

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

Publications and Research

Hunter College

---

2020

### **Making racial difference: A Foucauldian analysis of school memories told by undergraduates of color in the United States**

Debbie Sonu  
*CUNY Hunter College*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc\\_pubs/631](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_pubs/631)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).  
Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)



# Making a racial difference: a foucauldian analysis of school memories told by undergraduates of color in the United States

Debbie Sonu 

Hunter College, City University of New York, New York, NY, USA

## ABSTRACT

This paper draws from the writings of Michel Foucault and his recently reconsidered provocations on race and racialization. Using Foucault's definition of 'internal racism,' race is understood as a complex set of correlations that are employed for the purpose of establishing (ab)normality and exercising various forms of expulsion. Racialization is then seen as the circulation of knowledge that makes racial categorization evident as scientific truth, linked to themes of science, developmentality, and the governing of population. To illustrate its subjective materialization, I analyze childhood memories of school told by undergraduates of color at one large public university in New York City. In what follows, I present three narratives that exemplify the production of difference and abnormality, as a biopolitical strategy with racial significance, arguing that positivist school reforms and developmental theories in education cannot be thought of as separate from the mobilization of racial identity and experience. At its end, I argue that we must unravel our familiar ways of thinking about race and push against the constructs of normality that can have detrimental effects on everyday economic, political and social life.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 June 2019  
Accepted 27 April 2020

## KEYWORDS

Foucault; governmentality; racialization; biopolitics; childhood; race

Although Michel Foucault's oeuvre does not extensively discuss race, his analysis into the concept of racism as 'biopolitical government' (Rasmussen, 2011) illuminates the apparatus of racialization in ways that merit relevance and attention.<sup>1</sup> Applied more generously to gender and sexuality, scholars have recently turned toward his unfinished genealogy of racism, reconstructed from the final pages of *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1, and two series of lectures delivered at the Collège de France entitled *Abnormal* and *Society Must Be Defended* (translated into English in 2003), to examine the historicity of modern racism and its entrenchment in various forms of power (Feder, 2004; Foucault, 1978, 2003a, 2003b; Smith & Vasudevan, 2017; Stoler, 1995; Taylor, 2011; Young, 1995). While much scholarship on race adopts racial categorization as unquestioned antagonism, Foucault asks us to consider the discursive construction and circulation of knowledge that makes such categorizations evident as scientific truth and, even more importantly, lays focus on the subjective consequences of such

knowledge on the recognizability and regulation of self and others. The result is a provocative examination into how society has come to establish a stratified social order that defends its population against the development of the abnormal and the distinct forms of power that are constructed and coordinated to determine the life worth living, the life worthy of life.

Using Foucault's (2003a) definition of 'internal racism,' race is understood here as a complex set of correlations that are flexible enough to be employed in localized contexts for the purpose of establishing normality and exercising various forms of exclusion. This definition enables an exploration of schooling as a 'biopolitical strategy' (Foucault, 2000) that generates particular sets of individual and collective fragmentations within society, here along the lines of race. As a racism that is 'permanently, ceaselessly infiltrating the social body, or which is, rather, constantly being re-created in and by the social fabric' (Foucault, 2003b, p. 61), Foucault opens the field to a wider and deeper politics of exclusion that examines how a population is managed through a convergence of discourses that circulates normalizing judgments around intelligence, vigor, and strength, with detrimental effects on the everyday economic, political, and social life of racially minoritized<sup>2</sup> individuals (Stoler, 1995).

Contrary to common belief, an investigation into childhood memories does more than return us to the past. Instead, memories bring us forward by reclaiming the singularity of experience within the particularities of the present (Probyn, 1996). Scholars of curriculum theory and critical childhood studies have long studied how the child figure is subjected to disciplinary regimes that mobilize social, economic, and political aims in society. As an object of adult concern, the child, argues Claudia Castaneda (2002), is the cornerstone upon which broader societal and trans-national formations are built, including Enlightenment ideals of rationality; cultural-epoch theories of evolution and advancement (Baker, 1998); discourses on sexual and moral depravity (Foucault, 1978); and the production of childhood innocence, itself raced White (Bernstein, 2011; Dumas & Nelson, 2016). As anything but free, childhood then becomes a powerful focal point for the analysis of subject-making as it occurs within and through state institutions such as school.

In what follows, I offer an extended discussion of racism as 'biopolitical government' (Rasmussen, 2011; Taylor, 2011) with the intention of demonstrating how race is not naturally categorical, but discursively produced and linked to the themes of science, population, and the structures of schooling vis-a-vis technologies of biopower and governmentality. Using Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017), I examine the childhood memories of three undergraduate students of color and analyze the workings of power/knowledge within the disciplinary spaces of school. As one way to unravel the more familiar understanding of race as group difference, these stories unearth how institutionalized patterns of knowledge, including neoliberalism and developmental theories in education, discursively produce normalizing hierarchies that play into the formation of racialized positions. For undergraduates of color, childhood memories of school often involve the regulation of cultural knowledge in ways that re-inscribe normalizing judgements on what is considered acceptable and worthy. As found, discourses on development and societal progress, including the internalization of neoliberal school reforms, often masquerade themselves in complex racialized ways.

The implication here is to continually question the validity of racial thought and practice; to draw inter-disciplinary and discursive continuities with other forms of knowledge; and to reach new engagements and unsettlements that expand upon race as a destructive, deleterious, and naturalized aspect of human life. At its end, I argue that unless we continue to see race and racialization as working in conjunction with other sets of normalizing judgments, we may not be able to take on a history of racial segregation in ways that transform schools into more critical and heterotopic spaces of co-existence and difference.

## Race and population

As well studied, racism is not a phenomenon that can be parsed out from society, but is rather built into the social and structural apparatus that constitutes institutional and interpersonal life in the United States (Leonardo, 2013; Omi & Winant, 1994). According to Robert Young (1995), race operates as a form of power/knowledge in the way that racial assumptions are undergirded by a seemingly legitimate form of objectivity that circulates how we ought to differentiate ourselves from others. This ‘ideological fantasy’ (p. 2) inscribes normalcy as natural, masking its irrationality and positing others as either oppositional, or at its worst, a threat ‘born of and in its own body’ (Foucault, 2003a, p. 216). No longer an anatomo-politics of the individual, his treatment of the population, or a ‘biopolitics of the human race’ (p. 243) maintains that racial purification relies on this normative split and is less manipulated by direct forms of power – such as physical force, chattel slavery, and death – and increasingly governed through the formation of normalizing judgments (e.g., eugenics and psychiatry) aimed at reproducing a specific racial composition.

Racism, then, is a fragmenting system operating between macro and micro-levels with explicit rules and practices that make racialization a seemingly immovable and inherent characteristic of human life. Yet it does not only divide. In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault (2003b) argues that modern forms of racism emerge from a discourse of war that materializes long-held relationships of division and competition, an oppositional and confrontational system that leads to particular ways of knowing others and knowing the world (Binkley, 2016). As the history of war transformed from warring factions and land disputes to specific forms of state racism and biopolitical government, race became incorporated into society as biological differences that classified the population in ways that proved evolutionary development, progress, and superiority. This obsession with ‘boundary sanitation’ (Lesko, 2012, p. 26), grounded in an ontology of difference, produced new governing logics that not only divided individuals into hierarchies of value and worth, but established refined and far-reaching continuities between race and other discursive formations, penetrating into everyday life as capillary forms of disciplinary power.

As theories of eugenics and social hygiene created sub-specimens of deviants and misfits, racial categories turned into themselves to produce a centralized and centralizing power of normalization that Foucault named the ‘race war discourse.’ About this he writes:

It will become the discourse of a battle that has to be waged not between races, but by a race that is portrayed as the one true race, the race that holds power and is entitled to define the

norm, and against those who deviate from that norm, against those who pose a threat to the biological heritage. (Foucault, 2003b, p. 61)

This discourse of race war is less about the antagonisms between ‘qualitatively neutral cultures’ (what Foucault called ‘ordinary racism’) (Taylor, 2011, p. 752) and more about the building of a normalizing and highly institutionalized hierarchical system that justifies the exclusion, even death of, the other. Here, one becomes good by constructing the other as evil (Nietzsche, 1967). The erasure of the other being necessary for the population to maintain a pure, healthy, more affirmative and longer lasting existence. Against the production of a normative figure, this kind of racism is both a way of knowing (a product of knowledge) and a way of governing (tied to practices of management) that constantly defends itself against that which is considered outside the normal.

### **Biopolitics and abnormality**

In his series of lectures entitled *Abnormal*, delivered in 1974–1975, the time of writing his better known *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1978), Foucault (2003a) traces the intent of psychiatry from treatment and illness to one concerned with the management of abnormalities (Taylor, 2011). Legitimated first by its association with medicine, he demonstrates how this perceived expertise authorized psychiatry to establish social control by first identifying abnormalities (or even a hereditary predisposition to the abnormal) as dangers then executing their removal through systems of incarceration, sterilization, and the performance of lobotomies. With a focus on determining the conditions that may or may not give rise to diagnosable ailments, their greatly expanded domain led to theories of heredity that would merge eugenics, population control, and as Foucault (2003a) writes, a ‘racism against the abnormal’ (p. 317).

As different from ‘traditional, historical racism, from “ethnic racism”’ (Foucault, 2003a, p. 316), this ‘internal racism’ implicates and permits the ‘screening of every individual’ within a given society and targets its own population through a logic of exclusion that determines the difference between normal and abnormal. While Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power applied to individual bodies, biopower, as first called in *The History of Sexuality*, is a power that exists at a different level, on different scales, using different instruments, in different spaces. Not in place of, but existing with other forms of power, biopower in particular is a dispersed entity exercised not to ‘man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as living-being; ultimately ... to man-as-species’ (Foucault, 2003b, p. 242). By controlling for what and who is acceptable and deviant, this shift in focus transformed racism from an outward attack on other ethnic groups (hetero-referential) to a racism concerned with establishing a defense against its own members (auto-referential) (Rasmussen, 2011). Population, then, emerges as the new object of social intervention with new sets of processes in the management of the masses.

Circulating through more contemporary trends, the ‘new racism,’ writes Henry Giroux (2003) can produce its effects without any explicit reference to race and is shaped instead by belief and practices of modernity that overemphasize classification and make common the necessity of homogenization (Goldberg, 1993). Examples as cited in Roberts and Mahtani (2010) demonstrate how the construction of racial epithets such as (Black) welfare mothers, at-risk students (of color), or low wage (immigrant) workers become

mutually constitutive with other forms of differentiation. These constructions are more tightly bound than intersectionalities. They originate at the production of knowledge and work through multiple registers, levels, and processes, to enforce meanings of normality that have elusive yet penetrating racial consequences. While refusing to stake claim to any universalizing or teleological inevitability, Foucault reminds us that the constructed nature of race is not limited to incidences of prejudice and discrimination, but emerges as disciplinary technologies that rationalize the links between population and the norm.

### **Foucauldian discourse analysis as a method**

In their work on Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, Michael Arribas-Ayllon and Valerie Walkerdine (2017) glean several insights to consider when using Foucault's theoretical ideas as methods for research. Of relevance to this study are his notion of discourse and the 'focal points of experience' (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017, p. 111), both of which are studied along three axes:

the *axis of knowledge*, the rules that govern discursive practices that determine what is true or false; the *axis of power*, or the rationalities by which one governs the conduct of others; and the *axis of ethics*, or the practices through which an individual constitutes itself as a subject. (original emphasis, p. 111)

As what Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine call 'discourse samples' (p. 115), the childhood narratives in this study are especially useful in evidencing both 'the institutional partitioning of knowledge' and the 'techniques and practices through which objects, concepts and strategies are formed' (p. 114). Examining knowledge as discourse (Powers, 2007), this study looks at childhood memories of school as artefacts that shed light into the various ways that normalizing judgements are mobilized in school reforms, policies, and classroom practices. These include moments that communicate to children the meaning of knowledge, the privileging of knowledge, and the conditions from which the subjectivity of the educated and racialized child emerges.

Drawn from a larger qualitative study, this analysis focuses on three semi-structured interviews (Davies & Gannon, 2015; Mishler, 2004) that asked undergraduate participants to trace their educational lives from childhood to college. All participants in this study are undergraduate students between the ages of 19-21 and self-identify as persons of color. Two are born in the U.S. with parents who immigrated from Mexico and China. The third student came to the U.S. from South Korea at the age of 7. They are pursuing a range of different majors from art to education to neuropsychology and all identify as females. Interviews included prompts such as What was school like for you? What were some of your most memorable school experiences? Are there any teachers that stand out to you? Were there any big changes in your childhood life? Participants spoke openly about both joyful and challenging moments in school, types of nurture, guidance, and mentorship, the factors that shaped their interests, accomplishments and setbacks. While the original intent of the project was to document the multitude pathways that individuals take on their way to the university, it became apparent that themes of exclusion marked significant turning points in the recognizability of self as racial other.

Understanding that there is no direct portal into experience, I do not believe that memories derive absolute truths, nor can they promise precision and exact reliance. Yet

even without historical accuracy, there remains great significance in acknowledging the enduring emotional charge of past experience (Philo, 2003). As I listened to participants, I am reminded of my own childhood as an Asian-American child growing up decades ago in Arizona, the great rift between my home and school, the elusive sense of being different yet not quite knowing from where such messages arrived. Entangled indeed there is much concern with interpreting across races and I acknowledge both my insider-outsider positionality (Villenas, 1996) to the immigrant experience, if there even is such a thing. Working inductively and through the lens of Foucault, I acknowledge the impossibility of representation, knowing that the stories between me and participants are interwoven in ways that do not undermine their significance, but rather amplify the discursive circulation of technologies of power within broader society.

### **Stories of (ab)normal childhoods in school**

In what follows, I present narratives that include some of the first moments of self-realization and otherness for participants, exemplifying three different ways in which normative hierarchies mark the making of the racialized child. These stories illustrate how racialization is produced through complex linkages that rationalize certain truths about science, development, normality, and population.

#### ***Juana: they are close to our hearts***

When asked to describe school, Juana's very first description is about the stark difference between herself as a Mexican-American child and her predominantly White elementary<sup>3</sup> school teachers. 'I had some experiences because of that,' she alludes. 'I guess you could say, I felt I couldn't approach them in certain circumstances and you know, because you know in school, they tell you certain stuff.' For a weekly writing assignment, Juana recalls a time when she writes about making tamales with her mother to which her teachers calls out, 'What's that?' To allay public confusion, she begins to explain the contents of tamales, but then gives up until another student in her classroom exclaims, 'Oh yeah, I like did the same thing with my mother!' 'Stuck in that endless cycle of explaining,' Juana describes how 'nice' it was to have classmates from all different backgrounds and wished her teachers to be just as diverse, a 'wish' that she says would have made her school experience 'a lot better.'

When asked about her most formative childhood memory, Juana shares a time when she was asked by her teacher to write a journal entry on a topic of interest. Having just watched the news with her mother and seeing 'how immigrants are not liked in this country,' she wrote what she calls a third grade (age 7–8) composition about how this country should 'love immigrants more.' With astonishment, she recalls, 'Anyways, my teacher read it and said, "I don't think you should write that." And that really really stuck with me, those words just stuck with me.' Relating this experience to the xenophobia inflamed by an anti-immigrant U.S. President, Juana shares the need to tell this story as one of the reasons she volunteered for the study, and in doing so, seeks to challenge monocultural uniformity and the fear of political bias often present in the classroom. While this memory might seem quaint, for Juana, it creates an enduring sense of being known as a racialized child. As a site of production, we see power enacted as institutional

knowledge, discursively circulating specific intellectual rationalities that split knowledge into right and wrong, acceptable and abnormal.

In his analysis, Foucault examines how a body of statements, continuously referential and connected, produces discourses that shape the way we are constituted as subjects of our own knowledge (Gamez, 2018). As he demonstrates, a normalizing form of social control precedes and enables the expansion of racism against what is considered normal. Here, the experience of making tamales is responded to by a speech act that makes visible the kinds of knowledge that assert an official truth in school (Valenzuela, 2019). The politics of food and immigration are constructed as outside of what is considered school knowledge, an experience for Juana that produces and maintains cultural, racial, and curricular silences in an effort to reduce away her otherness (Young, 1995). Delgado Bernal (2001) writes, childhood stories are living testimonies through which the teller makes sense of their own construction. They are curricular artefacts that show how the devaluing of minoritized knowledge repeats and reinforces racial, gender, and class inequality.

While this event can be read as an impasse between a teacher and student, the angst felt by Juana is more than her need for integration; it is about her refusal to be subordinate to a pedagogical discourse that is actively producing the position of the racialized subject. As she got older, Juana shares how her observations of school began to illuminate her understanding of school inequity. Instead of trusting adults to create just and fair conditions, she realizes with age the rampant funding discrepancies among schools and the monocultural lens through which subjects such as history are taught. As early as middle school, Juana vividly recalls when teachers began cancelling events due to funding. '[The teachers] really wanted to do so much more with us,' she laments. About this she continues:

Maybe there should be some changes. Public schools need more funding. Uh, teachers don't have the resources that they should have to teach a classroom . . . But not only that. I feel like we should definitely be more inclusive. We need to teach more about different backgrounds. Because you know, they are close to our hearts.

The kind of curriculum that Juana is asking for is one derived from her need to be valued in a nation that has systematically excluded the history of Latinx people from the curricular canon. Her childhood memories of being misunderstood by her teachers, accentuated by her observation of educational segregation and underfunding, fuels her desire for a school that challenges objective, restrictive, and homogenizing forms of structural and curricular knowledge. As Juana reflexively and critically examines her childhood memory, her responses demonstrate the productive capacity of questioning whether she can think differently from the given expectations of school (Mayo, 2000). Here, then, power is not only repressive, but productive in that Juana exercises the possibility to subvert, eclipse, and reconfigure disciplinary power, revealing the importance of analyzing her own self-formation within and through social institutions that attempt to govern the masses toward dominant ideals and attitudes.

***SooYun: I was never at that level***

For SooYun, an art student who immigrated from South Korea to Queens, New York in the second grade, memories of school are overwhelmed by what she terms ‘a lot of polarities.’ ‘I just felt very confused,’ she says as she recalls the great cultural divide between home and school. School for SooYun was a place of ‘creativity and intellectual expression’, but somehow as she started growing older, something inexplicable happened and she began to struggle a lot. ‘I think as I started growing older, I started realizing the reality of everything.’ Feeling dejected, she points out her inability to socialize with others, and her feelings of being ‘stifled’ and burdened as a young child. She attributes some of this to the poverty her family experienced; not having enough money for a babysitter, SooYun was often left alone at a very young age. ‘In a weird way,’ she explains ‘that prevented me from learning social skills.’

For two years, SooYun went to a private school until she felt ‘like [the cost] was a burden on her parents’ and relocated to a public school. One of her most formative memories of this new school is described with a feeling of surprise over the ways books in her new classroom were leveled. The practice of leveling in childhood literacy is a sophisticated assessment-driven regime that meticulously matches the measured reading level of each child with a set of leveled reading materials, texts, and assessments (Kontovourki, 2012). In order to determine which level is most accurate, teachers administer a slew of assessments including everyday observations, miscue analyses, reading inventories, and running records. Accompanied with the marketing of materials, the system of leveling has transformed classroom libraries in elementary schools across the nation. Books are no longer shelved by discipline, decimal, or alphabetically, but by the level of text difficulty which is marked on their covers by a letter from A-Z. SooYun explains:

So they have those book levels that go by the alphabet and I felt like I was never at the level I wanted to be or was supposed to be. I felt that was really discouraging for me.

Similar to SooYun, students are often very aware of their reading level as teachers instruct them to only peruse books in their associated bins, and often publicly praise those who have moved up. Yet for SooYun, such systems of individual progress did not serve such a purpose. Instead, they became a source of public shame and distress as she found herself at the bottom rung of the developmental ladder.

Far from the literacy dreamt by Paulo Freire (1970), the act of reading has become an independent event determined by an ensemble of external measurements and records of progress (Dzaldov & Peterson, 2005). With outcomes driving the learning process, students and teachers are disciplined into the terms of the institution which call upon them to participate in causal, competitive, and normative ways of thinking about reading that, as explained by SooYun, do not always lead to the kinds of motivation they claim to inspire.

For SooYun, we can read her racialization as bound up in ‘epistemological power’ (Deacon, 2006) that include beliefs on development and achievement, that through the seemingly objective truth of science, come to classify and establish her abnormalities (e.g., intelligence, language abilities, class-based income, racial background). What seems crucial here is how the discourse of race is manifest within ‘the literacy debates’ (Green, 1998), reading levels as normative symbolic categories that at once have a ‘double effect’

(Fendler, 1998) of fragmenting along racial lines while asserting the desirable attributes that construct individuals as instantiations of that category.

The role of standardized tests and assessments appears again as SooYun describes the realization that her performance may not even be about learning at all. About this she says,

It really felt like, after a while, they were just teaching us to get a passing grade so [the school district] could get funding . . . And that's kind of what it felt like, you don't really learn what we wanted to do. It kind of felt like we were learning to get money for a school.

For early Foucault, disciplinary spaces are set up to pull individual bodies into a collective scene of surveillance and control, governing shared understandings of self in relation to state institutions such as school. As such bodies become instruments of the institution, continuous chronologies of evaluation justify adjustments to the masses. SooYun's observation reveals a critique of testing, leveling, and data generation that is not even tied to students at all, but to the funding apparatus of schools altogether. While it is well studied how standardized exams inscribe a norm against which linguistically and culturally non-dominant students are disadvantaged (Graham & Neu, 2004), SooYun tells a story of the exam as exercised at the level of everyday practice, while simultaneously tied to far-reaching systems of accountability that have historically underserved communities and schools of color.

### ***Grace: my grades did not reflect that at all***

'I've always had like a very sheltered school experience,' begins Grace, a Chinese-American student whose entry into a school magnet program<sup>4</sup> sent her to Long Island from grades first to eighth. Schooled with the same group of students for all those years, Grace recalls how she 'didn't really know people outside of my class,' and that 'teachers were very respectful of us, or they were just very interested in like the way our minds worked, teaching us things that maybe we shouldn't have necessarily learned at that age.' The making of the academically elite was not only internalized by the teachers, who according to Grace demonstrated preferential treatment, but fueled immense competitive pressure amongst her classmates. 'A lot of people were like, "Grades! Grades! Grades!" That was our defining factor,' she explains.

Modern forms of power, writes Lynn Fendler (1998), are predicated on knowledge of the self and others as a mode of subjectification. Here, we see that the construction of the 'educated subject' (p. 39) – Grace and her classmates – involves the creation of a system that not only parses and secludes them from others, but assigns a corresponding set of pedagogies, rights, and identities. In her analysis, Fendler draws from Foucault to examine how the educated subject is constructed to possess 'a faculty of cognition' (p. 45) that can be abstracted from the body; being educated refers not 'to the care and cultivation of a virtuous human nature . . . but rather personal identification with rational principles' (p. 46). This bonding of mind with external measure is found in the very exam Grace needs to enter into this specialized program, and the various disciplinary technologies that keep her and her classmates in constant search for institutional affirmation and pleasure.

While Grace describes school as ‘expanding your mind and learning about the world,’ she juxtaposes these ideals with numerous examples of how the competitive nature of her class oftentimes made her feel inadequate, especially in the area of math. Repeated almost a dozen times throughout the interview, math becomes the object of failure that Grace continually resurrects, oftentimes using words such as ‘horrible,’ ‘hate,’ ‘terrible,’ and ‘bad.’ Buoyed by the stereotype that all Asians should be competent in math, she is unable to live up to the ‘well-rounded knowledge’ of her peers and remembers that ‘math was the one thing that dragged me down.’ Here, Grace is internalizing a system of education that produces a particular kind of educated subject and that this subject is inherently competitive, competent, and outcomes-driven. When asked about feeling smart, Grace responds:

I think it was just the competition with these same people. Like if I saw someone finishing a test, that kid in me was like, ‘Oh I need to finish too!’ I always wanted to be the smartest even though I wasn’t good at math. I tried to be like, ‘I’m handing in my paper before everyone else, I must be supersmart’ even though my grades did not reflect that at all.

She continues to describe a memorable moment when her eighth-grade math teacher told her, ‘You know, you don’t necessarily have to have the best grades’ and the feeling of relief she felt for not having to perform at the highest level. Ironically, such breaks from pressure worked in ways that made Grace ‘feel a little better about my abilities,’ not outcomes, grades, or performance.

The degradation of the social is an aspect of her childhood that Grace now recalls as a difficult challenge. ‘Especially since like we weren’t able to connect with other classes and expand our social circle, and you know, the other classes didn’t look too kindly on us because we were kind of considered the nerds. So a lot of us were just friends with each other.’ When she graduated into high school, Grace experienced many problems trying to make friends in a new context with new people. As she ‘overcompensated,’ she found herself making and losing a series of friends in her first two years of high school and in retrospect now understands her school experience to have ‘not a lot of social benefits.’ Losing touch with those from her magnet school, she began to realize that ‘we were friends because we shared a similar struggle, or same teachers, but that was pretty much it.’

In New York City, educational programs for ‘gifted’ students face serious challenges for its role in exacerbating the increasingly segregated and disproportionately low quality of schooling for Black and Latinx students. Fundamentally hierarchical and exclusionary, Black and Latinx students make up less than 11% of specialized enrollment even as they comprise over 70% of the student population in the city. Conversely, in 2019, Asians made up 66% of student enrollment at the schools; at the most exclusive and competitive, Stuyvesant High School, Asians made up 74% of the current student body (Wong, 2019). In his work, Steven Mazie (2009) ties the production and identification of giftedness to the racially imbalanced history of public schooling in the United States, all of which hides behind the dehistoricized facade of merit-based testing and individual accountability. While the use of a single exam to determine admission is highly problematic, the residing knowledge that shapes the recognizability of the ‘educated subject’ works as a specific form of exclusion that reinforces the discriminatory potential of meritocratic systems and the myths of individual choice.

Complex indeed, there is little doubt, however, that population is fragmented by racialized subjectivities that are regulated by educational institutions bent on hierarchies that purport neutrality in their judgements. The normalizing school reinforces the commonsense belief that inequality is eradicated through personal responsibility and will, shifting the onus to the individual and denying a whole range of contemporary controversies and dilemmas involving race and various forms of racism. As said by Giroux (2008), when human agency is understood as a meritocratic process of individual choice – decontextualized, dehistoricized, and depoliticized – racism then becomes both fundamentally disguised and simultaneously empowered.

### **Racialization as models of educability**

Unsurprisingly, school is an enduring memory in the lives of all participants and a focus on how people articulate their subject positions within the everyday material conditions of school offers us a way to better understand how subjects come to know and accept their place in the world. In doing so, we can see race as a conjunctive and complex set of contemporary truths that make up a vast field of meanings and consequences. We see this in the way Juana's teacher directly disciplines her experiences as a cultural being; in SooYun's shame-ridden relationship to book leveling; and the compromises to friendship experienced by Grace and her privileged status in the academic hierarchy. In education, this points to problems of differentiation, how students are positioned as deviant or acceptable to standard models of educability, but also how schools insist on reproducing categories of 'success' and 'failure.' At the site of production, each story links questions of being and identity with localized politics and relations of power (Coffey, 2005), focusing on subjective experience within the context of their own socio-cultural locations. Such examples do not evidence pure adaptation to the norms, but complex negotiations that both master and subvert the domains of knowledge from which the subject emerges.

Formations of abnormality, steeped in the history of eugenics, science, as well as theories of selection and survival, appear within structures of schooling that hierarchize intelligence and justify discriminatory practices. These stories show how school practices restrict knowledge, surveil knowledge, and classify knowledge in order to reinforce categorical myths of worth and value for young children. Yet even as race representation is key to how certain racial groups are rendered intelligible, a counter-discourse that combats stereotypes and racism should include the potential for subjects to engage in more active problematizations of their own situatedness, to understand race, not as static or natural representation, but to better understand how it is produced and mobilized through a variety of forms of power and interrelations. Of relevance in this contemporary moment of neoliberal and neopositivist pedagogy is how understandings of racialization are subsumed within the logic of data driven-options and individual choice that promulgates seemingly race-neutral systems.

Moving forward, neoliberalism must be seen for the way it capitalizes on a specific kind of racial referent that imagines social and public issues as a function of private concern. Accentuated in neoliberal cultures, there is a deliberate attempt to transform the discourse of race by replacing structural and systemic analyses of inequity with a focus on individualized choice and agency. Here, as in all three memories, institutional forms of exclusion are grounded in judgments on personality traits, abilities, and dispositions

which are then corrected, removed, or lowered in status. Without direct reference to race, strict standardization and the over-reliance on data and evaluation become central tenets of the liberal racial framework in the United States (Au, 2016; Melamed, 2006). In a privatized world that sees human beings as personal dilemmas rather than social beings, there is less need for historical knowledge, critique, or questions over self-formation. Normative systems that re-legitimate meritocratic schooling are precisely the means to obscure racial discrimination behind the rhetoric of market logic and objective science, further disconnecting individuals from the social cohesion and expansion so desired and needed by young people.

Discussions on race and racialization are increasingly important in this epoch of schooling as discriminatory mechanisms are masked behind seemingly neutral learning standards and assessments (Giroux, 2003; Melamed, 2006). Competition is a defining characteristic of school that has little regard for context yet justifies privileges for those who inherit them. Similarly, the rationalization of linear development, found prominent in child psychology, recapitulates colonial demarcations from savagery to reason, a sequential progression that expresses racist, gendered, and ableist notions of human capacity, demeaning cultures of Indigenous or ‘developing’ societies and uplifting military/industrial and corporatized nation-states (Tesar et al., 2016). Developmental theories in education cannot be thought of as separate from the biopolitical mobilization of racial identity and experience. They are deeply wedded within a regulatory system of normalization that manifests in the schooling of children. Perhaps then, suggest Omi and Winant (2005), we must unravel our familiar way of thinking about race once more, to examine race beyond something that must be determined or eradicated, to instead push against constructs of normality and its desirability, both of which produce an uneven distribution of human-ness for the racialized life.

## Notes

1. I acknowledge the absences in Foucault’s work around imperialism, colonialism, and race, and understand my use is for a particular analytical purpose. See Stoler (1995).
2. I use the term ‘minoritized’ interchangeably with ‘of color’ to signify both a limiting category of identity and an action that uses racial categorization to organize individuals into an inferior minority status.
3. In the United States, elementary school typically includes kindergarten through fifth or sixth grade (ages 5–12). With the push for pre-kindergarten, many cities, including New York City, offer public elementary school education and services for children as young as three years old.
4. Magnet schools are public schools with specialized courses or curricula that are able to draw in students from outside the surrounding neighborhood zone.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Farjana Fatema, Anisah Ganee, Olga Ioukliaevskikh, and Joanna Wong, the undergraduate research assistants on this project, and Dr. Trevor Gale and the review committee for their thoughtful and patient review of this manuscript.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Funding

This work was supported by the Hunter College [Undergraduate Research Initiative].

## Notes on contributor

**Debbie Sonu** is Associate Professor of Education in the Department of Curriculum and Teaching at Hunter College, City University of New York and doctoral faculty in the PhD Program in Urban Education at The Graduate Center. Her scholarly interests include curriculum theory and philosophy as it relates to urban education, politically oriented teaching in public schools, and critical childhood studies. She has been published in *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, *Curriculum Inquiry*, *Journal of Teacher Education*, and the *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, among others.

## ORCID

Debbie Sonu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1420-1885>

## References

- Arribas-Ayllon, M., & Walkerdine, V. (2017). Foucauldian discourse analysis. In C. Willig & W. Stainton-Rogers (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research in psychology* (pp. 110–123). SAGE.
- Au, W. (2016). Meritocracy 2.0: High-stakes, standardized testing as a racial project of neoliberal multiculturalism. *Educational Policy*, 30(1), 39–62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904815614916>
- Baker, B. (1998). ‘Childhood’ in the emergence and spread of U.S. public schools. In T. Popkewitz & M. Brennan (Eds.), *Foucault’s challenge: discourse, knowledge, and power in education* (pp. 117–143). Teachers College Press.
- Bernstein, R. (2011). *Racial innocence: Performing American childhood from slavery to civil rights*. New York University Press.
- Binkley, S. (2016). Anti-racism beyond empathy: Transformations in the knowing and governing of racial difference. *Subjectivity*, 9(2), 181–204. <https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2016.4>
- Castaneda, C. (2002). *Figurations*. Duke University Press.
- Coffey, M. (2005). What puts the “culture” in multiculturalism? An analysis of culture, government, and the politics of Mexican identity. In C. McCarthy, W. Crichlow, G. Dimitradis, & N. Dolby (Eds.), *Race, identity, and representation in education* (pp. 257–272). Taylor & Francis.
- Davies, B., & Gannon, S. (2015). *Pedagogical encounters*. Peter Lang.
- Deacon, R. (2006). Michel Foucault on education: A preliminary theoretical overview. *South African Journal of Education*, 26(2), 177–187. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/saje/article/viewFile/25063/20733>
- Delgado Bernal, D. (2001). Living and learning pedagogies of the home: The mestiza consciousness of Chicana students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 14(5), 623–639. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390110059838>
- Dumas, M., & Nelson, J. D. (2016). (Re)imagining black boyhood: Toward a critical framework for educational research. *Harvard Educational Review*, 86(1), 27–47. <https://doi.org/10.17763/0017-8055.86.1.27>
- Dzaldov, B. S., & Peterson, S. (2005). Book leveling and readers. *International Reading Association*, 59(3), 222–229. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RT.59.3.2>
- Feder, E. K. (2004). The discursive production of the “dangerous individual”: Biopower and the making of the racial state. *Radical Philosophy Review*, 7(1), 17–39. <https://doi.org/10.5840/radphilrev2004711>

- Fendler, L. (1998). What is it impossible to think? A genealogy of the education subject. In T. Popkewitz & M. Brennan (Eds.), *Foucault's challenge: Discourse, knowledge, and power in education* (pp. 39–63). Teachers College Press.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: Volume I: An introduction*. Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (2000). *Power: Essential works of Foucault, Vol. 3*. The New Press.
- Foucault, M. (2003a). *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France 1974-1975*. Picador.
- Foucault, M. (2003b). “Society must be defended”: *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*. Picador.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Gamez, P. (2018). Did Foucault do ethics?: The “ethical turn,” neoliberalism, and the problem of truth. *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, XXVI(1), 107–133. <https://doi.org/10.5195/JFFP.2018.818>
- Giroux, H. (2003). Spectacle of race and pedagogies of denial: Anti-Black racist pedagogy under the reign of neoliberalism. *Communication Education*, 52(3/4), 191–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0363452032000156190>
- Giroux, H. (2008). *Against the terror of neoliberalism: Politics beyond the age of greed*. Routledge.
- Goldberg, D. T. (1993). *Racist culture: Philosophy and the politics of meaning*. Blackwell.
- Graham, C., & Neu, D. (2004). Standardized testing and the construction of governable persons. *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, 36(3), 295–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0022027032000167080>
- Green, B. (1998). Born-again teaching? Governmentality, “grammar,” and public schooling. In T. Popkewitz & M. Brennan (Eds.), *Foucault's challenge: Discourse, knowledge, and power in education* (pp. 173–204). Teachers College Press.
- Kontovourki, S. (2012). Reading leveled books in assessment-saturated classrooms: A close examination of unmarked processes of assessment. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 47(2), 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.1002/RRQ.014>
- Leonardo, Z. (2013). *Race frameworks: A multidimensional theory of racism and education*. Teachers College Press.
- Lesko, N. (2012). *Act your age!: A cultural construction of adolescence*. Routledge.
- Mayo, C. (2000). The uses of Foucault. *Educational Theory*, 50(1), 103–116. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2000.00103.x>
- Mazie, S. (2009). Equality, race and gifted education: An egalitarian critique of admission to New York City's specialized high schools. *Theory and Research in Education*, 7(1), 5–25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878508099747>
- Melamed, J. (2006). The spirit of neoliberalism: From racial liberalism to neoliberal multicultural. *Social Text*, 24(4), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-2006-009>
- Mishler, E. (2004). *Storylines: Craftartists' narratives of identity*. Harvard University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1967). *On the genealogy of morals*. Vintage.
- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (2005). The theoretical status of the concept of race. In C. McCarthy, W. Crichlow, G. Dimitriadis, & N. Dolby (Eds.), *Race, identity, and representation in education* (pp. 3–12). Teachers College Press.
- Omi, M., & Winant, H. (1994). *Racial formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. Routledge.
- Philo, C. (2003). “To go back up the side hill”: Memories, imaginations and reveries of childhood. *Children's Geographies*, 1(1), 7–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733280320188>
- Powers, P. (2007). The philosophical foundations of Foucaultian discourse analysis. *Critical Approaches to Discourse Analysis across Disciplines*, 1(2), 18–34. [https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/journals/cadaad/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Volume-1\\_Powers.pdf](https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/journals/cadaad/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Volume-1_Powers.pdf)
- Probyn, R. (1996). *Outside belongings*. Routledge.
- Rasmussen, K. S. (2011). Foucault's genealogy of racism. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28(5), 34–51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411410448>
- Roberts, D. J., & Mahtani, M. (2010). Neoliberalizing race, racing neoliberalism: Placing ‘race’ in neoliberal discourses. *Antipode*, 42(2), 248–257. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00747.x>

- Smith, S., & Vasudevan, P. (2017). Race, biopolitics, and the future: Introduction to the special section. *Environment and Planning, D, Society & Space*, 35(2), 210–221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263775817699494>
- Stoler, A. L. (1995). *Race and the education of desire: Foucault's history of sexuality and the colonial order of things*. Duke University Press.
- Taylor, C. (2011). Race and racism in Foucault's College de France. *Philosophy Compass*, 6(11), 746–756. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2011.00443.x>
- Tesar, M., Farquhar, S., Gibbons, A., Myers, C. Y., & Block, M. N. (2016). Childhoods and time: Rethinking notions of temporality in early childhood education. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 17(4), 359–366. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949116677931>
- Valenzuela, A. (2019). The struggle to decolonize official knowledge in Texas' state curriculum: Side-stepping the colonial matrix of power. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 52(2–3), 197–215.
- Villenas, S. (1996). The colonizer/colonized Chicana ethnographer: Identity, marginalization, and co-optation in the field. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(4), 711–732. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.66.4.3483672630865482>
- Wong, A. (2019, March 21). 4 myths fueling the fight over NYC's exclusive high schools. *The Atlantic*. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/03/stuyvesant-admissions-controversy-fact-or-fiction/585460/>
- Young, R. (1995). Foucault on race and colonialism. *New Formations*, 25, 47–65. <http://www.robertjyoung.com/Foucault.pdf>