POSTRACE 101

Teaching and Unteaching Race in America's High Schools

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PRUDENCE L. CARTER, *Keepin' It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 219 pages, ISBN 0-19-516862-3, Cloth, $29.95, ISBN: 0-19-53252-3, Paper, $15.95.

MICA POLLOCK, *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004, 268 pages, ISBN 0-691-12395-0, Paper, $19.95.

INTRODUCTION

There are some telltale signs that we might really be living in the kind of moment that academic provocateurs have labeled "postracial" (i.e., indifferent to historically self-evident expectations about race relations and race-based identifications): Duke lacrosse players, all of them White, who taunt a Black collegian-cum-stripper with carefully crafted quips better suited for a comedy club than a Klan rally ("Thank your grandpa for my cotton shirt"); a Black Ivy League professor testifying under oath that a baseball bat-wielding White vigilante who begins pummeling a Black man in Brooklyn by calling his victim a "nigger" does not necessarily harbor any race-specific animus; a former Education Secretary seemingly shocked and appalled that African Americans would be shocked and appalled by his comments regarding the hypothetical abortion of African American babies as a technique for lowering crime rates; and any of the dissenting judicial opinions penned by the lone Black justice on the nation's highest court. *Race* is doing some very strange things these days.

Given such a surreal social context, it can seem downright quaint for social scientists to go trekking off into high school classrooms in search of "data" on how teenagers and teachers discuss and analyze racial identities. Qualitative studies can sometimes waste valuable heuristic time spinning their ethnographic wheels far too

slowly to keep up with the centrifugal forces shattering racial common sense into a million antiquated pieces. Here, however, we have an anthropologist and a sociologist, both of whom have taken that traditional journey, using their respective treks to speak directly to the oddity and counterintuitive slipperiness of racial reasoning today. One works in Yonkers, New York; the other studies a pseudonymed "California City," but they both do a fabulous job capturing the complicated and ever-shifting landscape of contemporary race in America.

Prudence Carter's thought-provoking and carefully written book, *Keepin' It Real*, is a convincing discussion of so-called "Black cultural capital" and its comparative difference from more mainstream versions of cultural capital. Carter uses that divergence to explain (in ways that aren't always so easily and holistically grasped by other social analysts) the infamous "acting White" discourse bandied about with such fetishized frequency in the sociology/anthropology of education literature, a fetish often decidedly misapplied to important questions about African Americans' scholastic underachievement.

Carter frames her text with a memorable tripartite schema of student types: *mainstreamers* and *noncompliant believers* at either end of the evaluative spectrum, and *straddlers/multicultural navigators* bridging some of the gulf between them. *Mainstreamers* "do" education the way their teachers expect it to be done—purposefully, proactively, conventionally, and with a calculating eye towards their professional future. They talk and walk, write and think in just the ways their teachers demand. The *noncompliant believers* understand the significance of education and the traditional benchmarks used to assess students' performances, but that recognition does not translate into actions that mesh with teachers' expectations—nor with positive scholarly outcomes. For a number of reasons, they are unwilling to play the game the way their teachers insist, defining those very requirements as antithetical to their larger sense of self—an unabashedly racialized self. Only the *multicultural navigators* are able to have their cake and eat it too, anticipating teacherly expectations and maintaining a commitment to racial analyses of an educational system stacked against them. Carter asks middle-class teachers and academics to re-evaluate their socialized assumptions about the straightforward link between mainstream cultural capital and intellectual ability, between racialized social practices and academic investments (or the lack thereof) on the part of minority students. She also argues that *multicultural navigators* can help to model a way for *noncompliant believers* to perform without sacrificing the core values of Black cultural capital.

Keepin' It Real makes it clear that *acting White* is not simplistically reducible to anti-intellectualism. Instead, it is a response to mainstream privileging of the so-called "culture of power," a privileging that implicitly assumes the vernacular cultures of Black communities to be intrinsically inferior to the valued cultural repertoire of mainstream (White) America. Carter also deploys notions of *hardness* and *softness* to discuss how and why school-aged boys and girls might have different kinds of performance obstacles to negotiate in classrooms and on school playgrounds. Even though girls also can't be too soft, boys are specifically expected to police themselves against that emasculating possibility.

This point reminded me of discussions that I have had with several African American colleagues from different academic disciplines about what one of them terms *the feminization of African American male identity in the academy*: conscious or subconscious performances of a *soft masculinity* that serve to put White colleagues at ease, translating into assumptions about the subjects' commitment to mainstream institutional values—and, ultimately, to plum academic jobs at prestigious places. When such *soft masculinity* is privileged, to perform otherwise is to be deemed

noncollegial, haughty, even dangerous. It is to be read ungraciously and ungenerously, not as confident and self-assured, but as cocky and threatening. For a potential graduate student, it might mean the difference between being considered promising or dismissed as unteachable. These same scholars argue that the stakes are quite different for White males, individuals who are not forced to overcompensate for stereotypes and clichés about their racial group's purported violence, criminality, and volatility. How might such nonsystemic analyses of the premium placed on "soft Black masculinities" in the academy further extend the analysis of cultural capital and teachers' expectations about social presentations of self brought up in *Keepin' It Real*? Does this issue go away after high school graduation, or is it reanimated in slightly different guises?

This next point is my own little preoccupation. I am especially interested in what Carter might have to say about *multicultural navigators* potentially being considered insincere by their classmates/racemates for performing a supposedly inauthentic or overly calculated version of "Blackness" for public consumption and personal gain. In hip-hop, the criticism is concretized in those ubiquitous "studio-gangsta" accusations ("You ain't that hard; you just frontin'"). In academia, you have the snickers offered up by other Black intellectuals behind the backs of hip-hop-quoting Blackademics. Invocations of supposedly clichéd forms of Blackness can either prove one's commitment to Black culture and Black people, or be eyed skeptically as a form of "fabricating authenticity" [to use the Peterson (1997) term that Carter invokes]. I have already spent an entire book (Jackson 2005) trying to analytically distinguish *authenticity* from *sincerity vis-à-vis* contemporary racial/cultural politics, but their cross-fertilizing potential should not be underestimated. Might *multicultural navigators* have to justify their oscillation in other than strictly utilitarian idioms? Is it enough of a justification (in the eyes of their peers) to say that such performative flexibility is useful and necessary to succeed, or do they also have to prove that this liminal sensibility is more accurately an example of who they actually are? There seems to be a degree of tension between those two potential explanations.

Another question one might have for Carter is about *virtuosity*. That is, can *multicultural navigators* (or anyone else) always perform the needed switches successfully? What happens when they try and fail? Drawing on Bourdieu, several anthropologists and sociologists have offered powerful examples of attempts to navigate the cultural-capital divide (whether for a job interview or to appear professional/ presentable in alien contexts) only to have their attempts parodied and denigrated. Carter might be read to imply that the attempt itself is enough. Either Black students are compliant, or they are not. If so, they get the perks that come along with the attempt. If not, they get the presumptive penalties. It is all about a degree of volunteeristic choice; however, shouldn't some of this discussion also be about levels of skill and practical ability? Might not some *noncompliant believers* simply lack the ability, the background, the human and cultural capital, to perform as well as the *multicultural navigators* do in *both* worlds? Could the fear of such a potential double failure lodge kids deeper and deeper into their noncompliant shells? Not everyone *can* pull it off, and perhaps it is a bit of a Faustian pact to begin with.

Institutionalized education (i.e., all education) is about assimilation. Is it even possible to think of a pedagogical position that doesn't begin with the assumption that students ought to reproduce its sensibilities and priorities? Is it ever realistic to think otherwise? In addition, what kind of concession might we be making when we ask students to change their general behaviors so that they are perceived more favorably? Kenji Yoshino's recent book *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights* (2006) makes an argument that resonates with Carter's proposition. Yoshino

maintains that the biggest legal obstacles to minority groups are less about identity than activity; they move the discussion from being to doing. That is, the courts have made an analytical distinction, he claims, between laws that attack people for who and what they are (laws deemed unconstitutional) and laws that attack cultural practices that people are asked to "cover" or camouflage. Yoshino's concern is about legal cases, but his discussion of the downside to assimilationist assumptions is quite relevant to Carter's profoundly important work.

In her meticulously rendered ethnography, *Colormute*, Mica Pollock wants to talk about when and why racial assumptions are sometimes explicitly left unsaid, other times directly challenged, and in still different moments simplistically and stereotypically invoked. She uses the term *colormute* to emphasize the ideological scaffolding that justifies the decisions people make when opting for one of the three available alternatives discussed above.

Columbus High School is not racially homogenous, so Pollock is able to conduct her research in the kind of multicultural context where *acting White* discourse is supposed to be most operative (since the "cool points" that accrue to Blacks for trafficking in racial stereotypes are more valuable there than in all-Black schools). However, she wants to talk about the surrounding raciolinguistic universe within which *acting White* discourse emerges, starting with the depressing realization that "the more complex inequality seems to get, the more simplistic inequality analysis seems to become" (Pollock 2004, p. 15). By listening to variously positioned actors in this ongoing social drama, she shows that *not* talking about race at all, or not talking about it well (explicitly, honestly, and carefully) is hardly a mechanism for lessening race's social significance. Race still matters, even when it is euphemized and pretended away in polite discourse.

Pollock's advice to educators stems from her sophisticated reading of race's contemporary paradoxes: that the same people can deconstruct the ontological self-evidence of race at one moment and reinforce that metaphysical grounding in another; that some "race talk" actually takes us further and further away from serious answers to pressing questions of racial inequity and difference; that teachers, students, and administrators "are most reluctant to compare and rank race groups precisely in the very social location where we are perhaps most programmed to compare and rank them—school" (Pollock 2004, p. 170); and that being polite and euphemistic about race talk ("de-racing" words) can actually make it more difficult to address racial inequalities. Just as purported "color blindness" can be used as a cover for reproducing racial inequality under the de-historicized auspices of antidiscrimination legislation and 1960s rhetoric, so, too, can "colormuteness" reinforce racially uneven outcomes by circumventing serious engagement with the everyday machinations and manifestations of race thinking.

Being color-blind won't make race disappear; it might just make us woefully unprepared and unwilling to address its continued significance. Likewise, being *colormute* doesn't simply translate into the silencing of racial difference. Instead, like the high-frequency ring tones that students can hear and their parents/teachers cannot, it might simply continue that racial rhetoric in a register that makes it harder for us to recognize—even and especially when it is still signaling what it always has signaled to the many citizens unable to block out the sound.

As someone who also has experience teaching high schoolers, Pollock was able to engage students and teachers in various settings, formal and informal, impromptu and planned. The result is a thick description of racial life in a West Coast high school that exposes the fallacies and superficialities of most public discussions about race, education, and inequality. Actually, Pollock seems to ask us all to embrace a

newfangled and self-conscious role as one of Carter's *multicultural navigators*, recognizing all sides of the racial debate and helping to guide others past the dangerous obstacles around them.

Pollock ends on a practical note to teachers, asking them to educate parents, administrators, and the general public about their myopic racial attitudes. Her tips are usefully anticipatory and logical, persuasive and reasonable, which ironically might be the book's only stumble. In a moment as surreal and "postracial" as our unpredictable present, we might be deluding ourselves by thinking that we can simply *reason our way out* of this morass. I don't want to sound defensively anti-intellectual, but we might need more than just Habermasian rationality to slay the beast of racial reasoning in America's public sphere. Indeed, even to call it racial *reasoning* might already be going too far. Our investments are as affective, emotional, and unjustifiably illogical as they are reasoned.

Shedding light on the matter is a good start, and these two well-researched and carefully constructed books offer new and powerful ways of theorizing the "postracial" present, a time when the stakes are incredibly high—not just for high school students, but for all of us. Pollock and Carter make it clear that understanding *race* these days means emphasizing its self-contradictory nature, its inconsistent/incongruent applications, and its sometimes counterintuitive organizing principles. Both authors seem to imply that the problem with America's students has less to do with their racial preoccupations than with our stubborn determination to pretend race away when convenient—only to re-enchant its most reactionary and stereotypical aspects when it suits our self-interested fancy. These two social scientists ask us to do the exact opposite: to talk seriously about race when it is least convenient, and to eschew simplistic racial scapegoating/stereotyping as an easy alternative to critical social analysis. We should all try our best to heed their learned advice.

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