will be. Uh . . . and it shouldn't be.

Though she did more than other teachers in the school, this teacher's lessons were somewhat ambivalent (e.g., she asked students to empathize with Spanish motivations as well as with Native American subjugation) and were not used by students to inform their understandings of the present. For example, when I interviewed children from her class and asked about why some were rich and others poor, most talked about hard work and laziness.[10] As with Wills' (1996) findings in his study of high school social studies classrooms, if the goal of the curriculum is to sensitize students to others'

experiences, then it is at least partially successful. But if the goal is to have students use history to inform their understandings of what is happening today, then it falls far short. Students seem to see the injustices they learn about as specific to an earlier point in time, as problems that were solved, rather than as linked to contemporary forms of racial exclusion (Wills, 1996). For example, none of what the students learned about the settling of California, the genocide of Native Americans, and the subjugation of the Chinese was used by the teacher to guide their understanding or interpretation of present-day racial realities (e.g., wage inequality, wealth inequality, Native American's socioeconomic status).

Ironically, what little multiculturalism was "done" at the school was typically contested by parents. Several parents I spoke to were, in the end, quite cynical if not outright hostile about any explicit efforts toward multiculturalism in their children's classes. When asked about multiculturalism in the school, most immediately referred to Black History Week (or day, or month as they described it). Though they would initially say they thought it was okay, once probed, most expressed a number of reservations or objections. They made such statements as, "We should all be Americans," or "Talking about race is divisive." One mother exclaimed, "I'm so tired of Martin Luther King!" For the most part they did not object to the history curriculum, because like their children, they viewed it as just that—*history*—and not as lessons about the present. With regard to current race relations, most White parents believed (or hoped) that their kids were just taught that everyone is the same, and that we should all be color-blind.

Color-Consciousness at Foresthills

Is it true, as many adults claimed, that race does not matter at Foresthills? Are community members truly color-blind, treating everyone the same? Was, for example, Mrs. Moch right about Sylvie (the one Black student in her class) playing the race card? Was Sylvie misreading (or misrepresenting) her school experiences? In a conversation with me, Sylvie's mother describes her child's early time at school:

> Mrs. Cooper: I mean it started from the very beginning, you know . . . an incident happened where somebody used the "N" word with her. And uh, she waits until she's going to bed to tell me these things, so of course I—run to the phone and leave this scathing message to the principal, who avoids me . . . and then when I talk to her she says she'll talk to Sylvie. Well, I keep asking Sylvie, "No, I haven't talked to her, haven't talked to her," so I'm just getting angrier and angrier. And then it turns out that she's trying to get Sylvie to confront this boy, and deal with this. And I'm thinkin' to myself, why does Sylvie have to deal with this? This is the teacher's responsibility—or the principal's. Sylvie shouldn't have to deal with this. This is, you know, she has to be protected. And then I find out that—that—she, she keeps—she won't discuss it. Her grades are getting worse, and everything and . . . And then finally we have a sit down, with the

teacher and the principal and find out that the teacher dealt with it.
Sylvie had been avoiding the meetings with the principal, with un-
derstandable valid reasons, you know. But nobody was communi-
cating with *me*. So, I—I'm not very happy with the way things are
handled like that. It just—I shouldn't have to bug the principal, force
a meeting, to get . . . to get some answers. And, just this week she had
two other incidences.

    Amanda: Oh really? What kind of thing?

    Mrs. Cooper: Middle school boys out on the playground during
the after school care, calling her "Blackie"—which they said they
couldn't do anything about, 'cause it wasn't one of the schoolkids'.
And then a little Kindergartner . . . And, you know, I tried to explain
to her, the Kindergartner's like trying out a cuss word, you know, but
it's—and I told her, I said that the sad thing is that he heard it some-
where. And, you know. He got in trouble for it, but it's just the idea
that she knows that this is gonna come up over and over and over
again.

Sylvie's mom described how Sylvie's grades dropped, how she did not want
to go to school and eventually, after making one good friend, how she began
to rebound. Clearly, Sylvie was dealing with a stressful situation. I got inde-
pendent confirmation of Sylvie's reading of the world in interviews with
students. In response to generic questions about why some kids do not like
to play with other kids, more than half of them acknowledged that kids did
not want to play with Sylvie at first because she was "different." Here, there
is evidence that Foresthills children are not truly color-blind; that color, in
this case Blackness, is not only seen, but carries a negative meaning.

    In fact, Blackness was not the only color that carried negative conno-
tations and Sylvie was not the only student to confront racial hostility in
school. One day I was standing out on the schoolyard checking on the kids,
and as was not unusual, the three fourth-grade boys who are biracial (Angus,
Cedric, and Michael—each of whom have either a Latino or Asian parent)
were playing together. After a few minutes, one of the boys, Angus, ran over
to me and asked, "Is it illegal to call someone something because of their
race. I mean can you sue them?" I asked him what he meant and he told me
that Ricky, a White fifth grader, had just called Cedric a "Black boy" and he
wanted to know if they could sue. I asked Cedric what had happened and
he told me that Ricky called him and Michael "you brown boy." I looked
around the yard but could not find Ricky. I talked to their teacher, Mrs. Moch,
and she told me where to look for him and then we got them all together.
After giving each side a chance to tell their version, she told Ricky not to use
"derogatory names" and headed back to the classroom. Interestingly there
was some confusion about who exactly Ricky was directing his comments to.
Angus assumed it was not him, Michael assumed it was only Cedric, and
Cedric assumed it was both him and Michael. Michael and Cedric both have
brown complexions, whereas Angus is light-skinned. Cedric and Michael
were especially hurt, while Angus was just angry and wanted to talk more

about the legalities of such a comment. Later, trying to understand what he thought he was doing, I talked to Ricky and asked him why he had said it.

> Ricky: Just because.
>   Amanda: Is it okay to say that to people?
>   Ricky: (Looking down at the ground and speaking slowly) Nooo.
>   Amanda: Why?
>   Ricky: Because of racism.

Unfortunately our conversation was cut off "by the bell," but the exchange made it clear that Ricky was quite purposefully using a designation of color, of racial otherness, as a put-down. In truth, Cedric, a fairly dark-skinned Filipino, is a "brown boy." But it is telling that in this setting the mere allusion to color substitutes as a racial epithet. These kids and their teacher seem to understand that, in this case, in this context, to "see" and/or acknowledge race (particularly to identify one as Black or brown) is negative, or as Mrs. Moch put it, "derogatory."

In her interview with me, another mother related how upset her Latina daughter was after school recently.

> Mrs. Carter: The other day, it was this year, she was—I guess having lunch at the cafeteria. And somebody says "Oh, Catherine—, since you're Mexican you can have free lunches." You know. And then, and then this other kid said to her, "Where's your sombrero?" But, um, I said to her "If you don't feel comfortable, then talk to a teacher because she shouldn't be doing that." And she did.[11]
>   Amanda: And how did the teacher respond?
>   Mrs. Carter: Well, [the other student]—uh she got benched [lost her recess] and that was it.

As these examples of racial logic in operation at Foresthills show, school personnel's limited interventions or downplaying of such incidents do little to address the anxiety and upset of those who are the victims of this hurtful behavior. Moreover, it demonstrates that rather than being benign, the trivialization of racial incidents has a pernicious effect. In fact, there was some evidence that teachers were at least moderately aware of these kinds of incidents, but they understood them to be relatively unimportant and, to some extent, deracialized them. Mrs. Moch had the following comments:

> I don't see a lot of racism in the class, I mean occasionally a remark's made . . . but frequently what I find with the remarks, is that they aren't as clearly defined as racist as they are . . . kid put-downs. And, that they kind of—sometimes just can get lumped into everybody else's put-down kinds of things. So I haven't seen much here.

Here the specificity of racist put-downs are glossed over as not really being racial—as just the regular things kids say to one another. As Essed (1997) has discussed, this strategy of deracializing incidents where racist slurs are used

implies that they are like regular, everyday conflicts in which both parties should be held equally responsible; such a mode of addressing racist events makes it seem as if the victim is the one with the problem rather than the perpetrator (e.g., Sylvie being talked about as "playing the race card"), as if they are making a big deal out of nothing. This functions as tolerance for racist slurring—implying the comments are like other put-downs that just happen to be racial. As Essed (1997, p. 140) argues, these kinds of micro-events crystallize "the structural and experiential differences between the two parties; one party enjoys the safety of dominant group protection, whereas the other experiences the unsafe conditions of his 'race,' a group subjected to violence and discrimination." Such events, though sometimes seemingly minor, can reinforce the victim's sense of outsiderness.

Color-Blind Talk

In addition to the tendency to deracialize racial incidents, there were a variety of other ways Foresthills Community members denied the cogency of race.[12] For example, when asked about what role she thought race had played in her life, Mrs. Moch stated, "not a whole lot." When pushed further she offered a nonracial, individualized characterization of herself:

> Amanda: When you think—are there ever times now that you think of it, or it comes up or you think about your own racial identity?
> Mrs. Moch: Not to any great extent, I just think of myself as . . . me. I'm just that kooky gray-haired old lady at the school . . .

However, as discussed earlier, she did seem to recognize the importance of race in others, as in her decisions to go to get the one Black teacher in the school to explain to the one Black student in her class that she was blowing things out of proportion.

Although one might generally assume that it is a good thing that adults in the community want to assert that race does not matter, it is important to note that it seems merely to be an assertion—one that sits in uneasy contrast with seemingly pervasive color-conscious group-level racial understandings. It is not only children in the school community who see color. For example, while at one moment in a conversation, one mother (Mrs. Morning) stated, "I really don't think these kids see Black or White . . . which is good." Moments later when asked how she would explain racism to her kids, she offered a quasicultural explanation of racial group difference and why she would not want to live in a Black neighborhood.

> Amanda: If one of the kids asked what racism was, how would you define it for them?
> Mrs. Morning: Um . . . I guess I would define it that, there's different cultures, and, with different races—um, like Chinese—they have their own culture and their own churches that they go to, and their own food that they eat, and the same way with Black people. I

> mean they . . . like certain things, and when they go to their place of
> God or whatever, um, it seems to be more . . . when I drive around
> or whatever, you know you see all these Blacks coming out of a
> church, well that's where they go—I don't know what goes on in
> there and stuff, but it seems that certain people seem to gravitate,
> and, and live in certain areas. I don't know why, but that's the way it,
> it seems. I mean personally, I don't think that we'd go looking in a
> neighborhood that was all Black.

Mrs. Morning offers an analysis of other racial/ethnic groups as substantially
different and alien to her way of life. The fact that she has little contact with
these groups is understood as a natural or inevitable process.

Another Foresthills parent, Mrs. Fisher, a high school teacher in a mul-
tiracial school in another district, told me "Well I try to tell 'em that people
are who they are, and you have to not make a judgment on what they look
like or anything like that." She explained that she wouldn't even be able to
tell me how many African American, Latino, or Asian students she had in her
classes because she just didn't "notice" such things. Later in the conversation,
however, she talked about her displeasure with some groups' behavior and
performance in class and explained how she understood the differential
success of the kids in her school with the following:

> Do I think of those groups differently? . . . Yeah. I do. I think that the
> backgrounds, that a lot of the—the attitudes that those people have
> towards . . . how to be successful, are different. And I think that, um,
> the Asian attitude, from parents who aren't far from being, you know,
> born in, in some place in Asia. Their attitudes towards success are that
> you work hard, and you keep working hard, and you keep working
> hard, that's the how you're successful. I don't find that attitude among
> Latinos or Blacks.

She was not the only one who had quite different assessments of different
racial minorities—who had assessed Asian Americans as categorically differ-
ent and more acceptable than others. Mrs. Karpinsky was one of the few
parents I spoke to who admitted to being "a little prejudiced." She was
emphatic, however, that she did not pass these ideas on to her kids. She
regularly affirmed for them that everyone was equal. Later she provided
more nuance to exactly how equal people were in her eyes.

> Amanda: Um hm. Do you think it would be a problem for you or your
> husband, if your daughter marries or your son married someone from
> a different race.
>   Mrs. Karpinsky: It depends what race . . . I do, to me, Asians
> aren't—to me it is, I hate to say this, it sounds so prejudiced, but to
> me it's more like Blacks are, African Americans would be the only . . .
> to me Asians are just like—White. And I guess I just am realizing I am
> saying that (laughs) . . . But I wouldn't feel um, uncomfortable at all
> if my daughter, you know, married a, an Asian person or I wouldn't
> have felt strange dating an Asian person in college, but I would have
> felt a little bit—I would have felt uncomfortable dating a Black man.

Within each of these parents' comments, there is a particular and problematic understanding of race and social phenomenon. That is, individuals live segregated lives because: they choose to because of racial/cultural differences; different groups succeed or fail because of cultural differences; certain groups would be okay for interracial contact, but not others. As some authors have discussed (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997), these sorts of cultural explanations of achievement and segregation erase or ignore the role of institutional racism in producing these racial realities. Moreover, they demonstrate that far from really believing that "everyone is the same," these adults have views of people of color, particularly Blacks, as distinct, "other," and undesirable if not inferior.

In a slightly different example, when asked how she talked to her kids about race, Mrs. Harry explained that she would tell her kids, "Well, it's just like, I say "Well, you know, everybody's . . . try to be like everybody's the same." She soon after related events she had recently witnessed in which race clearly mattered:

> Mrs. Harry: Well, I feel—it's terrible when a Black—I mean uh, in [nearby suburb where grew up] I remember a Black family moved in, and they were forced out. They went to the church, and they were just like . . . my mother said, "Well they're just gonna have to move—it's horrible."
> Amanda: Oh. That's when you were a kid?
> Mrs. Harry: It wasn't that long ago.

Even events such as these, in which blatant racism is at play, are downplayed as being the result of the unfortunate racism on the part of other, "bad Whites."

In fact, when the topic of racism came up, many parents contended that racism was not really an issue. Rather, they explained that it is the attitude of racial minorities and Blacks in particular that keeps them down. One mother (Mrs. Lucia) stated that the problem was racial minorities' "chip on the shoulder" attitude:

> There is a certain amount of that racism that I feel like is, brought on by the groups themselves, and not by the outside group. Because, there's a certain amount of, um . . . "kind of chip on their shoulder" attitude, that they kinda carry around with them, whomever they meet. And it, it is apparent to whomever they meet, and it turns you off. And that doesn't help the Black image—(laughs) It doesn't help—it doesn't help their case, if they're try—if, if you know, we're all trying to work together—it doesn't help a race of people's case, for them to . . . always [be] using that as an excuse constantly.

In another interview, when I asked whether she ever talked to her kids about race-related current events, Mrs. Karpinsky stated, "I mean maybe Rodney King. Because he was kind of playing the Black card, you know, 'It's because I'm Black.'" Even in extreme cases such as this (the severe beating of a Black

man at the hands of White cops), these parents doubted minority claims of harm. In this way, community members' claims to be color-blind themselves, to not "see" or care about race, are combined with discursive strategies that explain away, downplay, or question people of color's claims of racial harm. These various denials of race's personal or global relevance, however, exist alongside community members' very race-conscious beliefs and discourse. Thus, the denial of the local or national significance of race stands in awkward contrast to their nonbenign race consciousness.

In some instances, any explicit racial talk on the part of Blacks—even in the seemingly unthreatening context of a television sit-com—is seen as problematic. In the following example, a parent expressed frustration at what she perceived to be the "whiny-ness" of Blacks on television (see Hochschild, 1995, for a related argument):

> Amanda: Anything recently that caused you to think about [your own racial identity] or any interactions you had, or . . .
> Mrs. Miller: (pause) N—no—not recently, no. I do get annoyed, when I see all of these Black family TV shows on TV. I have to say that. There's one of these stations that has a lot of those. And I do get annoyed, I don't like to watch them. That's why I know I might be a little more unaccepting. Because it bugs me. It just—it just bothers me the, the portrayal I guess, of it.
> Amanda: Which part of it?
> Mrs. Miller: Maybe that, maybe the hints they might make against the White people. Or . . . I don't like the corny attitude. I just—that kind of stuff. I'm very strongly into "we're in America, now be an American."

In this case, the identification of race as a problem in African Americans lives, even as expressed in television humor, is understood as un-American, divisive, and possibly itself racist against Whites.

Notably, we can see both from the experiences of the few students of color and from the racial logic of the adults (school personnel and parents) in the community that race matters at Foresthills. Yet, in almost every way, Whites there deny that it matters locally or nationally. There were a few notable exceptions. The three parents interviewed who had biracial children (one Latino mother, one Asian American mother, and one White mother of a biracial Black/White child) had different outlooks. All talked about race as something that mattered both in their lives and in the lives of their children. Although they varied in how much they thought race shaped their child's day-to-day school experiences, they all talked about it as a community issue. They worried about the lack of diversity and were careful about whom they let their kids play with or who they themselves socialized with—avoiding those who were "close-minded" or "backward." All had grown up in and moved from much more diverse surroundings and expressed some ambivalence about Sunny Valley. In many ways the experiences of these families— paradoxically having to be strategic about which of their "color-blind"

neighbors they spend time with—highlight the contradictions in how race is thought about and lived in the community.

The "Social Geography of Race" and the Creation of White Suburbs[13]

Notably, the general denials of the salience of race obscure the large role race has played in the fact that Sunny Valley is an almost entirely White community. Suburbs like Sunny Valley are part of a long history of racial policy and practice in the United States (Logan & Molotch, 1987; Massey & Denton, 1993; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995). A number of authors have written about the suburbanization of America. Specifically, they have outlined how a series of private and governmental practices together led to the formation and maintenance of White suburban neighborhoods (Jackson, 1985; Lipsitz, 1998; Logan & Molotch, 1987; Massey & Denton, 1993; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Quadagno, 1994). Government transportation, housing, and taxation policies encouraged suburbanization by both White homeowners and White businesses. Massey and Denton (1993, p. 44) note, "The suburbanization of America proceeded at a rapid pace and the White middle class deserted inner cities in massive numbers."[14] In fact, reports published in the last 10 years confirm that many of the discriminatory banking, mortgage, and realty practices that helped lead to segregated residential areas are still in effect (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Yinger, 1995).

Whereas several authors have documented the resulting isolation that many African Americans confront as a result of these policies and practices (Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987, 1996), few have given much attention to the flip side of the problem—the persistent racial isolation of suburban Whites. George Lipsitz (1998) reports that in 1993, 86% of suburban Whites lived in places similar to Sunny Valley with Black populations near or below 1%. Moreover, as Orfield and others have documented, most White students in the United States continue to attend schools that are almost all White (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield, 1993; Orfield & Monfort, 1992). In national surveys conducted across more than 20 years (1975 and 1997), we see surprisingly consistent self-reports from Whites about their exposure to racial minorities in various social settings (see Table 3). In both years, more than 90% of Whites report living in all- or almost all-White neighborhoods. In several recent reports, Orfield and others (Orfield & Gordon, 2001; Orfield & Yun, 1999) documented that school segregation is actually worsening: "New statistics from the 1998–99 school year show that racial and ethnic segregation continued to intensify throughout the 1990s" (Orfield & Gordon, 2001, p. 1). Moreover, residential segregation patterns continue to show stark patterns of racial separation (Massey & Denton, 1993). However, unlike African Americans who have been historically isolated as a result of others' attitudes and behaviors, most Whites choose to live in these White neighborhoods and send their children to White schools. For example, Farley and others have consistently found that racial stereotypes continue to play a key role in Whites' housing choices and thus in persistent housing segregation

Table 3
White's Exposure to Racial Minorities in Selected Social Settings

Social setting exposure	All/mostly own race	Half and half	All/mostly other race	Base N
Adults (1975 SRC Study)[a]				
Neighborhood	95.5	3.1	1.1	1632
Workplace	89.0	10.3	.2	870
Shopping center	79.9	18.3	1.0	1627
High school	66.2	12.1	3.8	1631
Grade school	71.1	9.0	3.5	1633
Clubs/organizations	94.9	4.6	.3	901
Adolescents (1997 Monitoring the Future Survey)[b]				
Friends	87.1	9.7	3.2	1685
Neighborhood	90.0	6.4	3.6	1688
Grade school	81.5	13.4	5.2	1693
High school	73.6	17.9	8.6	1691
Workplace	82.1	13.0	4.8	1495

[a]From Jackman, M. (1994). *The velvet glove: Paternalism and conflict in gender, class, and race relations.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
[b]From Monitoring The Future Project. (1997). Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

patterns across class lines (Farley, Steeh, Krysan, Jackson, & Reeves, 1994; Farley, Schuman, Bianchi, Colasanto, & Hatchett, 1978; Massey & Denton, 1993). As a number of sociologists (Drake & Cayton, 1955; Kinder & Mendelberg, 1995; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995) have documented, the resulting residential segregation has large implications socially, economically, politically, and beyond.

White suburbs like Sunny Valley then are a creation of the racial order in the United States. They are not the result of an accidental process, but of deliberate private and public policies and practices. Local understandings in places like Sunny Valley that race is not particularly relevant (that, for instance, neighborhoods "just happen to be all White") is closely connected to a general historical amnesia about even relatively recent racial history— amnesia that goes along with pervasive denials of persistent racial discrimination. This history is important to include in an article on a suburban school setting because it is part of the history of how schools like Foresthills become White spaces. Moreover, it highlights that although the contradictions in community members' discourse are noteworthy, so is the fact that they claim to be color-blind while living racialized (racially segregated) lives.

In this case, race was clearly at play in parents' and teachers' decisions to move to Sunny Valley. Foresthills adults talked about living in the city as being exotic and dangerous. Mrs. Harry, along with several other mothers, talked about not even wanting to drive in the city. At one point during the school year, a woman in an even wealthier community nearby was killed in her home. This led to weeks of discussions in the teachers' lunchroom about whether or not they were "safe" enough, "far" enough, whether they would

have to move to gated communities with walls. The narrative at the time explained the killing as a result of the mass-transit stop less than a mile from the victim's home. The community was thus understood to be too accessible to outsiders from that most dangerous of places, the city.

Many related their move to the suburbs to having children who were nearing school age. This pattern fits with other studies of White flight. There is evidence generally that race plays a role both in how parents choose where to live and in the related decision about where to send their children to school. For example, Harris (1997) found that having children ages 2–6 years (soon to enter or entering elementary school) was an important pre-dictor of White flight. In the case of the Foresthills community, parents explicitly talked about moving to the suburbs as being driven in part by concerns about where their children would go to school—throughout their discourse, race was a regular part of the subtext.

Generally, White parents in Sunny Valley offered a fairly standard nar-rative of having moved to the suburbs "when we had kids" or "for the schools." As they explained it, the urban or semi-urban communities they had lived in before were fine for them, but other considerations applied when it came to their children. For example, Mrs. Fulton reported having lived in Sunny Valley for 5 years. Before moving out to the suburbs she had lived in a small city, Townside, on the edge of an urban center within the metropolitan area. As she explained it, they had moved from Townside to the suburbs because of her children, "For the schools and stuff." It was not that she was sure that the schools were better in Sunny Valley, but as she put it, "I hate to say it, but better neighborhoods. Not so rough, you know, I mean there's probably drugs, but not as much."[15]

Ironically, Mrs. Fulton had herself grown up in Townside and had re-ported it as having been fine. She and her husband had thought about staying there, but had never considered sending their children to the public schools there.

> Mrs. Fulton: When we lived in Townside. We thought about, it was either live in Townside and send them to private school, but then I'm thinkin' well I probably wouldn't let 'em hang out with the kids in Townside. So, do we move out and send 'em to *public* school and then at least he has a community. So what's more important, the private school or the community? So, we thought, *I* would feel more comfortable with having more of a community. Because it would be kind of sad to send him to private school, then he'd come home and be alone.
> Amanda: Was Townside pretty diverse?
> Mrs. Fulton: Oh yeah. It was mostly I think, I would say, it was mostly Black. And then there was the White, and then a few Asian. You know. I mean that's the kind of the way that I remember it.

As she talks about it, a private school in Townside might have been okay, but she had concerns about letting her son hang out with "the kids" in what she described as a "mostly Black" community. Ironically, although the Fultons

moved to the suburbs so their son could have friends to play with in the neighborhood, their neighborhood in Townside was not all that different from where they are in Sunny Valley—both all White. The problem with Townside was that although in the city one can to a certain extent control neighborhood composition, school composition can only be controlled by sending a child to a private school (as the Fultons considered doing). Because Townside is more diverse than Sunny Valley, the public schools would have been somewhat more diverse than Foresthills. On the other hand, they would not have looked nearly as different as Mrs. Fulton suggested. Her description of the town as "mostly Black" was not quite accurate. In 1990, just before she moved away, Townside was close to 70% White with only 23% Black and very small Asian and Latino populations. As Gallagher (2000) and others have argued, Whites often over-estimate minority populations. Mrs. Fulton uses many euphemisms in her explanations of the decision to move (e.g., "rougher"), but race is clearly at issue in her various decisions about where to live and send her child to school.[16]

There were a few parents who had never lived in a city and never would have considered it. Mrs. Harry had moved from one suburb to another, explaining that they would rather have stayed in Bloominghills, the fancier town nearby where she had grown up, but they could not afford it (median housing prices in Bloominghills in 1998 were $510,000—more than twice that in Sunny Valley. Though she and her husband were both working in the city when they were looking for homes, they had not considered living there.

> Amanda: Did you guys ever think about living in the city?
>   Mrs. Harry: (chuckle) No! (laughs)
>   Amanda: No? (laughs)
>   Mrs. Harry: No—that wouldn't be good. (laughs). No I'm from Bloominghills. So the city—no. (laughs) No—(laughs) I don't like to go there, even. I don't drive in Bayside. I'll never drive in Bayside. (laughs).

In various ways Sunny Valley parents (with few exceptions) are part of a general pattern of White abandonment or avoidance of urban areas and specifically of urban public school systems. Although most of them talk in code words and euphemisms, it is clear that race is one of several factors that goes into their decision about where to live; in a diverse metropolis, the decision to live in an almost entirely White town is not a racially neutral one.

Sunny Valley community members' experiences are not idiosyncratic—relative to other Whites in the United States, their homogenous surroundings are more the norm than the exception. Parents and children at Foresthills report little contact with people of color in their daily lives. Children could list by name the two or three Black people they had known in their lives. Some parents talked about having some limited contact with Blacks or Asians at work or of having one Black neighbor. Otherwise, none had any regular contact with other racial groups, but especially not with Blacks. People's daily lives are typified by direct contact almost entirely with people "like them," with only intermittent or occasional vicarious (mostly through

the media) contact with others, who they seem glad to have remain at a distance.

In sum, while I was at Foresthills many of the most *explicit* expressions of racial understanding at the school present a benign if not idealized picture in which members of the community understand all to be equal members of the human race: (a) "We're all human." (fourth-grade student); (b) "Everybody's the same" (fourth-grade parent); (c) "People are people." (fourth/fifth-grade teacher). Although these three quotes represent the racial discourse and overt or explicit racial logic operating in the Foresthills elementary school community, throughout my time at Foresthills it became clear that this explicit color-blind discourse masked an underlying reality of racialized practice and color-conscious understanding. As many others have documented, this kind of color-blind discourse has various detrimental effects (Peshkin, 1991; Schofield, 1982; Wells & Crain, 1997).[17] Although all members of the Foresthills community in various ways denied the cogency of race in their locale, it was clear in multiple ways that race does matter there—in relation to history, current practices, everyday beliefs, attitudes, and understandings. However, community members were not trying to fool me in their denials of the local salience of race. Nor were they just naïve. Why then do they fail see race as important even as they talk about the exclusion of racial groups? In many ways, this apparent contradiction can be explained as part of the operation of racial ideologies gaining preponderant influence in the United States today.

Ideology and Color-Blindness

Ideologies tell particular kinds of stories about the way the world works. As Stuart Hall (1990, p. 8) states, ideology refers to "those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence." They are not individually generated, but are part of a larger set of stories told over and over again in political speeches, on situation comedies, by neighbors, and in newspapers. Ideologies emerge out of social struggles, what Gramsci (1971) called "wars of position." The power of ideologies lies in their ability to facilitate collective domination in a way such that they often make vast inequalities understandable and acceptable to those both at the top and the bottom of the social order.

For example, in schools, ideologies of meritocracy based on the belief that individuals succeed or fail according to their own merit help both students and professionals "understand" why some excel and others flounder (Apple, 1990; MacLeod, 1995). In that way schools are seen merely as transmitters of useful knowledge, as neutral instructional sites rather than as cultural and political sites in which the prior social order is reproduced (Giroux, 1983). Although it is true that individual merit and effort matter for school success (in this way ideologies are built on kernels of truth, e.g., merit matters for success), significant bodies of research have demonstrated that

merit and effort are quite differently rewarded, supported, encouraged, funded, and framed. The ideology of meritocracy however, manages to successfully naturalize the resulting large gaps in school achievement.

When people deploy ideological narratives, they are most often not being duplicitous. As Jackman (1994) argues, these kinds of ideologies are interpretations of social reality that are consistent with the dominant group's experience. They are collective property, permeating the main institutions and communication networks and being propagated with what Jackman (1994, p. 8) calls "an easy vehemence that can come only from uncontrived sincerity." Ideologies then are not fabricated justifications, but are the widely available chains of meaning, stories, or narratives we have to draw on in explaining social existence. They work most effectively when we are least aware of them, when, as Hall (1990, p. 10) states, "our formulations seem to be simple descriptive statements about how things are, or of what we can 'take for granted.'" In this way, socially constructed premises appear instead to be natural, for example, Black people can dance, boys like to play rough, those who work hard succeed.

These narratives are not static—in order to make sense they must change with the times. As new racial formations emerge, so too do new ways of understanding relations between racial groups (i.e., racial ideology). For example, during slavery it was widely understood that races were biologi-cally separate species; it was okay to enslave Africans because they were not human. During the Jim Crow period in which segregation was strictly en-forced, the one-drop rule still reigned supreme and biological understand-ings of race abounded, although they were not the same as during slavery (Davis, 1991).[18] Following the civil rights movement, it was no longer ac-ceptable to assert genetic difference as the explanation for racial gaps. Even with the demise of Jim Crow, however, racial inequalities persisted (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997; Bonilla-Silva & Lewis, 1997; Lipsitz, 1998). The ques-tion of how then to explain persistent gaps in wealth, health, and life chances in the absence of organized, legal segregation has led to the emer-gence of new racial narratives; these new accounts utilize a different set of rhetorical strategies along with variations on old themes. In fact, the disjunc-ture between Sunny Valley residents' assertions of color-blindness and the reality of color-consciousness must be understood as part of the dominant racial ideology functioning locally and in the nation today (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Crenshaw, 1997; Smith, 1995).

As discussed by Crenshaw (1997), Bonilla-Silva (2001), and others, this ideological form of color-blindness involves several dimensions, all of which are reflected in the data from Foresthills. Color-blind ideology presumes or asserts a race-neutral social context (e.g., race does not matter here). It stigmatizes attempts to raise questions about redressing racial inequality in daily life through accusations such as "playing the race card" or "identity politics," which imply that someone is trying to bring race in where it does not belong (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Crenshaw, 1997; Gitlin, 1995; To-masky, 1996). Color-blind ideology substitutes cultural for genetic or bio-

logical explanations of racial disparities (e.g., parents' cultural explanations of housing segregation and gaps in school achievement). It also involves the technique of nonrecognition, the implied process of noticing, but not considering race (Crenshaw, 1997).[19] Under these new terms, equality is reframed to mean not equality of life chances, but "the formal removal of race categories across society" such that "race is precluded as a source of identification or analysis" (Crenshaw, 1997, p. 103). In this vein, explicit and traditional Jim Crow-style racial discrimination is stigmatized, but so are efforts at challenging institutionalized racism.

As Crenshaw (1997) argues, in its assertion that race does not matter, color-blind ideology attempts to mask the power of race as it simultaneously demonstrates precisely the difference race does make (e.g., when one asserts that he/she does not pay attention to race, the implication is that to notice it would have deleterious outcomes). In many ways color-blindness is powerful precisely because it espouses the ideal Martin Luther King expressed in his "I Have a Dream" speech. Yet it is particularly troublesome because it operates in a context, as in Sunny Valley, in which color-consciousness remains pervasive and pernicious, just more covert than during Jim Crow.[20] In this way, color-blind ideology serves to explain and thus protect the status quo—the current racial formation. As is echoed in the discourse of Foresthills' adults, it suggests that "the problem" is not a historical and/or present-day pattern of racism, but is a result instead of bad attitudes, and if we just let things be, it is only a matter of time before racial gaps fade away naturally. As Bobo, Kluegel, and Smith (1997, p. 16) describe, "institutionalized racial inequalities created by the long era of slavery followed by Jim Crow racism are popularly accepted and condoned under a modern . . . racist ideology." Such color-blind ideological assertions fly in the face of "substantial and widening racial economic inequalities, high levels of racial residential segregation, and persistent discrimination experienced across class lines in the Black community" (Bobo, Kluegel, & Smith, 1997, p. 40).

In many of the ways described above, color-blind racial common sense shapes how people in the Foresthills community understand their context and their place in the world, and thus also shapes their practices. Rather than a benign phenomenon, in many ways it helps to enable the reproduction of racial inequality. Color-blindness enables all members of the community to avoid confronting the racial realities that surround them, to avoid facing their own racist presumptions and understandings, and to avoid dealing with racist events (by deracializing them). Moreover, it does all this as it enables people to feel as if they are on righteous racial terrain, following in the footsteps of Martin Luther King, Jr. Persisting racist ideas about group difference along with continuing evidence of racism in interpersonal interactions, life opportunities, and neighborhood housing patterns all are ably diminished if not erased with the simple declaration that race no longer matters and is thus not important. As the stories above demonstrate, this is not a benign outcome relative either to the children of color growing up in

such a context, or to a society that aspires to function in truly color-blind ways, rather than merely being blind to the effects of color (Fish, 1993).

What Can Schools Do?

Arguing that the phenomena witnessed at Foresthills extend far beyond the school's bounds is not an argument for not doing anything about it in school. On the contrary, schools may be one of few places where such racial understandings can be successfully challenged. As discussed above, when racial inequity in schools is talked about today, it is most often discussed in the context of multicultural education. Clearly this is not an uncontested concept, because multiculturalism has always meant different things to different people and, in practice, has taken many different forms (McCarthy, 1995; Rezai-Rashti, 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 1988). Traditionally directed at improving the school experiences of students of color, multiculturalism has typically been focused on either teaching the culturally different in order to assimilate them into the mainstream, or focusing on increasing the sensitivity of dominant group children in order to help children get along (Rezai-Rashti, 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 1988).[21]

A number of authors have critiqued this kind of traditional multiculturalism for its emphasis on culture rather than social stratification, which tends to leave social inequality unchallenged. As Olneck (1993, p. 166, as quoted in Rezai-Rashti, 1995) notes:

> Dominant versions of multicultural education delimit a sanitized cultural sphere divorced from sociopolitical interests, in which culture is reified, fragmented, and homogenized, and they depict ethnic conflict as predominately the consequence of negative attitudes and ignorance about manifestations of difference, which they seek to remedy by cultivating empathy, appreciation, and understanding.

In this way, very particular kinds of understanding of culture, difference, and race are offered that do little to challenge students' daily lives. It is not merely that multiculturalism as it currently is manifested does little to challenge what is, but that it in fact serves to defend it. As Crichlow, Goodwin, Shakes, and Swartz (1990, p. 103) argue, traditional multiculturalism has little impact on the "grip of Eurocentrism on the construction of knowledge." Very particular kinds of "ways of knowing" and ways of telling stories about the world are left at the center, as the "way things are," while only surface level representations or manifestations of cultural pluralism, in the form of what some have called the "tourist curriculum," are added as a thin layer on top of existing structures (Derman-Sparks, 1989, 1993–1994). This approach, as stated by Crichlow et al. (1990, p. 103), "masks itself as social justice in the curriculum, while it actually accepts and thereby legitimizes monocultural curricular dominance."

We should understand this way of doing business in schools not as normal or inevitable but as the product of social organization that favors

some groups over others. It is no accident that the fact that schools operate as social and political sites rather than as neutral arbiters of knowledge is never raised at Foresthills, a school community peopled almost entirely by members of the dominant social group. The structures of the community, the school, its practices, and curricular policies, help to reproduce the current status quo. Both directly and indirectly it reproduces social inequality through fostering or enabling color-blind ideology to operate unchallenged and by allowing Whites, therefore, to continue to see themselves as racially neutral, outside the racial hierarchy, deserving of their own success and not responsible for the exclusion of others.

For this reason Rezai-Rashti (1995) and others have turned to another tradition of educational reform, critical multiculturalism or anti-racist education (Carby, 1992; Giroux, 1998a, 1998b; McCarthy, 1988; Olneck, 1993).

> While the central assumption of multicultural education is that sen-sitization and celebration of difference can counteract biased and prejudiced attitudes . . . anti-racist education concentrates on exam-ining the histories and the practices that prejudice supports. Anti-racist education insists on closely studying and revealing the sites, institutions, and ways in which racism originates. (Rezai-Rashti, 1995, p. 6)

For example, anti-racist education differently locates the origins of student failure. Whereas traditional multicultural education may allow that the sys-tem is partly to blame, most of the focus remains on the home and culture. On the other hand, anti-racist or critical multicultural education says that although we cannot ignore social, cultural, and home factors, much of the blame must be located in institutionalized racism in the classroom, school, and society. Differences in performance are understood as being produced not by differences in ability or motivation, but by the "organization, conduct and content of pedagogy, curriculum, and assessment" (Olneck, 1993, p. 243). It is clear that this type of approach to education would in many ways serve as a direct challenge to color-blind ideology, forcing those in schools to see not only the "racialness" of their own existence, but of their institu-tions, neighborhoods, and communities.

Critical multiculturalism then involves not only the examination of school practices, but of school outcomes including issues of student access to the academic curriculum. In this way the goal is not merely, or primarily, about fostering appreciation of diversity, but of ensuring equal access to the kind of education that translates into access to real opportunities. Even though, given parental resistance to the limited multicultural curriculum currently offered in the school, it is difficult to imagine such a critical mul-ticultural curriculum being put into place immediately in Foresthills, we cannot give up arguing that it should be. A more honest, critical educational experience will help those students better understand their place in the world and what it would really mean to operate in a color-blind context.[22]

Conclusion

As I have tried to establish in this article, it is essential to talk about how race operates even in settings where people say it is not important. Race matters as much in (almost) all-White settings like Foresthills as it does in any multiracial inner city school—perhaps even more so. In particular, if we continue to have an investment in a future of greater racial equity, we must confront the way race operates in White settings as much as we do in other settings. As Giroux (1998b, p. 132) states, "Education works best when those experiences that shape and penetrate one's lived reality are jolted, unsettled, and made the object of critical analysis." Yet it is clear that in many ways the stakeholders in Foresthills will not throw out their arms in welcome of such jolting and unsettling changes. It is not an accident that dominant multiculturalism has remained primarily focused on minority students and more radical forms have remained at the level of theory, only rarely put to work in schools and even more rarely considered in White settings.

Still, if we recognize schools to be institutions responsible for challenging what is, and initiating new, more critical and more honest understandings of the world, then we must continue to try to imagine what this might look like, even in White settings. This involves both interrogating injustices *and*, as Giroux points out, investigating possible "contributions for humanity." This is not about laying blame on students, families, and schools, but working to try to imagine a different kind of public sphere in which schools are able to begin to fulfill the role in which they have long been cast—that of the great equalizers.

In short, education that is critical, multicultural, and focused on racial justice cannot be reserved only for students of color. On multiple levels it is clear that the children in almost-all-White schools like Foresthills Elementary need critical multicultural education. Most immediately, the experiences of the "one Black child" in the class show that lack of discussion about race is neither benevolent, nor even neutral. As Stephen Carter (1997, p. 205) points out, although students of color can learn how to cope and achieve within a racist context, they cannot end their victimization by themselves:

> Victims of oppression cannot stop their victimization. They can fight against it, protect themselves from its effects, learn to achieve in spite of it, but they cannot stop something they are not creating. Whites invented race and maintain racial oppression in all its forms: individual, institutional, and cultural. The White person who comes to feel this reality and is able to communicate it no longer looks to the victims for solutions to their oppression.

In this way it is crucial that Whites learn more not only about the reality of racial inequality, but also about their own role in its reproduction. As the experiences and beliefs of those I interviewed demonstrate, Whites who grow up in racially homogenous settings often do not have any idea of how race works or how their lives too are racialized.[23] As Wills (1996, p. 385)

suggests, without counternarratives available, White students will become dependent upon stereotypes and other racist assumptions:

> A multicultural history curriculum is extremely useful for White, sub-urban students, who often have little contact with people of color in their everyday lives and are, therefore, much more dependent upon cultural stereotypes and assumptions when trying to imagine the situations of others in American society. These efforts are sure to be met with resistance and anger from parents, teachers and students, as we have already seen in the debate over multicultural curriculum reform throughout the United States. These efforts are necessary, however, if we are going to prepare all our students to live together amidst the diversity of American society.

A more critical multicultural education must not only seek to produce students who can think critically about their world, it must also endeavor to serve the larger goal of changing that world. As Carby (1992, p. 197) puts it,

> In this social, political, and economic context . . . it is appropriate and important to question the disparity between the vigor of debates about the inclusion of Black subjects on a syllabus and the almost total silence about and utter disregard for the material conditions of most Black people.

These are political issues, very directly involving who does and who does not have power, and likely to be engaged with only after some struggle. We must ask ourselves, can much change if the educational experiences of White middle-class children do not undergo some transformations? Ironi-cally, any movement toward a real and substantial color-blind world, one in which all children have truly equal opportunities to realize their dreams and to live dignified lives, is limited if not halted in its tracks by the dominance of color-blind ideology within a context in which race clearly still shapes access to resources and opportunities. In this way, color-blindness, in the way it functions both in Foresthills and far beyond, serves as a defense of the currently unequal status quo. Ironically, until we are able to recognize what is still "racial" about our life experiences, we will not make progress toward undoing the effects of race in our lives. In fact, I would speculate that not much is going to change if children do not get exposed to something dif-ferent. Sunny Valley is not an idiosyncratically "racist" town—it is probably better than many, worse than some. This story then is not of some "bad White folks" who are in denial, but of our collective inability to confront racial realities in their everyday manifestations. Particularly in schools where there is a suggestion of, or an expressed effort toward, providing all children with the ability to honestly and accurately assess their worlds, perpetuating color-blind myths is ultimately a disservice.

Notes

[1]Research by John Wills (1994, 1996) on history curriculum in White suburban schools is one notable exception to this.

[2]Historically, schools have played a central role in racial struggles in the United States. Public schools, as state institutions, have always been a part of the contestations over racial boundaries, racial entitlements, and racial meaning. There are numerous historic examples of race being utilized to decide who should be allowed to attend public schools. Later struggles over desegregation and busing were always covertly and overtly about race. Battles over multiculturalism and curricular content have been in part about racial equity, about how we want to talk about multiracial America, whose history should be included in the curriculum, and what contributions to literature are worthwhile. Conflicts over access to educational institutions and over the actual racial composition of those institutions have raged throughout the country in recent years. In all of these ways, race-related negotiations have been central in the history of education in the United States.

[3]There has been a great deal of work theorizing multiculturalism as dealing with multiple dimensions of difference (gender, sexuality, physical ability). For better or worse, in this paper I will be limiting my discussion to issues of race and racial group differences.

[4]I use the term "typical" here to mean several things. First, a school that is generally similar to the kind most White students attend and thus one that offers a fairly typical experience. In this case, most White students attend schools that are all or almost all White. However, in selecting a school, I was careful to pick one that, if anything, would yield an underestimate of effects. Thus, in my selection of a suburban school, I looked for districts that were neither particularly wealthy nor particularly poor or working-class, and whose student populations were between 80% and 90% White. I also looked for districts that were located in growing and economically thriving multiracial metropolitan areas.

[5]Despite numerous efforts, I was not able to get access to many fathers. In most cases, I was referred to mothers as the adults who were responsible for dealing with anything school related.

[6]All interviews and field notes were analyzed using the general techniques of initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 1983). Analytic categories were developed inductively through this coding process. The quotes I offer as illustrative examples in what follows are typical of the kinds of statements found in the interviews. They are not unique or idiosyncratic, but are representative of the general tenor of comments made by those in the school community.

[7]The confusion seemed to be more about the topic of the research than about why I as a White person would be conducting such research.

[8]Although there were, for example, far more Asian Americans in the school than African Americans, as I will outline further later, Asian Americans seemed to occupy an in-between space, and were often understood as almost honorary Whites.

[9]These have been the subject of some controversy for being multicultural in often-superficial ways. For more on this, see Wills (1994, 1996).

[10]When asked these same questions, students of color in two urban schools talked about inheritance, opportunities to go to college, and discrimination.

[11]The mother was further upset because they are Colombian, not Mexican.

[12]For other examples of this in schools, see Schofield (1986) and Rist (1974).

[13]Here I am drawing on the term "social geography of race" as developed by Frankenberg (1993) to indicate the way race and racism shape social and physical spaces.

[14]Although there has been some growth in recent years in Black suburbanization, Black suburbanites are still relatively disadvantaged. As David Harris (1999) and others have pointed out, Blacks suburbanites remain concentrated in low-socioeconomic status (SES) suburbs and are vastly under-represented in middle and high SES suburbs.

[15]This quite common impression about the relative levels of drug use among urban and suburban children has recently been challenged as data have shown higher levels of drug use in suburban contexts (Clawson & Khang, 1996; Davis & Thomas, 1997; Harris, 1999; Radin, 1997).

[16]In recent research, Saporito & Lareau (1999) also found race to be one of the first criteria parents used in choosing their child's school.

[17]Schofield (1982), Wells and Crain (1997), and others have found similar contradictions between what they call a "color-blind perspective" and the clear salience of race in the schools they studied. Although their findings are similar, I am here trying to argue that color-blindness is not merely a "perspective," but a set of narratives and understandings that are pervasive throughout the culture and which have broad-scale impact both inside and beyond schooling. Thus, drawing on recent theoretical writing on color-blind ideology pushes us to think about the interests served by color-blind discourse, rather than seeing it merely as a deficiency in how educators understand what is taking place in their school.

[18]As Davis (1991) discusses, the "one-drop" rule was the practice by which anyone with "one-drop" of African blood was categorized as Black within the United States' racial terrain.

[19]Crenshaw (1997, p. 100) provides an example of how color-blind ideology works in her discussion of how O.J. Simpson was initially portrayed at the beginning of his criminal trial:

"Mainstream commentators, perhaps in a preemptive response to possible concerns about whether Simpson could receive a fair trial, were quick to comment that Simpson was not thought of (by Whites) as an African American, but as simply a race-neutral celebrity. Yet such 'assurances' unwittingly revealed an underlying racial logic in which Blackness remained as a suspect category that Simpson had been fortunate to escape. Implicitly, a defendant who was thought of as Black might well have reason to worry."

[20]Several scholars have discussed the use of racial code language as a way of talking about race and racial issues without appearing racist (Apple, 1988; Omi & Winant, 1994; Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Terms including welfare, gangs, inner city, busing, and crime all are examples of strategic rhetoric used to talk about race without naming it or any particular minority group.

[21]Sleeter and Grant (1988) talk about several other forms of multicultural education—single group studies focusing on one group at a time (e.g., Afrocentrism); efforts that emphasize cultural pluralism including staffing, unbiased and inclusive curricula, and affirmation of languages other than English; and finally few efforts that actually address both combining multiculturalism with a commitment to challenging inequality and promoting diversity— but these are much less common than the forms named above.

[22]More research is clearly needed in this area to identify precisely what critical multiculturalism can/does look like when implemented in classrooms. Up to now, much of the writing on this topic has remained at the theoretical level.

[23]For a recent discussion of national trends in White youths' racial attitudes, see Forman, 2001.

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