# *Blinded by the White: Social Studies and Raceless Pedagogies*

PRENTICE T. CHANDLER
*Athens State University*

ABSTRACT: This article examines the race related pedagogies of two white, male teachers in north Alabama. Drawing on the analysis of two qualitative case studies related to how they taught about race within the context of their American history courses, the author argues that teaching about race within their classes serves to reify and uphold white supremacy in the social studies curricula. The author describes the following themes that emerged throughout the research: a) liberal, incremental process, b) race neutrality and color-blindness, c) fear of teaching about race, and d) naturalization/essentialization of race. The analysis of how race is conceptualized by the teachers in this study is informed by critical race theory (CRT), social studies research, and Pierre Bourdieu's notion of *misrecognition*. By utilizing CRT philosophy, he points to the idea that race, as a part of the formal and enacted curriculum is downplayed and overshadowed by more traditional explanations of race in United States history. He argues that the social studies profession needs to make race and racism a more visible part of the social studies curricula. Implications of this research point to a need to reconceptualize citizenship and citizenship education and to resist the cultural right in the area of social education.

RESUMÉ: Ce papier passe en revue les pédagogies de deux enseignants blancs du nord de l'Alabama. Ces pédagogies sont liées à la race. A l'appui de l'analyse de deux études qualitatives de cas concernant leur façon d'enseigner en matière de race pendant leurs cours d'histoire américaine, l'auteur soutient que leur méthode d'enseignement sur la race au sein même de leurs cours, sert à réifier et à maintenir la suprématie de la race blanche dans les programmes de sciences humaines. Ressortis de la recherche, l'auteur décrit les thèmes suivants: a) le processus libéral cumulatif, b) la neutralité de la race et le daltonisme, c) la peur d'enseigner en matière de race, et d) l'état naturel et le côté incontournable de la race. Dans cette étude, la théorie critique de la race (TCR), la recherche en sciences humaines et la notion de *non*

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*reconnaissance* de Pierre Bourdieu, sont les moyens d'information qui aident à analyser la façon dont les enseignants conceptualisent la race. A l'appui de la philosophie TCR, il dégage l'idée que la race, en tant que partie du programme officiel publié, est minimisé et éclipsé par des explications plus traditionnelles de la race dans l'histoire américaine. Il soutient que le domaine des sciences humaines a besoin de garder une part plus importante sur les sujets de race et de racisme dans leurs programmes. Il résulte donc de cette étude un besoin de reconceptualiser les notions de citoyenneté et d'enseignement de la citoyenneté et de repousser le droit culturel dans le domaine de l'enseignement des sciences humaines.

## *Introduction*

Social studies, as a school discipline in American schools, has historically followed the political climate of the day. This is to say that in times of historical upheaval or lack thereof, the paradigms and the shifts of what is taught, why it is taught, and to what extent alternative narratives are allowed space in the formal curriculum come into relief. This pattern of teaching social studies to fit the political climate in the United States is a pattern that can be seen in pedagogical philosophies of the progressive movement, before and after WWII, the critical social reformers of the Great Depression, the upheaval of the 1960s, the conservative restoration of the 1980s, ( Stanley & Nelson, 1994) and the current back-to-the-basics, "conservative restoration" (Ross, 2006, p. 322) movement that got a much needed shot in the arm with the tragic events of 9-11. This pattern of curriculum following politics is so predictable that Evans (2006) states, "if you don't like the current direction of curricular reform, take heart, it may not last" (p. 317) suggesting a pendulum that swings to meet the political needs or demands of the day. But what this pattern of politics and pedagogy reveals is a lack of attention, philosophically, that has been paid to the ways in which non-white groups in American history have been Otherized and tokenized in the telling of the American nation state's narrative, essentially serving as the backdrop to the "American story." Given this debate among scholars, "conservative cultural continuity is the dominant approach practiced in schools" (Ross, 2006, p. 231); regardless of the debates among scholars, conservative paradigms dominate practice. The social studies curricula as it currently is conceptualized and taught in American schools represents a *racial* education, in that it ignores the importance of race (Ladson-Billings, 2003) as a central construct in the unfolding of United States history.

Whether it is the glossing over of the conquest of indigenous people, the enslavement of Africans, or modern examples of how the United States represents a nation state built upon the principles of racism (Omi & Winant, 1994), the social studies status quo fails to adequately take race into consideration. Even the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has admitted to ignoring race and racism in national debates. Marshall (2003) points out that the NCSS's *Curriculum Guidelines for Multicultural Education* intentionally excluded race and racism as subjects in the hopes that it would disappear of its own volition: "We rarely used the term race in the first edition, perhaps because of our vain hope that silence would facilitate racism's disappearance" (cited in Marshall, 2003, p. 80).

## *Conceptual Framework*

Race and racism, as academic topics within social studies research, have been largely ignored (Baber, 2003; Branch, 2003; Howard, 2003; Marri, 2003; Marshall, 2003; Pang, Rivera, & Gillette, 1998; Tyson, 2003; Rains, 2003). A review of social studies literature from 1973 to the present in *Theory and Research in Social Education* (*TRSE*) reveals an embarrassing lapse of scholarly inquiry into race and how it manifests itself in social studies classrooms and curricula models. In Ehlman's (1998) review of *TRSE* from 1973-1997, only 6% dealt with "social problems and controversial issues," of which race would be a part. In light of the fact that social studies is the "most inclusive" (Ross, 2006, p. 19) of school disciplines, and the fact that the social studies is probably the most suited to approach controversial issues such as race (Nelson & Pang, 2006), it is surprising that this is the case. Two recent *Volumes in Research in Social Education* are instructive in how race is pushed to the margins of social education research. The two volumes in question, *Critical Issues in Social Studies Teacher Education* (Adler, 2004) and *Critical Issues in Social Studies Research for the 21st Century* (Stanley, 2001), both treat race as a topic that finds itself on the periphery of social studies thought and research. Of the 33 chapters in these volumes, which are written by the foremost scholars in the field of social studies research, five address race in some fashion. Of the five chapters that deal with race and racism in the social studies, one locates race as a sub-field within a multicultural education framework relative to global education and its impact on political action (Avery, 2004). This article mentions race as an aspect of multicultural education, but does not explicitly deal with how race manifests itself in social studies curricula

or classrooms. Geneva Gay's (2004) chapter, "Social Studies Teacher Education for Urban Classrooms," deals with race in a much more critical way, but she also locates race and racism in the social studies within a larger discourse and contexts (i.e., urban classrooms), instead of treating race as a multivalent discourse. She also addresses programs that can be used in urban settings to reduce the impact that racism has on teachers and students, but the drawback of this chapter is that race (again) has been subsumed and engulfed by a larger discourse relative to urban education. Race, again, has been pushed to the margins of the scholarly effort.

The one chapter in *Critical Issues in Social Studies Research for the 21st Century* (Stanley, 2001) that deals with race as an inherent part of the social studies is Santora's (2001) "Interrogating Privilege, Plurality, and Possibilities in a Multicultural Society." Again, this effort was directed at the larger discourse of multicultural education and cross cultural dialogue, not explicitly the area of race. The purpose of her work was to "complicate some of the dichotomies propagated in educational discourse as they relate to multicultural social studies" (p. 168). Also addressed in this chapter is the notion of socially constructed notions of race and whiteness and how these discourses serve to define culturally constituted normal.

The social studies is the *one* school discipline that should be charged with defining and examining the difference between American *ideals* and the American *experience*, but for various reasons this is not the experienced curriculum of American students (Marshall, 2003; Nelson & Pang, 2006). One of the reasons for a lack of discussion about race in secondary schools is due to the power that textbook publishers possess and actions of censorship taken by school boards to check and control outside sources of historical import relative to racism (Nelson & Pang, 2006). Nelson and Pang also point to the paucity of intellectualism that exists in colleges of education as another culprit for the lack of discussion about racism in our schools and in the social studies curriculum.

An examination of the social studies curriculum and practice reveals a field characterized by "dullness, vapidity, absolutism, censorship, and inaccuracy in the promotion of patriotic nationalism and conservative social values" (Nelson & Pang, 2006, p. 152). In addition to the unpopularity of social studies among students (Loewen, 1995), the shoddy treatment of race within the social studies is exacerbated by the seemingly inability (historically) of the social studies field to define race

as a topic for scholarly investigation. From its beginnings as a quasi-scientific construct in the 16th century, it has been used throughout history to categorize and classify humans into certain groups for political purposes; although race has no basis in biology (Kailin, 2002) and constitutes a socially constructed reality for its members, the impact serves as a marker to bestow certain rights and resources to some at the exclusion of others. Social studies research and practice has failed to adequately address the origins, history, and political uses of race (Nelson & Pang, 2006) and the impact it has on society. Missing from mainstream social studies research, theory, and practice is the seemingly inability and unwillingness to view race in a critical fashion (Ladson-Billings, 2001) and to view history (as a social studies discipline) as socially constructed and historically contingent (Washburn, 1997).

## *Methodology*

Data from two qualitative case studies conducted on two high school American history teachers informs the analysis of race and white supremacy in the social studies curricula for the basis of this article. This study was guided by the umbrella question: How do white social studies teachers conceptualize and teach about race? In order to delve into the meaning of this question the following guiding research questions were utilized: a) How do white teachers conceptualize and teach about race in the social studies classroom? b) What role do participants' personal notions about their own existence (race, gender, class) have on their conceptualization and teaching of race in the social studies classroom, and c) What are the perceived/lived constraints for teachers when teaching about race in the social studies classroom?

With these questions as posts to guide the research, it was assumed that the process, as well as the research questions, was subject to revision and change as the research project developed. Although this study was conceptualized and framed around a research design it should be viewed as "emergent and responsive" (Stake, 1995, p. 48) to the context and participants involved.

### *Participants*

Two white teachers were selected for participation in this research study. The teachers were purposefully selected because they were (a) teaching in a high school setting, (b) working in social studies classes,

and (c) were white. The selection of two white teachers is derived from my wish to study how white teachers conceptualize race, their personal philosophies about race, and how it manifests itself in the classroom. I hoped to find connections between the experiences of these teachers because they are "affected by common structural and social forces" such as white supremacy and white normativity in the social studies (Seidman, 1998, p. 45).

Given that the social education research corpus suggests that crace is ignored in American history classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2003), and that white teachers are fearful when teaching about race (Branch, 2003; Ellsworth, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Landsman 2001; McIntyre, 1997; Rosenberg, 1997; Tatum, 1997), I chose two white teachers at different stages in their teaching careers. What follows is a brief description of each teacher; pseudonyms have been used to protect anonymity.

Brody is in his early 30s and is considered by those in the school district to be one of the best teachers in the area. He was recently awarded a prestigious national fellowship in history and has a reputation at this school for being the top social studies teacher; he is in the process of earning a masters degree in history from a local state university. Aaron is a brand new teacher; the semester that he participated in this research study was the second semester of his first year as a classroom teacher. He is in his late 20s, and also serves as an assistant football coach in the fall. These teachers were chosen because they represent distinct levels of experience and education. Both teachers taught at Liberty High School in north Alabama. Liberty High School is 99% Caucasian.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The primary data collection method that was utilized in this research study to determine how teachers conceptualize their practice and notions of race within social studies teaching was personal interview. I conducted 4-6 (12-18 total) interviews per teacher over the duration of the semester; each interview lasted between 1-2 hours. These interviews were directly related to answering the following aspects of the research questions: (a) teacher's conceptualizations of race, (b) personal-pedagogical existence, and (c) lived/perceived constraints related to teaching about race. These interviews consisted of two types: semi-structured and unstructured. Semi-structured interviews, in this study,

should be conceived as an interview in which the interviewer asked a preordained set of questions to different interviewees. The questions, their order, and the pacing of the questions are *relatively* similar; all interviewees received the same questions, in the same order in similar environmental situations. The semi-structured interview was organized to ensure sameness of responses (Fontana & Frey, 2000).

Because I was observing two social studies teachers with two different lessons each week, I used the unstructured interview method to interrogate lesson content and classroom pedagogy vis-à-vis race. Classroom observations served as the origin of my unstructured interviews; furthermore, the unstructured interviews were directed toward enacted pedagogical decisions, activities, and discourse within that particular social studies class. After analyzing taped class lessons through the theme of *classroom teaching about race*, I used these lessons as discussion points via the unstructured interview. I allowed the interviewees to view selected portions of the tape as starting points for discussions about their pedagogy.

Observations served as another main source of data for this study. I conducted 4-6 observations per teacher (12-18 total) over the duration of the semester; each observation lasted 96 minutes (length of a class period). Observations were focused around and directed towards explicitly race-related themes in American history. Given that the teachers in this study were American history teachers, I coordinated my observation visits when the teachers were teaching about race related themes in American history. Although these arbitrary divisions of historical race-related events seemed to obscure the fact that people of color have always been a part of all historical events (Deloria, 1997; Foner, 1990; Takaki, 1993; Wills, 2001; Zinn, 2005), these are the standard, typical "noteworthy" events (Ladson-Billings, 2003) found in traditional American history textbooks. I planned these visits after determining from the teachers when they were covering specific topics. These observations served as a springboard for the unstructured interview questions and topics that I discussed with the teachers. The unstructured interviews were directed towards enacted pedagogical decisions, activities, and discourse within that particular social studies class.

## *General Themes That Emerged From the Research*

### *Liberal, Incremental Progress*

Perhaps the most pervasive racial discourse that runs through both Brody and Aaron's classes was that of incremental progress. Relative to the American nation state and the ways that we have socially constructed the historically contingent notion of "freedom," both of these classes took the liberal (i.e., gradual, incremental) approach in dealing with race and racial injustice. Critical race theorists (CRT) have persistently critiqued this way of viewing and approaching topics of race and racism in general. This critique is based on an inherent acceptance of objectivity and fairness as the foundation of such a conceptualization of race; critical race theorists do not believe that such objectivity is neither possible nor desirable. What liberal approaches to civil rights and racism serve to do, according to critical race theorists, is to perpetuate the racial status quo for as long as possible without any real meaningful change in the material, psychological, or ontological experiences of people of color. In short, structural adjustments or radical changes in the structure of white supremacy are not utilized because it would threaten white power in American institutions. When changes, or reforms are made within institutions, the institution retains aspects of the old with aspects of the new transplanted on to it – giving the appearance of change without drastic structural (i.e., macro) reform.

Both Brody and Aaron took the liberal perspective when they discussed and talked about racism and race in class and in interviews. Several times over the course of the semester, there was an acknowledgment that race still mattered and that there was a history from which Americans, black and white, could not escape, but it was oftentimes followed by statements suggesting that we were gradually becoming a more just society. Problems and their solutions were framed not only in terms of incrementalism but also in terms of individualism, placing the blame for racism on "bad people" rather than a systemic ill. In short, racism was not viewed as a system (Tatum, 1997) of oppression giving whites advantages *at the expense of others*, but rather an aberration that some whites and blacks committed on rare occasions. Again, this is not to suggest that Brody and Aaron did not comment on and acknowledge that whites, in the past, received benefits relative to others because they were white, because they did. However, it was framed in terms that placed the responsibility for racism on people, rather than nations, and the issue of oppression in the past, rather than the present.

In the last interview, Brody spoke of his willingness to discuss race and how he tries to comfort his black students during these lessons by telling them that racial apartheid in America happened *many* years ago:

> *There have been times when I have shown videos on The Scottsboro Boys and on Emmett Till that are graphic and I am sure they are videos that some of my black students have not seen before. I will call them to the side or talk to them in the hallway and tell them this is pretty rough but remember, this is a long time ago.*

This quote is telling for a couple of reasons; first, it gives us insight into his genuine concern for the feelings of his students of color, and second, it gives us a glimpse into the ways that he structures his race-related lessons and the way that he frames the topic for discussion within his pedagogical space. Essentially, this represented *statement of closure* related to the aspect of race being a major factor in the lives of people of color. The message is as follows: yes, this happened to your people, but it happened a long time ago, so do not worry about it. This reminds me of a statement by bell hooks that is located on the other end of the racial spectrum: "All black people in the United States, irrespective of their class or politics, live with the possibility that they will be terrorized by whiteness" (hooks, 1992, p. 175).

Not only are there dismissals of race as being a factor in current times, there is also a shying away of teaching about race by both teachers in class during *special* months of the year. In Aaron's comments during interviews, he stated that he did not teach about African American history during the month of February because he "*wants it to be a natural flow of what's going on. ... If it's in the history book we'll talk about it when it comes along ... I'm not going to force issues.*" Aaron, in this episode, seems to view teaching about race as being "forced" and outside the accepted norm of pedagogy for his classes. In this discussion, he also seems to equate differing histories (African American, Hispanic, Caucasian, etc.) and sees treating any of them special as inherently *unfair*. When he claims that he would not teach special topics for "National Caucasian Week" he is serving to mask real differences and perspectives of these differing groups. By not giving any of these groups special treatment, Aaron, like Brody, sees this pedagogical stance as being *the most fair and equitable*. What is missing in this noble stance is the assertion by both teachers that the curriculum is neutral and fair in nature. An assertion of treating everyone by not making "special

provisions" in February assumes a fair playing field, in terms of curricular representation, that does not exist.

### *Race Neutrality and Color-blindness*

Given the stance that racism is a thing of the past and that we are constantly climbing to a more just social order, it is perhaps not surprising that the discourses of neutrality and merit dominated both classes. Tatum (1997) argues that color-blind, race-less, merit-based educational discourses are more palatable to teachers in the field; these discourses also seem to fit with the ways that Brody and Aaron see themselves as teachers as well as the way they view their mission as teachers. This pedagogical outlook related to race allows teachers to simultaneously acknowledge racism and then to insist on its sporadic occurrence therefore assigning limited importance to it; this allows educational institutions to uphold and reify the myths of societal meritocracy (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). *Given this pedagogical stance, they can criticize and uphold, acknowledge and accept, mention and ignore the significance of racism in one conceptual and pedagogical move.* As was noted in the above section, this is not to suggest that race is totally ignored, but rather to point out that race and racism are *soft-pedaled* to students in these social studies classes. By this I mean that race issues are covered rather than "un"covered. If they are in the state approved course of study, they will be discussed in neutral, factual ways. The oppression and ontology of the people under discussion is conceptually off limits.

Brody was the most vocal about notions of a color-blind society and how this can and should impact his own teaching pedagogy. In an interview he stated, "*We've got to get past who was right, who was wrong and talk about what's right for America and think about America in a color-blind way.*" In looking at Brody's teaching, there seems to be a fine line between acknowledging the race-based oppression of the past and not allowing this analysis to be an explanation for the way social relations unfold in the present. He in fact adopts a *raceless* (Ladson-Billings, 2003) perspective in his teaching about race. He said, "*I try to ignore the fact that I may have some students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds.*" While he claims to be color-blind he also seems to go in the direction of speaking explicitly about race because he wants to correct misperceptions about race relations in our nation's history, stating that, "*I don't avoid subjects because I am afraid it might offend*

*some students.*" In fact, for both Aaron and Brody, to ignore race is deemed to be the fairest, most noble stance that one can take because it is assumed to be in line with American ideals of merit and personal worth. Brody continued,

> *I think a lot of my white students, especially in this community have been told the myth that race relations and things were not as bad as it's been made out to be by the liberal media or revisionist historians. I try to provide them with evidence, visual evidence that things were really bad for blacks during segregation.*

Although Brody does show his students "visual evidence" of how oppressed African Americans were in United States history, this evidence took the form of a video that was shown to the class one day on the Scottsboro Nine case. This video, although serving to give students some exposure to the event in question, represented scant coverage of class/race oppression in the experienced curriculum of Brody's students. In this way, like in previous cases, we can say that race was covered in this classroom because it was discussed, talked about, viewed, and so forth, but it is the ways in which race-related coverage is framed and conceptualized. In this particular incident, race is covered honestly and openly via video, but it is couched within the discourses of the distant past and incremental improvement between the races. In this way, conflict is allowed to occupy some of the pedagogical space, albeit from the margins, but it is allowed to transform into the standard narrative of progress that claims that race problems are a thing of the past, and that we are working hard to achieve a mythical order where race is not recognized for what it truly represents – a badge of oppression. Again, this is not to suggest that Brody's pedagogy was intentionally explicitly racist, because it was not. He truly cares about his students as the following quote will bear out:

> *I even have referenced black students in class trying to let them know I am on their side and we are in this together. I have placed my hands on their shoulders trying to make them feel like we are one community, we are one family, we are working together to learn from the past so we can deal with the challenges of the future.*

Brody was saying several things here in this quotation. First he was acknowledging that speaking about race in his pedagogical space can be uncomfortable for all of his students, especially his students of color.

Second, he was acknowledging that race has played and continues to play a role in the unfolding of our history. Third, he assumed that his take on race's impact and the way that it should be handled are in line with the students of color whom he teaches. This was another situation in which Brody frames this discussion in terms of "us" and "them." By this I mean that he frames this discussion in terms of *sameness of experience and consensus* that does not exist, historically, in this nation. The experience of black people in this country's history differs from that of whites; he admitted this in class and in interview sessions. To say that "we are one family" or that "we are brothers" is situated on the other end of the spectrum from statements about the different experiences that the two groups have had, historically, in the United States. It served to explain away real differences between blacks and whites in our racial histories. This need to couch the discussion in terms of "family" and "brotherhood" comes from notions of togetherness and cooperation that are a part of the American credo (Nelson & Pang, 2006). *In short, it comes from a good place.* Critical race theorists point out that some teachers do not give attention to race (explicitly) and cultural differences because it goes against the creed of color-blindness and is therefore seen to be, itself, an explicit manifestation of racism. In other words, by pointing out differences, you incur the risk of being labeled a racist. Brody and Aaron seemed to shy away from this idea.

In a classroom episode dealing explicitly with race, Brody taught a lesson that was critical of race propaganda during the American Revolution. Within this particular lesson, he spoke openly about the power of racial inequality as well as the politically situated and constituted realm of race relations within political circles. However, this discussion was followed by *disclaimers* of sorts stating that he, as the teacher, did not wish to be controversial. Within this pedagogical space, he realized the importance of race as a topic proper in a history class; this discussion was followed by an attempt to quell his students concerns, whether they be imagined or real, as to the merit and/or appropriateness of discussing race in this way. As West (1993) points out, many teachers, by utilizing color-blind, meritocratic paradigms when teaching about race, are "often complicit with the very thing they are criticizing" (p. 6).

Brody's own positionality as a white, middle-class, male also gives insight into the ways that he views race relations in the classroom. Again, in the following quote we can see a dual theoretical move, one that acknowledges but also tries to explain away racist thought:

> *I think being a white guy in America is good and bad. Number one, there is no question that white privilege has served white men especially throughout American history and that is still the case today, but ... there is a little bit of, "blame it on the white guy mentality" and current white men cannot make up for the sins of the past. ... It may be that some white men feel like that they may need to step aside ... a lot of our white men are not asserting themselves as they once did because of the social changes in society and the changing family structure.*

In this statement, we can see how race is viewed as something that happened "in the past" but at the same time, how it influences white power in the present. When asked about constraints on his teaching about race and whether or not he feels pressure to teach in certain ways about race, he claimed that he did not feel any pressure by his administration to teach in any particular way. After commenting on this for a while, he said,

> *I think we have got to get to the point in school where we are given the authority and are backed by the educational system to tell students when something is right or wrong and not take race into consideration. I know some groups consider some things right or wrong based on their culture, but there is a fundamental right and there is a fundamental wrong and if we are trying to help our country then we have got to be willing to stand as an education system and say this is accepted, this is not accepted ... if it's right for white people, it's right for black people, too.*

The notion that white experiences and expectations are the same for all people constitutes a major discourse pattern in both Aaron and Brody's classes. This is one of the hallmarks of white supremacy in the United States relative to institutional power, especially in schools. The "rationality of the European Enlightenment, with its privileged construction of a transcendental white, male, rational subject," whiteness became the norm by which all Others were judged (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998, p. 5; Bhabha, 1994; Lee & Lutz, 2005; Taylor, 2005; West, 1993). This appears to be what was occurring in their respective classrooms relative to race and whiteness.

### *The Naturalization/Essentialization of Race*

Several times over the course of the semester, race, racism, and whiteness were discussed in ways that served to naturalize and

essentialize notions about race. Ideas about the origins of European notions of race, how race is used by groups in society to deny rights, and how race is socially constructed by those in power is missing from the formal and experienced curriculum. What was left to fill this conceptual void were commonsense, religious, and political understandings of why we have race and why it matters so much in current times. Parker (1996) describes race in contemporary times as an essentially contested concept (ECC), because its meaning and the prospects for its definitional foreclosure are far from complete. Race and what it means is a historically contingent, moving target. Powerful groups in society, who have more resources and wealth, are in positions to define and set agendas for debates on race and schooling (Parker, 1996). The *contested* nature of race and more importantly what it means for all groups of people was completely missing from these classrooms. Teaching, or more accurately *mentioning*, race in social studies classrooms serves to "romanticize," "essentialize," and "tokenize" race as an integral part of the American body politic (Mahalingam & McCarthy, 2000, p. 4). This accurately defines the role that race plays in these two classrooms in terms of pedagogy – race is mentioned and tokenized.

From a theoretical perspective, to allow naturalized ideas about race to dominate classroom discourses (i.e., not interrupt these ideas) gives strength to the logic behind racist notions of thought and their perceived natural(ness). Much overt racist thought is based on the idea that Others are *naturally* a certain way and these naturally occurring differences serve to justify their unequal treatment. This can be seen historically in the treatment of "Indian Savages" who naturally did not use the land as did the Europeans, which justified their genocide; the ways that "childlike" Africans were to be taken care of by their European masters "for their own good" to save them from religious damnation; the ways that Mexicans are viewed, in current times, as being naturally "good workers;" and the ways that *Other* European minorities have been treated as new arrivals in the United States (Greeks Need Not Apply, Chinese Exclusion Act, etc.). To not interrupt notions of *naturalized* race, is to reify and uphold the very logic that is used to justify explicit racism proper. Both Brody and Aaron, I believe, talked about race and racism in their classes with the most virtuous of intentions. They saw it as part of their professional and philosophical goals as a teacher of American history, part of which is to help the nation reach "freedom and justice for all" – both noble goals. However, speaking on race as if we "are all the same" and saying that "we are all brothers after all" gives

the impression that real differences do not exist, it serves to give the impression that consensus on fairness and equality exist where none actually does, and reinforces the myth that our histories are homogenous.

In one of Brody's lessons in which he spoke openly and honestly about race and whiteness, he tied perceived notions of fictive kinship (Fordham, 1996) and the use of "brothers and sisters" by black Americans into a statement that all Americans are brothers and sisters. In addition to claiming that we are all brothers and sisters, he gives credence to Biblical and evolutionary accounts of humanity's interconnectedness. Speaking of race and racism in this way, as both Brody and Aaron did, also masked the complex matrix of intersecting factors that play a role in the racial identity of the United States. Complex theoretical concepts undergirding the formation of the American nation state are totally hidden from view. Racism, imperialism, classism, military adventurism, and actions that are antithetical *to ideals of freedom and liberty* are either not mentioned at all or they are framed as being on the periphery of the dominant narrative, which is one of American exceptionality, progress, and virtue. This represents an acknowledgment of these wrongs and a subtle downplaying of past wrongs in the same breath, in the same lesson, in the same pedagogical space.

### *Fear of Teaching About Race*

Both of the teachers in this study revealed some fear and/or apprehension about teaching race-related concepts. Their fear, in both cases, resided not in perceived reprisals from the community or their students, but rather in an attempt to protect their students of color from comments, arguments, and crisis in the classroom. This was a topic that they both spoke of and it needs repeating that in each of the classes studied for this project, there was one African American female in Brody's class and there was one African American male in Aaron's class; therefore, these statements and well thought out strategies were designed to protect a total of *two* minority students. When I first asked Aaron how he taught about race, he very quickly stated that he did so, "*Very carefully.*" Again, being careful was designed to not insult or offend his *one* student of color. He was not fearful of what he might say, although he stated he was careful about that as well, but rather what

students would say during the unfolding of a race-related lesson. Aaron said,

> *Some of the kids might start saying ... "It would've been a good thing if the South had of won. ... There's nothing wrong with having slaves." I'm just afraid that they are going to say something and he might even get defensive. I don't really think he would get defensive, he's smart enough that I think it would probably make him upset. That's what would be the problem I think.*

He also stated that the class makeup, in terms of people of color, sets the tone and parameters for what he can say and do within a given class. He compared this semester's American history class with last semester. This term he has a class of 25 white students and one African American. Last term he had an all white class with several Spanish speaking students. He described the class dynamic as different, because he had to be more careful with this semester's class. The following deserves to be quoted at length because it shows Aaron's fear of talking about "black" people, a fear that seems to be tempered slightly, when speaking about "brown" people. It also gives insight into the relative worth of such discussions within his pedagogical space.

> *I think I've been a little more careful with this class than I was with my first semester class. It didn't have any African Americans in it, we had some Spanish kids in it, but we didn't have to deal with Spanish slavery. I want to make sure that I don't make John (i.e., only African American student in the class) feel uncomfortable. I think that's not a good thing. ... I have been a little careful about it. ... I can hear their parents in their voices, mimicking things. I am afraid something might be said by one of them and they not realize that they might be hurting somebody else ... [last semester] I gave them some debate topics ... one of my Spanish speaking girls got a topic about whether race relations are better now than they were and she was like "this one is going to be so easy because of how much I have to put up with." School is the worst part she said. All she ever hears about is how the illegal immigrants need to go home and I think maybe talking about race relations might be a helpful thing.*

There was little evidence to suggest that they approach race in this manner because they are fearful of offending their students or their

communities. Rather, the way they teach about race mirrored the pedagogical structure of the way they teach *all* topics in their classrooms. Although fear was expressed as a reason for teaching about race in particular ways, it still mirrored their day-to-day teaching methods and discourses.

## *Implications*

Within the classrooms of Brody and Aaron, the topic of race was one in which meaning was defined for and reified by the teachers and their pedagogical methods. Over the course of this study, both teachers spoke, within the context of classroom lessons, about the meaning of race within American society and history. In all cases when this occurred, they were engaging in a competitive process, a process in which they were defining the racial understandings of their students. This competition over the meaning of race represented a one-sided story, but that did not quell the attempt by these teachers to frame race problems and racism in commonsense terms and individual, atomized ways, giving the distinct impression that race was a thing of the "long ago past" and that systemic racism did not exist in current times. This served not only as a definitional and conceptual move for the teachers involved in the study, but it also couched racism in libertarian and liberal discourses. The idea that race and the ways we think about race are socially constructed never entered into the classroom discourse; it was ignored in favor of natural and biblical notions and ideas about why racism exists.

The capital of these two classrooms, from a pedagogical perspective represented a classic banking (Freire, 1970) education. The capital of the class represented Euro-American standards of speaking and thinking about the American nation state. Because both teachers dominated the classroom "speak" via direct lecture and objective testing on these lectures, their schooling methods also represented a classic, traditional European pedagogy. From a critical race perspective, the curriculum of both of these classes emphasized white history over the history of Others. Both of these history classes framed the development of the United States from the East Coast to the West Coast, ignoring the Native and Spanish influences in the West. They downplayed the existence of Native cultures and the impact that they played in the development of early America. The stories told, the perspective of the stories told, and the protagonists were essentially white males. The stories of people of color were completely absent from these history

classrooms. This is not to suggest that race, as a topic, was not "talked about." This *is* to suggest that when it was discussed, it was done so from a tangential perspective, from the borders of the dominant narrative of America. This manifested into a classroom curriculum that left out the majority of people who have called America their home. Although people of color were erased in the day-to-day classroom pedagogy of these two classes, the element of whiteness was always the backdrop of the dominant meta-narrative of America. Although poor whites were also left out of the curriculum as well, there was an implicit connection to and coalescing around the fact that the major players and important people in this story shared a common trait, that of being white.

By teaching and adopting this type of pedagogy, both teachers unwittingly serve to engage in what Bourdieu and Passeron (2000) call symbolic violence. This construct can best be described as "the imposition of systems of symbolism and meaning (i.e., culture) upon groups or classes in such a way that they are experienced as legitimate" (Jenkins, 2002, p. 104). In this way, modern schooling serves to obscure the power relationships between groups of people serving to give them legitimacy while ignoring their arbitrary nature in the process. From this perspective, race theorists point to the ways that institutions (schools) frame and construct the discussions about race, serving to set boundaries of acceptable dialogue about this topic. Using this logic, the people in positions of power are in a setting where they have the ability to set the pattern and substance of the discussion before it actually begins. In terms of personal agency, social actors make decisions and choices that are framed by situations that are not of their choosing; yes, agency exists, but it is a limited agency because the choices and *perceived possibilities* are preordained and predetermined. This discussion, as described in detail by many critical race theorists, is usually framed in liberal, incremental, gradual change and by mean-spirited individuals who are overtly racist. This is the way that race and racism were framed in these two social studies classes. Race was never a system that (over)determined the life chances of a person or a group of people; rather, it was something that a strong person was to overcome. In short, racism was a problem of individuals, not of nations, and the solution to racial oppression (although this term was never used) is hard work and the ability to *rise above* one's station.

In the curricular context, this allows race to be explained away as someone else's problem, but it is not perceived as too important of a

problem because we are constantly progressing and working at making this country a place where everybody is *free*; ultimately, this serves to point out racism as existing while simultaneously legitimizing the racial status quo. This dual move also serves to erase the experiences of Others because their oppression is not perceived as a structure that determines life chances, but rather the normal order of things. This is a denial, a *misrecognition* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000), that allows the racial curriculum to reinforce and reinscribe itself in perpetuity. Misrecognition is manifested in the ways that Others' experiences and voices are not allowed pedagogical space, obscuring the power laden, relational structures that serve to define worldviews, foreclose alternative ways of conceiving social relationships, and ultimately reproduces hegemonic structures.

The general themes of the research point not only to the ways that they conceptualize the American state, but also the ways that they see race and its impact on the unfolding of the American narrative. In terms of the ways that they teach and conceptualize race in their teaching pedagogy, they both took the liberal, incremental approach when speaking of "progress" (Loewen, 1995); inherent in their comments on race was the underlying assumption of the virtue of a color-blind and neutral society. This led to a naturalization of race (i.e., "it's just the way they are" vs. race as a socially mediated construction). Both teachers were not afraid or fearful of teaching about race, as some research (Ladson-Billings, 2003) suggests, but rather they were afraid of offending or hurting their students of color; they both expressed an earnest desire to protect their students from *race-based pain*. From a pedagogical standpoint, both teachers were traditional social studies teachers, given the way they taught and constructed their classroom lessons (Grant, 2003). Their pedagogies reified traditional history teacher capital based on the material that was stressed and the ways that they operated their classrooms. The above intersecting aspects of their pedagogies served to give strength to Bourdieu's notion of misrecognition. That is to say that race, as a central construct in American history, was misrecognized for the role that it has played in the formation of the American identity and psyche. Given the above analysis of Brody and Aaron's race pedagogy and the fact that race is treated in non-critical ways, the next section will outline suggestions for social studies curricula in an attempt to bring attention to and decenter whiteness from its privileged position within our classrooms.

## *Alternatives*

### *Reconceptualization of Citizenship*

> Social studies educators can choose to stand behind a totem that celebrates the status quo and makes spectators of us all, or we can reject the lines as drawn as the inevitable nature of things and start to construct a new vision. (Ross, 2000, p. 60)

In interviews with both Brody and Aaron, they both told me that they did not think that the social studies, as it currently exists, does a good job of creating citizens for the future of America. Their assertions that the social studies does a poor job of creating citizens was not couched in concerns about social justice or creating a more equitable society, but rather in the ways that the social studies does not serve to uphold the existing social structure. Brody, in particular, sees citizenship as a passive role for people to play, within the existing societal structures. To both Brody and Aaron, voting, being aware of current events (an activity in Aaron's class devoted specifically to this idea), paying your taxes, and being a law abiding citizen were the basic requirements of being an effective citizen in the United States. They both frame conflict, ironically, in non-conflictual ways serving to de-emphasizing real politico-racial differences in American history. When asked about change within society, they both stressed incremental, rather than radical, change within the confines of already established channels of grievance.

Understanding that the meaning of *citizen* is fluid and changing, depending on your perspective, the story of social studies has constituted a central and unavoidable tension in its mission statements: to transmit the facts of the dominant culture, but to also develop a citizenry who can exercise agency when interacting with the world to change anti-democratic conditions (Hursh & Ross, 2000; Stanley & Nelson, 1994). Shaver (1981) clearly identifies this tension for the social studies when he asks the question: "How can the school contribute to the continuity of the society by preserving and passing on its traditions and values while also contributing to appropriate social change by helping youth to question current social forms and solutions?" (p. 125). This dialectic has created and sustained an intense debate within the social studies about the meaning and re(presentation) of what constitutes this ideal *democratic citizen.*

Too many times in social studies and education in general, citizenship is narrowly conceptualized as an act isolated from the context of human existence in which paying taxes, following the law,

and being patriotic constitute the characteristics of a good citizen (Cuban & Shipps, 2000; Martin & Chiodo, 2007). Citizenship education too often simply represents the "historically dominant justification of social studies and that it includes knowledge or information, skills, values, and socio-politico-economic participation" (Vinson, 2001, p. 67) without attacking oppression caused by these categories of thought; this amounts to ignoring "the existence and roots of oppression" (p. 74) in favor of seemingly *neutral* frameworks and standards. Because the origins of the social studies is rooted in social justice (Ross, 2006), the expansion of the notion of citizenship is necessary. I support what Westheimer and Kahne (2004) term the "justice oriented citizen" (p. 4). In this (re)conceptualization of good citizenship, "educators should be given the 'opportunities to analyze and understand the interplay of social economic, and political forces' and bring attention to 'matters of injustice and to the importance of pursing social justice' " (p. 4). Freire (1998) probably best conceptualizes citizenship in ways that differ from the modernist notions of citizenship as given, fixed, and neutral:

> Yes, citizenship – above all in a society like ours, of such authoritarian and racially, sexually, and class-based discriminatory traditions – is really an invention, a political production. In this sense, one who suffers any (or all) of the discriminations ... does not enjoy the full exercise of citizenship as a peaceful and recognized right. On the contrary, it is a right to be reached and whose conquest makes democracy grow substantively. Citizenship implies freedom. ... Citizenship is not obtained by chance: It is a construction that, never finished, demands we fight for it. It demands commitment, political clarity, coherence, decision. For this reason a democratic education cannot be realized apart from an education of and for citizenship. (p. 90)

Citizenship education within social studies should be framed in terms of social justice, a social justice whose *mission is to interrupt oppressive discourses, not merely celebrating the heroic meta-narrative of the past.* In reference to the Shaver (1981) quote above, a *critical* social studies would lean in favor of "contributing to appropriate social change by helping youth to question current social forms and solutions" more than "preserving and passing on traditions" (p. 125). A call for critical social studies would involve a break from the way that social studies education has taken place in American schools, and would have as its focus, not the creation of passive students, but active, change-oriented students. This would involve a decentering of whiteness, a critique of capitalism, an attack on classism, gender oppression, and heteronormativity to

name a few. In short, the lines of the social studies need to be "redrawn" (Ross, 2000). Ross follows the thinking of Counts (1932) in stating that the social studies profession (in practice and in theory) represents one way of conceptualizing the field, that all education is a form of indoctrination, and that a more *radical* approach is necessary. Ross deserves to be quoted at length:

> This examination of traditional social studies instruction illustrates how particular theories of knowledge and conceptions of democracy function to obscure the political and ideological consequences of mainstream social studies education. These consequences include conceptions of the learner as passive, democratic citizenship as a spectator project, and, ultimately, the maintenance of status quo inequalities in society. Often, social studies educators eschew openly political or ideological agendas for teaching and schooling as inappropriate or unprofessional; however, it should be clear ... that the question is not whether to encourage particular social visions in the classroom but rather what kind of social visions there will be. (2000, p. 58)

It should be clear from this conceptualization of social studies education, that the traditional ideas about neutrality and objectivity are not only rejected, but not perceived as necessary or even desirable. Because all education is some form of indoctrination, the messages and discourses that we give life to should be in the name of social justice, not social reproduction. Ultimately, a shift away from conservative lenses and traditional ways of conceptualizing citizenship will need to emerge if critical social studies, one that gives attention to intersecting positionalities, is to replace current curricular and pedagogical habits.

### *Resisting the Right and Cultural Literacy*

In the context of Brody and Aaron's social studies classes, their students were receiving the "uncritical canon" (Hursh & Ross, 2000) that has come to define most of social studies' curricular history. As was stated before, the call for critical social studies is not an objective or value neutral enterprise. Conservatives on the far right also call for a return to the dominant stories of the past; conservatives like William Bennett and Edward Wynne push for "European history" and "Western values" (Hursh & Ross, 2000, p. 8). Wynne in particular calls for teaching "particular values to students but also explicitly calls for schools to indoctrinate students in those values" (p. 8). Again, the notion that either side (conservative or radical) of this argument reside in the land

of objectivity is a false argument. To teach in more alternative, inclusive ways is viewed as a loss of "Western heritage" and a reification of "degraded cultural attitudes" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p. 213). This reconceptualization will need to take place within colleges of education, textbooks (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991; Loewen, 1995; Sleeter & Grant, 1991), and in the ways that we *holistically* conceptualize teaching the social studies.

A brief look at the historical unfolding of social studies as a discipline will reveal the ebb and flow of competing ideologies and how they often mirror the social milieu of which they are a part (Evans, 2006; Ross, 2006; Stanley & Nelson, 1994). Given this ebb and flow and the fact that there has never really been a "golden age" of social studies education in this country (Evans, 2006), we need not lose sight of the fact that curricular conservatism controls much of what goes into social studies teaching in the United States. From parental challenges (Chandler, 2006; McKnight & Chandler, 2008) to more inclusive narratives to legislation in Florida that requires history classes to be conceptualized as "factual, not as constructed" ... and ... as "knowable, teachable, and testable" (Florida Education Omnibus Bill: H.B. 7087e3), the interplay of factors that influence the social studies is complicated and varied. In short, the right is attempting to standardize the history of the American people by washing away the resistance of some Americans against others who were trying to oppress them. The *facts* of history are different depending on whom you ask. The facts of "Manifest Destiny" are very different for the current citizens of the American West and those living on reservations. One is a story of heroic exploration, the other a story of genocide and theft. Florida's law mandates the closing of the gate of historical interpretation in social studies classrooms. This is the panacea for those in power: close interpretation of history and you control the future, expunge any notion of dissent in our history and you control the masses by erasing the past.

The conservative backlash of the 1980s found newfound vigor in the 1990s and was given all the fuel it needed after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This conservativism championed by an apocalyptic call for a return to the basics, the Great Books, and the classic canon; this represents a lack of historical perspective on what the social studies should represent in the school curricula. It should be constantly *changing*, evolving into whatever is needed by the people at a given time in history. This is not to suggest that the canon of the conservatives should not have a place within social studies, but rather that they

should represent one perspective of a *polyglot social studies curriculum.* Theirs is a mistake of perspective because they assume standardization and universalism in an age of postmodern and post-structural philosophy. Theirs is an all encompassing pedagogy that erases the experiences of people that do not fit within an artificially constituted world of nice endings and acceptable meta-narratives.

Hirsch (1988) frames the conservative canon that is seemingly in line with American notions of fairness, freedom, and merit – all of which have been debunked by social theorists (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991):

> Literate culture has become the common currency for social and economic exchange in our democracy, and the only available ticket to full citizenship. *Getting one's membership card is not tied to class or race* (italics added). Membership is automatic if one learns that background information and the linguistic conventions that are needed to read, write, and speak effectively. (Hirsch, 1988, p. 22)

In this statement of support for "cultural literacy," Hirsch makes the mistake that others make on occasion: they take an ahistorical, raceless, classless, and objective look at complicated social issues. Pedagogy and education constructed in this way, which mirrors the teachers that I studied at Liberty High School, represents an education in oppression, racism, and simplicity. Such a statement ignores historical realties of people whose culture has been erased (Rains, 2003) by the canon (and the education system that espouses this vision) that he speaks so proudly of and about, and it ignores the impact that race and class play in society, past and present (Roediger, 1991, West, 1994). His is an analysis that places *value* on the dominant culture while claiming to be *objective.* The historical realties of culture and education in American schools refute Hirsch's assertion that all one need do is to learn to be *culturally literate.*

It is increasingly apparent and obvious that American curricula and the teaching of "content" in American schools has become a "battleground" (Apple, 2001, p. 198). It is imperative that teacher education programs integrate into their programs a perspective that treats alternative ways of seeing the world (and American history) as naturally diverse, rather than naturally monolithic. In terms of an American history class, I propose *parallel narratives.* In this scheme, no one narrative would (over)dominate the telling of the American story. Metaphorically, it can be conceptualized as two (or three or four, etc.) streams running side by side that eventually merge to tell one story. That one story, though, would not be the story of oneness – the *E*

*Pluribus Unum* narrative. It would instead be a narrative that admits that it is a value laden story and that it is historically constructed and defined. Furthermore, the questions of "Whose story?" and "Why this story?" would, in fact, be an *explicit part* of the story. An interrogation into why we tell the stories we tell and what purpose these stories serve is an area, given my own research, that seem to be completely absent in classroom pedagogy. This purpose should be rooted in social transformation, not in replication of the status quo. This should serve as the benchmark for whether or not a social studies curricula is in the name of social justice or not. Simply claiming to advocate for social justice is not the same as actually teaching for social justice. Furthermore, given the way that social studies classes are conceptualized and the ways in which pedagogy currently manifests itself within classrooms, the field of social studies is antithetical to social justice.

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*Prentice T. Chandler* is an Assistant Professor of Education at Athens State University in Athens, Alabama. He teaches courses in social studies methods, foundations, and management and serves as secondary education program head. His research and writing interests are in the areas of social studies education, critical race theory, Pierre Bourdieu, academic freedom, and teacher agency in the classroom.

*Author's Address:*
Athens State University
College of Education
300 N. Beaty St.
Athens, AL 35611
U.S.A.
EMAIL: prentice.chandler@athens.edu