Race Bending: "Mixed" Youth Practicing Strategic Racialization in California

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As more U.S. youth claim "mixed" heritages, some adults are proposing to erase race words altogether from the nation's inequality analysis. Yet such proposals, as detailed ethnography shows, ignore the complex realities of continuing racialized practice. At an urban California high school in the 1990s, "mixed" youth strategically employed simple "race" categories to describe themselves and inequality orders, even as they regularly challenged these very labels' accuracy. In so "bending" race categories, these youth modeled a practical and theoretical strategy crucial for dealing thoughtfully with race in 21st century America. [race, youth, youth culture, discourse, language]

At the turn of the 21st century, more and more U.S. residents are becoming versed in the 20th-century anthropological deconstruction of biological race groups as human-made "myth."[1] Popular magazines occasionally tackle the very concept of "race," reminding readers that the nation's "racial groups" are more genetically diverse *within* than *between* themselves (see *Newsweek* 2000). The American Anthropological Association has launched a new public education program contesting biological notions of "so-called racial" difference (AAA 1998) and it has now become almost routine in U.S. academic discourse to call racial difference a "social construction." Indeed, contesting the very existence of "racial" difference is increasingly everyday popular practice in the contemporary United States (see Jackson 2001). In a most explicit demonstration of race's constructed nature, an increasing number of U.S. youth proudly claim "mixed" parentage, in the process hinting that supposedly distinct "race groups" have always had blurred boundaries (see Root 1996; Sollors 2000).

Given these increasingly routine challenges to foundational U.S. notions of simple racial difference, many U.S. residents now express uncertainty about the very validity of using "race" labels to categorize human beings—and as this uncertainty infiltrates U.S. equality ideology, it is having a major impact on the nation's racial politics. Indeed, some public figures—a few even citing directly the anthropological rejection of biological race—have begun to argue publicly that using race labels to describe people is inherently "racist," and that to achieve equality, people should no longer speak in race terms at all. Although such calls for ignoring race (typically called "colorblindness") have long been a part of

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American popular ideology and legal discourse (see Guinier and Torres 2002), this is the first time that public figures have argued widely that racial categorization has effectively reached its endpoint: Quests to *delete race words altogether* from national inequality discourse are for the first time characterizing U.S. public policy. Anti-affirmative action figurehead Ward Connerly, for example, a University of California regent who teamed up with an anthropologist in the 1990s to promote California's "colorblind" Proposition 209 (also known as the Equal Opportunity Initiative, which began the process of dismantling race-based affirmative action policies in the state), was in 2003 backing another state proposition (Proposition 54), designed to eliminate *all* racial data-gathering by the State of California. I term such moves *colormuteness* rather than colorblindness, as such actions seek to erase race words from public discourse in an *exceedingly* race-conscious way (Pollock 2004).[2] Although Connerly's Proposition 209 outlawed "discriminating against" or granting so-called preferential treatment to "any individual or group" in California "on the basis of race," this new initiative declared that "the state *shall not classify* any individual by race, ethnicity, color or national origin in the operation of public education, public contracting or public employment" (emphasis added).

Adult framings of equality co-opt youth in such official discourse about race. For just as adults placed the imagined desires of youth of color at the center of the state's 1990s affirmative action controversy (Proposition 209 proponents argued that youth felt stigmatized when recruited to colleges through racially conscious outreach programs), they placed "multiracial" youth's imagined needs at the center of this new controversy over racial politics. As one think tank reported on a public speech from Connerly on the initiative in April 2002:

> Mr. Connerly (like so many Californians) is a prime example of the absurdity of racial classification. His heritage includes Irish, African and Choctaw native American ancestors. His wife is Irish. His son married a Vietnamese girl. "But when people find out my grandchildren are Ward Connerly's grandchildren, they often say, 'Oh, you're black,' " he told the audience. *"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."* [American Civil Rights Coalition 2002; emphasis added]

As some California adults call for deleting race categories from public policy in the name of "freedom" for the state's "kids," however, some "mixed" California youth offer quite a different version of the nation's equality ideology. They demonstrate that given a national inequality system in which opportunities have long been distributed along simple "racial" lines, strategically using race labels one alternately acknowledges as reductive still often seems necessary to make things "fair." Indeed, acknowledging quite directly on occasion the nation's legacy of simple racializing practice, the "mixed" youth I came to know over

several years of teaching and fieldwork in California knowingly treated race labels paradoxically, employing simple racial identifications for inequality analysis even as they contested their accuracy for understanding complex identities. In doing so, they exposed daily a paradoxical reality of U.S. racialization, one that adult analysts such as Connerly all too quickly dismiss: We don't belong to simple race groups, but when it comes to inequality, we do (Pollock 2004).

California, long on the cusp of the nation's demographic diversity, is a key site where public policies hoping to erase race words from inequality analysis are clashing with the complex realities of everyday racialized practice (Pollock 2004). Many such clashes over race have centered on institutional sites serving young people: schools. This is unsurprising, as U.S. schools are particular places where people both distribute opportunities along racial lines and form identities in racial terms. Indeed, schools are key sites where U.S. young people and adults, in a striking "institutional choreography" (Fine 1997), actually *"make* each other racial" (Olsen 1997).[3] Clashes over race in America, too—from laws denying basic literacy to slaves, to battles over desegregating "the races," to contemporary debates on college admissions—have long taken place in and around schools. As many ethnographers have shown, schools are institutions where people encounter, struggle with, and reproduce many such received systems of difference and inequality: Schools in the U.S. and elsewhere also (re)produce young people who are "ethnic" or "indigenous" (Luykx 1999), classed (Willis 1977), gendered (Luttrell 2002), citizens of nations (Levinson 2001), and "abled"/"disabled" (Mehan 1996; Varenne and McDermott 1998). Since all such categorizations are (re)birthed within existing systems of inequality, young people themselves also often wield these categories compensatorily to garner resources in school, responding to local inequalities with a received equality logic. At an urban California high school in the 1990s, youth used and challenged race labels strategically rather than deleting them unthinkingly, and in doing so they modeled a practical and theoretical strategy crucial for dealing with race thoughtfully in 21st century America: They kept race words in the daily inequality analysis even while alternately calling the very existence of "race groups" into question.

To better understand such everyday race theorizing, I looked ethnographically at youths' everyday *talk* of race at Columbus High School in California City (both pseudonyms), where I taught Ethnic Literature from 1994–95 before returning there as an anthropologist in 1995–97. My ethnographic focus on everyday race talk was not just academic fascination: Columbus youth, going to school in a state and nation full of adults struggling fiercely over the very future of racial language, indicated unmistakably in their daily discourse that race talk itself mattered to how racial orders were shaped and challenged (Pollock 2004).

In using everyday race talk for analyzing everyday practices of racialization, I also build here upon prior theories of the everyday (re)production and challenging of social structures: As Ortner (1996:2) writes, social scientists have long argued that "human action is made by structure, and at the same time always makes and potentially unmakes it." While race structures are re-made daily through various human actions that include complex habits of body movement, social association, taste, speech variation, and economic distribution, my more restricted focus on race-label use as a key racializing practice echoes many scholars of language, who have long viewed talk as an everyday action that shapes the world as well as describes it (see, e.g., Duranti and Goodwin 1992; Tedlock and Mannheim 1995). Indeed, self-described "mixed" Columbus youth *became* single-race-group members in school, even as they negotiated so becoming, every time they described themselves or others in simple racial terms. Ethnographic work has long examined the everyday re-creation of "classes of people" (Frake 1980) through such naming practices (see, e.g., Moerman 1968). Further, a rich tradition of historical work has shown us people actively building (and contesting) a racial structure through the use of basic racial labels throughout American history (see, e.g., Davis 1997; Roediger 1991). Youth is an important time for such paradoxical reproductions of race: much literature on youth culture has examined how young people actively redraw received lines of racialized difference even as they erase and blur them (Bailey 2000; Gilroy 1993a; Hebdige 1979; Maira 2002; Perry 2002; Roediger 1998). I call youths' everyday strategic use of race labels "race-bending": Columbus youth, far from accepting their nation's race categories wholesale, alternately contested and strategically accepted the ability of simple racial categories to describe complex people.

In describing themselves purposefully at times as members of single "races," Columbus students temporarily prioritized simple, equality-minded "racial" *identification* over complex, personal racial *identity*, a distinction Lee Baker (2000) found similarly central to the late 1990s controversy over a proposed mixed-race category of the U.S. Census (see also Cose 1997). Although proponents of the mixed-race category demanded that the Census allow "mixed" individuals to finally accurately record their complex personal identities, opponents argued that distributing resources equally in the United States still necessitated the bureaucratic boxes of lump-sum racial identification, precisely because resources were still denied along simple race lines. By sometimes listing multiple terms to describe themselves (the Census's final solution), sometimes creating new racialized words to describe "mixed" youth accurately, and sometimes applying single, simple race labels to describe their own diversity, Columbus's "mixed" youth, too, employed simple race words strategically to cope with an already racialized, racially hierarchical world. In so doing, they demonstrated that deleting race altogether from U.S. equality talk is a premature proposal—that in fact,

negotiating equality still requires using the discourse of simple race even as at other moments we openly defy the very notion of "race" itself.

Method

Capturing the shifting race talk of Columbus youth required a special self-consciousness about ethnographic method. Scholars studying race too often treat the talk they gather as simply quoted opinion or static "truth," more rarely examining the complex situational politics and shifting scripts of racial talk. I conducted far more interviews with youth and adults during this research than I eventually used, having become convinced that formally prompted race talk was packaged particularly statically for a researcher and that the "informal logic of actual life" (Geertz 1973:17) was best demonstrated by more naturalistic interaction with both students and adults. Youth race talk at Columbus alternately highlighted complexity and imposed a simple categorical order, and being an *ex*-teacher made me particularly likely to experience both forms of race talk with Columbus youth. Although my newly informal presence at Columbus made me available for unprompted "race bending" games with Columbus youth, as a former teacher I still routinely participated with youth and adults in the simple race talk of Columbus' more institutionalized racial equality discourse.

Notes on my teaching year in 1994–95 were taken from a personal journal I kept in the hopes of writing a (never finished) first-year teacher memoir; over time, this diary provided an important window into the race talk of teacher–student interactions in Columbus classrooms. During my subsequent years as a researcher at Columbus (1995–97), I also spent almost every day embroiled in more informal, impromptu research discussions with students and adults in hallways, on outside benches, and in empty rooms; I reconstructed these research conversations on paper immediately after they occurred. I thus participated in much of the race talk I present here, and in both out-of-classroom and in-classroom talk, my own "whiteness" unquestionably influenced the situational emergence of Columbus youths' race-challenging talk *and* their strategically simple race talk. For one, my presence occasionally prompted youth to discuss and debate the very category "white"—and in doing so, they articulated some central realizations about the need to retain simple race labels in monitoring racial equality.

Describing Youth at Columbus

To a newcomer watching Columbus students emerge at the end of a typical day, these youth might have appeared stunningly diverse, an urban population that seemingly embodied the country's breathtaking demographic complexity. Many Columbus students or their parents had immigrated to California City from Central and South America, various Philippines islands, Cantonese- and Mandarin-speaking regions of

China, and Samoa; recently or some decades earlier, the relatives of many African American students had headed to California City from the U.S. South. Just a handful of students, most with ancestors from Western Europe, were called "white" at Columbus; as in many tracked urban communities, white parents in California City sent their children to so-called academic, application-only schools rather than to "comprehensive" schools like Columbus. And at Columbus, complex, "mixed" parentage was so common that "What are you mixed with?" was a matter-of-fact student question. Even students who did not consider themselves "mixed" would acknowledge that it was often quite hard to tell "what" anybody at Columbus "was"; many young people listed strings of multiple words to describe themselves, and if you were to ask any Columbus student "what" s/he "was," you would likely find that s/he offered different answers at different times of the day, week, or year.

Hanging around Columbus for a few days, though, you as an observer would realize that the confusion of such endlessly crisscrossed parent-group and national boundaries coexisted with the discursive simplicity of six described "groups." Despite the "mixed"-up roots and global routes (Gilroy 1993b) central to the Columbus youth experience, these young people, in conjunction with the adults around them, worked daily in school to squash their diversity into six groups they called "racial." Although identities at Columbus were infinitely complex, racial identification was an accepted process of social simplification. In the mid-1990s, there were six words that Columbus youth used to describe the school's main student and adult "races": "black," "Latino" (occasionally conflated with "Mexican," to the consternation of "Latinos" with other Latin American origins), "Filipino," "Chinese," "Samoan," and "white" (this last category included mostly adults, including myself). A student who told me in one conversation that he was both "black" and "mixed with Puerto Rican" thus still wrote for a class this poem describing Columbus's complexity with easy numbers:

> 4 good teachers, with two bad ones a day
> every 5 bad kids copping one great student
> 2 fights, 0 body breaking them up
> 6 different groups, and nobody cares about anything
> over 1500 people different to the bone

In identifying daily these "6 different groups," notably, Columbus students called "racial" even the labels scholars typically term "ethnic" or "national" ("Filipino," "Chinese," "Latino," and "Samoan"). One day, for example, a student-made poster appeared on the walls of Columbus ranking "The Top Five Races of the Week," bluntly listing the five most demographically prominent student "groups" at Columbus:

1. Samoan
2. Filipino

3. African American
4. Latino
5. Asian

Rules: Do things positive with your race to get moved up on the chart like perform in a rally or play football in the quad or just about anything just get along with one another. Congratulations Samoans.

While some scholars would criticize this conflation of race, ethnicity, and nationality, eliding and negotiating between the three systems of difference was a process key to Columbus students' daily social analysis; indeed, it is a daily process for young people in many areas of the world, one intertwined intimately with negotiations over social and political power (see, e.g., Gilroy 1993a; Sansone 1995; Sharma 1996). At Columbus, although these "race" terms indeed described six groups assumed to look somewhat physically different, rarely did students suggest that they saw these six "racial" groups as inherently biological entities. Rather, calling all these groups "racial" indicated primarily that they were competitive parts in a local, shifting social hierarchy of groups. As Rumbaut (in press) notes, youth negotiating local power struggles often label as "races" their self-categorizations of national origin or ethnicity; and at Columbus, calling all these groups "racial" indeed demonstrated that notions of racial difference—as opposed, for example, to the more unranked notion of ethnic difference (Sanjek 1996)—always denoted socially ranked populations vying for resources. As Fine (1997:64) argues, "race" groups in schools and elsewhere are always interconnected in such unequal structural relationships, never simply "different" or "distinct, separable, and independent," but rather "produced, coupled, and ranked." Many scholars have noted that people of all ages strategically employ simple self-categorizations to wield power within such racialized inequality contexts (Omi and Winant 1994), calling such tactics finding "strategic places from which to speak" (Sharma 1996:34), "strategic essentialism" (Spivak 1987), "anti-anti-essentialism" (Gilroy 1993b), and "the politics of recognition" (Taylor et al. 1994).

When talking to one another *about racial classification itself,* then, Columbus students almost always wound up contesting easy accounts of race group membership; it was in talk about racial *equality,* particularly with adults, that contestation over group membership ("*Is* he Samoan?" "Who *is* 'white'?") vanished. In such equality talk, students demanded the equal curricular and social representation of six racialized groups, reifying these groups as things they should "learn about" in equal amounts in Columbus classrooms and events. Indeed, in an analytic convergence that indicated a shared simple diversity system employed for distributing limited resources, this student framing of a handful of Columbus "races" was central to district and legal discourse on educational equality in California City as well. The California City Unified

School District (CCUSD) used roughly these same six labels to describe what it called Columbus's "racial/ethnic groups"; the district, laboring under a desegregation court order, scattered a set of nine such "groups" of students districtwide in proportional amounts. Accordingly, in 1994–97, district demographic records reported that Columbus enrolled students classified as Filipinos (28 percent), Latinos or Hispanics (29 percent), African Americans or blacks (22 percent), Chinese (8 percent), Other non-Whites, a catch-all category that included Columbus's Samoans (8 percent), and Other Whites, a category that for the district primarily meant white (5 percent). Columbus's teaching staff—also monitored for racial/ethnic balance—was listed as 54 percent Other White, 15 percent African American, 10 percent Filipino, 13 percent Latino, 5 percent Other non-White, and 3 percent Chinese.

Policies in place throughout the district in the mid-1990s quietly compared the achievement and disciplinary records of these simple student groups: Although district personnel typically employed these "racial/ethnic" labels in formal written texts or uttered them anxiously in safe locations far away from schools, the equality-minded *logic* of simple race comparison was central to district and legal thinking about the distribution of resources and educational achievement (Pollock 2001). Only rarely did outside adults struggling with inequality orders indicate confusion over these "racial/ethnic" categories' boundaries. Near the beginning of California City's desegregation history, for example, a judge had suggested in one legal opinion that the city's public school population consisted of "at least four, and as many as nine distinct racial/ethnic groups," momentarily indicating that he could not say conclusively how many such "distinct" "groups" actually existed; after this momentary stumble, he proceeded to argue confidently that desegregation would provide the city's students with "meaningful opportunities to know members of different races." Similarly, in the 1990s, the CCUSD publicly acknowledged in one way only that the nine simple categories central to its desegregation policy might not adequately describe the city's infinitely complex student population: The district allowed parents to change their children's recorded "racial/ethnic" classifications up to two times to facilitate their enrollment in particular schools. Of course, students were allowed simply to shift from one simple race category to another—that is, as long as parents could produce some (unspecified) "proof" of category membership.

The project of balancing resources and attention *between* these simple racial "groups," then, was a staple legal and policy concern in California City (as academics reviewing the city's desegregation plan put it classically in the 1980s, "An improved plan . . . will not subtract from some groups to pull others up"). Policymakers would eventually bury such tensions over simple racial equality altogether within generalized talk of schooling for "all students" in California City, a de-racialization of policy talk that would, as I describe elsewhere, make inequality analysis

impossible (Pollock 2004). In contrast, Columbus students continued to openly employ their six basic race labels to compare resources given to "blacks," "Filipinos," "Latinos," "Samoans," "Chinese," and "whites"—even while at less inequality-charged moments, as we see first here, they often talked as if their peers did not belong to such simple "groups" at all.

Students Contesting Simple "Racial" Classifications—Even while Employing Them

The first informal conversations presented here, which I documented as a researcher, demonstrate students talking directly about their own shifting self-classifications. (As an ethnographer interested in "race" at Columbus, I focused immediately on capturing such *student* self-descriptions, seeking to discover how important "race" was solely to Columbus students' identities and more rarely noting the racialized roles Columbus and district *adults* were playing in school life. Research questions about race and schooling regularly frame "race" in this way as the implied property of students of color, rather than as a communal practice involving people of all ages and "races"; once I made race words themselves the unit of analysis, I came to see the institutional choreography that had all players inside and outside Columbus racializing school life together.) As I wandered around tables one day in a library study hall at Columbus, I ended up in an impromptu conversation about classification with several students I had never met. A small, wiry, light brown-skinned boy with a pointed nose and freckles, enveloped in baggy clothes and a big black ski cap, looked up at me and without prompting started a guessing game:

> "Does that girl over there look Mexican to you?" he asked. "I don't know, do you think she does?" I asked. "Don't you think she looks Mexican?" he repeated. "I guess so, why?" I asked. " 'Cause she's not Mexican, she's Samoan!" he said, smiling. "Samoan and white, with some black," he added. "Hey, don't be pointing!" the girl yelled over at us, smiling slightly. "I ain't no Mexican!" she added. "How do you know so much about her?" I asked him. "She's my cousin. And she's his cousin too, and he's mine!" he said, pointing to a guy sitting next to him who was somewhat bigger, with curlier hair, less freckles, and a wider nose. "So are you Samoan too?" I asked. "Yeah, Samoan . . . and part white, and part Chinese," he said. "So do you call yourself Samoan?" I asked. "Yeah . . . and part white, and part Chinese!" he said, laughing.
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> The girl next to him said, "I'm Samoan, black, Puerto Rican, Filipino, and Indian." She was tall, freckled, with long braid extensions wrapped up into a loose knot on her head; I had met her earlier that day. "Indian from India, or Native American?" I asked, pointing at the table to mean "the U.S." "Native American," she said, mimicking my gesture. "How do you know all this about yourself?" I asked her. "My mom! My mom tells me," she replied. "What does she call herself?" I asked. "Others," she said matter-of-factly. "What?" I asked. "Others, like that's what she puts down," she said. "Oh, on forms and stuff. What do you put?" I asked. "Other," she said. "That's what I put, too," said the small guy, adding, "I don't know what to put. Or I put *Polynesian*."

> "What'd you say you were?" called over a girl with straightened-looking hair and slightly darker skin. "Samoan, black, Puerto Rican, Filipino, and Indian," the freckled girl repeated. "Hey, you tryin' to be like *me*," the other girl called back, smiling slightly. "Nobody's tryin' to be like nobody," said the small boy. "I bet I can tell what everybody is," he said. "Like you, you're black and Filipino, right?" he said to a guy down the table. "What?" the guy replied. "You're black and Filipino, right?" he repeated. "Yeah," this guy said, nodding slowly. "And he's part Samoan and part white," the small boy said, gesturing toward a guy with a long braid sitting two seats away. "What's your dad?" a girl asked this braided kid. "He's French," he replied, very softly. "I can always tell a Samoan," said the small guy, shaking his head and smiling. "How?" I asked. "I just can," he said.
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> "Are you from Western Samoa or American?" the small guy asked the five-ethnicity girl. "American," she said. "Is there a difference?" I asked. "Yeah," the boys said. "Then there's Tongans, and Fijians," he said. "Are Tongans different?" I asked. "Yeah—we don't eat horses!" said the bigger guy. Several people laughed. "*We* eat the pig, and chicken," he continued. "Everyone eats chicken!" said the smaller guy. "And _, and _," continued the guys, naming foods in Samoan and laughing. "Who's *we*?!" I asked. "Samoans," they answered. . . . "And Tongans have big noses," added the small guy. "Like some Samoans, too, hella big!" added the bigger guy. A girl at the table raised her head from her magazine *(Ebony)* and said, "Don't be putting us down like that, I ain't no Tongan, we don't got noses nearly that big."

Group boundaries were fundamentally blurred here—and simultaneously reinscribed. The students kept returning over the course of the conversation to expose race group memberships as infinitely malleable and multiple, yet somehow through all this contestation the single category "Samoan" survived. As the discussion of "forms" indicated, the complexity of multiple origins at Columbus was often literally boxed in by the simplistic options of bureaucratic documents from the outside requiring students to "put down" such single-word identifications; yet even in everyday student conversations challenging the very notion of simple "groups," such single-race categories also were sporadically and voluntarily invoked. Here, the stated nuances of lines of nation (such as the distinction between Western and American Samoa), as well as the gleeful chaos of unexpected familial mixtures and unclassifiable appearances, evaporated finally into a "Samoan" "we." Such simplifications were fueled, to some degree, by my own classifying questions ("Do you call yourself Samoan?" "Are Tongans different?"). While I proceeded throughout my study with the methodological commitment to always let others drop race labels into conversations first, in asking students questions such as "Who's we?" in the midst of conversations in order to get them to articulate their running classifications of self and others, I often found students imposing the idea of racial categorization upon the very people who defied the concept. Indeed, even to answer routine peer or adult questions such as "What are you mixed with?" and "What are you?", students had to describe themselves or others using one or multiple simple race terms, as the sum of numerable matter-of-fact

parts. Tautologically, students also especially brought such single categories into race-bending conversations when comparing (and informally ranking) simply-bounded groups; and in the end, the basic structure of available "race" categories remained sturdy, even while games of "guessing" indicated that one could always "guess" wrong (see also Root 1996).

Students sporadically imposed race categories on one another in the midst of debates about racial classification without direct adult influence as well. Occasionally, for example, as I found one summer school day visiting a teacher friend at a nearby junior high, students even merged existing race terms into new race terms to racially identify "mixed" people. Of course, my notes' own imposed physically descriptive language ("Filipino-looking," "black guys") demonstrated a cultural context in which racialized phrases seemed almost required shorthand for describing people:

> A Filipino looking guy is speaking to two black guys and one Filipino looking guy sitting in an informal circle. He says, "I know who's a niggapino—my auntie. And that one guy, he's a niggapino; my cousin's a pino; she's (points across room) a japapino."

In inventing such new race terms (and to me, disturbing ones, in the case of using "nigga" to denote a category I presumed to be "black") to describe the complex "mixture" of specific people, students were indicating that the very practice of racial classification was a human act that could be actively contested. Still, they retained race labels as dominant descriptive tools, hinting that the context of simple race categorization was simply too pervasive to be escaped. Students thus bent race categories in such debates rather than breaking them apart altogether. In a discussion about "assumptions" in one of my own classes in 1994, similarly, one student's assertion that she could "tell who's Filipino 'cause I'm Filipino" prompted a conversation about the actual difficulties of "telling" Columbus people's "race," yet all but one of us still left the conversation racially identified:

Lani:	I can tell who's Filipino 'cause I'm Filipino.
Nando:	Yeah, I can tell who's Latino 'cause I am. Like her (points to Anita), she looks white but I know she's Latino 'cause of how she talks. . . . Like you, I can tell you're, well, white 'cause of the color of your hair (reddish brown). Michael, I can tell he's white, just 'cause.
Michael:	But I'm not.
Me (to Michael):	How would you describe yourself? (He shrugs) Okay, you don't want to? (He shakes his head) Okay, he doesn't have to.
Carrie:	You can't always tell—people never know I'm Hawaiian.
Me:	Do you think you look Hawaiian?
Carrie:	(She shakes her head) I look white.

Nando:	Really? I would've thought you were white or Latino.
Me:	Do people assume anything about you when they find out you're Hawaiian?
Carrie:	No, 'cause they hardly ever find out or guess.

Michael, who proved through his silence that "race" was indeed not always something you could "find out or guess," said to me a year later in an informal interview that although he himself "*appeared* white," "there are hecka races in me." He now called himself a "white black kid," adding that he got along with "black kids" because he grew up with them and with "Filipino kids" because he had "Filipino cousins." He had no interest in hanging out with "Samoans," though, he said—they always "caused trouble." While talk about racial classification itself had Michael observing his own blend of "hecka races," then, his sudden social rankings had him slotting others into simple racial groups: When not focused explicitly on contesting the very idea of classifying people racially, Columbus students often simply went ahead and classified. Similarly, outside in the main quad one day in 1995, I ran into Robert, a former student who had typically labeled himself "Latino" in my classroom. Only once our matter-of-fact conversation about the merits of his "Latin American Studies" class at the nearby community college turned into a discussion of racial categorization itself did he reveal to me for the first time his own complex roots:

> I asked what he was reading and he showed me *Down These Mean Streets* by Piri Thomas, saying he liked it. "What's it about?" I asked. "A Puerto Rican kid growing up," he said. "Do you feel like you relate to it at all?" I asked. "Yeah—the gangs and stuff. Not that I really relate to gangs, but like that stuff, and the fights he gets into," he said. "Do you relate to the Puerto Rican part?" I asked. (An unusually leading question for me, but with an unexpected race-bending answer:) "Yeah, 'cause I'm actually part Puerto Rican," he said. "Really?" I asked (he hadn't mentioned this last year in class). "Yeah—my mom's Filipino and Puerto Rican, and my dad's Mexican and Puerto Rican, so I'm mostly Puerto Rican," he said . . . " 'Cause I don't even remember you mentioning this in class," I said. " 'Cause I didn't *know* I was Puerto Rican!" he said, smiling. He continued: "I thought I was Hawaiian, but I was curious about my grandfather's last name. I asked my mom, 'cause I was like, that doesn't sound Hawaiian. And my mom said no, he was born in Puerto Rico." "You never mentioned the Hawaiian part in class either," I said, smiling. "No—I was all confused last year. What did I say I was?" he asked. "Uh, I think Mexican and part Filipino, you definitely didn't mention Hawaiian," I said. "I didn't? I thought I did," he said.[4]

In most assignments in my Ethnic Literature class the previous year that had prompted written self identification, Robert, despite his now admitted "confusion," had actually just described himself simply as "Latin." The classroom world typically took little time for debating the subject of racial classification itself, more often proceeding using a logic of single-group identification. As my own year of teaching Ethnic Literature at

Columbus proved, classroom life typically prompted a discourse of lump-sum groups, alternately called "races," "ethnicities," and "cultures" in the presence of adults. And as students and adults proceeded using these simple race terms in their shared public life, their simple race discourse intertwined always with a key shared race concern: equality.

Students Using Simple Race Talk in Conversation with Adults

When I arrived to teach at Columbus in 1994, I learned quickly that the social studies curriculum, designed to explore each of Columbus groups' histories in turn, was to begin with a unit on pre- and postcolonial Africa, and then turn to units on Latin America and the Philippines; as the Ethnic Literature teacher, I was to lead concurrent examination of "African-American," "Latino," and "Filipino" literature (as the Samoan population in the 10th grade happened to be particularly small, we had no "Samoan unit"; "Chinese" literature would be covered in a brief unit on immigration, and Europeans would be covered most explicitly in an end-of-the-year unit on the Holocaust). Moving sequentially from group to group, it seemed, was an expected format for a teacher of "Ethnic Literature." As one white teacher would say several years later of her own Ethnic Literature class, "We're moving from Hispanic to Asian poetry, and then we'll be doing crazy white guys, the Beat poets."

Wielded by both students and adults, a Columbus discourse of "learning about other cultures" took the placement of people into clear-cut "cultures" for granted—and those students in my classes who considered themselves "mixed," I found out over time, typically left the full complexities of their identities outside the classroom. Seth, a former student who told me in one interview that he considered himself "a melting pot" (his father was "African American," his mother was "Italian," his grandmother was "Irish and Italian," and his dad's parents were "black and Filipino"), revealed that in our class discussions the previous year, he had simply "picked Italian" because he had more ties with his mother, never mentioning his African American, Irish, or Filipino "parts" ("Most people knew," he explained, since outside class students routinely asked him what he was "mixed with"). I myself silently recalled Seth framing himself simply as "white" in the classroom. He now said emphatically that he was, if anything, *"not white."*

At Columbus, curriculum played a key role in simplifying the local taxonomy of student "races"; as Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco (2001) have noted generally, the very "entry into American identities today is via the culture of multiculturalism," which often quickly socializes young people into the nation's simplified "racial regime" (Suárez-Orozco 2001:357). In my own classroom curriculum, simple lines delineating people into the school's small handful of "races" persisted to the end of the school year, despite my intermittent attempts to have discussions challenging the very concept of racial classification. In response to the year's last assignment, in which I asked students to bring in music

that they felt "represented themselves" or had something to say about "ethnicity," students squashed the complexity of their everyday media usage into neat racialized categories, announcing that Tupac Shakur songs were about being "black"; "corridos" were "Mexican"; traditional folk songs expressed the experience of "Samoans"; national songs made one "very proud to be Filipina"; and music from the Chinese New Year demonstrated, as one student put it, "what my culture's mostly about." Robert brought a song that, as he put it, "represents how Latins have come up a long way from Christopher Columbus." Although some students of all "groups" brought in the same hip-hop songs on this last day of Ethnic Literature, demonstrating the border-crossing appeal of the genre (Leslie, a self-identified "black" student, summed up paradoxically that, "It's my ethnicity—everybody that's my ethnic group and that isn't listens to it"), most students throughout that day still talked as if music was designed for uncontested racial or "ethnic groups." My assignment to "represent" through music, of course, had prompted such simple identifications even while suggesting that students be their complex "selves" (see also Gilroy 1993a; Perry 2002; Roediger 1998).

In Columbus classrooms, then, as in classrooms across the United States, adults and students typically "learned about other cultures" one at a time. And with such sequential discussion of distinct "races" or "cultures" or "peoples" came another crucial question—namely, whether each group was equally represented. Pleas or demands for equal racial representation in Columbus school events, too, were routine—and such demands rarely suggested that race groups had negotiable boundaries. As inequality in racial "representation" seemed to pattern out in simple-group ways, achieving equality accordingly required simple-race groups. As Winant (1998:90) writes, the very concept of "racial" difference serves both to allocate resources *and* to "provid[e] means for challenging that allocation"; and when students were considering the allocation of curricular resources, their talk of simple racial identification always trumped considerations of complex or multiple identities.

One afternoon in 1996 at a traditional assembly where juniors parodied seniors, an equity-minded call from the audience caught my attention: "Where're the black people at?" I had noticed the same pattern myself: out of around twenty juniors performing on stage, only two regularly identified as "black." One of the two was the event's emcee, and when he greeted the audience, several students, all of whom looked African American, stood up and shouted out, "reeeeee!"—it was Columbus students' colloquial form of the word "represent." Moments later, I heard a girl next to me ask another, "Why don't they do any black people?"

In 1998, I called Tina, a former student who had graduated the previous spring, to ask her opinion about this question of racial "representation" in Columbus life. In my classroom, Tina had described herself as "black and Filipino" in a few conversations that had touched on

racial classification itself; in later years, as she finished up at Columbus and went to college, she repeatedly described herself to me as "black." Notably, she did so again during our telephone conversation, while suggesting that people at Columbus had neither adequately represented "black people" in school nor assisted her to adequately "learn about" *other* "cultures":

> "It would have been nice if we would have had some African American history," she said. There was "no black history until February, and then suddenly all the black people came out—and as soon as February was over they put them back in the closet again. And the only people you ever heard about were Martin Luther King and Malcolm X." In her history classes, she said, they "never learned anything about black people, Latin people, Filipino, Chinese—immigrants—nothing about culture really." . . . I mentioned to her that at the senior parody I had heard students say things like, "Where're the black people at?" "Mm-hmm," she replied. "But who organized that event? All Filipinos," she added, who only portrayed their friends.

Although students describing themselves in detail sporadically admitted the nuances of their own "mixture," analyses of social and curricular resource distribution had them comparing (and slotting themselves into) a short list of simple race groups. When articulating their needs for material and educational resources, students similarly prioritized simple racial identifications over the nuances of national origin. Carlo, who at many other moments called himself "Nicaraguan," argued fervently one day for more "Latino" history by contrasting "Latino" representation in school to the overrepresentation of "blacks" and "whites":

> He mentioned the conquistadors, and I asked where he had learned about them. "Not in school—we don't learn about our race," he said decisively, adding, "Most teachers worry about keeping the blacks and the whites happy. They give blacks a whole month—for us, it's one day." "One day," his friend Miguel (arrived a few years earlier from El Salvador) echoed, "Cinco de Mayo." . . . "They just teach us black history and white history," Carlo finished.

Comparing the resources given "our race" to those given other "races," Columbus students fit themselves and one another into simple race groups for the very purpose of comparison. Michael (the student of "hecka races") suggested in a private conversation with me and a "Latina" teacher after school one day that this logic of simple racial equality extended far beyond the Columbus walls. He actually had to "pick" a culture, he said, in part to acquire resources within an adult-run structure of distributing financial aid:

> "I feel like I don't have a culture. My mom's Mexican and Irish, my dad's Filipino and, uh, Portuguese," he says. "You're American then, it doesn't get more American than that," Ms. Duran says. "My dad says, 'You're white,'

> and I'm like, 'No I'm not, just 'cause *you* wanna be white,' he says. . . . My mom doesn't tell me stories like about rituals and stuff, so I don't have a culture. But I have to pick one." "Why do you have to choose?" asks Ms. Duran. "Well, it says *Other White* on my transcript. And I can't get *any*thing with that," he smirks, adding, "even though I live in the projects or whatever."

Noting the structural constraints of resource distribution inside and outside Columbus, students selected single racial identifications within a finite system of options. And as students strategically appropriated racial identifications for themselves, adults struggled circularly to equalize resources distributed to the school's six "groups." In navigating the school's omnipresent discourse of equal racial representation, as Tina and Carlo demonstrated, adults *and* students could always be accused of "bias." Michael himself had demonstrated this directly one day the previous year, when his class, having finished a unit on Africa and African Americans, began a unit "on Latin America and Latinos in the United States":

Lizzie ("Filipina"):	How about the Philippines?
Me:	They're last.
Lizzie:	Why they gotta be last?
Me:	Someone has to be last.
Michael (smiling):	You're biased!

Given the omnipresent possibility of unfairly underrepresenting one of Columbus's "groups," public schoolwide activities (organized by both students and adults) were meticulous about presenting sequential appearances by students representing the six major groups of Columbus's simple race taxonomy. Looking more closely at the details of these "multicultural" assemblies, of course, one could notice that racial categorizations were actually leaking all over the place: Although performances often involved Samoan students in grass skirts performing traditional dances, Latino students dancing merengue in billowy shirts, and black students rapping, Latino students also sometimes rapped in these performances, Filipino students sometimes played hard rock, an occasional black student danced merengue, and Samoan students routinely sang Rhythm and Blues tunes. Still, talk *about* "multicultural" events and classroom curriculum continually referenced simple racial groups *as if* these groups had clear-cut borders: In a sense, so-called multicultural rites were *about* simplification, *about creating an equalizable set of "groups."* Indeed, talk of equal representation in events and texts itself seemed to organize students into measurable racial groups, even as everyday actions repeatedly demonstrated the blurred complexity of racial practice. For example, when I showed *Menace to Society* (a movie whose cast appeared almost entirely "black") as a class reward one day, Carlo approached my desk to say that he himself owned the video and had seen it countless times. But anyway, he complained, he "thought this was supposed to be Latino week!"

Such conflict, what we might call competitive diversity, sometimes seemed part and parcel of sequential curricular units and "multicultural" events. As one self-described "black" teacher remarked of "multicultural" assemblies, "Now in assemblies, it's the same old thing all the time—see who can outclap who." In meetings the summer after my teaching year, my partner teachers and I similarly discussed how setting up our own curriculum as a series of "ethnic" units had seemed to foster what we called "ethnic cheerleading": If all "cultures" were not given equal time, students had sometimes stated, they didn't want to learn about "other cultures" at all. As Lipsitz (1998:66, 252) argues, simplifying practices of "encouraging allegiance to [single] group interests" and "investment in individual group identities" can, often unintentionally, inhibit cross-"racial" allegiances and even "run the risk of reifying the every categories they seek to destroy." In truth, equity-minded, sequential presentation of simple race groups did seem paradoxically to prime people to measure such representation as unequal, as I described in my diary as a teacher after one "multicultural fair." Takisha and Frankie, both of whom usually labeled themselves "black" (Frankie sometimes called himself "Jamaican"), had grumpily measured the unequal representation of "blacks":

Takisha:	This school's *racist,* I swear.
Frankie:	The rapper didn't even get to finish!
Me:	But the sound system broke, Frankie.
Takisha:	It didn't break down during the *other* performances.
Me:	You think they broke it on purpose?!
Frankie:	He was gonna do free flow, they didn't let him do it.
Takisha:	And the Samoan group got hella time!

Many U.S. observers critique so-called multicultural curricula for setting up precisely these sorts of race-group conflicts (Schlesinger 1998), in part *by* oversimplifying the infinite complexity of human diversity (McCarthy 1998). Yet multicultural education scholarship itself increasingly critiques the very concept of distinct "cultures," *even while* still setting out unapologetically at times *to* represent basic "groups" in sequence to remedy a history of ignoring these very "cultures" in schools (see Nieto 2000 on multicultural education's project of actively "affirming diversity"). The typical "multicultural" tactic of sequential presentation, however, sets up a constant dilemma: as Gonzales and Cauce (1995) wonder most generally, "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?" (1995:140–141).

As a teacher selecting books, films, and projects, I indeed had repeatedly found myself arguing defensively that in our attempts to "do" one racial group "before the next," we were learning about these groups in equal amounts—and the very act of balancing curricular time between

simple racial groups often had us ignoring the identity complexities that Columbus students articulated when discussing racial classification itself. Yet as my students and I struggled to equalize the proportions of simple-race-group representation, of course, these very shared processes of racial simplification also served to clarify when resources *were* distributed equally: in the very act of reproducing together a reliably simple racial taxonomy, that is, we clarified the set of "groups" to which equal resources could be distributed and ensured that all Columbus students would feel in some way represented. In fact, confronting a local world and nation in which resources always appeared inequitably distributed along simple racial lines seemed to *require* the compensatory use of simple race terms, and Columbus students sometimes acknowledged as much explicitly. Notably, they did so with particular insight when they were given the space to debate racial classification itself—and especially when they were adding the category "white" to the analysis. Lipsitz (1998:1) argues that simple-race "identity politics" often leave "white" people unmarked, never acknowledging the particular role whiteness plays "as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations;" and indeed, interrogating the very category "white" often led us immediately to an analysis of racial identification itself as a process intertwined with struggles over power. When we started discussing the category "white" most directly in my own classroom near the end of my teaching year, for example ("White people? Let's *do* this!" one student exclaimed), within moments Michael, the student of "hecka races," had offered the year's most piercing structural analysis of the racial identification process:

> Michael says: "They say all people from Europe are supposed to be white, right? And all the people from Africa are supposed to be black, right? And all the people—Indians are supposed to be red, right? And all the Asian people are supposed to be yellow, right? These are the colors people are givin' 'em. So it seems just like sports—they put 'em all in teams, like categories," he says. "*Yes*!! And why do they put 'em into teams?" I ask. "To make 'em compete!" he finishes.

Although people didn't necessarily belong to simple race categories, "they" had already lumped together the people who were "supposed to be" racially similar—and now, the categories were bricks in a wall of power relations. Accepting the idea that race categories existed, of course, itself helped maintain this artificially simple racial structure—but as Columbus youth themselves demonstrated, people now also had to remain racial in order to make things "fair."

Conclusion

Some analysts have predicted that contemporary U.S. youth, by professing self-consciously "mixed" ancestry and often by associating seemingly easily with one another (when desegregated demographics allow), sound the death knell for American racial categories writ large

(Heath 1995). Yet even our most diverse youth populations employ simple "race" categories daily, in concert with the adults around them—especially for the purposes of negotiating toward "fairness," and perhaps particularly in school. Indeed, as Columbus students reproduced daily a structure of simple, six-group "race" difference despite their stunning diversity, they activated a finding central to national equity policy and law: the persistent paradoxical need to employ, in equity efforts, the very systems of difference Americans have long naturalized to make people unequal (Minow 1990). By alternately challenging the very notion of simple racial difference and strategically utilizing race categories to identify human beings in their discourse, however, Columbus students also indicated the importance of fostering such race-bending discourse in our schools. Adults, too, can spearhead far more conversations in schools *about racial categorization itself,* bringing to light the youth contestation of "race groups" occurring already in the margins of our institutions in order to expose the lines we draw around "races" as human-made. Adults can also highlight the intersections and blurred borders between "races" when structuring school curricula and performances, even while discussing with youth how after several centuries of treating one another unequally along racial lines, Americans must often employ race labels purposefully in our attempts to make things equal.

At largely "mixed" Columbus, then, the shifting nature of youth identity did not erase simple-race identifications as crucial social ordering devices. Both defying and employing the racial logic available for use in America, Columbus students demonstrated that racial classification itself is always a process intertwined with struggles over power—and that creating local versions of equality in a nation with a legacy of simple-race logic will for a time require speaking categorically even while interrogating the very reality of categories themselves. Indeed, as Guinier and Torres (2002:42) warn, people who *continually* question the existence of race groups cede analysis of race's relevance to those who would like to "purge legal and political discourse of *all* racial references and who may be indifferent to whether this move preserves unjust hierarchies" (emphasis added).

As some California adults hasten to delete race words from equality talk, then, youth proceed strategically with race talk and with "racial" equality demands. Daily, Columbus youth both challenged the very idea of simple-race categorization *and* temporarily sacrificed the detailed complexities of racial "identity" to a national habit of simple racial identification, as a strategic response to an inequitable nation that has for generations bluntly asked us what we "are." While demonstrating that "races" are indeed a mind-boggling oversimplification of human diversity, young Americans still practice this oversimplification daily—in part to learn how to strategically challenge an existing simple race system in which the distribution of social and tangible resources remains perennially unequal.

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Notes

1. For a classic work on "racial formation" in U.S. history, see Omi and Winant 1994; see Pollock 2004 for additional bibliography.
2. Data excerpts in this article, along with several paragraphs of description and data analysis, also appear in Pollock (2004; introduction and chapter 1).
3. For ethnographic evidence of how children start reproducing racial categories and orders in U.S. preschools with the help of adults, see Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001; on high schools, see Fine et al. 1997; Fordham 1996; Perry 2002; Peshkin 1991; Pollock 2004. On the racialized distribution of school resources, see Oakes et al. 1990; Orfield and Eaton 1996.
4. Ironically, in his autobiographical novella, Thomas describes his own youthful dilemmas of racial self classification, particularly regarding the U.S. category "black."

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