

The following talk was delivered by Angelia Means, J.D., Ph.D., at a Manhattan Country School panel discussion entitled “After Affirmative Action: The Resegregation of American Society and What We Can and Cannot Do About It” on March 18, 2008.

THE PARADOX OF INTEGRATION

Last June, the Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision, declared that public schools could not seek to achieve or maintain integration through measures that take explicit account of a student’s race. (See *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007)) The 5-4 decision reflected two very different understandings of race in America. Writing for the majority, Chief Justice Roberts argued that the idea of a color-blind society, Dr. King’s dream, required race-neutral application of law. (“The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.”) Though he joined the majority holding, Justice Kennedy left the door open for using race conscious plans *as long as individual children were not sorted by race*. Kennedy agreed with the dissent that a “colorblind Constitution” is at odds with the constitutional aspiration of integration. He agreed that “some form” of race consciousness is legitimate: race consciousness that is “narrowly tailored” to the end of respect for diversity and integration, and avoids the labeling and sorting of individual children, is permissible. This means that people who care about integration need to search for race proxies, like class, or for plans that take race into account without “sorting” on the basis of race, like minority recruiting programs or strategic site selection for new schools.

As part of its integration project, the NAACP is seeking to accommodate Kennedy’s roadmap by advising school districts that have voluntary integration plans. The goal is to encourage experimentation and innovation, and, ultimately, full implementation of voluntary integration plans *that are likely to survive constitutional scrutiny*. Frankly, the “narrow” scope of constitutionally permissible integration means that, Kennedy’s concurrence and the NAACP’s hard work notwithstanding, we have, in fact, adopted a post-racial (“for the most part colorblind”) constitution.

In places like Cambridge, Massachusetts, post-racial “class indicators” have worked as race proxies. (The “different diversity factors” that Cambridge adopted in 2001—in lieu of race—resulted in the doubling of racially segregated schools; nonetheless, the schools remain “relatively” integrated. *Still Looking to the Future: Voluntary K-12 School Integration*, NAACP publication (2008)). Unfortunately, the Cambridge-style experiment has failed altogether in places like San Francisco. (“Since the 2001 “reform” of its integration scheme, San Francisco schools have rapidly re-segregated and the racial achievement gap has widened.” *Still Looking to the Future*) Why the difference? Cambridge has a small school district and there is a rough racial (and class) balance within the district. By contrast, San Francisco is a big city with a small (and shrinking) white public school population. While the San Francisco school system is diverse (50% Asian, 23% Latino and 12% Black), the number of white public school students (9%) is shrinking (even as the white population is increasing relative to the Black population).

New York, much like San Francisco, has public schools that are 87% minority (despite having a white population that numbers nearly half the total population and is growing). Segregation in the NY context is a product of (“re-urbanizing”) whites attending private schools. And, just as importantly, within the public school system the white children who do attend are more likely to be placed in “special” programming that re-segregates the public school system. Aside from special programs (like gifted schools) that can re-segregate entire school systems, tracking further re-segregates individual schools.

A recent documentary commemorating the 50th anniversary of the de-segregation of Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas illustrates the point. Central High is now “integrated”: about 60%

black and 40% white. On one level, it is emblematic of Barack Obama's insistence that we are not a "stagnant" society. Central High is the only school that is a part of the national park service, and in the city of Little Rock the black children who de-segregated the school are memorialized as heroes. Moreover, Central High is a great school! It is an award winning school that sends many of its graduates to the Ivy League. It provides its students with extraordinary extra-curriculars like a nationally ranked debate team and a range of sports, including a golf team.

On another level, the students who play golf—let alone take the college prep classes that get them into Ivy League schools—are overwhelmingly white. (The exceptions, highlighted in the documentary, prove the rule.) While there is some resentment, there appears to be little racial animus in this school; yet, structurally, the black children are isolated, and they bear both the stigma and the concrete deleterious effects of this isolation. Blacks and whites do not have equal opportunity at Central High, and, as the interviews reveal, all the children understand this—the white children understand that this prominent school and its legacy constitute powerful cultural capital whereas, for the black children, "living history" at Central High is more like repeating the history of segregation.

Even an iconic and heroic "achievement" of the civil rights movement—the "desegregation" of Central High—remains more aspiration than achievement. In this context, we cannot hope to integrate American public schools using the type of narrowly tailored methods articulated by Kennedy. Integration is elemental to the democratic constitutional project; yet, the means necessary to achieve this end have been taken off the table one by one. With *Brown*, we were promised integration "with all deliberate speed." We're still waiting—only what we were once promised (backed by the force of state action) we are now expected to achieve via voluntary, narrowly limited, and evermore innovative experiments.

Given this constitutional "transition," what can we do to integrate our schools? Obama's attempt to initiate a national dialogue on race and race consciousness is an important step. But, as important as dialogue is dialogic context: meaningful political conversation happens between equals who approach each other with sincerity, who feel free to speak the truth and who are capable of empathizing with others and "enlarging" each other's point of view. Meaningful political conversation happens between people who really *recognize* each other as equals, as opposed to "merely" getting past mutual animus and *tolerating* each other in limited contexts. When it comes to racial equality this means it is hard to have an honest dialogue because the dialogic context is underdeveloped. We are not "approximately" equal speakers. We do not approach each other with sincerity. We do not trust each other enough to speak the truth. We consistently betray the fact that we do not actually possess the type of "enlarged mentality" that allows us to see the world from the other's point of view. *And, as long as we live separate lives, we will never inhabit the state of mind that enables us to really talk to each other.* Residential segregation and segregated schooling reproduce conditions that impede meaningful dialogue and mutual understanding, and hence cut short inter-racial/inter-cultural dialogue before it gets started.

In fact, *de facto* segregation may explain why Barack Obama cannot even talk about race without alienating whites who concur with the Chief Justice's assertion of "colorblindness". For two generations, we have debated the pathologies of the "culture of poverty". Today, even critics of the theory have to acknowledge that there *are* pathologies associated with the ghettoization of poor, minority groups. But, just as mastery destroyed the master not just the slave, "white privilege" is also pathological *for whites*. "White students are the most likely students to be isolated—a fact that is surprising to many given the relative lack of attention to segregated white schools." And, isolation breeds intolerance: "white students in integrated schools exhibit more racial tolerance than their peers in segregated white schools... [especially] if integration occurs at earlier ages as children are still in the process of forming their understanding and attitudes about race." Moreover, "early

intervention” lasts a lifetime; it has “perpetuation effects,” since whites that grow up in a context of diversity “are more likely to live in integrated neighborhoods and choose integrated colleges and workplaces.” (*Still Looking to the Future*)

In surveys, whites express openness to, even a preference for, an inter-racial lifestyle. (See Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (2003)) His data is based on the 1998 Detroit Area Survey (DAS), surveys of university students and the author’s in depth interviews with a randomly selected sample of the survey participants.) Yet, in these same surveys, most whites not only live in segregated neighborhoods they affirm these communities, describing them as a good place for children to grow up. Most are tolerant of interracial marriage. (In this generation, while there is still a great deal of animus towards the “idea” of gay marriage, there is comparatively little anxiety about the “idea” of interracial marriage.) Yet, despite their tolerance for the idea, few would choose it for themselves or their children. If friendship is defined as people that you trust and support, and with whom you interact frequently, then most whites have no Black friends. Many whites have successful collegial relationships with Blacks, and are friendly with some Blacks, but few have friends.

In short, whites live in a ghetto, and, while this separate life does not preclude the abatement of animus and the growth of “situational” toleration, it does keep us from “recognizing” each other in the deeper sense—it keeps us from getting to know each other in a way that allows us to talk to each other honestly and enlarge consciousness so that we can alternately perceive the abiding relevance of race conscious politics and the need to transcend all forms of self-segregating identity politics. White identity politics, as one critic notes, is a prison house: “In every racial ghetto there are particular ‘racial problems’ unique to the lives and conditions of the people in that ghetto. [In] our white society, although we are not accustomed to thinking of ourselves as ghettoized people, we have a ‘white life style’ and ‘white racial problems’ which have emerged as a result of our confinement in a prison built by racism . . .” (Joseph Barndt, *Liberating Our White Ghetto*)

There is an obvious paradox between whites’ commitment to the principle of inter-racialism and their mostly white pattern of association. If you live a segregated life and you don’t experience any particular disability because of this segregation (and you honestly don’t feel any animus towards “others”), it is hard to experience your own life as part of the problem—as part of a pernicious structure that reproduces the segregation that you disavow.

It is not surprising that whites who are most sympathetic with the problem of abiding racial inequality (in public schools, higher education and employment) often grew up in the context of racially mixed neighborhoods and schools, and in politically “progressive” families. They had minority friends (as opposed to just being friendly with Blacks). They dated “others” (as opposed to just having sexual liaisons with “others”). They sometimes witnessed or experienced discrimination themselves. They had an actual range of empathetic human relationships that cut across race lines. (*Racism without Racists*) For a long time, we have understood what Obama’s support from white college students and their college-educated parents verifies, namely, there is a correlation between education and toleration. But, if we want to deepen toleration, and extend it to encompass most whites—to transform limited toleration into generalized recognition and understanding—we need *all* citizens to engage in the type of educational *experience* that specifically “enlarges” one’s capacity for inter-racial and intercultural dialogue.

The multiperspectival worldview can only happen if we are capable of *being together* in different “educational” fora: in schools, universities, neighborhoods, churches, and, as interlocutors, in national conversations (sparked by leaders who “just happen” to look like *all* of us). We need educational experiences *with others* to support a pedagogy focused on inter-racial and inter-cultural education: in addition to cognitive learning that exposes us to the intersubjective exchange of reasons, and thus diversifies explanatory and justificatory categories (Juergen Habermas, Patricia

Gurin), we need “new experiences that are prompted by [actual] encounters with different cultures...” (Maevé Cooke, 2006, p.200)

Unfortunately, integrated schools will not *necessarily* result in an integrated educational experience: even when whites attend schools that are 40% or more minority, their classes are majority white. (*Racism without Racists*, p.109) Moreover, “school integration typically occurs late in the lives of whites (usually in high school). By that time, they have already developed emotional attachments to whites as their primary social group, learned a number of stereotypes about minorities, and bypassed the development of the skills necessary to navigate multicultural situations.” (*Racism without Racism*) Not only do whites suffer (intellectually and morally) from isolation in a segregated context, they continue to suffer this isolation when they move to integrated contexts because they have already been socialized to accept the normalcy of mono-cultural pathology.

In addition to perpetuating, within the white community, the pathology of intolerance (and “misrecognition” of others people’s point of view), segregation perpetuates the “culture of poverty” that traps Blacks and other minorities. While it has been criticized since its inception, the “culture of poverty” paradigm helps to explain the structural dynamics of poverty in general and racialized poverty in particular. In its latest incarnation, the culture of poverty literature focuses not just on social stigmatization and economic deprivation, but on the denial of cultural capital—arguably the most important “asset” for gaining access to equal citizenship and equal opportunity in the new competitive horizon of higher education and professional employment.

In *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life* (2003), Annette Lareau argues that the idea of cultural capital is essential for explaining the structural reproduction of class in the “new economy”. (Lareau studied 9-10 year old children of different races in a multi-year multi-dimensional study. She started with a data set from a mid-western college town and an eastern city and its environs, and then had field workers conduct multiple in depth interviews with a sub-set of families, accompanying them on errands to doctors’ offices and even observing the children in school for extended periods of time. She made a real effort to select children who attended somewhat integrated schools—but, due to patterns of housing segregation, most of the children live in segregated neighborhoods.)

Obviously, the new (information) economy requires “educated” as opposed to “skilled” workers. As a consequence, unequal access to college preparatory education now has exponential effects on opportunity (recall the opportunity differential plaguing Central High); however, as Lareau discovers, cultural capital—not just formal education—is essential for successful political and economic integration. A child accrues cultural capital in families, schools and neighborhoods, and it consists of the temporal organization of daily life (a conception of time), the cultivation or lack of cultivation of organizational spheres (a conception of space), and language use. In her study, Lareau concluded that working class parents aspire to give their children what they “need” and then let them grow up “naturally”. Since meeting basic needs can be taxing for those in strapped financial circumstances, “child support” accentuates emotional and material dimensions, not cultural ones. By contrast, middle class parents engage in the “concerted cultivation” of children (a cultivation which is further supported by comparatively elite schools).

Whereas working class parents in the study gave their children lots of free time and the freedom to explore their own neighborhoods (in part so that parents had recuperative time), middle class parents tended to both organize their children’s “free” time and delineate the “organizational spheres” or spaces in which their children spent time. As a consequence, while working class children were free to negotiate their own relationships and engage in self-directed play (as developmental psychologists recommend), middle class children had “play dates” and enrichment activities in which play was often a veiled form of learning. For example, middle class parents

reported that sports like soccer (and golf and tennis) were more about learning how to interact with others and how to be “appropriately” competitive than about the game itself. Since they spent so much time on extra-curriculars, the middle class kids spent less time with extended family and less time in their communities, i.e. they spent less time on natural human “relationships” and less time in “home territory,” and more time “interacting” with peers and mentors in (geographically) dispersed social networks that emphasized competitive reciprocity over intimacy.

Most importantly, while working class children “use” language to demonstrate competence (as we all do) and as “a conduit for social life”—as a means of basic social communication—middle class children learn early on that language is about power. Middle class children learn to use language to defend “rights”; they have a sense of “entitlement” (in both the pejorative and positive sense) and they understand that the capacity to authoritatively articulate and defend rights is an important skill like reading and writing.

In short, Lareau argues, poor and middle class Americans grow up differently: culturally speaking, they are the product of two different Americas. From the vantage point of child psychology, the focus on play and intimacy may mean that poor kids are the ones with “non-pathological” childhoods. However, from the vantage point of the new economy, and even late-modern democracy, adaptation to a frenetic pace, cultivation of networks and a sense of entitlement are indispensable forms of cultural capital.

The “need” for cultural capital means that black children are likely to be the victims of a new kind of inequality. African-Americans are less likely to be middle class (and less likely to have the wealth to reproduce middle class status even if they have middle class incomes). The Black middle class is not only smaller than the white middle class, it is more precarious: half of all African Americans born to middle class parents will experience class “demotion”. As a consequence, they are less likely to accrue the type of material and social capital that stable socio-economic mobility requires. And, without having these achievements under their belt, blacks are now expected to master the next generation of “capital”: the cultural capital that is both a product of the middle class way of life and a precondition of reproducing it.

Given that the barriers to upward mobility are mounting—there are material barriers, barriers rooted in social alienation and stigmatization and, now, cultural barriers—it is all the more difficult for the ghettoized to escape their peculiar “culture of poverty”. In terms of material barriers, there are still “savage inequalities” separating black kids in racially isolated schools from white peers: infrastructure, teacher qualification and experience, student performance and the dropout rate all mark black schools as inferior. (Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation* (2005)) Famously, those who are burdened by “savage inequalities” are also burdened by the stigma or loss of self-esteem that attaches to inferior status. (Recall *Brown’s* citation of child psychology research.) In today’s world, however, segregation creates *even more barriers than it did in the past*. “[T]he isolation of students of color limits their access to integrated networks that broaden opportunities for them, especially against the background of racial segregation in the United States. For example, students attending racially isolated schools are often at a disadvantage when seeking jobs or college admissions, *even if they have been academically successful*, because of their school’s reputation and lack of alumni or teacher networks that could have helped them to take advantage of post-secondary opportunities.” (*Still Looking to the Future*) Moreover, even kids who attend integrated schools that are internally re-segregated (like Central High) must circumvent a new generation of invisible and intangible barriers: we now have to worry that they are not just conspicuously absent from the academic fast track, but their temporal-spatial-linguistic horizon is eclipsed as well.

Finally, even black kids who are good students fail to succeed in a context of “social mistrust”. (Claude Steel, *Young, Gifted and Black* (2003)) Like “self doubt” and the loss of self-esteem in general, “social mistrust” is a product of racial stereotypes. Yet, while self-doubt plagues students who “dis-

identify” with school (and are so unengaged from academics that their identity is not at all connected to success in school), social mistrust leads to academic failure for students who identify with school, have their sense of self bound up with doing well at school and, based on past performance, have no reason to doubt their capacities. Because the latter identify with school, as school gets more competitive, they will seek to protect their “identity” from the threat of projected stereotypes, which, though intangible, circulate powerfully for those reared in the shadow of the culture of poverty or even for those middle class Blacks who (despite demonstrated intelligence) are “presumptively” less intelligent. Thus, while savage inequalities of the material sort and status inequalities linked to the deprivation of self-esteem seem intractable, we have to reckon with new inequalities like the failure of students who identify with and succeed at school but nonetheless mistrust curricular selections and orientations, evaluations of teachers and peers, etc. Black children like all children not only need material pre-conditions to be equal: they need intellectual and cultural tools, **and** they need a context of trust and understanding to make these “tools sing”—to make them work for them.

At MCS, our children are lucky. They have what *all* children should have: the tools they need and the right context in which to use them. When we say they are “living the dream,” the words possess an integrity and meaningfulness (a truthfulness) that is altogether lacking when we speak of a “colorblind” Constitution or the “commemoration” of the 50th anniversary of “desegregation” at Central High. MCS *is* integrated. Our children are the future citizens capable of responding to Obama’s call for a sincere and honest conversation *about* race and *about more* than race. How did they get this special capacity? They have excellent teachers, a beautiful space, and a thought-provoking multicultural curriculum that de-constructs stereotypes without degenerating into post-racial myth making. The curricular core—civil rights and human rights—resonates in every aspect of learning, from music to science.

Undoubtedly, some of our children (especially the tweens) are alienated and, undeniably, there are conflicts—lots of conflicts. Yet, these conflicts are not about America’s original sin: slavery and its “racializing” legacy. When MCS opened in 1967, there were racial conflicts. This is normal. (When neighborhoods first integrate, there is often an increase in racial animosity. When children move from segregated grammar schools to “integrated” middle schools in New York, there is an increase in racial name calling and bullying.) These are just the growing pains of first contact, which prefigure the mature community that can take root *if integration is managed correctly*.

In our case, integration has been well managed. Our children are “forced” to live with each other—they have no choice but accept the reality of petty disputes and then work through (sometimes tedious) processes of conflict resolution. The academic and social pedagogy forces them to look at everything from each other’s point of view. Our children “identify” with school and yet are not compelled to protect their identities from the searching scrutiny of pervasive (albeit intangible) mistrust and misunderstanding. They are not all friends with each other. And, the truth of the matter is that they do not all like each other. But, in all the ways that matter, they trust each other and their teachers. Their actual friendships and mentorships cut across race lines *seamlessly*. Their inter-racial relationships are deep and real. Not only is racial animus distant to their way of thinking, so is “mere” toleration.

These kids don’t just tolerate each other. They work at mutual understanding (even when the peculiar “narcissism of petty differences” that afflicts all small communities produces antagonism). *On every level*, our children do not live in an isolated world: their “space” is large and widening; they possess self-confidence, self-esteem and social trust; they participate in “networks of affiliation” that are not only functional but also pathways for enlarging frameworks of understanding and emotional intelligence; they participate in peer relations, not status hierarchies; and, they understand that they

are entitled, not in the pejorative sense, but in the heroic sense of all those brave child-ancestors who claimed the right to integrated education in the first place.

We *need* citizens like our children if we really want to solve the race problem. Instead of just saying the words “colorblind” over and over again as if its a magical talisman and instead of “merely” memorializing child-heroes who bravely integrated schools that we now cowardly condemn to re-segregation, we must rear citizens who believe in integration (in the fibers of their minds and souls). Here’s the paradox: the belief system of integration can only be a byproduct of a cultural *habitats* that actually engrains an integrated perspective.