Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School
By Mica Pollock.

Reviewed by Nathan Glazer

Mica Pollock taught in a California high school for a year in the mid-1990s, then spent another two years in research in the same school as a graduate student in what appears to be social anthropology. (She is now on the faculty of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.) Those were hectic times in this multiracial and multiethnic high school, which she calls “Columbus,” and which is located in an otherwise unnamed “California City”—though it is clear from the details of the court case under which all “California City” schools then labored that the city is San Francisco.

While she taught there, the high school, as a failing school, was being “reconstituted” by the central administration. When she returned as a researcher, it was already reconstituted, with a new principal and staff. But these problems did not seem to affect the issues she was studying.

Her concern was with how teachers, administrators, and students talk, or do not talk, about race, and how race comes into their thinking and acting about school issues. Surprisingly, there is very little about how race comes up in classroom teaching, which is a central issue in other books on race in schools. A typical issue is what to do when “nigger” shows up in a class reading from Huckleberry Finn. But Columbus High is a rather sophisticated setting when it comes to race: it comprises six ethnic groups (no fewer than nine are identified under the citywide court order, and all nine must be considered in the making of administrative decisions), and its student body is, for all practical purposes, all minority. Officially, the school is 28 percent Filipino, 29 percent Latino, 22 percent African American, 8 percent Chinese, 8 percent other nonwhite (mostly Samoan), and 5 percent other white (just white in common parlance).

The students seem to be of two distinct minds about the subject, and they are quite comfortable with both. On the one hand, their notions about their own race are complex, mixed, and shifting. Many of the students are of mixed origin (this is, after all, the San Francisco region), and they seem to take delight in the fact that their race is often not easily identifiable to others. They are very direct in talking about race, their own and that of others, and one supposes that “nigger” would not have caused much of a stir at Columbus if it came up in a classroom reading. On the other hand, they accept that the school is composed of the six defined groups and that those groups are often in conflict over such matters as how many of each appear in a representative school event, or in what order, which students become officers in the school, and the like.

Avoiding the R Word

Such sophistication on the part of the students makes the inhibitions of the teachers and administrators seem odd, but especially evocative. The adults are reluctant to speak about race differences in achievement and behavior, and this, the author believes, contributes to the continuance of racial problems. Pollock seems to be asking for more openness in the discussion of these issues, but matters are more complicated than that, and just how one is to be open to questions of race is not easy to discern from her account.

Pollock notes that for the teachers race matters when they talk about students, but not when they talk about their own problems as teachers. They do not seem to take much notice that a majority-white teaching force is teaching a student body with minuscule numbers of “other white” students, nor do they consider what problems this might create for their teaching. Or if they do, it is only in sub rosa discussion.

At the city administrative level, where Columbus was considered a failing school, there also seems to be a problem talking about race directly. If Columbus is failing, it is clearly because its black, Latino, and Samoan
students graduate in small numbers. There is no great problem with the Filipinos, the second-largest ethnic group in the school, and the group dominant in school government and in school achievement. There is no problem with the Chinese, a small group in this school, but dominant academically in the school system city-wide. But the problem of who is failing is concealed by the rhetoric of “all students”: “all students” can and must learn. The racial issue is left unremarked in the rancorous public meetings over reconstitution, even though it is, in fact, the racial difference in failure that started the whole process.

Between a Rock and Racism
In her extended and interesting accounts of how teachers view the matter, Pollock teeters between acknowledging a range of factors aside from race in accounting for academic success and failure and taking the teachers to task for not directly acknowledging and addressing racial and ethnic groups in those outcomes. But it is not easy to see just what the author would consider a proper response. Consider her reference to research on group inequality in achievement: “Researchers rarely admit that their own matter-of-fact research questions about racial patterns, launched from a distance, are themselves evidence of culturally scripted expectations that achievement be racially ordered—and more important, that such research questions routinely produce culturally scripted explanations for why racial patterns exist.”

What is the researchers’ failure? They “presume certain racial achievement patterns,” Pollock writes. But is it “presumption” when almost all research agrees on the matter? At another point in the book Pollock abashedly notes that these are her own expectations (“presumptions”?) too. “After two years around Columbus, I myself would hear a student coming late to class and anticipate she would be ‘black’; I regularly assumed the honor roll lists would largely display names that were either ’Filipino’ or ’Chinese.’” But like the other adults in this book, Pollock too remains silent on the issue: “I just waited quietly for racial patterns to manifest themselves…. ”

In discussing the researchers’ failure, Pollock displays the tendency of current social science to concentrate on representations, how matters are seen, as if that were the problem, rather than the underlying realities that give rise to those representations. She seems to want the teachers to recognize and be more straightforward in their talk about racial realities; but she does not want them to acknowledge straightforwardly that blacks, Latinos, and Samoans are the problem. If one speaks about racial failure, it must be within the context of the larger “racial order.”

If one speaks about racial failure, it must be within the context of the larger “racial order.” One senses that teachers reading this book will think the author gets them coming and going: Be aware of the “racial order,” but if you speak about it, you’ll probably be doing so the wrong way. Pollock believes that black academic failure, if spoken about directly, simply becomes part of the process of creating and sustaining that failure.

In the end, Colormute asks a great deal from teachers and administrators; fair enough. But it also asks them to take on the burden of an analysis that is itself questionable. Would evoking the racial order really help in this situation? Would it not as likely fan resentments and provide excuses that would make education even more difficult?

Yes, we must recognize the role of race and group and of complex history, and we must acknowledge that fault can be variously apportioned. It is a central issue of academic achievement and academic failure. But then, whatever the ultimate analysis, is the task not one of effective instruction for the competencies that society expects from the educated? This, it seems to me, is what is shortchanged in this otherwise sophisticated analysis of the problems of talking about race in school. And in those moments when Mica Pollock recognizes her difficulties in following her own prescriptions, we recognize not only her honesty and good will, but the problem of incorporating the weight of our racial history in our instruction.

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