Beyond Silenced Voices

Class, Race, and Gender in United States Schools

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Chapter Fourteen

*Constructing Race at an Urban High School: In Their Minds, Their Mouths, Their Hearts**

Conversation between an academic and an African-American high school student:

APPIAH:

The truth is that there are no races. . . . What we miss through our obsession with the structure of relations of concept is, simply, reality.

—Anthony Appiah "The Uncompleted Argument: DuBois and the Illusion of Race"

VINNIE:

It's still there. Color is a dead giveaway to who you are.

—Group interview, 5/15/90

At an urban high school the student population is almost entirely African American; the nonteaching aides, too, are Black; the teaching staff is racially mixed; the administration is predominantly white. In the halls, Black athletes adorn posters with slogans of effort and triumph. However, African American Studies meets after school, during child-care and wage-earning hours, and carries no academic credit. A senior explains that Black students drop out because school is unrelated to their lives. Others add that cutting and acting out are ways that students express anger at what is not acknowledged in

school but permeates their daily lives. A young man offers, "[Schools] teach Black kids . . . to buy, but they don't teach [us] to create."

What is at issue here? Whites predominate in positions of power. The study of African-American culture is marginalized. African-American teenagers articulate concerns about an education that seems to leave them out. However, this is not willful neglect: Staff express commitment to the education of these young people. We confront not "sides" but contradictory realities. How might we make sense of "such moments of discontinuity and contradiction" to inform change?[1]

Multicultural education provides a framework for examining some of the contradictions in schools today. A buzzword vaguely and variously defined, multicultural education has been interpreted as assimilating students of color into the mainstream; improving intergroup relations; studying discrete cultural groups; promoting reform so that school programs reflect cultural diversity; and preparing students to challenge structural inequity.[2] The literature focuses on teachers' managing activities; scant attention is paid to a reconsideration of overall processes and content from a multicultural perspective.[3] With few exceptions, voices critical to this discussion—the voices of students themselves—go unheard.[4]

This essay suggests that young people's experiences, questions, and critiques of the meanings of race/ethnicity in our society are essential to developing multicultural education with consequences for their lives. In concert with young African Americans, students at the school described here, I will open a conversation about race and culture. In light of this talk, I will propose a reexamination of multicultural education.

How do we define race in the context of multiculturalism? Often we act as if racial categories were immutable facts. To the contrary, an examination of definitions over time and across communities suggests that race, like gender and class, is socially constructed and contested.[5] Schools operate as a crucial site for the enactment of racial meanings.[6] However, race is seldom addressed in schools. A public high school teacher can't recall the last time race was discussed at her school, despite racial tensions (personal communication). A seminar ending with a discussion of race stunned participants, long-term teachers in the system. Fine notes that there are too few Black teachers and that white teachers more often seem reluctant to raise "race and class contradictions in our society."[7]

If pedagogy is to address "the transformation of consciousness that takes place in the intersection of three agencies—the teacher, the learner and the knowledge they together produce,"[8] then education must invite genuine questions and multiple answers. Schools are uniquely positioned to provide opportunities to investigate race as a construct shaping our lives, as students and teachers bring rich, often contradictory, perspectives to this inquiry.[9]

Many of the young people I spoke with had already begun a process of inquiry, as they tried on, discarded, and revisited images of race. I offer a window on their processes in the generation of knowledge.

Well outside the domain of the high school, academics from a range of disciplines seek to mine the meanings of race. Anthropologists interrogate the lives of culturally defined groups to reveal signifying patterns.[10] Psychologists investigate how race shapes and is shaped by personal and group identity development.[11] Critical educators situate race as a category of experience and oppression, as in the trilogy "class, race, and gender."[12] Literary poststructuralists set off "race" in quotation marks, metaphorically denoting its nonexistence as a thing-in-itself.[13] Like the teenagers we listen in on here, the literature represents multiple voices.

While this paper takes none of these disciplines as its own, it borrows from each to illuminate or provide counterpoint to the words of the young people who are the intended subjects here. In meshing the literature with the voices of African-American teenagers, I will construct a "theoretical fiction,"[14] a dialogue that *could* exist in our high schools.

RESEARCH AND/AS PEDAGOGY

Several recent studies use a deconstructive framework to examine pedagogies in antiracism and women's studies courses.[15] This essay examines high school students' conscious constructions of race; but the work began as research, becoming pedagogy only in the process, and the talk that constitutes data occurred outside the mainstream of classroom life.

Over six months, I spent time in a large urban high school in a working-class neighborhood. The student population is African American, a critical framework for engaging these young people's concerns. I am a white, female researcher/educator. Having entered a classroom to observe writing, I began to talk with students writing about issues of race. My colleague and her students were both curious and generous, so a series of individual and small-group interview sessions evolved. Student writings provided a springboard for investigating racial identities and politics.

Group sessions often began with a reading by the student writer. Texts included a dialogue, "Conversation (Two Brothers Talking): Revolution against a 'Nigger' mentality"; an I-Search paper on interracial relationships; proposed titles for a class newspaper; a guide for an interview with a board of education representative on African-American dropouts.

The situation differed from classroom teaching. As an unknown adult entering as researcher, I presented neither a familiar persona nor a predictable role. I had not yet earned trust; neither did I carry the authority of teacher as

evaluator. My conversations with students lacked regularity and duration. On the other hand, students were free to participate or not. Perhaps risks were taken in the relative absence of classroom hierarchy. We had no curriculum to cover, and so we were free to pursue ideas and contradictions emerging from our discourse. Nonetheless, it was only later that I recast this research as pedagogy (during a conversation with Michelle Fine).

Lather suggests that as teachers we ask, "How can we position ourselves as less masters of truth and justice and more as creators of a space in which those directly involved can act and speak on their own behalf?"[16] This question resonates for us as researchers and writers as well. As I select and arrange these voices, I shave and shape their stories and my own. Nonetheless, my effort is to honor the integrity of their analyses. I am interested in these students' "creative process" as they construct race;[17] and in working toward "a pedagogy that would collapse the distinctions separating teaching, research, and art (and) might also have the power to guide transformation of the lived, social world."[18]

How do African-American teenagers enter into talk about race with each other and with a white researcher? Where does this talk go? Who talks, who listens, when is the talk comfortable or not, and why? These teenagers argue and laugh, agree and disagree with each other; they construct race differently in different contexts. Here are rich voices, partial voices, voices with much to teach as well as to learn. This essay will address "moments of rupture"[19] within public schooling by creating space and context for these voices, in concert with those of writers and scholars and with my own voice. Together we offer a mosaic of rich and suggestive possibilities for inquiry into race.

IDENTITY, DIFFERENCE, AND RACISM

These teenagers put forth no "party line" on race. We drew from diverse bodies of knowledge and experience to voice diverse theories. Later, sifting through data, I began to review our talk in terms of three broad discourses, overlapping strands often braided together, which I am calling "identity, difference, and racism."

Much of the early talk in group sessions revolved around issues of identity: How do you name and describe your racial or ethnic identity? How are African Americans unified and diverse as a racial/ethnic group? How do the contours of race shape the forging of personal identity?

Identity is often framed by difference, understood not as fact but as perspective. "What is not" defines the boundaries of "what is." Who is the same as I am, who is other, and according to what criteria? How are racial differences essential or constructed, and what do they mean in our lives?

In a world where difference connotes not equal, better/worse, having more/less power over resources, discourses of identity and difference are braided at many points with a discourse of racism, both interpersonal and structural, including talk about constructing race to deal with racism.

IDENTITY

Although identity development is not in the curriculum, teenagers continually formulate, act out, and revise identities.[20] Public education recognizes this developmental task by staffing schools with psychological personnel. But the ratio of students to trained staff makes meetings unlikely and discussion of real issues less likely still.[21] This may be compounded by racial difference between counselors and students.[22]

Interwoven with individual identity formation is the development of cultural identity, in our society closely linked with racial identity. "Strong and complex identification with one's culture and community are necessary not only for survival but also for a positive sense of self and for the making of an involved and active community member."[23] Schooling provides requisite information and affirmation for members of the dominant culture. Members of minority cultures, however, may find schooling irrelevant or even hostile to their development of cultural identities.[24]

Recently, attempts have been made to include images and information relevant to diverse populations. Some publishers have hired consultants to diversify textbook language and illustrations. In some districts "world history" courses that covered only the Western world now include the Third World. Some students study their cultures, using as resources both libraries and communities. However, identity development is a complex task, calling for more systematic, profound changes in schools.

Meanwhile, African-American teenagers are not simply recipients of education, but "create a culture of their own that is weighted with contradictions and ambivalence, promise and peril."[25] It is to this culture, enacted in a large, urban, African-American high school, that we now turn.

When I first asked, How do you name your racial identity, I assumed I was asking about language. Shavon, a usually reticent sophomore, spoke up right away: "I have Apache. My grandmother was white and her father was a Indian." Others named Cherokee as part of their racial identity. Hurston's ironic commentary, offered sixty years ago, provides counterpoint:

> I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of extenuating circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was *not* an Indian chief.[26]

From Shavon's perspective, is she offering an "extenuating circumstance" or highlighting the complexity of naming racial identity?

Vera, Aneesha, and Devon, seniors in a college-prep English class, launch readily into a discussion of racial identity. In describing their own identities, they explore language and the exercise of choice. Vera, an articulate and self-possessed young woman, begins:

> I name my racial identity because I have a lot of people in my family who are from Ghana in Africa and they are like my great-great-great grandmothers and grandfathers. I choose to call myself an African American because there's no such place as Black, there's no such place as Negro, and usually people tell their ethnicity from the place from which they came, like Italian-Americans.

Vera's analysis makes racial and ethnic identities synonymous and self-naming a matter of choice, and offers place as an identifying principle. Her logic is reminiscent of DuBois's ultimate displacement of (biological) race with race-as-civilization, a stance rife with contradictions.[27]

Devon implies other criteria for his self-naming: "I call myself Black because I really don't have any ties with Africa other than what I read, no family that I know of. They tell you that's where you came from but [pause] I just call myself Black." Vera analyses language as signifier, now distinguishing race and ethnicity, and problematizing the question:

> Calling yourself Black, I think that's automatically degrading because first of all that's what they want you to call yourself, and Black is an ugly color, and nobody is black, [Devon's] shirt is black, I'm brown, and there's no way to call a brown race, so I call myself an African. Even though the whole race is human, my ethnicity is African-American.

Gates, a literary theorist, draws on similar logic to contest the naming of racial identities in the interests of cordoning off the Other:

> Who has seen a black or red person, a white, yellow, or brown? These terms are arbitrary constructs, not reports of reality. But language is not only the medium of this often insidious tendency; it is its *sign*.[28]

Later, Vera revisits the nuances of color, irritated with a family friend who calls "white people beige and black people brown": "I said, What do you put down on an application, she said, Black, I said, Well then it doesn't matter what you say because they always gonna look at you and say, This is a Black woman." This contradiction in Vera's thinking—we exercise choice in naming our identities yet are passive recipients—may signify her struggle to construct an internal identity to meet the needs of the developing self and an external identity consistent with social realities.

Linda, a young woman identified by others as "the white girl" in school, states with some awkwardness: "Well, I think I'm Black, you know," and explains that her father is Black. In constructing racial identity models for counseling purposes, Helms uses this definition of *race:*

> a sub-group of people possessing a definite combination of physical characters, of genetic origin, the combination of which to varying degrees distinguishes the sub-group from other sub-groups of mankind [sic].[29]

Racial *identity* refers to "perceived" membership in a racial group,[31] but how does one distinguish the "definite" from the "perceived"? Linda, fair with hazel eyes and light silken hair, lacks the "combination of physical characters" that would label her "Black." Who is entitled to name Linda's race, and on what criteria? How does this naming shape her racial identity?

In spontaneous interactions, these teenagers offer diverse images of what African Americans are like. Young women critique the school rule barring students from wearing shorts: "Ain't no Black people wear shorts all the way up here!" (Damira's hand is on her hip. Everyone laughs; they begin a rendition of "Who Likes Short Shorts.") Terrance responds angrily to a debate over the class newspaper: "Why must our race always fight with each other? Why is our race so stubborn and narrow-minded?"

In discussion, underlying sociological questions emerge: What is the interplay between race and culture? How are stereotypes constituted? Now Terrance challenges his friend Kurt's characterization of Blacks as a group:

Kurt: I know a white kid named Mike with two Black parents, he act just as worse as us, I mean—
Terrance: Don't stereotype me, man.
Kurt: I ain't stereotyping you. I'm saying, he act like I do, he act just as bad as I do.

Anthropologists Abrahams and Szwed argue that stereotypical behaviors attributed to a group can often be mined for embedded cultural practices. In Black communities in the West Indies and the United States, "playing bad, playing black" is a public performance mode deemed admirable for males.[31] Even preschoolers learn to be community actors.[32] Kurt asserts this style of "acting bad" as Black character. His exchange with Terrance offers a glimpse of how group identity might be negotiated in a structured context.

For some, explicit learning about their cultural histories provides crucial foundations for identity development. No one mentions doing this learning in school. Ed reiterates a claim I heard often about rap:

> [These groups] talk in their rap music about be yourself, they have a lot of words about your African-American heritage. Like about slavery times and what it was like. And about Egypt, and the pyramids. I love Black history. I've got tons of books on Black history at home. They say you have to know where you come from to know who you are.

Vera suggests that "cultural values" should be taught to young African Americans "cause half these people don't know who they are. . . . We need to redefine our values within our community." Devon argues that people should define their own values independent of race and community. Playwright August Wilson contends that we are never independent of race and culture: "You never transcend who you are. Black is not limiting. There's no idea in the world that is not contained by black life."[33] How are our identities shaped by context, and how are we free to shape both self and context?

These teenagers are astute observers of tensions between individual and social context within the African American community. Yvonne voices the pressure she has felt since attending an all-Black school:

> I had more trouble here getting along with people because it's like when you're in a mixed school nobody judge you for the way you look or what you wore, like here you gotta look a certain way just for people to like, to fit in. . . . See basically I keep to myself and everybody be like, she thinks she's too cute to be with anybody else.

Others nod. Rhomain, an incisive social critic, offers insight into the culturally condoned materialism that may feed a loss of self:

> Black people grab for things that make them proud, so they'll grab for something material and place a great deal of emphasis and self-esteem on that, but if that material's taken away or lost it's like you've lost your insides.

Vinnie suggests the possibility of community as resource for individuality:

> I think [people] are scared or hindered to be themselves for some reason, especially Black people, we have such a rich heritage and background that there should be no reason for all of us to be the same, we're so diverse.

Interestingly, these young men and women *do* speak in diverse voices, perhaps attesting to the shared context of an all-Black school where African-American teenagers may feel relative freedom to experiment with diverse selves, since they are not explicitly confronting the dominant culture of white

teens. In more racially integrated contexts, they might well react by synchronizing voices and electing group styles, behaviors, and values in opposition to those of the white mainstream.[34]

These young people talk about diversity within the African American community in terms of the historical and current implications of skin color as a signifier of power, particularly in the context of gender relations. The terms are continually renegotiated. Kurt, a dark-skinned tenth-grade male, struggles with his own partial voices:

> Light-skinned is, I mean from the giddayup, it look good, I mean ain't nothing wrong with a dark-skinned sister, but light skin from the giddayup it looks good, I mean some people like lighter colors, some people like dark colors, I mean I don't know.

Rhomaine eschews personal aesthetic, offering a political framework:

> The way they depict Black people in sculptures and cartoons and movies—a lot of times it's been used to turn us against each other, because light-skinned Blacks never saw themselves in that negative imagery. Even though they were accepted in the Black community a lot of times, they saw themselves more in a different perspective.

Tamika, the only woman in one group session and soft-spoken, claims not to care about males' skin color. Kurt agrees emphatically, but trails off: "I say it don't matter how they colored . . . if she light-skinned she light-skinned, if she dark-skinned she dark-skinned, if she pitch-black, then [pause] it depends." Finally, he describes what happens at the Easter parade:

> . . . So when the girls stepped to us, the majority of guys that got the girls were like Tamika's complexion [light-skinned] . . . so I'm saying, light-skinned must be, they must have some kinda, they must be more radiant or have some special beauty or something, I mean it looks good [pause] but I mean so does black or brown and all that.

Kurt voices multiple selves, exploring his access to different discourses on the meaning of skin color. Given a context to continue his inquiry, he might arrive at a stance; he might also position conflicting perceptions of skin color in the larger framework of societal power relations.

DIFFERENCE

While *diversity* connotes variety, *difference* may imply dichotomy, even disagreement. Who defines difference, on what criteria, and how are we—grouped and separated by the boundaries of difference—affected?

Linda explains that her mother assured her she wasn't different: She could be anyone she wanted to be. She feels "the same" in white and Black communities. Although her brother is darker than she and in a mostly white school, "he don't feel different, he just feels mixed in like me." Difference then is a question of individual choice. She smiles shyly as she describes her own tastes in music and clothing as different from others' at school; paradoxically, she reiterates, "I'm not different, just blended in."

After our (one-to-one) interview, which is polite and awkward, I become aware that, like others at school, I have positioned Linda as white and so "same," which means I have positioned others as different, African American, Other. I am faced with the heavy-handedness of my own narration. "By defining the other's difference, one is forced to take into account, or to ignore at one's peril, the shadow cast by the self."[35] Linda, whose birth mother is white and birth father and foster family, Black, perceives "blend" where I perceive distinction. When we name difference, distinguishing "not us" from "us," we frame identity. Difference (and so identity) is less a matter of fact than "a function of a specific interlocutionary situation . . . matters of strategy."[36]

Music may be the arena where these teenagers feel most invited to explore racial identity and difference, to find themselves reflected in sound and imagery, to hear the sounds and images of others. Devon described music as a bridge between self and other, albeit not a bridge crossed by all:

> I know a lot of white kids who love rap, they grew up listening to rap cause they grew up around Black people, so that's what seems to be closing the gap. A lot of my [Black] friends tell me that what I listen to is noise, right, devil-worshipping crap, that's a quote, but . . . I chose to understand this thing, to read [white] lyrics, and therefore I have learned to like their music.

Interracial relationships remain a volatile topic among these young people, perhaps because of the intersection of race and gender issues shaped by societal power differentials. Several express concern that involvement with a white might alienate them from Blacks at school. Yvonne and Tamika describe relationships that reframe difference. Yvonne begins with setting:

> The white people over there do not act white, they're more like Black people cause they live around Black people all their life, so it really wasn't no different. Like if [her boyfriend] was to come here, he would fit in with the Black people more than he'd fit with the white people.

Tamika talks about a friend's white boyfriend who "just fit in so well with everybody." Nevertheless, when I ask whether she ever forgets he is white, Tamika and Yvonne respond, "You can't forget somebody's white!" Racial identity and difference are neither essential nor entirely fluid.

Damira too suggests that we construct difference in context. During a discussion of why only two of twenty-four students voted for *Black Underground* or *Black Times* as newspaper titles, she comments to me:

> You don't hear no white or Caucasian person saying "White Newspaper" or "White Something," so we know our color, I don't have to express it to everybody else, when they see me they'll know what color I am. Cause you don't see yourself as white such-and-such, . . . I'm proud of my color . . . but I don't want to put *Black Underground* . . . I (am) trying to broaden the issues.

Although African Americans, unlike most European Americans, are often not at liberty to forget race,[27] Damira may feel freer here than in a racially mixed environment to "broaden the issues." In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois struggled with the "double-consciousness" embedded in Damira's talk: "One feels ever his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body."[38]

Hurston writes, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background."[39] Vinnie muses on his racially mixed elementary school: "I never put that much thought to race, because I wasn't just surrounded by all Black people and then, wham, white." In this light, identity and difference are created not by color alone but also by fit and contrast. Backdrop describes foreground.

Even an individual in a single encounter may voice contradictory perceptions of identity and difference. Kurt claims that race "makes no difference, I mean skin, we been through that . . . skin color is not what's happening." Later, he voices another perspective:

Kurt: I don't know, I never been white before.
JC: I never been Black before.
Kurt: I don't know how you feel and you don't know how I feel.

While most of these teenagers reject skin pigment as the barometer of identity and difference,[40] they grapple with complexities they are unable to resolve. During a discussion of historical criteria I ask, "But in *our* minds what would make somebody Black or white?" Kurt answers,

> In their mind, their mouth, their heart. You have to know 'em, you can't just walk up and say, Tamika, she look like she white, cause I mean Tamika can act like *too* Black, she could be Black and she just came out a real fair baby.

Given the opportunity, these teenagers challenge each other, using experience honed by humor to contest and build knowledge. Tamika claims she is Black because of "my attitude and how I think on things." Ed argues that Black people may "act white" in a white environment. Kurt agrees: You know how Valley girls talk, I know girls personally who went to nothing but white school all their life, they talk like, 'I'm like this and like that.' " When Rhomaine contends that difference goes deeper, Kurt reflects on Mike, white child of Black parents:

> I mean he was accepted into the neighborhood cause of him, period, we don't kick that racial crap down the way, that's not right. He just came in and we treated him like, Yo you suck, and he's like, Yo you suck, we gonna roll it up. I mean he don't talk like, "I was going down the street." He like blended in. He still white and all, we know that, he just acts Black, like a Black person acts, or like I am and I'm Black.

Asked about a Black person who acts differently, Kurt reverts to color-based analysis: "Black is considered your skin color, and white is going by skin color, so you can be Black and born, raised and died in a white community and still be Black." While commitment to one idea may support a "right answer," contradictory ideas invite analysis, a higher order thinking skill necessary for moral development.[41]

Ogbu characterizes African-American teenagers as developing oppositional identities and norms in reaction to dominant white society.[42] While the teenagers I spoke with also note instances of opposition, many employ a strategy that reverses Ogbu's principle, as they struggle to thwart others' expectations of difference based on race. Vera (re)constructs an image of herself as white men's Other:

> When I was in the hospital, I had tonsillitis and my doctors used to come in there every day . . . and ask me what I'd be majoring in and stuff like that, and when they found out I had over a thousand on my SATs they acted a little different towards me. It was deep, because they expected me to say something like seven or eight hundred, and that's a stereotype right there that comes from, what can I say, a lack of exposure.

Are these professionals simply exercising the white privilege of "lack of exposure," or are they willing ignorance? "The resistance to finding out that the Other is the same springs out of the reluctance to admit that the same is Other."[43]

A young man reflects on "(d)ifference disliked as identity affirmed."[44]

> I'm driving home and a bunch of drunk white guys are yelling, "bunch of fucking niggers!" If it's a poorly dressed guy, I figure they're just saying it because I'm dressed better. Me and my friends, with Puerto Ricans, we be saying, You going to Taco Bell or what? So I can relate to those white kids.

Through examination of his own assumptions of differences, he identifies momentarily with the white teens whose racism circumscribes his world. Is it possible to imagine a society where difference is not tantamount to oppression or at best tolerance, but offers the resource of diversity?

RACISM

> The specific features of Blackness as cultural imagery are, almost by definition, those qualities which the dominant society has attempted to deny in itself, and it is the difference between Blackness and whiteness that defines, in many aspects, American cultural self-understanding.[45]

> *Field note, sixth-period English class:*
> The class is discussing medieval history as background to *Merchant of Venice*. The teacher has handed out a sheet of relevant terms, and someone asks for a description of the "Black Plague." A young woman calls out, "Why didn't they call it the 'White Plague.' "

In our society, where white skin buys privilege, difference is an entry to unequal positionings. It is difficult to imagine "separate but equal" as anything but a racist sham: "I understand your essential difference from me, and will make you live up to it with an imposed program of separate development."[46] We cannot explore identity and difference without bloodletting from the veins of racism coursing throughout.

Many of these teenagers struggle to construct dynamic identities grounded in awareness but not necessarily in reaction to white society,[47] grounded in a continuum of choices rather than in a single choice such as "racelessness."[49] Racism shapes these young people's experiences of the world. However, they are not passive but engaged in constructing racial identities *in action*, a self or selves that deal creatively with the challenges of being an African American in a racist society.

Although several tell of blatant, physically manifested instances of racism, most talk revolves around subtler, pervasive forms. Rhomaine, a mediocre student who shares impressive cultural knowledge, analyzes the structural racism in seemingly personal issues:

> It's very deep-seated, if something happens in history you have to go back to it and find out. Like Vinnie said, hundreds of Black women were used by

> white men, so white men have a very deep-seated fear that erupts if they ever see a Black man with a white woman . . . because they feel that the Black men would do the same thing that they did. . . . [Also] our standards of beauty in this country are white . . . we've been under that so long, upset with being that which we see, that a lot of people hate themselves, they'll go out looking for an interracial thing or to have children, mix with other races. So it's a lot more into the psyche and into the heart that people think it is, it's not just simple.

Damira and Kathy also probe structural racism, complicated by issues of gender. An all-female group debates Black women's opportunities in the working world. Damira's metaphor for satisfying quotas provides ironic commentary on the racism and sexism of this ostensible "equalizer":

> [When an employer hires a black woman] they killed two minorities, you a woman, there they go, they killed that minority, and you Black, they killed another one. Then they don't got nobody on their shoulders, Oh you don't hire women, you don't hire Black people. They killed it right there, the two minorities.

Kathy describes difficulties faced by Black women in a racist society.[49]

> In a lot of Black home situations you have mostly the mother . . . and then the mother have a older girl and then she have younger children, and so [the girl's] childhood is usually taken up by the children. . . . And when your parent isn't home and you gotta make decisions for yourself and you make the wrong decision, and then, you know, you making decisions, you feel, I'm grown cause I do everything my mom should be doing anyway.

Kathy's analysis is laced with frustration. She argues that after pregnancy a young woman should not stay home on welfare but "go ahead . . . strive to do more for yourself." Kathy's own "aspirations" provide a basis for her critique of societally imposed constraints and of the "cultural practices" of peers.[50]

Much of the discourse on racism revolves around interpersonal tensions sometimes read as manifestations of structural racism. A young woman captures these tensions compellingly:

> Mostly it's older people. . . . Well maybe the young whites just don't talk about you, maybe they got it in their minds, Nigger nigger nigger. What they're saying is they're your friend, but they thinking, Nigger nigger nigger.

In racially mixed contexts, these youngsters strive to imagine identity, difference, and racism as experienced by their European American counterparts. Vera recalls the complexities of racial dynamics at a predominantly white summer program:

> A lot of my white girlfriends used to hang out in my room cause they're like, Vera's the life of the party, cause they never saw anybody act fun yet when they themselves would be around them, and you know it was just fun for me to be around them. . . . They couldn't say certain things around me because they didn't want to offend me . . . and white people always have that problem, I sympathize with them about that too because they're always trying to, they watch what they say so carefully because they're afraid that it may be sort of prejudiced.

Aneesha jumps in, "They're like, 'I'm not prejudiced, no I'm not!' Everybody in this world has some ounce of prejudice." Vera, Aneesha, and Devon have all been treated as if "you're different from all the others." Devon explains, "When [whites] try to hide the fact that you are Black, and I mean *you know* that you are, they're gonna say stuff that's gonna supposedly offend your average Black person." In such mixed contexts, these teenagers may draw their racial identities in bolder strokes.

The racism described by these young African Americans is full of subtle contradictions, requiring acute attentiveness. While Vera enjoys her role in the (white) group, she examines carefully the racial tension felt and perhaps faced by her young white friends. Recalling her roommate, Vera muses, "She was kind of uptight, you could tell, but I sorta let her know, you could loosen up some, I'm not gonna hurt you or anything. They so afraid of you in a way," then, "But you know, we have to give them a reason to feel that way too." White fear, Vera's power to defuse it, and her notion that Blacks may be implicated in this fear seem symptomatic of the labyrinthian nature of relationships in the 1990s.

Black parents have long taken into account the "functional value of racial socialization" based on perceived social realities.[51] African American adolescents may critique their parents' "powerlessness,"[52] yet as they forge separate identities they too act in light of cultural realities. In "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Hurston deconstructs the title: " 'Compared to what? As of when? Who is asking? In what context? For what purpose? With what interests and presuppositions.' "[53] Similarly, these teenagers construct identities in the plural, given the plural realities of daily life in school and community, with peers, authorities, and families.

In Fordham's study, Black teenagers confront a mismatch between a school culture that rewards competition and individual achievement and a community culture that values cooperation and group advancement. Her analysis foregrounds the invention of "racelessness" as a means of obviating

the need for racial identity as a Black American to her identity as an American, hoping that a raceless persona will mitigate the harsh treatment and severe limitations in the opportunity structure that are likely to confront her as a Black American.[54]

The African Americans I spoke with—who attend a school demographically similar to Fordham's and some of whom are successful by conventional measures—offer a range of strategies for constructing race to cope with racism. While they too struggle with "severe limitations in the opportunity structure," their constructions of race are compellingly complex, including, but not limited to, strategic use of the appearance of "racelessness." Aneesha's narrative, in which her phone manner clearly fooled a prospective employer into assuming she was white, evokes appreciative, pained laughter. Her tone is laced with irony:

> When I got there [the employer] looked at me like, who is this. I said, Hello, my name is Aneesha Haskins, I'm here for the job interview. She said, Are you the young lady I spoke to yesterday? I said, Yes I am. She said, You are very well spoken. [Group laughter] I said, I know! [More group laughter]

Aneesha explains that sometimes life demands that "you change your roles" but this does not mean "forgetting who you are." She refuses to play victim, to give up self-consciousness and choice, as a raceless persona would require; neither is she willing to forego a job opportunity.

Like students and professionals whom Fordham quotes at length, Vera has been called "white" by members of the low-income Black community where she grew up. She describes feeling "stuck in the middle" between Black English vernacular, used with friends, and "a certain way that you talk when you're talking to somebody of authority." Vera articulates awareness of both the institutionalized racism in the "design of ghettos" and the internalized racism described by Woodson, whom she quotes: "If there's not a back door [African Americans] will make one, because they know their place." Rather than submerging her developing identity, Vera seeks to expand what it means to be an African American; her struggle highlights the conflict and creativity required to construct race in a racist society.

The civil rights movement may represent to these youngsters a naive attempt to (re)construct race relations through denial of difference. Vera, Aneesha, and Devon agree that a color-blind society is "a baseless dream." They shake their heads at "Martin Luther King—us all grabbing hands and singing songs—after they sing [whites and Blacks] will wind up fighting anyway, you know." I ask what the dream is now, and Devon shrugs: "You adjust." He describes dinner with a white friend, a mayor's son:

Devon: It was like, [the family] were waiting for me to like, you know, they were like testing me, I was sitting there eating and they're—

Aneesha: Waiting for you to evict [spit out] something.
Devon: Yeah. They're waiting for you to make a mistake or something. But I just look at them, I act normal, I just act like myself and so they were impressed by that . . . I mean, try to speak clearly and all so they would understand, then I'd come home to my mom and speak a little more loosely.

Devon's narration positions him as young educator of a white family, requiring on-the-spot analysis of identity, difference, and racism. Later, he is educated by the racism of a white schoolmate who calls him "oreo": "I said I would take charge now, nobody would lead me around like that."

Aneesha urges Vera to tell "the watermelon story," in which she is the educator of white peers, a role about which she expresses ambivalence:

> It was me and my two Black friends, we were in front, and the special fruit for the day was watermelon. And the one white girl behind me—you could tell the whole group got quiet when she came—tapped me on my shoulder and asked me how the watermelon tastes. I said, How would I know, I'm in line just like you are, and I said it nice and calm and everything. I said, I don't even eat watermelon, why didn't you ask one of your friends in back of you. . . . And then I just went on about my business. I think she probably learned something from that, because I don't eat watermelon, and if I would eat watermelon I wouldn't eat it there.

Vera's narrative takes us back to Hurston's deconstructive questions: Who wants to know, and for what purpose? Even in the retelling, she says she doesn't *eat* watermelon, not that she doesn't *like* it. The complexities of the decision not to eat watermelon expose the density of our cultural constructs. Vera's "nice and calm" tone, emerging through metaphorically gritted teeth, contrasts with Rhomaine's explicit language of anger:

> The Legions of Fury, that's what I call all 40 million of Black people in this country, the hate had built up so much and the resentment because of what happened to us . . . I don't think white people understand the pressure or the anger or the right to be angry. So that's why I say, Legions of Fury, we have to create now.

Later, Rhomaine's suddenly wistful tone reveals another self: "I would love, I was telling Vinnie this, I wouldn't want my color to make a difference in anything I did [pause] but my color is how I [am] perceived." Rhomaine is not Fordham's "raceless" student: Graduation is his sole symbol of academic success, and he sees himself headed for an uncertain future. He more nearly fits Helms's developmental category "emersion," in his positive, political identification with Black/African culture.[55] But his sudden voicing of

a wish to act in a color-neutral setting evokes the possibility of a world where color dimensions but need not dominate who we are.

Rhomaine's friend Vinnie struggles to reconcile his certainty that "the world will never be equal" with his hope for "more harmony in the future." In a final exchange:

JC: How do you feel about, I'm a white researcher asking this stuff?
Vinnie: I didn't look at you as someone different, I mean, I'm pretty open-minded, unless you want to bring out the racial thing . . .
JC: I guess I am.
Vinnie: But I'm saying it's good for all people to talk about race because I think knowledge is the only way that we can get along . . . if we just got to know people as people . . . because *in the dark world (we're) the same, we all die, we're all born.* [my emphasis]

Through engaging in talk and constructing knowledge, can we move *in this world* toward equity in diversity, harmony in difference?

RACE AND SCHOOLS

In these conversations, African American teenagers share experiences, theories, and questions about the meanings of race/ethnicity, as they live, learn, and construct what is and what could be. Such talk suggests starting points for education that affirms and explores cultural diversity. As we reconsider multicultural education, both students' roles in reforming schooling and our understandings of such categories as race/ethnicity must be interrogated. Not only are students authorities on their own experiences, but they also bring critical insight to the complexities of race/ethnicity. Further, student's problematizing of the reified category of race suggests that schools go beyond transmitting knowledge about cultural groups to study race, gender, and class as dynamic, interacting social constructs.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to talk globally about multicultural curriculum building. Instead, I offer a series of practice-based images emerging from the conversations opened in these pages. Let us imagine such talks as a springboard for structured, school-based planning teams of staff, parents, students, and community members, for the purpose of generating a multicultural curriculum. Let us further suppose the experientially based discourses of identity, difference, and racism to be proposed by such a team as thematic cores for interdisciplinary courses of study. What might a series of related thematics look like?

The study of racial/ethnic *identity* could generate student inquiry into their own racial and cultural identities, through critical readings of recorded

versions of history as well as through "readings" of their homes and communities. The disciplines of psychology and sociology raise critical questions: How is the identity development of the individual shaped by his or her racial/ethnic group identity, and how do individuals shape group identity? Literature that explores these themes, as well as expressive modes that engender group identity, such as music, cuisine, and folklore, could be interrogated. Students could use knowledge of groups' identities to generate and analyze "cultural and epistemological statements."[56]

An investigation of *difference* in a global context may find intellectual roots in ethnology, the study of similarities and differences among cultures. An organizing question might guide inquiry: How do differences reflect essential qualities and/or social constructions? Students could use their own experiences and questions to do critical readings of texts often judged "too difficult," texts by anthropologists, educators, literary theorists, and scientists that propose diverse and often contradictory theories of difference. Lived experiences also provide contexts for inquiry, such as observations and interviews with members of one's own and other's groups. An examination of discourses used by diverse cultural groups focuses the study of language on difference, interrupting the unproblematized teaching of "standard English."[57]

An interdisciplinary study of *racism* might begin with students using their lives and the media to generate questions about the history and psychology of racism, and about how to challenge racism in our society and our lives. An organizing question might seek models for constructing identity and difference without recourse to racism. Students could conduct research in libraries, theaters, the mass media, and communities, and could share findings and take actions in and beyond their schools.

The teenagers whose words fill these pages are engaged with issues of race and culture, gender and social class, as they strive to make meaning in their lives. By dealing with these issues only tangentially, or as if transmitting a "body of knowledge," schools consign their curricula to a marginal position in many young people's lives. The images of multicultural practice offered here represent one set of possibilities for how schools might facilitate students' struggles with these issues. Such images need to be developed by school-based teams of instructional leaders, teachers, nonteaching staff, and parents engaged—with students—in constructing and implementing a multicultural curriculum.

However, the diverse and even conflicting agendas that often divide those whose voices are crucial to this project may pose daunting obstacles to such conversations. Indeed, these constituencies may not *want* to communicate with one another. The essay concludes with suggestions of structural supports to facilitate open lines of communication.

Because of the lack of training in multicultural education, administrators' and teachers' years of experience do not necessarily translate into expertise with these issues. On a district-wide level, instructional leadership might address cultural concerns by investigating current thinking on a key issue. Principals in an urban district are studying Afrocentric education; such a group might offer new perspectives on district guidelines and school-based multicultural programs.

Educational change movements are emphasizing teacher empowerment through school-based reforms. A restructuring initiative aimed at comprehensive high schools includes a seminar where teachers explore the implications of cultural diversity for their schools and classrooms. As teachers reflect on practice, they generate questions and learn to facilitate student inquiry. As "mediators of culture,"[58] teachers also need contexts to explore these issues collaboratively, within and across disciplines, in such units as "houses" or "charter schools." They need to reexamine not only processes of teaching and learning, but also their own racial and cultural identities and perhaps privilege,[59] and their relationships with colleagues and students of similar and different backgrounds.[60]

Nonteaching staff, parents, and other community adults also provide crucial resources, as "collaborators, sources of critical information, innovators [and] critics."[61] These adults must be offered legitimated positions of influence and opportunities to investigate educational agendas.

Constructing racial/cultural identities in a racist, culture-biased society is a demanding task, one in which democratic schooling must play a key role, particularly if we recognize that equality of treatment does not guarantee equality of opportunity. Education that invites students to construct cultural knowledge should affirm all of our lived experiences, and engage students in designing their own educations through conscious study and construction of the world we live in.