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# Race Wrestling: Struggling Strategically with Race in Educational Practice and Research

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As researchers try to understand, improve, and equalize U.S. schooling, we talk too little about how to study race well. It is particularly crucial, I argue, that researchers struggle to interrogate education's familiar racial practices more self-consciously and strategically. I suggest that researchers "race wrestle" by struggling with race on two levels: researchers can (1) learn from the everyday struggles over race already taking place in U.S. schools and (2) struggle more actively with race talk and analysis in our own research. I argue that refocusing analytic attention on everyday struggles over race in educational practice and research is a necessary strategy for moving forward toward racial equality.

So, Nat'ralists observe, a Flea  
Hath smaller Fleas that on him prey,  
And these have smaller Fleas to bite 'em,  
And so proceed ad infinitum.  
(JONATHAN SWIFT)

In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, anthropologist Clifford Geertz paraphrased a myth an informant from India had once told him about the earth: the earth rested on a platform on top of an elephant upon a turtle, and after that, until infinity, it was "turtles all the way down" (1973, p. 29). The world of U.S. education, I argue here, is race dilemmas all the way "down." From researchers to superintendents to teachers to students of all ages, navigating the national system of racialized difference and racial inequality plagues us all in some crucial everyday ways.

My own work suggests that people working in and studying U.S. schools struggle routinely with some basic dilemmas of talking (and, relatedly, thinking) about "racial" difference and racial inequality in U.S. education (Pollock

*American Journal of Education* 111 (November 2004)  
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0195-6744/2004/11101-0002\$05.00

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2004a). Such everyday dilemmas of race talk, I have found, are not “just talk”—both our talk and our silence about race have real ramifications for what we do and do not do about racial inequality. I have found that when researchers and practitioners talk and think clumsily about race in education—and relatedly, when we refuse anxiously to talk and think about race at all—we risk harming the very students many of us set out to assist.

In this article, I introduce a core set of “race talk dilemmas” I claim are central to ongoing educational discourse in the United States, unearthed in a multiyear ethnographic study of unprompted everyday school and district talk in California (Pollock 2004a). I argue here that U.S. educational researchers struggle with the very same dilemmas of talking (and relatedly, thinking) about race. Since both researchers and practitioners often make things more difficult for kids when we do talk about race as well as when we do not, I suggest that those of us who are interested in reducing racial inequality in education might struggle to talk and think about race with more explicit critical self-consciousness.

That is, I suggest that rather than flail privately with the dilemmas of race talk and analysis, both practitioners and educational researchers can assist the field by struggling purposefully and explicitly throughout our work over how most productively to analyze and discuss issues of race in education. I call this project of purposeful struggle with race talk and analysis “race wrestling.” I attempt here to assist such wrestling by first exposing my journey from more typical race research to more “race wrestling” research that grappled *with* race talk and analysis both “on the ground” and in my own investigation (part 1)—and second, by laying out six specific dilemmas of race talk and analysis that educational researchers, like practitioners, might consider carefully (part 2).

While my prior work on “race talk dilemmas” in education has hoped particularly to assist practitioners to talk more successfully about racial orders in schools (see Pollock 2004a), this article speaks to researchers specifically. Throughout this article, I contend that educational researchers—who get paid, after all, to analyze and talk about education—must wrestle with race talk and analysis in our research on two levels, both of which require rethinking the typical habits of race research in education. First, I argue, researchers must investigate and bring to light how school and district people themselves are already arguing about and struggling over race in their daily lives. Such research requires fortifying a more typical research habit—simplification—

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with a methodological attention to the ongoing race disputes of everyday life. For while race researchers (like all researchers) tend to make race practice appear simple for the purpose of research (thus typically simplifying the behaviors of racial actors, the social actors responsible for racial orders, and even the very organization of U.S. diversity), race practice in the real world of schools and districts often takes shape as people arguing and struggling over these very things. That is, real lives are often far more disputed than educational research on race suggests: neither kids nor adults consistently exhibit the simple race-group behaviors research expects them to exhibit, many more social actors are responsible in choreography for racial orders than research typically admits, and people argue over categories of racial difference and patterns of racial inequality even as they reproduce them. Thus, while we must continue to research the simple, unarguable ways in which racial inequality gets reproduced (the bluntly unequal distribution of dollars, books, credentialed teachers, science labs, or advance placement courses to race groups is one obvious example; see Darling-Hammond 1999; Oakes et al. 1990), it is also a research responsibility to lay out the complex disputes over “racial” difference and racial inequality currently occupying people in schools. Research on racial inequality and diversity—in education as well as in social science more generally—often masks such crucial everyday struggles, by taking actors out of context to answer simplified questions or by burying the messy arguments of everyday life under abstracted theory. My own suggestion, in contrast, is to investigate and theorize actors’ everyday disputes in their full ethnographic complexity—to analyze moments when youths and adults (of all “races”) themselves are arguing over how best to understand and navigate their own issues of racial diversity and inequality. Such research on everyday race wrestling has practical as well as intellectual implications. I have found that making familiar disputes, dilemmas, and controversies themselves the phenomena for intellectual examination (Pollock 2001, 2004*a*) assists educators and youth to perceive and address their own racial practices with increased analytic clarity.

Second, I believe that we researchers must wrestle more with our own habits of talking about and analyzing race in our research. As I will argue here, the six race talk dilemmas I found plaguing practitioners plague race researchers as well. We, too, can consider carefully these dilemmas of race talk and analysis, and learn to navigate them strategically in a quest to make U.S. education racially equitable. Throughout the article, then, I discuss lessons from practice (Pollock 2004*a*) that suggest ways in which researchers, too, might wrestle with race more actively in our analyses and writing.

I should state directly that I am claiming here that some basic troubles of race talk and analysis are shared by researchers across “racial” lines. In my work on race talk dilemmas “on the ground” in schools and districts, I have

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demonstrated that some core problems of talking and not talking about race are shared by students and practitioners of all “races,” even while white speakers exhibit a subset of particular (and particularly troubling) race talk habits (Bonilla-Silva 2002). Similarly, while white researchers (like myself) exhibit spectacularly a subset of problematic habits of race talk and analysis (for comment, see Sleeter 1993*a*), I believe that the basic dilemmas of race talk and analysis I present here plague the researcher community writ large. I am not trying to assert that researcher race is irrelevant to race research; on the contrary, researchers who write self-consciously about the task of researching race have proved that the race of the researcher can drastically affect the data gathered (or told) in the field (Twine and Warren 2000). Yet such work also demonstrates that simplifying claims about how researcher race will affect the data gathered (or told) in the field often prove to be wrong. Rather than make arguments here about what happens when researchers belong to particular “races,” then, I attempt in this article to assist the field by suggesting some dilemmas of race talk and analysis that I believe are shared by us all.

Before discussing how each race talk dilemma operates in research, however (part 2), I want to begin by discussing my own process of learning to see these dilemmas operating in practice. I began my race research asking far more simplifying questions about race in school; my own “race wrestling” process required that I learn instead to attend to the race struggles of everyday school life (part 1).

#### Part 1: Beyond Simplification: Learning to Research Everyday Struggles over Race in Schools

I taught “ethnic literature” and “American literature” from 1994 to 1995 at “Columbus High School” in “California City,” and I conducted two years of almost daily ethnographic research there as a doctoral student in the anthropology of education during 1995–97.<sup>1</sup> Having arrived at Columbus from the East Coast after a college career spent studying black-white issues in U.S. history, I was, to be honest, fascinated by the school’s demographics. District statistics counted Columbus students as roughly 30 percent “Filipino,” 30 percent “Latino” or “Hispanic,” 20 percent “African American” or “black,” 8 percent “Chinese,” 8 percent “other nonwhite” (a bureaucratic category that nobody at the school level really used, but which included the students Columbus people called “Samoan”), and 5 percent “other white” (a bureaucratic category also typically ignored, but which included the handful of students at Columbus who described themselves as “white.”). While the district called these categories “racial-ethnic,” Columbus people called these categories the school’s “races”—and they regularly used basically the same six categories

(Filipino, Latino, black, Chinese, Samoan, and white) to describe and organize their own student and adult diversity in curriculum, public events, and everyday social interactions. Columbus's teaching staff was listed in district documents as roughly 55 percent other white (the group into which I myself fell), 15 percent African American, 10 percent Filipino, 10 percent Latino, 5 percent other nonwhite, and 2 percent Chinese.

Learning to divide Columbus's student and adult population into this set of groups, referred to locally as "races," was one key aspect of becoming a "native" at Columbus, and over my teaching year I learned to talk about students and colleagues matter-of-factly in this set of comparative "racial" terms. Accordingly, as a researcher I also set out originally to do research using them. I embarked initially with two predictable research questions about race and Columbus students: I wanted to know how important "race" categories were to Columbus students' identities, and I wanted to know how race mattered to how students from these groups "got along" socially with one another.

Notably, my interest at the time was not in adult identities or relationships but, rather, solely in how Columbus students "made each other racial" (Olsen 1997). Research questions about race and schooling (indeed, about race and youth in general) regularly simplify race like this, by framing racial "identity" and race relations as the property of young people (and primarily young people of color) rather than framing race more accurately as a shared practice of organizing diversity and power that involves people of all ages and "races" (for comment, see also Fine 1997; Payne 1984). It would take several months for me to learn to listen and watch for how adult players, including the superintendent, judge, school board members, and academics outside Columbus, were intertwined with students in a choreography of racial practice.

It would also take time for me to come to see race categories as things people at Columbus struggled with rather than simply lived with. Learning gradually to listen more closely to the everyday discourse of both students and adults, I would come to recognize that Columbus students were actually arguing daily over how accurately their six simple race labels described complex people and that Columbus adults actually used race labels comfortably to talk about people, patterns, and policies only in particular ways at particular times. Listening over time to hundreds of thousands of examples of race label use, I would also come to realize that race labels themselves, ostensibly descriptions of "diversity," can never be detached from inherently controversial historic and contemporary orders of inequality. As Sanjek (1996) notes, hierarchy is what race is about. Indeed, that Columbus people called "races" even the groups scholars typically term "ethnic" or "national" (such as Filipinos, Chinese, Latinos, and Samoans) implied how both student and adult members of these six groups were often engaged in negotiations over social power and resources.

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Many scholars have defined “race” group systems as systems of distributing (and arguing over) power and resources, as opposed to the heritage-connoting, more voluntary systems of “ethnicity” and the geographic “origin”-connoting systems of “nationality.”<sup>2</sup>

I began, however, interested not in struggles over racial equality at Columbus, or even in race label use specifically. Rather, I was interested in studying how students organized their identities and social relations racially—and I was not interested in adults as racial beings at all. Luckily, my research on Columbus students was ethnographic, which allowed for redirecting my investigation over its course to pursue deeper understanding of the actual complexity of Columbus racial practice. And early on, for one, listening at length to students talk informally about racial identities and race relations made me realize how much they debated and struggled with race categories (and their relevance) as a routine part of their everyday lives.

Having returned to Columbus as an anthropologist in training rather than as a teacher, I now had lots of time to listen to students talk unprompted and at length about race outside of classrooms, conversations for which I had had little time as a teacher and which so-called qualitative researchers themselves often eschew in favor of simplifying sit-down interviews or surveys (see Becker 1996). In these impromptu ethnographic conversations, I found that students routinely led the conversation to the topic of racial categorization itself—and that in doing so, they then typically started debating the very concept of race-group membership and contesting easy assessments of what everybody “was.” Outside the classroom, a number of students who had labeled themselves with one matter-of-fact “race” category in my classroom now told me stories of how they learned over time to be members of some other group instead, finding out suddenly through familial channels that they “were” one “race” rather than another (as one girl put it to me in an aside during her English class, “I used to be Chinese”). As I spent more time in student-dominated spaces, further, students who were total strangers to me drew me into playing guessing games about their own race group membership, teasing me and student observers to “tell” what everybody present “was.” I soon noted that “What are you?” and “What are you mixed with?” were routine informal student questions at Columbus, resulting in lengthy answers like “I’m Samoan, black, Puerto Rican, Filipino, and Indian” as often as single-label answers like “full black.” Only sometimes, I realized, did students classify themselves into a simple six-group “race” taxonomy—and determining when they did so in their everyday school lives became the new goal of my research (see Pollock 2004*b*).

By attending closely to when students employed and contested simple race labels, I noted one key pattern of timing organizing such race talk. Columbus students consistently contested the ability of simple, single-race labels to de-

scribe complex individuals when they discussed racial classification itself (“What are you mixed with?” “She’s not Mexican, she’s Samoan!”). Yet they employed the school’s six basic “race” labels to describe themselves and one another without much question when talking about relations between groups—and in particular when talking about equality in school orders (“I thought this was supposed to be Latino week!” “The Samoans got hella time!” “Where’re the black people at?!”).

Thinking more about race history and theory, I realized that in alternately contesting and employing simple race labels, Columbus students were actually negotiating the basic problem of race categories in the United States. Such simple categories (born just centuries ago to organize slavery and, in more recent years, to organize immigration) have always been inaccurate for fully describing complex identities, but they are necessary for describing the simple social orders (and particularly the inequality orders) with which Americans have come to live. I came to call students’ daily wrestling with race categories “race bending.” For students were neither throwing race categories away, nor accepting them wholesale—rather, they were alternately challenging the very idea of such simple categories’ ability to describe complex people and keeping race labels strategically available to describe and analyze social orders and inequalities in resources (Pollock 2004*b*).<sup>3</sup>

I was now treating Columbus students’ naturally occurring race talk as complex data—and in doing so, I found more race wrestling in unprompted Columbus student discourse. Listening carefully to students talk informally and at length about my second research interest—how race factored in to how they “got along”—I realized that students also routinely debated whether and how race mattered to their relations with one another. Notably, the direct research queries I had embarked with first had masked this debate altogether: Columbus students had turned immediately and comfortably to talk of racial student-student relations when I asked them how people “got along” at Columbus, summing up bluntly that “the Samoans” were currently fighting “the Filipinos,” that “the Latinos” sat separately from “the blacks” in classes, or conversely that student race groups were not fighting these days (students also routinely summed up bluntly to me and to one another that they personally went against the grain by hanging out “with everyone” “regardless of race”). Columbus adults, too, turned quickly to sum up the state of student “race relations” when asked directly about people “getting along” at Columbus, whether they were asserting or denying race’s relevance to those relations. When I asked one teacher in 1996 generally what she made of “race issues” at Columbus, for example, she replied matter-of-factly that among students there usually “weren’t many problems: if there’s a fight, it’s Mexicans vs. blacks.” A new teacher answering the same question in 1997 responded similarly easily with a classically student-focused answer: “I don’t think it’s a

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problem—the kids get along fine.” Other teachers complained summatively about how student race groups did not “get along,” arguing that students grouped themselves racially at lunch or in the classroom.

Once again, an ethnographic methodology allowing people to talk unprompted about race and to ruminate at more length on race’s relevance to their relations revealed that while Columbus speakers of all ages often turned in scripted ways to sum up race’s relevance to students, the very question of race’s relevance to how Columbus kids “got along” was actually a question of routine debate. Looking at student race talk examples across contexts and time, for example, I noted that students routinely denied explicitly that race mattered to them only minutes before speaking matter-of-factly as if race did. I also noted that if allowed to talk in depth about things like student “race riots” at Columbus, students often started arguing over whether student relations were purely racial, offering complex arguments about how fights over girlfriends or possessions (often sparked because there was “nowhere to go” after school) became racial as groups of friends entered the fray and organized themselves around the available taxonomy of race. Further, students knowingly wielding the pervasive logic that race should not really matter to how people in general “got along” often proffered scripted rhetoric about race’s irrelevance with actively subversive glee: in a practice I came to call “race teasing,” Columbus students summing up to me, one another, and their teachers the relevance of race to their friendships and identities often simultaneously suggested smirkingly that race did not matter at all (“no, we’re all the same, though!” was a classic example of such a race teasing interjection, often offered immediately after a claim about race’s importance). I began to see that simple talk of student race relations was not always a pure description of reality but, rather, often a type of scripted simplification obscuring race’s shifting relevance and irrelevance—and I also began to suspect that the topic of student race relations was simply one of the most comfortable Columbus scripts for noting race’s relevance in school. Indeed, I myself had reproduced this script in my own confident research questions about how race mattered to how Columbus kids “got along.”

For I started to notice something else that I had overlooked in my rush to focus on the well-worn comfortable topic of how kids got along: students discussing race’s role in social relations at Columbus were also routinely referencing their relations with adults. While my first research instinct on noticing these references was to start viewing all interactions between students and adults through a statically racialized research lens, in listening more closely to students talk about race’s role in their relationships with Columbus teachers and administrators I noted that students often displayed the same basic fluidity they displayed when describing how race mattered to their interactions with one another. Students bounced from claiming in one interaction in the principal’s



office that they “hated white teachers” to claiming in the next interaction in a quiet classroom that white teachers at Columbus were not “really racist.” Students who called pointedly for more “black teachers” during classroom conflicts with nonblack teachers complained vigorously in other settings about not “getting along” with black teachers or administrators in particular. Students who argued in some moments that Columbus adults (of all “races”) treated student race groups differently would argue with shrugs or even indignation at other moments that adults at Columbus did not “treat people racially” at all. While different contexts definitely seemed to make students differentially comfortable with stating race’s relevance to student-adult relations, students’ ongoing talk also demonstrated that they were often wrestling with the very question of when and how race was relevant to their relations with Columbus adults, even while at times they also framed these relations confidently in racial terms.

The real story here, I realized finally, was the race wrestling itself. That is, it was a daily activity for students at Columbus to figure out and debate how race mattered to their own everyday interactions with adults and one another—and to confront listeners of all ages with this very question about race’s relevance. Accordingly, this very question of how race mattered to social relations at Columbus had to be wrestled with similarly in my own research. Any attempt to understand how race mattered in Columbus social relations was going to take many hours of listening to and even participating in impromptu debates about race’s role in Columbus life.

Taking direction from students’ framing of adults as key players in Columbus’s race relations, I also realized I had to listen more carefully to adults talk about how they got along with students. In doing so, I realized that the very question of how race mattered to student-adult relations was also a persistent (though more subterranean) Columbus adult debate. In private, Columbus adults of all “races” sometimes raised the question explicitly of how much their own “race” (often vs. their “class”) mattered to how they and students “got along”: one white teacher, for example, wondered to me during a car ride home how much authority she had with students as a “white chick,” while a black teacher pointing to her bare arm as she muttered to me in the back of her classroom about her “trouble” with various students mused that all students at Columbus had race-based expectations of her teaching. While adults mused privately at times like this about the role that race played in their relations with students, they (like students) also talked racially about student-adult relations at some moments and explicitly denied race’s importance to those relations at others. Columbus teachers talking to me and one another in offices or empty classrooms, for example, would often question or even bluntly dismiss a reported student accusation of adult “racism,” even while mentioning moments later their own or other teachers’ repeated conflicts

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with representatives of particular racial “groups.” Administrators, too, would complain with exasperated sighs about district mandates that schools monitor themselves for racially disproportionate suspensions, even while telling me in other private conversations that disciplinary records indeed showed school adults disproportionately suspending Latinos, Samoans, or blacks. Columbus adults of all “races,” then, too, were quietly debating race’s relevance to their relations with students—such that asking adults even informally to provide quick answers to my questions about race’s role in those relations would inevitably provide me with responses that, like students’, oversimplified race’s relevance or irrelevance. Quick answers to quick questions about how race mattered to social relationships would never expose the truly complex “logic of everyday life” (Geertz 1973, p. 17), in which race’s relevance to social relations was itself actually a core topic for ongoing debate.

Now listening to adults quietly debating race’s role in their relations with students, I also realized with a start that this very debate was never publicly engaged. While students sporadically raised the question of how race mattered to student-adult relations by punctuating classroom or deans’ office life with teasing or angry accusations of teacher “racism,” adults in particular were often deleting race labels from public talk of this very topic that they quietly (and, for many, anxiously) described often as racially charged. Indeed, I now realized starkly that school adults were often telling me directly that they were deleting race labels from public talk of various race-loaded topics. For example, I noted that a white teacher wondering to me whether “black” students were statistically overrepresented among students wandering the Columbus hallways would remark simultaneously that he felt it would be inappropriate to ask this question publicly; a black teacher’s aide remarking on the overrepresentation of black students in Columbus’s “special ed” classrooms would whisper that the pattern was something “we don’t talk about.” A white teacher muttering about administrators’ allowance of “Samoan” misbehavior would note that “no one talked about” this racial pattern in public; an Asian-American administrator bemoaning “Latino” test scores in private would argue next that Columbus reforms should be discussed as serving “all students” rather than particular “groups.” Noting the frequency of Columbus people’s daily talk *about* race talk, I finally began to work more systematically as an anthropologist to make strange and examine directly this basic act troubling people at Columbus: figuring out when to talk about school people and school life in racial terms.<sup>4</sup> To do so, I began systematically to seek patterns in when people at Columbus used, struggled with, and deleted race labels in their unprompted everyday discourse.

Now that I was examining “race talk” as a patterned everyday activity, I soon confirmed a crucial race talk habit characterizing adult talk in particular: while adults of all “races” indicated in some situations that they saw certain

aspects of school life as deeply racialized, they often resisted describing these very aspects of school life racially in other locations and in interactions with particular actors. I came to call the shared, adult-dominated practice of deleting race labels from talk “colormuteness”—that is, the routine act of knowingly deleting race words from discourse, rather than being truly “color-blind” (Pollock 2004*a*).

Further, noting that quiet Columbus debates over race and race talk often mentioned district, legal, and academic adults outside Columbus (people would argue about race’s role in superintendent’s policies, court decrees, or academic research), I expanded my analytic lens to consider the discourse of these players as well. I now observed that the Latino superintendent, too, let race labels wax and wane in his various public pronouncements about school “problems,” that a white judge waffled in using and deleting race labels in discussions of district reform plans, and that even my graduate school professors struggled with talking of blacks, Latinos, Asians, or whites in their public talk and written research about various charged educational topics. As race talk occurring throughout the world of education became data, I realized that describing people, practices, programs and policies in racial terms seemed to cause certain predictable problems for every actor I found trying to talk about education.

An ironic twist of fate at Columbus solidified my sense that the habits of race talk and colormuteness I was finding at Columbus and in California City were actually common American property. Midway through my research, the California City Unified School District replaced the entire Columbus faculty in a reform called “reconstitution,” which district representatives described in high-level policy circles as designed to improve the education of black and Latino students, but which they rarely described racially in speeches to school faculties or to the public. Throughout a year of “probation” before Columbus’s reconstitution, district leaders instead publicly described the threatened reform almost exclusively as a reform designed to improve the education of “all students.” In turn, Columbus adults hoping to avoid reconstitution (some of whom knew of the district’s particular interest in blacks and Latinos, and some of whom did not) spoke in public meetings or in documents designed for district readers only of their attempts to improve the education of “all.” Columbus’s faculty was finally reconstituted without having participated in any sustained school- or district-level conversation about whether Columbus’s current programs and reforms were sufficiently serving blacks and Latinos—or about whether the district’s reconstitution reforms were designed to assist these two populations better. And after reconstitution, the same discourse of serving “all students” was reproduced almost immediately with 100 almost complete strangers. Indeed, having been given permission by the new principal to finish my doctoral research at Columbus, I would see the full set of school-level

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patterns of race talk and colormuteness I had isolated at the prereconstitution Columbus get reproduced by a new cast of adults assembled from across the country. Throughout this final year of my research, people at Columbus wrestled with the same dilemmas over talking in racial terms about school life.

It was this reproduction of race talk struggles at Columbus that convinced me that the race talk dilemmas I was finding at Columbus actually might be a key issue of racial practice in U.S. education. People working in and on schools in the United States, I realized, must navigate more directly than many Americans our shared issues of diversity and inequality. And while working in contexts saturated by questions of inequality and difference, school people (like professional analysts) also have to *talk* about schooling—and when talking about schooling, many of us are never quite sure whether talking about people or patterns or policies racially makes things better or worse. While people in education cannot truly regulate whether we see one another in racial terms or see racial patterns in schools, then, we struggle all the time in both private conversations and public policies over how, whether, and when we should talk racially about one another and about race's role in school life. While some people resist race talk out of a simple conviction that race talk is itself “racist,” and others resist race talk because they are not particularly concerned about racial inequality, many people resist race talk because they are unsure when talking in racial terms about school people, programs, policies, and patterns would be beneficial—either for kids or for adults. But such resistance to race talk, as I found at Columbus, itself has consequences, just as race talk does. I now believe that people in diverse schools and districts are always struggling with the consequences of both race talk and colormuteness, whether communities struggle openly, angrily, or only subterraneously (for these distinctions, see Fine, Weiss, and Powell 1997). I describe these consequences fully in my book *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School* (Pollock 2004a).

Over my own research journey, thus, I had learned to see one subset of the everyday race wrestling taking place in schools—the basic struggle over talking and not talking in racial terms. I had also decided that investigating various such everyday struggles over race was an educational researcher's responsibility. Many scholars have implied that creating racially equitable, or what some have called “truly integrated,” schools (Powell 2002) requires that the adults and young people in schools and districts analyze their own ongoing racial practices (see Dance 2002; Delpit 1995; Fine et al. 1997; Lewis 2003; Lipman 1998; Pollock 2004a; Tatum 1997). To assist the world of practice, then, researchers ourselves can investigate, analyze, and clarify the daily race struggles occupying and stymieing real people of all ages in schools. Ethnography, with its detailed attention to the functioning of the everyday and (if done properly) its careful, purposeful refusal to impose simplistic answers from “above,” is particularly well suited to the analytic task of pinpointing and

theorizing such everyday race struggles in schools. But studying such struggling (using any method) requires actively learning to focus on ongoing controversy over race in schools rather than just entering schools or communities with familiar categories or too-simple questions in hand to matter-of-factly employ in race research.

As researchers investigate race wrestling in schools, further, we must simultaneously wrestle with our own dilemmas of race talk and analysis, for many of the race dilemmas of everyday school life are mirrored in educational research. I now want to discuss the six basic race talk dilemmas I found operating at Columbus, framing each first briefly as a problem of daily schooling practice and then as an educational research problem. I will spend more time on those dilemmas that particularly plague researchers. I refer readers to Pollock (2004a) for a full treatment of how these dilemmas play out in everyday school life.

## Part 2: From Practice to Theory: Six Dilemmas of Race Talk and Analysis Plaguing School People and Researchers

I begin with the most basic dilemma of race talk, one which Columbus youths engaged particularly explicitly (and which they often navigated with far more grace than do researchers). Race categories are social realities built on biological fictions, and as such they must be engaged inherently paradoxically.

### *Dilemma 1: We Don't Belong to Simple Race Groups, but We Do*

Racialized people are infinitely complex, but racialization itself is and always has been a process of simplification. Racialization is about placing complicated people into simple boxes; Americans have practiced this simplification ever since “race” categories were created to separate masters (“white”) from slaves (“black”) from indigenous populations (“red”) in the period of colonial exploration and expansion in the 1400s (Smedley 1999). Over centuries, various populations first categorized as members of religious, national origin, or language groups became “race” group members in a U.S. simple-race taxonomy of power relations (the pan-national, racialized categories “Asian” and “Hispanic”-“Latino” were gradually simultaneously imposed, chosen, and disputed by the people placed in them).<sup>5</sup> This process of simplification has played out historically, and we replay it in our everyday lives—with fluctuating levels of self-consciousness.

In their everyday discourse, Columbus students attended quite self-consciously to both the complexity of racialized people and the frustrating and often

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necessary simplicity of racial boxes. A great proportion of Columbus students, for example, often described themselves explicitly as “mixed”—what scholars and census makers call “multiracial” (Root 1996). Such students describing their personal identities in detail often admitted the nuances of their own parental or ancestral “mixture,” yet analyses of resource distribution always had them comparing (and slotting themselves into) a short list of simple race groups. When articulating their needs for social, educational, and material resources in and out of school, students similarly prioritized simple “race” identifications over the nuances of national origin. Just as a student who listed five “groups” to define her identity often chose just one when assessing the allotment of time in “multicultural” performances at Columbus, for example, Guatemalan- and Salvadoran-descended students united in simply comparing the political clout given U.S. “Latinos” to that given “blacks” or “whites.”

As noted earlier, I came to call students’ simultaneous defiance and use of race categories “race bending”: students neither accepted race categories wholesale nor threw race categories away (Pollock 2004*b*). Rather, they were strategically contesting the very idea of racial categorization, even while keeping race labels available for social analysis and inequality analysis—the very strategy I want to argue here is essential for race research in the twenty-first century.

Researchers tend to be less good than youths at navigating between two necessary tasks: contesting the very validity of “race” categories when they oversimplify complex people (or worse, when they reify false notions of biological difference) and using these categories for analyzing real social orders and personal identifications built on them. Some researchers attempt to solve the problem of race-categories-as-simultaneous-fiction-and-reality quickly by simply putting the word “race” in quotation marks (I myself employ this strategy), or with a quick caveat that the researcher does not believe in biological racial difference (indeed proved to be a bogus concept for half a century; see Montagu [1942] 1997). Some scholars go so far as to assert that any use of the word “race” to imply human difference is itself “racist” (see Patterson 1997). But more typically, education researchers proceed with comparing race groups without ever questioning the foundational premise of “racial” difference at all. As Almaguer and Jung state of social science writ large, research often “unreflexively” “employs racial categories as if they were biologically given and fixed,” a habit that “obscures the continual ambiguities and contestations over how racial lines have been drawn historically and are being re-drawn today” (cited in Lewis 2003, p. 6). Even researchers who eschew “biological” thinking about race often unquestioningly compare race group behaviors and race group identities, too, as if each child or adult has one “group’s” grab bag of traits; as both philosopher Anthony Appiah (1996) and cultural studies–media scholar Cameron McCarthy (1998) argue, a dangerously oversimplifying account of

“races” often characterizes treatments of “diversity” in scholarship and educational practice.

Of course, leaving race categories unexamined in education analyses also often serves a strategic equity-minded purpose. Since simple categories of race difference have come to have consequences in the real world of opportunity, calling these categories continually into question (as Columbus students themselves hinted) would harm the very populations who now need the most protection. As titles like *The Education of African-Americans* (Willie et al. 1991) or *Latino High School Graduation: Defying the Odds* (Romo and Falbo 1996) make explicit, analyses calling for racial equality in education rarely interrogate the theoretical or empirical validity of racial categories themselves. Most researchers commenting on educational opportunity in the United States continue to compare the resources and treatment given simple race groups, the place of those groups in achievement orders, and the pedagogical strategies seemingly most successful at serving members of those groups. Scholars worried about how students navigate inequality systems typically proceed as if students fit neatly into simple race groups as well.

Yet fully attacking racial inequality, as Columbus students indicated, seems to require treating simple race categories a bit more paradoxically—that is, using them to investigate simply ordered inequalities of opportunity in education (and using them to understand the simple identificatory boxes into which people do at times place themselves and one another) but also questioning race categories’ very existence as clear-cut or fixed classifications of student or adult diversity. Researchers are far less skilled at such strategic use than are youths themselves (for more on youths’ strategic racialization, see Carter in press; Perry 2002; Sharma et al. 1996)—we typically leave it to some researchers to use race categories and other researchers to question them. Yet education researchers have a particular responsibility to model a necessarily paradoxical use of race categories. Since we study institutions of learning, for example, we in particular must stress more often that while we do belong to simple race groups in our inequality orders, we do not belong to simple race groups in our genes; the latter claim, a bogus one, keeps rearing its head in U.S. life (Fraser 1995). (Anthropologists, whose discipline came into being through a racist nineteenth-century quest to rank “race” groups, have a similar responsibility. The American Anthropological Association has thus embarked on a public information campaign to debunk public beliefs about race’s biology, while also stressing publicly [such as in a usefully explicit disciplinary “Statement on ‘Race’” 1998] that people have built racial orders on “racial” categories for long enough that such categories have *become* real.)<sup>6</sup> In addition, as scholars studying the development and identity formation of the young, education researchers in particular can question too-easy assessments of identities as born (or single or fixed) rather than made (and multiple and in flux;

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Cross 1991; Hall 2002; Perry 2002; Root 1996). Educational researchers can also state more explicitly, as have some lawyers, that strategically using in policy and practice the very biologically bogus race categories central to inequality may for some time remain necessary to make things “fair” (Guinier and Torres 2002; Minow 1990).

Articulating this necessarily paradoxical treatment of race categories more directly in our writing and analysis encourages readers, too, to tackle the twenty-first century antiracist task of trying alternately to think and not think about human beings as members of simple race groups. Authors in the recent *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, for example, help readers to think paradoxically about race categories by warning explicitly that readers should avoid assuming that the group characteristics explored in their papers are simplistically shared by all members of those “groups,” even while urging educators to teach students from various “groups” in culturally relevant ways (Banks and Banks 1995). Multiculturalist Sonia Nieto (2000, p. 8) similarly argues that educators must learn about students’ “cultural” experiences and heritages even as she explicitly mentions the “major pitfall” of such group-based thinking: “the information presented can be overgeneralized to the point that it becomes just another harmful stereotype” of any student “group.” Gonzales and Cauce (1995, pp. 140–41) usefully admit to readers a paradoxical dilemma of “trying to deal effectively with race and ethnicity within the educational system”: “How does one recognize ethnic differences and support ethnicity as an important dimension of self-definition without paradoxically encouraging group divisions and intergroup tensions that often result when ethnic categories are emphasized?” And in writing about the politics of higher education, Dominguez (1994, p. 335) helpfully explains explicitly to readers a related paradoxical race task plaguing university professors: professors must try to diversify syllabi and their own faculties without hyperracializing as “minority intellectuals” the authors or applicants of color involved.

As other scholars have suggested, educational researchers too rarely discuss racial categorization with this kind of race-wrestling, paradox-illuminating language (Lee 2003; Parker et al. 1999). Rather, we typically land on either side of the fence (racial categories are fixed or racial categories are “unreal”), and in doing so we create real problems for children. The risks of proceeding in educational research with unproblematized notions of race-group difference will be discussed further later in this article; let me state for now that U.S. politics has demonstrated that academic deconstructions of racial categories as “fictions” can also risk dangerous consequences for kids. Around the same time that I was doing my research in California, some California adults started (mis)using research to imply publicly that since race groups do not biologically exist, monitoring racial inequality itself somehow damages children. Little-known anthropologist Glynn Custred, cობacker (with University of California



regent Ward Connerly) of California's antiaffirmative action "Proposition 209," used the twentieth-century anthropological research deconstruction of race's biology to critique affirmative action policies designed to help children denied opportunities along these supposedly "false" racial lines ("As an anthropologist," Custred reportedly said at one point in "academic" explanation, "I know that when you've got diversity, you've got a problem"; see Chavez 1998, p. 1). Several years later, in another proposed referendum entitled the "Racial Privacy Initiative," Connerly returned to argue that since race categories are biologically bogus, race labels should be deleted altogether from public school data gathered in California. As Connerly told one crowd of potential voters, he had the state's "mixed" kids in mind: "This initiative is for the growing population of kids who don't know what box to check—and shouldn't have to decide. Please give them freedom from race and let them just be Americans" (see "Editorial: Undermining Identity Politics," American Civil Rights Coalition, Friday, April 5, 2002 [available at <http://www.acrc1.org/editotial.htm>, last accessed October 9, 2003]).

Young Californians wrestling more thoughtfully with race categories, in contrast, demonstrate that deleting race altogether from educational record keeping is a premature proposal—that in fact, negotiating equality in education still requires that we use the discourse of simple race categories to describe educational opportunity and some aspects of social life, even as at other moments we openly defy the very ability of "racial" categories to fully describe complex individuals. By sometimes listing multiple terms to describe themselves, sometimes creating new racialized words to describe "mixed" youth accurately ("japapino" was one example), and sometimes applying single, simple race labels to describe their own diversity, Columbus's "mixed" youth employed race labels strategically to cope with an already racialized, racially hierarchical world—a strategy far more sophisticated than deleting race categories from educational analysis or proceeding matter-of-factly with assumptions about "racial" categories' fixed reality.

Learning to look closely at such everyday ways in which the actual people in schools already struggle with categories of racialized difference within systems of racial inequality is one key way to produce scholarship that both utilizes and disrupts racial categories. When researchers observe and analyze people's struggles over drawing lines of racial difference, for example (what anthropologist Renato Rosaldo [1993] more generally calls negotiations over "borders" of differentiation, and what anthropologist Frederick Barth [1969] called struggles to draw and maintain "ethnic boundaries"), we show how everyday people remake "racial" difference and racial hierarchy, too, through daily actions slotting "group" members into expected identities, roles, and performances (and through daily distributions of resources). We also demonstrate how orders of difference and inequality are routinely challenged by

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everyday people. Rather than always draw matter-of-fact lines around “racial” communities a priori in research or refuse altogether to draw such lines, then, education researchers can more often research the everyday analytic struggles over racial categorization occupying real people in schools.

Such research also is important for assisting school adults in particular to “race bend” more, for schools are places that rarely take officially sanctioned time to wrestle openly with the very idea of racial difference. As my own work and other analyses have demonstrated, however, young people routinely informally debate with one another in and around schools what it means to belong to race categories, debating, for example, what it means to “act black” or “act white” (Carter in press; Dance 2002; Fordham 1996; Perry 2002; Rampton 1995; Smitherman 2000), act “Spanish” (Bailey 2000), act “Asian” (Hall 2002; Lee 1996; Maira 2002), or even act “American” (Olsen 1997; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001), just as they debate other kinds of social categorization and inequality in the margins of school life (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995; Varenne 1982). Research has also shown that children struggle informally over racial categories as early as preschool (see Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001) and elementary school (Hatcher and Troyna 1993), while “mixed” or “multiracial” students struggle particularly spectacularly over being slotted into (and slotting themselves into) simple U.S. racial orders (see Pollock 2004*b*; Root 1996). Student newcomers to the United States, too, struggle routinely and usefully over whether detailed national, regional, or skin-tone distinctions from home should be submerged within the new country’s simple-race taxonomy (Rumbaut in press; Waters 1999).

All such debates are crucial debates to engage more openly in schools, and highlighting existing debates in our research is thus an essential analytic move for dislodging familiar assumptions among both readers and educators not just about race-group memberships but also about the identities and behaviors often assumed to go with such memberships. As anthropologist John Jackson (2001) has said of his own community research in Harlem, for example, documenting Harlem African Americans “constantly theorizing” and arguing over notions of “black” and “white” behaviors in their daily lives opened up a space for contesting essentialized notions about fixed race-group identity. Noting that “folk theories of racial difference” are daily both “refashioned and fought for by the people who hold them dearest,” Jackson concluded that “this jostling over race’s falsifiable projection onto the observable data of everyday behavior may serve as the interpretive beginning of the end for some of racial essentialism’s most entrenched clichés” (2001, p. 15).

Through analyzing how some people in and around schools already “jostle” daily over categorizing people, identities, and behaviors racially, researchers studying race and schooling can “jostle” other youths’ and adults’ too-easy ideas about race categories and the people in them. Indeed, ethnographic

research that has analyzed in detail how some school people already struggle over categorizing children has always itself helped readers rethink the basic categories of schooling.<sup>7</sup>

*Dilemma 2: Race Doesn't Matter, but It Does*

The second basic dilemma of race talk operating in U.S. schools is that since people sometimes want race not to matter to how people are treated in schools and sometimes argue that race should matter very much indeed, claims about race's relevance are always highly controversial. For example, students at Columbus wanted to be treated as race group members in curricula recognizing students' heritages, or for the purposes of distributing curricular attention; students did not want to be treated as race group members at moments when deans were considering who to suspend, or when teachers were distributing personal attention. Given that both framing and refusing to frame students racially could alternately be "wrong," debating when race was relevant to the treatment of students (or more generally to Columbian life) was, if often subterraneously, a core part of everyday school life at Columbus.

As described earlier, everyday race talk and colormuteness at Columbus itself exposed that people of all ages were themselves debating when race "really mattered" and should matter to how various people related to each other at Columbus. Yet only once I allowed such daily debate itself to become central in my research did I realize that debate over race's appropriate and actual relevance in school life was Columbus's daily reality. Further, only once I listened to people debate race's relevance did I realize that I myself had simply focused my research on the most comfortably discussed question about race's relevance at Columbus (how race mattered to relations between Columbus students). As described earlier, the topic of how race mattered to student-adult relations was far more submerged in Columbus discourse. Columbus adults, who talked all the time in matter-of-fact racial terms about how students got along, never even used race labels in any public descriptions of relations between students and themselves. Columbus adults would reference "Filipino gangs" or "Samoan-Latino blowouts" at staff meetings or would send home letters about conflicts between "Latino" and "African American" students, but when planning together to improve "discipline" schoolwide, adults typically described conflicts with named individuals, "students," or various kinds of "problem students"—never with race group members. Except when quoting students who had spit out race labels in anger, adults discussing discipline publicly almost never described themselves as racialized beings, either. Indeed, this general pattern of colormuteness in regard to adult race was mirrored at the district level: district representatives almost never framed

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school adults in racial terms in public discourse, even though they labeled students racially (albeit sporadically) throughout high-level district statistics and to the city papers.

Researchers, too, often frame students most comfortably in racial terms, often matter-of-factly assuming that race is centrally relevant to students and exploring less comfortably the racialized school practices of adults. In an analytic habit I call the “lunchtime cliché,” for example, researchers interested in race in schools often march confidently into cafeterias to verify that race matters a lot to students (journalists do the same), surmising that if student “race groups” are not sitting together they are not “getting along.” We do this even though research looking at young people debating lunchtime habits reveals instead that the full complexity and depth of race relations cannot simply be surmised by a quick scan of a lunchroom (nor can animosity be assumed; Tatum 1997). We also go straight to lunchrooms to investigate race in student lives despite evidence that race in school involves adults. As I will describe momentarily, researchers also tend to go primarily to students to ask them (often too bluntly) about race’s relevance. Less often do we frame adults as intertwined racial actors who must be talked to (with care) as well.

This particular habit of student focus might be particularly common to white researchers, who as adults perhaps are more likely to view students (of color) in racial terms than to view school adults (particularly white adults like themselves) in racial terms (Frankenburg 1993; Kincheloe et al. 1998; McIntyre 1997; Sleeter 1993b).<sup>8</sup> Having myself grown up in the extremely homogenous state of Iowa, I must admit, racial categories had always been for me strangely familiar tools for describing other people. For me, as for all other Americans, race was “a key component of our ‘taken-for-granted valid reference schema’ through which we get on in the world” (Outlaw 1990, p. 58), but as a white person I became cognizant of my own “whiteness” only while studying race history in college. I turned to teaching as a contemporary anti-racist project, but my main goal as a teacher was, unsurprisingly, to interrogate race with students.<sup>9</sup> While by the end of my teaching at Columbus I felt “whiter” than I ever had in my life (after countless daily reminders from my students), I still pursued research, as a beginning anthropologist, that framed students as the school’s primary racial beings. I realized that I had to focus on adults as intertwined racial actors only once I realized (indeed, remembered from my own teaching experience) that adults were regularly wondering about the relevance of their own and students’ “race” to their relations with Columbus kids, even while they spoke of these very relations publicly in deraced language.

Understanding race’s relevance in schools thus requires (1) analyzing the practices of both students and adults and (2) focusing not just on the topics that adults and students describe matter-of-factly and easily in racial terms

but also on the topics causing students and adults to debate (and even delete mention of) race's relevance. Yet educational research rarely shows people in schools wrestling with determining race's relevance in their own lives; instead, researchers typically enter schools to determine race's relevance ourselves. Furthermore, in this quest to prove race's relevance or irrelevance, we often treat both student and adult race talk too simplistically as unproblematic evidence.

As Mertz (1992) argues, the assumption that talk is a purely descriptive "window" onto the "real world," rather than a strategic act in itself, actually plagues all research using talk as data.<sup>10</sup> As Hammersley (1998) argues similarly, researchers particularly tend to oversimplify student talk by treating it as transparent, unambiguous opinion, rather than as negotiated talk offered to a researcher. Hammersley argues further that while researchers often treat student talk about race as unadulterated "truth," we often refuse to take adult talk about race at face value, instead treating it as consistently disingenuous. In so doing, I would add, researchers actually often oversimplify adult talk about race as well, "unmasking" racism in such talk as if the researcher alone has access to the "real" thoughts lurking just "underneath the surface." Less often does such research acknowledge that the adults talking might actually be complex people struggling with issues of race and racism themselves (Sears et al. 2000; see also Wetherell and Potter 1992).

Further, while some scholars argue that the goal of antiracist research is to get past adult denials and discover racism operating as expected in schools (some have suggested that this "uncovering" of adult racism is Critical Race Theory's project; see Parker et al. 1999), such an objective, while very important, risks implying that people in schools just robotically practice racism and never struggle themselves as conflicted human beings to avoid it. Such research also risks being unconvincing to unsympathetic readers who assume that the researcher simply found the racism she set out to find. Of course, since some analysts of education prefer to argue simplistically that racism is no longer an issue in schools at all (e.g., McWhorter 2000; Reynolds 1996), researchers who care about racial inequality must also work to prove that race does still matter in schools in order to counter blunt denials of race's relevance (Lewis 2003). How then to navigate between the "race constantly matters in predetermined ways" and "come on, race doesn't matter" poles? Again, I believe that analyzing and presenting school people's ongoing, intergenerational disputes over race's relevance might actually provide some of the most convincing analyses of how race really matters, is known to matter, is made to matter, and is actively covered up on the ground in schooling. But this approach is rare. Our surveys, statistics, and field notes routinely demonstrate that we enter schools primed not really to see the struggles in which school people are engaged regarding race's relevance but, rather, to uncover for them

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more simplistically how race matters (or for some researchers, does not matter) in expected ways.

Further, researchers often attempt to solve the problem of determining how race matters to school life by simply asking respondents quickly to tell us (or, if we are so-called quantitative researchers, we simply embed the debate in our variables). But in research relying on discourse in particular (interviews, surveys, and participant observation), we often forget that summing up race's relevance is anything but a straightforward act in the United States. Researchers investigating race in schools through talk often appear to forget the particularly strategic nature of race talk, which contends always, even when unprompted, with the pervasive U.S. ideology that race should not really matter or should matter only at certain times (Banaji 2001; Sears et al. 2000). The assumption that prompted talk about race is a direct representation of informants' attitudes, rather than a strategic response to prompting, runs throughout various methods of race research (Studs Terkel thus confidently titles his collection of interview data *Race: How Blacks and Whites "Think and Feel" about the American Obsession* [1992, quotation marks mine]). But one must question, for example, this classic dismissal of race's importance during an exchange between a researcher and a "black" student interviewee (Grant and Sleeter 1986, p. 32):

R: Are you going to date just black boys, or what?  
Frances: Nope. I'm not just gonna date black ones.  
R: Are you going to date just who you want to?  
Frances: Yeah, regardless of race.

As seen here, direct queries asking respondents to sum up race's relevance can have respondents obligingly denying that race is relevant at all. In a study of "ethnicity" in a California high school, Peshkin (1991) proceeded to ask students a similarly direct research question, which was, "To what extent, if at all, is ethnicity a fact in the students' lives?" (p. 171). While Peshkin acknowledged retrospectively that his other blunt interview questions about student "ethnicity and identity" had not captured the "inconsistencies" of racial identity at his field site (pp. 177–78), he continued to treat students' proffered assessments of race's (ir)relevance as uncontroversial. Asked bluntly about the relevance (and possible irrelevance) of race, Peshkin's interviewees summed up repeatedly that race was unimportant, "not salient," or "not really a big thing." Peshkin, who was himself white, reported receiving similar answers to his direct questions from students of all "ethnicities": "white" students responded that "being white" made little difference at school, while black students he asked "about the importance of being black if someone wanted to

know them well . . . did not rank it highly” (p. 191). Interviews with “Filipino” students also suggested that “during their high school years, their ethnicity is not salient” (p. 208). Despite the existence of racial achievement patterns in the school (which Peshkin described elsewhere), Peshkin concluded similarly that:

At school, nonnewcomer Mexicans basically see being Mexican as a fact of little consequence, as I learned when I asked students if being Mexican affected their life in and out of class. Specifically, did being Mexican make a difference regarding the grades they got, how teachers treated them, being popular, getting elected to office, who’d they vote for, what clubs they’d join, success in sports, getting in trouble, getting their share of what the school had to offer? Overwhelmingly, students saw little or no relationship between their ethnicity and any of these points: it was neither helpful nor unhelpful to be Mexican. (P. 184)

Interview questions demanding to know the salience of race in respondents’ lives can, of course, also lead respondents to highlight race with expected zeal. In the same study quoted earlier (Grant and Sleeter 1986, p. 34), interview questions asking students to assess the “importance” of “background” could actually lead them to emphasize the salience of group membership just as bluntly:

R: How important do you think a person’s background is?

Rakia: It’s important.

R: Do you intend to pass down your Egyptian background to your kids?

Rakia: Yes.

Since people of all ages often give researchers oversimplified answers about race’s relevance-irrelevance when asked, race research must not only be wary of simplifying questions but also pay far more attention to ongoing contestation over race’s relevance. To do so, we can attend both to the subtle hesitations, stutters, arguments, and denials within individual conversations or interviews (see also Bonilla-Silva 2002) and to the explicit arguments over race’s relevance that take shape during the ongoing life of schools. For such everyday contestation over race’s relevance is itself not just the reality of racial practice but also the key reason why various claims about race’s role in school can be dismissed so easily. Since people also resist talking in many situations about the ways in which race matters to them most dangerously, we can also try to examine carefully the patterned absence of race talk in interactions or across institutions, as well as its conspicuous and too-easy presence.<sup>11</sup>

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*Dilemma 3: The Deraced Words We Use When Discussing Plans for Racial Equality Can Actually Keep Us from Discussing Ways to Make Opportunities Racially Equal*

In Pollock (2004a), I discuss at length the paradoxically inequality-increasing effects of some equity-minded talk of reforms for “all students,” which was rampant at Columbus and in California City. I will say little about this dilemma here and point readers to the longer treatment in that work. But there is one core lesson to mention from equity-minded practice for equity-minded research: the equality discourse of assisting “all students” is both necessary and dangerous. That is, researchers, like practitioners, often proceed as if demanding that schools serve “all students” itself helps achieve equality for “all,” yet equity-minded calls for assisting “all students” (now routine in U.S. educational discourse) do not in themselves achieve equality. Further, talk about “all students” does not precisely analyze inequality either. An overreliance in educational discourse on the spirited language of “all students” might, at times, actually make us imagine falsely that we have adequately modeled how to analyze and address patterns (including racial patterns) of student need.

*Dilemma 4: The More Complex Inequality Seems to Get, the More Simplistic Inequality Analysis Seems to Become*

Every day, Columbus and district speakers embarked on a daunting task shared with educational researchers: discussing which students are disadvantaged in comparison to whom. Every day, for example, a student population of “low-income minorities” who had weathered years of educational denial walked into Columbus’s run-down building, making Columbus seem to many to be undeniably “disadvantaged” in comparison to the district’s more well-off and white schools. Yet Columbus also had class patterns, race patterns, language-need patterns, and academic patterns within its own walls. There were other complexities to local systems of social and academic inequality: the city’s predominantly “black” public housing projects also housed most of the “Sa-moans” who attended Columbus, while districtwide, “Chinese” students dominated “academic” schools along with “whites.” “Filipino” test scores topped Columbus charts even while Filipinos demonstrated disappointing levels of English proficiency city- and statewide.

Considering such complexities, speakers at Columbus and in California City argued particularly over how race mattered to the economic and educational opportunities afforded students, both within Columbus and districtwide. They argued about whether inequality patterns were binary or multi-racial, about whether all racial patterns in the city and school had exceptions,



about how district policies should distribute or financially assist the city's "races," and about how race should matter to school reforms. They also argued over whether class inequality trumped race inequality within the school or district (or whether race dominated class), and over whether school or district programs should ever "target" specific student race groups for special assistance as race-group members. And in response to all this analytic confusion about race's role in local systems of social and academic opportunity, many speakers often deleted race labels altogether from vague discussions of "inner city," "at risk," or "disadvantage," both within Columbus and districtwide. In so deleting race labels from their analytic discourse, they often unwittingly avoided thoroughly analyzing the details of how inequalities in educational opportunity actually worked.

Such habits of analytic and discursive murkiness are common to educational research on inequality as well. Professional analysts, like school people, sometimes avoid tackling the full analytic complexity of determining race's role in contemporary inequality systems, either by resorting too often to simple, familiar analyses of racial inequality (e.g., favoring easier binary black-white analysis over the substantial complexities of multiracial analysis) or by trumping race analysis simplistically with class analysis (see, e.g., Chavez 1996). Marable (1996, p. 15) points out that the race-class debate usually ends with the full trumping of race by class and is thus to some extent a "false debate."

In a demographically complex nation, as we acknowledge not just the specifics of money, migration, language, and social services within our local communities but also the complex "multi-polarity of racial identities (not just black and white, but also red, brown, and yellow)" (Omi and Winant 1994, p. 158), both researchers and practitioners need to become far more proficient at responding to the complicated question of who exactly is to be called disadvantaged in specific places, and in comparison to whom. Once again, researchers can assist practitioners and researchers in training by considering and discussing more explicitly in our analyses how we are analyzing specific systems of "disadvantage," and particularly how we are analyzing race's relevance to specific inequality systems. We can explain to readers, for example, when and why we think binary (white-of color, black-white) analyses make the most sense for understanding inequality, and when and why we think analyses must be multiracial. We can explain explicitly when, why, and how we are analyzing the intertwining of race and class locally or nationally, by describing when and how to look within "race groups" for class patterns (Wang and Wu 1996) or within class groups for race ones (Rothstein 2004). Rather than proceeding with a murky language of "risk" ourselves, we also can more often analyze explicitly how racially patterned denials of opportunity intertwine with patterns of language need, immigration, and neighborhood resources in specific places. In sum, we can take up the challenge of analyzing

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and debating how race still matters to the complex local and national inequality systems in education, for precise inequality solutions “on the ground” rely perhaps more than ever on precise inequality analysis. Policy makers wrestling with addressing the distribution of educational opportunity nationwide, statewide, or locally founder on the same analytic problems as do everyday analysts, and the result is sometimes policy based on inherently imprecise categories of “disadvantage.” California’s “Proposition 209,” which purposefully replaced the complications of statewide race analysis with the murky project of assisting students literally labeled “disadvantaged,” quickly helped transform diverse University of California campuses into more homogenously white and “Asian” spaces—a perfect example of how the triumph of vague analysis on the ground can end up actually making race matter more to educational inequality, not less.

*Dilemma 5: The Questions We Ask Most about Race Are the Very Questions We Most Suppress*

As I have discussed elsewhere (Pollock 2001, 2004a), achievement talk is perhaps the kind of race talk that most plagues educational practitioners and researchers in the United States, even while talking racially about student achievement is also one of the most routine acts of U.S. educational discourse. Adults at Columbus, for example, routinely compared in private the presumed achievement motivations and achievement-related behavior of Columbus’s “race groups” and their parents; district officials similarly routinely measured the district’s race-group achievement patterns in documents kept at district offices (while implying in public speeches that these patterns were the fault of educators alone). Yet when speaking to one another in public about achievement and how to improve it, school and district people rarely talked directly about achievement in racial terms at all. The question asked most about race in education (“Do racial achievement patterns exist here, and why?”) is also the question most often deleted on the ground.

Discussing racial achievement patterns is easy, it seems, if one is far away from the people one holds responsible for that achievement. The district’s superintendent talked much more easily to the newspapers than to teachers about racial achievement patterns, while the California Department of Education Web site was perhaps most forthcoming about presenting school-level race data. But when actors in education come together face-to-face, even naming an achievement pattern often seems threatening—because naming a pattern always invites an explanation blaming self or others for it. Since in education talk of racial achievement patterns routinely involves a habit of blaming other people, I have urged that practitioners discussing racial achieve-

ment patterns might be most productive using an “urgent language of communal responsibility” (Pollock 2001, 2004a).

Race researchers, I believe, must also consider carefully how we talk about race and achievement from far away. In particular, we must ask whether unproductive blame dynamics are often embedded in our own research. For example, researchers often seek “achievement gap” causes with zeal, but we more rarely stop to question the effects of our own familiar explanatory habits. For one, researchers regularly isolate groups of players analytically (often racialized groups like “Latino parents,” “black kids,” or “white teachers”) to stress their responsibility for producing racial achievement patterns. Such analytic isolation is necessary at times to figure out various actors’ contributions to creating achievement patterns, but it also encourages a national habit of framing achievement patterns as orders produced by isolated sets of players, rather than by multiple intertwined players both inside and outside of schools. As researchers routinely end up “blaming” teachers alone, parents alone, or student race groups themselves for achievement patterns (Pollock 2001), superintendents focus analysis-blame reductively on teachers, teachers focus analysis-blame reductively on students or parents, and everybody blames the teachers, parents, and student race groups toiling in city schools (e.g., rather than parents moving out to the suburbs, governors, or presidents).

The tone in which we researchers discuss racial achievement patterns is also routinely dangerous, even when we mean for the information we present to spark curiosity in others. In slapping up racial achievement charts and graphs nonchalantly at conferences or habitually rattling off achievement statistics to the newspapers, for example, we often promote a matter-of-fact discussion of racial achievement patterns and their causes—one that helps prime Americans nationwide (and educational researchers in training) almost to expect racial patterns as natural orders. While researchers today are no longer measuring heads to prove the nation’s racial inequalities are “natural” outcomes of presumed intelligence differentials, a research tendency toward naturalizing racial disparities in educational attainment is still uncomfortably strong.<sup>12</sup> Research inquiries often blandly seem to expect racial achievement patterns, setting off to measure academic outcomes with a nonchalance born of familiarity rather than a startled stance of outrage (for a similar argument, see Payne 1984). Far more rarely do we researchers analyze and critique our own matter-of-factness about investigating and describing racial achievement patterns or frame racial achievement patterns as both unnatural and communally preventable.

Researchers, I would argue, also realize too rarely that particular educational research explanations of racialized achievement gaps have real consequences for the children we describe. For example, Fordham and Ogbu’s popular article (1986), which argues that youth of color frame school achieve-

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ment as undesirably “white,” is a prime example of how a feedback loop between research and “real life” reinforces numbing popular assumptions about the nation’s “races.” As Erickson (1993, p. 42) describes, Fordham and Ogbu’s initial claims that black youths resisted academic success were immediately picked up by National Public Radio; radio interviewers confidently set out to grill black “Capitol High” students on how (not if) they avoided school achievement for racialized reasons. While Fordham and Ogbu have themselves critiqued the oversimplification of their findings, one popular article after another (see, e.g., Lee 2002) cites their work to reinforce the “black and Latino kids don’t care” thesis in U.S. race ideology. And as many other scholars have argued, this argument about race-group behavior and attitude has suspiciously been taken as a familiar national fact without sufficient debate (see Conchas 2001; O’Connor 1997). As Carter (in press) argues, for example, those black and Latino youths who resist social behaviors seen as “white” in school have instead been framed by both researchers and their own teachers as rejecting school achievement itself. Such naturalized assumptions have serious consequences for black and Latino students who struggle daily to both achieve and “act black” or “act Latino” in school. Further, rarely do popular articles seeking student opinions on “acting white” interrogate the problematic social consequences of analytically assuming achievement motivation to be a “white” domain; nor do they typically look within “race groups” for counterexamples. This simplified, familiar framing of “race groups” in school—which blames various student groups of color for desiring their own “failure,” and in doing so lets everyone around youth in schools off the hook—seems simply too palatable to the American public.

Accordingly, graduate students in U.S. schools of education, too, often seem programmed on arrival to choose one racialized, ethnic, or national-origin group (typically a group of students of color) for their dissertation research (as if this group acts in isolation) and to set out to determine how members of that “group” react to the task of achieving in school. Yet having generation after generation of educational researchers lunge forth with ingrained, matter-of-fact assumptions that racialized “kinds of kids” will have racialized attitudes toward schooling (or schooling behaviors) is dangerous business (for a confessional self-analysis of such a research design, see McDermott 1997). It might be far better for kids if we researchers were more often to name and critique shared U.S. assumptions about race and achievement (Steele 1992). We could also promote more often a discourse of communal responsibility pinpointing all the necessary actors who have to be invited to the table to produce solutions (Moses 2001).

*Dilemma 6: Although Talking in Racial Terms Can Make Race Matter, Not Talking in Racial Terms Can Make Race Matter Too*

Finally, Columbus people were caught, daily, in the most basic dilemma of U.S. racial practice: in a world in which racial inequality already exists, both talking and not talking in racial terms can alternately be “racist.” This dilemma showed up in the most routine examples of school race talk. For example, Columbus adults regularly privately discussed the racial demographics of an everyday school issue—students wandering in the hallway during class time. Across Columbus, adults of all “races” whispered anxiously their perceptions that the hall wanderers were predominantly “black.” Yet Columbus adults also admitted self-consciously that they deleted the very label “black” from public discussions of the hallway “problem,” explaining that openly labeling the hall wanderers as “black” would seem “discriminatory.” Simultaneously, they acknowledged that not describing the hallway’s racial demographics seemed potentially “discriminatory” as well, since black students were effectively allowed to miss class disproportionately and at times to wander through the halls for hours anxiously ignored.

I found further that there was another paradoxical consequence of color-muteness, of which Columbus adults were somewhat less aware. By nervously and self-consciously deleting the very word “black” from their public talk of the hallway, adults actually paradoxically increased the relevance of “blackness” to the hall-wandering “problem.” Columbus adults quietly whispering about “black students” and then letting them wander in full view actually ended up ignoring black students in racial terms—that is, ignoring them precisely “because they were black.” Ian Haney Lopez (1996) makes a related argument: “to banish race-words” often “redoubles the hegemony of race,” by “leaving race and its effects unchallenged and embedded in society, seemingly natural rather than the product of social choices” (p. 177). Further, in whispering daily about black students’ hall-wandering behaviors, Columbus adults relentlessly placed black students alone at the center of daily analysis of this school “problem,” effectively ignoring their own roles in producing the hallways’ racial demographics (e.g., their own acts of ejecting black students disproportionately from classrooms, or of allowing black students disproportionately to wander). And in doing so, they repeatedly framed black students themselves as “problematic” students whose presence in the hallways could not be openly mentioned—in the process making the “blackness” of students matter more.

A school-level tendency to focus on black students as particular school “problems” (see Ferguson 2000; Noguera 2003) has been shown to be mirrored in the discourse and practice of educational research, even as researchers often

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fail to talk systemically about the obstacles affecting black students and other students of color (for comment, see Perry et al. 2003). Research focusing on school patterns disproportionately harming black students often focuses analysis on black students' behavior alone, rather than including the various additional actors creating problems that harm black students; the strategy often risks reinforcing a notion of black students themselves as particularly problematic. Powell (1997, p. 3) notes, for example, that research focused obsessively on discovering the isolated role of black students in "black underachievement" systematically ignores the role that other people, particularly white people, play in the "knot of minority student failure" (for more recent examples of scholarship isolating black youths' behaviors as the primary cause of black underachievement, see McWhorter 2000; Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003). Sullivan (1996) makes an analogous argument about analytic reduction in the study of impoverished neighborhoods, arguing that "by focusing on processes internal to a poor community, the researcher continually runs the risk of ascribing the causes of problems within the community entirely to its own members and neglecting processes of disinvestments, exploitation, and exclusion emanating from powerful interests and institutions outside the community" (p. 209). As research on the "model minority" myth (Sue and Okazaki 1995) similarly shows, researchers often seem fixated on figuring out what it is about racialized groups' behavior that makes them succeed or fail (one article on "Asian" student achievement puts it classically: "*What is it about Asian students that helps account for their above-average record?*" [See Steinberg 1996; emphasis added]). More rarely do we frame student "race groups" as embedded within intergenerational, multiracial systems of schooling opportunity and expectation, systems that both produce "group" behaviors and assume these behaviors the moment smiling kindergartners arrive.

Such analytic reductions focused on any one "group's" school behavior often have practitioners, too, talking about groups of students as if they naturally have group-specific school behaviors or "attitudes" toward schooling (and as if inbred student attitude and actions alone produce achievement outcomes, with "the school" serving primarily as background "context"). As one Columbus teacher recently out of graduate school suggested to me in a discussion of the hall wanderers (see Pollock 2004a, p. 192), educational "research" itself often seems to be about race group-specific hypotheses implicating the behaviors and attitudes of students and, often, their parents: "I don't want to say it's *because* they're black—I'm not being prejudiced. I think maybe it's because of other things, and I don't know for sure because I haven't done the research or anything. But something about the socialization of African-Americans—the street culture, and maybe because of the lack of values at home."

Research too often muses similarly about the actions of any given such

“race group” in isolation, thus often implying to readers that achievement patterns are in a sense “because of” student “race.” Far more rarely do scholars examine the “institutional choreography” (Fine 1997) in which students and adults of various “races,” inside and outside of schools, together help produce racialized school patterns of failure or success (one good, short example of systemic research is Valencia’s [1991] analysis of Latino underachievement, which makes clear that it is not only Latinos but also the many actors building the system of opportunities and educational experiences surrounding Latinos that must be investigated to truly understand “Latino underachievement” [see Conchas 2001]). Thompson (1999, p. 144) names “colortalk” this kind of systemic race talk, which “explicitly names the mechanisms” (implicitly, mechanisms including many actors) by which racialized orders are “maintained.”

Achieving sufficiently systemic race talk takes work. Simply talking more in practice or research about kids as racial beings with racialized behaviors, of course, often does little to challenge preexisting unsystemic analyses that harm kids (for a related argument, see Perry, in Perry et al. 2003). Indeed, every time researchers open our mouths or sit down at our computers to talk about race in education, we risk hurting kids by falling into reductive scripts for talking about them. Again, one tactic for talking systemically in research might be to add up and pit against each other the various everyday analyses of the adults and young people themselves struggling in schools and districts to analyze racial patterns, as well as the analyses of the researchers, policy makers, and community people arguing about schools and school systems (Pollock forthcoming). At Columbus, for example, while adults routinely talked about the hall-wandering “problem” in reductive ways that ended up implicating black students alone, if taken in total the full range of ongoing Columbus debates about the hallways and other school “problems” actually showed that both adults and students were wondering (albeit often in analytically atomized conversations) about the respective roles of administrators, students, teachers, parents, the district, and various city and national actors in producing racial patterns (as one teacher put it to me, “it just gets too big, trying to *explain* it”). Indeed, in worrying about their own colormuteness in regard to the hall-wandering phenomenon, teachers even indicated at times that they recognized they themselves played roles in producing and allowing this racial pattern (“I don’t want to harp on the fact that the hall wanderers are black—I’m not being prejudiced. . . . But it needs to be addressed. . . . *We’re not serving them well enough*”). There is a good deal to be learned from everyday race analyses—if we take the full analysis to be distributed across many actors and treat each individual analysis as partial and flawed.

### Conclusion: Wrestling with Race More Strategically in Educational Research

To produce analyses that actually assist educators in dismantling racial inequalities, I believe, we must analyze not just the simple acts that produce these inequalities but also the struggles over racial inequality and diversity already occurring on the ground in schools and districts. We must also wrestle with our own habits of talking about and analyzing race in research. Over the course of my own research, for one, I myself had learned to see everyday race struggles, rather than simplifying and obscuring these struggles in a quest to answer my original research questions. I had also countered my beginning research assumptions by reframing racial orders in schools as communally produced, intergenerational, and multi-“race” phenomena rather than phenomena specific to kids of color alone. During my research on race at Columbus, I had also realized that as an ethnographer interested in the everyday workings of race and racial inequality, I could simply measure and discuss the basic experiences of race-group members (which race groups had less money? Which ones graduated more? Which ones got suspended more often?). Alternatively, I could make the conflicted details of racial practice a strange phenomenon for analysis by watching the everyday ways in which people racialized one another, debated race group membership, and muttered anxieties about proceeding racially. My inquiry into race talk “race wrestled” by combining the two approaches. I continued collecting data typically seen as racial “facts”—school demographics, grades, and test scores—while analyzing students and adults producing and struggling over these very facts and what to make of them.

I am concerned that if researchers do not work more to analyze everyday struggles over race, and if we do not struggle more with talking about and analyzing race in our own research, we ourselves might continue to rush into dangerously familiar, too-easy analyses of race in education. This article has thus been, in part, a call for employing the ethnographic mantra of “make the familiar strange” when considering our own work. I think that U.S. education researchers, like practitioners, could do far more to debate how we talk about and analyze race. We might as well debate this, for we ourselves are already talking and thinking about race all the time: any meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) will always offer hundreds if not thousands of papers referencing and analyzing students in racial terms. Yet while race talk and analysis is typically all over AERA, researchers too rarely make struggling over race talk and analysis an explicit part of our communal work.

Fundamentally, we must balance two necessary tasks in our work on race: analyzing adequately the true complexity of human diversity and analyzing



adequately the production of simple orders of racial inequality. It takes much more work, of course, to talk this way in research. It is much harder to talk as if race is not some taken-for-granted system of human difference but, rather, a produced system in which lives have and do become actively racialized through “thousands of daily interactions” in and around schools (Johnson in press). It is much harder to talk as if children or youth are not fundamentally different by “race” but as if children’s and youths’ life experiences and opportunities get fundamentally differentiated by race. It is much harder to explain that race categories are not at their origins real but that Americans young and old organize identities and opportunities and life scripts as if they are. And it is much harder to proceed as if race matters centrally at some key moments in schooling and maybe is not the central issue in others. But in a country in which shockingly popular contemporary authors discussing education assert blatant falsehoods about race—that race categories should be taken for granted as “genetic” facts, for example (a notion disproved half a century ago), that serious racialized differences in life opportunity no longer really exist, or that kids of color today really have no interest in achieving in school—researchers and practitioners need to learn to think and talk about race with unprecedented agility.<sup>13</sup> Neither employing race categories too matter-of-factly as natural units of diversity nor denying the produced social facts of racial inequality helps children. Accordingly, the more self-consciously researchers struggle with how to talk about and analyze race in education, the better equipped we are to assist the school and district people who are already struggling to do so. We would do well to put such struggle itself at the center of educational research.

## Notes

I would like to thank the following thoughtful and generous scholars who read and critiqued this piece: Wendy Luttrell, Heather Harding, Meira Levinson, Maya Beasley, Mia Ong, and Dorinda Carter. Thanks also to Gil Conchas, who invited a talk that prompted this article. Many thanks also to this journal’s anonymous reviewers for their helpful critiques.

1. “Columbus” and “California City” are pseudonyms, promised to the second of Columbus’s two beleaguered principals. My framing of Columbus as a place with deeply American dilemmas rather than as a local “case study” also makes naming Columbus seem unnecessary. For a thorough treatment of colormuteness and the six race talk dilemmas of educational practice described here, see Pollock (2004a). Several paragraphs of description and analysis in this article also appear in that work.

2. For more scholarship framing racial systems as inequality systems and race categories as categories of power distribution, see Espiritu 1992; Frankenburg 1993; Gilroy 1993; Haney Lopez 1996; Harrison 1995; Ignatiev 1995; Kincheloe et al. 1998; Lipsitz 1998; Omi and Winant 1994; Roediger 1991; Rumbaut in press; Sacks 1997; Thompson 1999; West 1992; Winant 1998.

3. Indeed, everyday people of all ages strategically seize simple categories to deal

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with simple-category systems of distributing resources; see Omi and Winant (1994) on “racial formation,” Spivak (1987) on “strategic essentialism,” and Stuart Hall (1992) on what Sharma (1996, p. 34) calls finding “strategic places from which to speak.” As Winant (1998, p. 90) writes, the very concept of “racial” difference serves both to allocate resources and to “provid[e] means for challenging that allocation.”

4. As anthropologist George Spindler has argued (1982), the task of “doing the ethnography of schooling” in familiar places necessitates that researchers “make the familiar strange.” For any researcher or practitioner who begins with the familiar—with “home” practices and logics sedimented within her own life—the mantra demands that she work extra hard to make strange the ideas received involuntarily over a lifetime of socialization. But as anthropologists George Marcus and Michael Fischer (1986, p. 111) admit of American anthropology writ large, “For the most part, anthropologists have taken the job of reflecting back upon ourselves much less seriously than that of probing other cultures.” As I note in Pollock (2004*a*), labeling (or not labeling) each other with race words is of course just one familiar way that Americans make each other racial. We reproduce “racial” difference through the patterned use of particular languages, dialects, styles, or vocabulary; going beyond talk, we make ourselves and each other racial when we make meaning of genetically insignificant physical characteristics, like skin color, nose shape, eye contour, or hair texture. We reracialize ourselves and one another through the music we listen and dance to, the people we sit down next to, the organizations we belong to, the resources we distribute, and the neighborhoods we choose to live in or not to live in. Racial orders in school are also built through the distribution of dollars, through the “tracking” of racialized bodies to designated schools and classrooms, through the false expectations that differential abilities reside in racialized minds, and through an “institutional choreography” (Fine 1997) of everyday actions funneling opportunities to some students and not others. For a full bibliography of these contemporary and historical methods of everyday racialization in the United States, see Pollock 2004*a*, intro. and chap. 1.

5. On the creation of the U.S. category “white,” see Haney Lopez 1996; Ignatiev 1995; Roediger 1991; Sacks 1997; on “black,” see Davis 1997; Jordan 1974; on “Asian,” see Espiritu 1992; and on “Hispanic” and “Latino,” see Delgado and Stefancic 1998; Suarez-Orozco and Paez 2002.

6. At the nineteenth-century origins of the field, anthropologists compared, physically measured, and ranked presumed-different “racial” populations without apparent consciousness about their own culpability in producing these very differences and rankings (see Baker 1998; Gould 1981; Smedley 1999). The core of contemporary anthropological “reflexivity” is a self-consciousness about the ethnographic practice and product (see Clifford and Marcus 1986; Wolf 1992). As Emerson et al. (1995, p. 11) put it, “*What* the ethnographer finds out is inherently connected with *how* she finds it out.” The same, of course, can be said for all modes of race research.

7. Mehan’s analysis of mother, psychologist, and teachers arguing over labeling a child “disabled” in a placement meeting (1996), e.g., makes readers question the very existence and definition of “disability.” Varenne et al.’s (1997) research (like Spindler’s [1987] and Henry’s [1963] before them) looks closely at competitive rituals in U.S. schools and has readers rethinking the very process of delineating winners from losers. Looking at children and teachers struggling over defining “English proficiency” in an elementary school classroom, Moll and Diaz (1993) have readers questioning “proficiency” itself. For other analyses making readers rethink definitions of “kinds of kids” in schools, see, e.g., Varenne and McDermott (1998) on disability categories, Fine (1991) on the category “dropout,” Deyhle (1995) and Foley (1996) on the categories “Indian” and “Anglo,” Luttrell (2003) on categories of sexuality, Thorne (1993) on

categories of gender, Page (1991) on the category “low-tracked,” and Willis (1977) on class categories. See also Levinson et al. 1996.

8. Many scholars have pointed out that “whites” have always been central to racial orders in the United States, even as whites are, by this point in history, allowed daily immunity from much race analysis as if “whites” were not race group members at all (the greatest privilege given “whites,” perhaps, is the privilege of racializing others while seeming unracial or worse, “normal”). See also Lipsitz 1998; Macintosh 1989; Thompson 1999. On whiteness and schooling, see also Fine et al. 1997; Perry 2002.

9. I myself, thus, had grown up in an American place where I was almost never explicitly racialized. The homogeneous state of Iowa of the 1970s and 1980s offered no daily personal reminder of my own place in the U.S. racial taxonomy. In the schools in Iowa City at the time, few of us in our almost completely all-white schools even sporadically framed ourselves self-consciously as “white.” (While pride in European immigrant heritage permeates some Iowa associations, national-origin ancestry was not a big concern for my peers either. Iowa today, by the way, appears less homogeneous, as industries attract more migrants from within and outside the United States who do not frame themselves as “white.”) To say that I was unfamiliar with race, however—or indeed, that any “white” person in the United States is—would be only partly true. White people are racialized, too, of course, and we, too, are race makers (See Roman’s aptly titled “White Is a Color!” [1993]). Indeed, framing distant others racially was a distinctly familiar act of my youth. Further, questioning “racial” difference was also on my mind as a young person: as the grandchild of Holocaust survivors persecuted for their racialized group membership (see Fredrickson [2002] on racialized anti-Semitism), I had a fairly skeptical and also fairly negative view of racialization from the beginning, only later in life coming to understand the positive empowerment that could be derived from membership in racialized communities bonded by struggle. West (1992) defines “blackness,” e.g., as a state of being in which one experiences both a constantly looming system of white supremacy waiting to denigrate one’s person, and the joys of belonging to a culturally rich community of people empowered through resistance to such denigration.

10. Mishler (1986) demonstrates more generally that much interview research ignores the effect of the interview situation, often abstracting answers from the context of questions asked and erasing the interviewer entirely from the text presented. See also Briggs 1986.

11. Prioritizing naturalistic interactions in my research allowed me to recognize that quiet struggles over race and race talk were a key aspect of Columbus people’s everyday existence. As described in Pollock (2004a), as an ex-teacher, I was given mostly free rein by the principal to walk around the school and talk to people for my research, and I participated in the same casual interactions with students and adults in hallways and classrooms that I had as a teacher, only with more time and with the shared understanding that such conversations were my research. I also learned to go looking for race talk in multiple institutional locations: I documented discourse from school board meetings; superintendent’s addresses; conversations between teachers held in classrooms, hallways, and happy hours; conversations between teachers, students, parents, and administrators in and out of classrooms; and conversations between students both in and out of school. I also gathered systematically the written artifacts of legal opinions, district and school-level statistics, district pronouncements and press releases, union newsletters, faculty newsletters and memos, student assignments, newspaper articles, and educational research itself. Analyzing all such talk eventually helped me discover the key role of the kind of race talk that simply happens in informal school moments, along with that which happens at the more formalized moments of faculty

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meetings, public assemblies, and document writing. As described in Pollock (2004a), I chose not to tape record my natural research conversations for a simple self-conscious reason: turning on a tape recorder during a quiet conversation about race with a former colleague or new friend seemed likely not only to make people extremely uncomfortable but, indeed, to destroy the very data we were producing. Yet I did not need to capture language at too fine-grained a level of linguistic detail in any case. I came to need instead to capture the basic timing of the appearance of race terms, the topics in connection to which race labels were used, and the worries people expressed about using them. I thus reconstructed conversations immediately after the fact—within minutes or hours—slipping into bathrooms or empty classrooms to scribble them down. Over several years, thousands of speech examples collected through participant observation at Columbus and in its district would reveal that people used, struggled with, and deleted race labels in predictable ways at predictable times. By making race “talk” my unit of analysis, I had started listening far more carefully to the structure of everyday talk rather than its content alone. Researchers use talk as data most of the time, but we only rarely get self-conscious about using talk as a unit of analysis; most researchers, as Briggs (1986) and Mishler (1986) have pointed out, treat talk captured in the field as simply opinions or “beliefs” to write down. By attending to race talk as a structured social action, I progressed from studying just the presence of race labels to studying their patterned absence as well. While collecting data and afterward, I read repeatedly through my corpus of field notes, attaching a sticky sliver of Post-it to the notes every time that race labels emerged or were conspicuously absent (e.g., when school speakers who had just spoken to me in private about racial patterns in school discipline spoke haltingly in public of the “problem kids,” or when district speakers who had written of “black and Hispanic” students in policy documents spoke with virtuous emphasis of “all students” in public). Making lists of such repeated race talk patterns running through my notes (what anthropologist Carol Stack called finding “threads”), I began to see striking patterns in when speakers in different institutional locations used race labels, and when, in discussing the same topic in another context, they conspicuously did not. After repeatedly culling patterns out of my notes, compiling lists into shorter lists, and coding again, the data finally presented to me three main processes of race talk. People used race labels matter-of-factly, they contested their use, and they deleted them—and two key variables that affected these dynamics were the topic they were talking about and the person(s) to whom they were speaking. (The question of “when” was central to my adviser Ray McDermott, a microethnographer who had spent years looking at the strikingly choreographed timing of classroom activity patterns in several minutes of videotape. Proceeding more often with such “when” questions in race research would help us view racial practice as patterned practice; knowing such patterns, we could also debate better how to reshape our own predictable actions.)

12. Anthropologists originally (mis)measured the skulls of presumed-distinct race-group members in attempts to naturalize the country’s presumed social racial hierarchy as a result of differential “intelligence.” Anthropologists passed the nineteenth-century baton to psychologists, who instead purported to measure the inside of racialized heads to prove the U.S. social racial hierarchy “natural”; see Lemann 1999.

13. For anthropological disproving of race’s genetic reality, see Montagu [1942] 1997. See also Fraser, ed., *The Bell Curve Wars* (1995). For an example of a recent claim of the genetic reality of “races,” see, e.g., Herrnstein and Murray 1996. On supposedly equal opportunity, see Reynolds 1996. On presumed achievement motivation, see McWhorter 2000. For a counterpoint, see the recent “Tripod” survey research of Ron Ferguson at Harvard University, who has found widespread desires for academic achievement among black youth.

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