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Learning War/Learning Race

Fourth-grade Students in the Aftermath of September 11th in New York City

Maria Kromidas
Teachers College, Columbia University, New York

Abstract ■ The tragedy of September 11th produced immense controversy and re-ignited simmering culture wars in the media over the presentation of these events in American schools, or what students should know. The ethnographic research conducted with fourth-grade students in a public school in Brooklyn, New York, side-stepped this debate in order to contribute to it. Specifically, the goal was to capture what children do in fact know through an investigation of their modes of speaking and writing about these events. What figured most prominently in the students' talk and writing was their racialization of a far-away and ill-defined enemy. By showing how this racialization was also evident in the students' interactions and friendship, and contextualizing these patterns in the racial (dis)order of the United States, I suggest that the events of September 11th and the war on terrorism have produced a culture of fear that will have lasting, if as yet unintelligible, effects on the racial dynamics of the United States.
Keywords ■ children ■ discrimination ■ multiculturalism ■ race relations ■ racialization ■ schools

Immediately after September 11th there was a veritable outpouring in the media from adults who deal with children – child psychologists, religious leaders, politicians, pediatricians, educators, school counselors and parents. In one way or another, they all asked: how are 'we', 'as a society', going to address these issues with children and what *should* children know? Polite suggestions quickly become political and controversial when it comes to curricular directives for public schools. There is one issue that has taken center-stage in this respect, making simmering culture wars in schools erupt into a boiling national debate. This has been the debate that has been framed as that between the values of teaching 'multiculturalism' or teaching 'patriotism'.[1] The debate is re-ignited in the media periodically, and it is doubtful that it will be buried any time soon. What should teachers teach and students learn at the two-year anniversary of the attack? At the ten-year anniversary? Stepping back from the heat of the controversy, however, reveals how much those on either side of the debate share in the form of their most basic assumption – that students are somehow empty

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receptacles waiting to be filled by the educators. What children do actually know has rarely been considered in these conversations.

Rather than seeing children as blank slates, the goal of this research with a class of fourth-grade students (nine-year-olds) in East New York, Brooklyn departs from critiques of dominant socialization models and instead seeks to view children as *bricoleurs* in their own right, actively constructing and negotiating meaning from the resources available to them, 'multicultural' or 'patriotic' discourses being among those resources. Simply stated, my purpose was to figure out what children actually *do* know and what lasting impact, if any, there was on their daily lives almost six months after September 11th. For this purpose, I investigated students' modes of speaking and writing about these events. Although my work with the students spanned various topics that are all interesting in their own right, what emerged again and again in discussions with students was their racialization of a far-away and ill-defined enemy. My observations of the children's social interactions reveal how this racialization was also evident in their interactional patterns and friendship networks. The point of this article is thus to consider the shifting terrain of race in the children's daily lives after September 11th in terms of the local dynamics and the wider social and historical context that in many respects frames it.

While I argue that matters of race are always rooted in the local historical patterns of interaction, I also suggest that the issues of race, racialization, racial discrimination and xenophobia that were evident in this fourth-grade classroom of 23 students are related to wider, nation-wide patterns of discrimination. By looking at nation-wide reports of personal, institutional and state violence directly related to September 11th and its aftermath, as well as political mobilization of targeted groups, I suggest that one of the many effects of this rupturing event is a shift in the racial dynamics in the United States. The most obvious shift is in the increased visibility of Arabs, Muslims, and those attributes that are in the popular understanding related to them by virtue of skin color and vague notions of 'foreignness', including religion. While the increased visibility and lumping together of these 'brown' people may be considered in some respects 'new', it is most productive to view these reverberations in the racial dynamics in terms of processes that have long been entrenched in the history of race relations in the United States. And while the long-term effects on the racial (dis)order are not completely intelligible, this analysis suggests that the soil is well tilled for the exacerbation of racial tensions by fear, real and/or imaginary, in the continuing crisis and internal war on terrorism as well as the [then] impending war with Iraq.

The school and the surrounding neighborhood

First it is necessary to very briefly sketch out the school and its surrounding neighborhood. Public School 999[2] in East New York, Brooklyn (Community School District 19, Community District 8) is located in a multi-floored building straddling relatively quiet residential streets on three of its sides, and a busy and speeding expressway on the other, back side of the building. The zoned neighborhood serving the school includes the three- to four-family homes surrounding the school as well as the imposing five building projects across the expressway. The children who live in the projects are mostly African-American and second- and third-generation Latino, while most of the children who live in the unattached homes are recent and first-generation immigrants who mirror the changing immigration base of New York. Three of the top five sending countries to NYC in the 1990s (Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Guyana), as well as new groups whose increasing immigration is due to the new 'diversity' provisions in immigration law – Nigeria and Bangladesh (Bangladeshis are now the sixth largest group entering New York under the diversity visa program) – are well represented in the school and surrounding neighborhood (NYC Dept of City Planning, 1999). Twelve percent of the students have come to the United States within the last three years (NY State Education Dept, 2001). A traditional breakdown of the school population into the major racial/ethnic categories (28 percent black, 1 percent white, 46 percent Hispanic and 25 percent Asian [NY State Education Dept, 2001]) does not capture the spatial organization of these categories, nor does it appreciate the diversity within them. Approximately 85 percent of the students in the school are eligible for free lunch (NY State Education Dept, 2001), which is commonly interpreted by state and federal agencies as the poverty level index of the students' families. Most of the students' parents or guardians work in the lowest rungs of the service sector ladder – as dishwashers in fancy hotels, security guards for financial companies, janitors in airports, maids for wealthier households. By contrast, the Bengali immigrants have a slightly different pattern – most of the women do not work and a larger percentage of the men are self-employed or employed in 'semi-skilled' labor. Like schools with similar demographics throughout the city, the school is identified as a 'high-need' school, with most students scoring far below the achievement goals set by the city and state on standardized exams.[3] The classroom in which I conducted fieldwork was considered the lowest-performing of the seven fourth-grade classrooms and was set up as a 'reading intervention' class, and thus had a larger percentage of recent immigrants. My choice of this site was at the same time practical (I had previously taught in the school for three years and thus had familiarity with the neighborhood and relative ease of gaining permission from the administration), methodological (a culturally diverse site) and

moral/ethical (these students are rarely given the opportunity for open and critical discussions).

While the dominant media and Bush administration's portrayals of 'evil' terrorists, the evil governments that support them, and the general rhetoric of 'evil-doers' that we must 'rid the world of' had somewhat prepared me to excavate issues of cultural (mis)essentialism and the like, it was evident from my first day with the children that I need not bring my pick and axe; these matters were not only plainly visible on the surface, but deeply consequential in the students' daily lives. These were the reasons that I altered the focus of my investigation as well as my teaching.

In the classroom

Within the first three minutes in the classroom, responding to my question of 'What's going on in the world right now?', one student stood up to declare 'We fighting those ugly people', to the laughter and amusement of most of the class. Later that afternoon, it was the students' continuous shorthand use of the word 'they' in the ensuing discussion of war and September 11th that needed clarification. One example, arising after the class was brought together from small discussion groups, follows:

Example 1

Sheri: We were talking about who started it first, and if they kill a lot of white people. . . . I mean a lot of people, we got to go to war right then.
MK: Who are they?
Sheri: The Indians.
MK: The Indians?
Sheri: I don't know – that's what I call them.
Jonathan: The Pakistans!
MK: The Pakistans?
Sodiq: The Afghanistans!
MK: The Afghanistans?
Joseph: The terrorists.

Later that afternoon:

Example 2

Sheri: I feel sorry for the Afghanistan people.
Susanna: Why do you feel sorry after what they did?
Sheri: Because they gonna die!
(Most of the class breaks up with laughter)
Latisha: (standing up) I feel happy!
(laughter)
Latisha: No, no, no . . . because they want to kill our people, they're going to die too. They want to have a party when we die, so we should celebrate!
Anupa: If they die, it will be better for us.

MK: Who are they?
Anupa: The Araback people.
Marisela: The Afghanistans have always hated the Americans. I know because I always watch the news.

In Example 1, the enemy or 'they' referred to Indians, Pakistanis or Afghanistanis; while in Example 2, 'they' became again the Afghanistanis, then the Palestinians (I hold strongly that the people that were having a 'party' refers to the film recording of Palestinians repeatedly aired in the media), and eventually all Arabic (Araback) people. The students' labeling of the enemy as 'Araback' or 'Indian' can be considered a racialization – a lumping together of unrelated peoples by virtue of their skin color, and a racialization that was woven with – not surprisingly – xenophobia. It is quite easy to dismiss this racial lumping together as a result of the students' immaturity or ignorance of these matters; it is just children's babble. Two points make this dismissal unacceptable. First, that it is not unlike the sort of racial and xenophobic lumping and labeling that is going on in the wider culture and, second, that this kind of talk made sense in the classroom. Indeed, it made so much sense that it elicited laughter (some uproarious, some mischievous, some nervous) from many classmates, as in the first question I posed, and as in Example 2. So much sense that the students were exasperated with me when I kept asking them to clarify who 'they' referred to (Example 1). The students knew what Sheri was talking about, they knew that I knew what Sheri was talking about; the adult was just playing with technicalities. In a sense, the students were just 'playing' themselves. For even after I had clarified that the only acceptable reference to 'they' was 'terrorist', Latisha continued to use the 'wrong' signifier.

Example 3

Latisha: The Indians, *I* call them Indians . . .
MK: Who?
Latisha: The people that was in the airplane. They said that God told them to do this. (throwing up her hands and moving her head in mock frustration) Why would he tell them . . .?
Teacher: (Interrupting) You see, they had certain beliefs, but . . .

Latisha quite adeptly used the 'wrong' signifier as an additional way to belittle the terrorists as part of her theatrical display to make her classmates laugh. And they did. What is interesting is not what Sheri or Latisha knew or believed in their heads to be the proper identification of 'terrorists' (the case could in fact be made that Latisha certainly 'knew' the terrorists were not Indians), but rather that they effectively made use of an emerging and available racial construct – successfully in that it made so much sense that it elicited laughter for the audience of students. The activities of fun, 'making fun', playing and laughing are clearly an important context where learning occurs, especially learning race, as will be discussed below, but it

is important to point out that that not all are playing, not all are having fun, and not all are laughing.

'Difference multiculturalism'

My initial response to the students' discriminatory remarks was to put forth a few clarifications in the form of a 'lesson' about the diversity of peoples who profess Islam; using maps, pictures, literature, etc. I then asked the students to write what they know and might want to know about Muslim people, in order to gauge where and how far I should take this inquiry. The Muslim students in the class wrote about Islamic beliefs, practices, holidays, cultural practices and traditions. A few students earnestly tried to write all of the little they did know, and asked questions about what the religion is like and about the languages Muslims speak. However, the bulk of the responses from the non-Muslim students were frightening to me, to say the least. Here are a few of these written responses.

> They don't talk English. They like money. They like to kill people. They own different kind of stores. (Susanna)

> I don't know any thing about the Muslim people. The only thing that I know is that they are poor and they eat out of dirty pot and the Muslim people stink and they got rotting teeth and they take a bath once a year and the ugly people try to bomb the U.S.A. (Anthony)

> They like to fight other people. They fight the people in their own country. They drink dirty water. They poor. They don't get along. They sleep in bushes. If they are mean they go to hell. (Sheri)

> Muslims kill people. They are terrorist. (Anupa)

> The Muslim like money. They like to kill people. The Muslims is bad. The Muslims like to [go to] war. Muslim people is like bin Ladin. Why do Muslim people stink? Muslim people has long hair. (Chaitram)

What is initially striking about the students' written responses is how perceptions that were obviously new for the students and directly arising from the events and aftermath of September 11th are grafted on to previously existing prejudices, to be discussed in the next section. But also important to note here is the context in which these remarks made sense. I was employing and making available to the students the discourse of 'difference multiculturalism'. While this is the most popular form of multicultural discourse employed by schools, it has been shown that the espousal of this discourse actually has a divisive effect on students' friendship groups (Fine et al., 1997; Goode, 2001; Goode et al., 1992). This effect was evident from just one multicultural lesson, and the students' 'play' with it clearly shows the danger involved in the use of such discourse. Through my talk about Muslims, I was inadvertently singling out this group, reifying their

'difference' and justifying talk about 'them'. But 'they' were not just out there, 'they' were also in the classroom.

The students' social interactions

It was during this class period that two Bengali girls approached to tell me that some students were 'making fun of my country'. Although I found out later that this had been an issue with these girls (and others) for some time, the classroom teacher was completely unaware of it. The teacher should not in any case be blamed for this, for these are the informal processes that often go unnoticed within the increasingly formalized world of public education.[4] The following should illustrate to ethnographers of education that children's informal learning may be just as important, or in some cases more important, to consider than the official classroom lessons. Because I was not under the ordinary formal constraints of a teacher – the students were not going to be tested on the material I was teaching, and neither my skills nor my job were at stake[5] – I had the luxury of stepping back, observing and responding to the informal processes taking place.

'Making fun of my country' actually referred to the statement 'you sleep in bushes' or 'your family sleeps in bushes', as recorded in Sheri's responses to the exercise above. The girls perceived that this was a remark directed not at their individual families, but to their families' background, or rather some imagined aspect of it. I would agree with the girls' perception of this remark for two reasons: the context in which these remarks were made (during a formal lesson about Muslim people) and the students to whom these remarks were directed. This derogatory remark was picked up by many students in the class (it is not known whether Sheri had started this or not) and aimed at students that were from Bangladesh or Guyana, regardless of whether they were Muslim or not. The non-Muslim Guyanese were loudly proclaiming that they were not Muslim, nor were they from Bangladesh – and to make their case they began using the remark in reference to others to whom they felt it applied more appropriately (the Bengali Muslims). Other students continued to make fun of these non-Muslim students as if they did indeed 'sleep in the bushes'. Anupa (non-Muslim Guyanese) later complained to me: 'They always think I'm from their country and I always tell them that I'm not.' The questions that arise, then, are – what is the import of the country Anupa is from? What is the function of a statement such as 'You sleep in the bushes'?

Quite simply, statements such as these function as forms of exclusion – they indicate to the recipient that she or he is somehow unlike the rest of the group. 'You sleep in the bushes' or 'you are from Bangladesh' take on a level of significance that the statement 'you are from Ecuador' does not, regardless of where the individual is from. It is an accusation of not only being somehow unlike the group, but not worthy of participation in

the group's activities. For instance, during a group science project that I was observing, the students in Chaitram's group complained that they did not want to work with him because 'he doesn't speak English', 'he speaks Bengali'. This would not be such an interesting point if it were not that English was Sayab's native and only language! Indeed he did have a Guyanese accent, but the Jamaican accent of another classmate did not arouse any such exclusionary tactics. Thus being from Bangladesh, speaking Bengali or looking as if you do is the new marker for not belonging in this classroom. As folklorist Winslow noted:

> Uncomplimentary and hateful names have always served as a protest against social change and thus as a means of social control. A new name, derogatory or otherwise, is always an indication of flux. Old names are sufficient until a nameless variation emerges, then new identifications are made. After the new thing is located, it is pigeonholed to enable the rest of the group to handle it. (1969: 261)

While the children have not made up a 'new name', they are clearly at work constructing and labeling a group with racist and xenophobic tools. This is a space that clearly shows the children as *bricoleurs* – adopting constructs from the media, their families, the neighborhood and the school, grafting new perceptions on to previously existing ones, reconciling these often contradictory discourses from the private and public realms, and applying them to their classmates. What must be emphasized is that the singling out of South Asian and Muslim students is in many ways new, and that the indicative 'flux' must be accounted for in terms of both ongoing processes as well as the rupture point of September 11th. Before September 11th, the Bengali and South Asian diasporic students' presence can be characterized as almost invisible for the other students. Guyanese and Trinidadian students of South Asian descent formed friendship networks with Bengali students and these networks rarely overlapped with those of other students. It cannot be assumed that this pattern of clustering was due to any similarity in immigration status, country of origin, culture or religion of the students, for these networks were composed of a diversity of these characteristics. It may then be presumed that these students were racialized as belonging together and not quite belonging with the black and Latino majority. To illustrate, in the midst of the 1999–2000 school year, I received a new student from Trinidad. She immediately became included and included herself as a part of one group of black and Latino girls rather than the group of South Asian diasporic girls that included another Trinidadian immigrant. Thus, racialization was a relevant process at work in the students' friendships, but this process can be better characterized as *non-inclusionary* rather than *exclusionary*. The key difference is the discriminatory and derogatory elements that are missing from the first as opposed to the second. The first seemed to proceed 'naturally' while the second proceeds with force. What follows is another instructive example concerning the marked difference in the significance of a headscarf in the two time periods.

In the midst of the 1999–2000 school year, Shelley, a normally exuberant fourth grader (she wanted to be a singer), approached me tearfully in the morning about how upset she was that she had to start wearing a headscarf. She was nervous that everyone was going to make fun of her and that she looked 'ugly'. She came back to my classroom after school, her normally chipper self, reporting that everything was fine, except that she felt a bit hot during gym class. Shelley's experience contrasts sharply with Sonia's, who arrived at PS 999 already wearing a headscarf. Nevertheless, she reported to me that this was an issue that she was continually bothered with – 'Every day they always ask me why I wear my scarf and every day I tell them that it's my religion.' However 'invisible' this group may have been for the students before September 11th, points of tension did exist for the adults around them.

For the parents, the Bengalis became visible only at moments of tension, as during a proposed re-zoning of students due to overcrowding or during a meeting concerning the collapsing of one kindergarten class in order to construct another bilingual Bengali class. To many of the parents, it was inevitably the immigrant families from Bangladesh that were to blame for these inconveniences. One parent had even proposed during a meeting that only they should be re-zoned. This pattern of intolerance and blaming the newcomer for structural problems is a phenomenon documented for other neighborhoods in New York (Kim, 2000; Sanjek, 1998; Susser, 1982). Other points of tension and intolerance were evident, for example, parents groaning when meetings were translated into Bengali, or when some parents walked out of a graduation ceremony when it was translated into Bengali (there were no such moans during the Spanish portion). Another point of stress is the fact that many of the small businesses in the neighborhood are owned by Bengalis in a neighborhood with very few black-owned businesses. Evidently the students picked up on this fact from their written responses above such as 'they like money' and 'they own different kinds of stores'. The point I wish to make is that these previously existing tensions moved from the private sphere and became exacerbated in the very public domain of harassment and discrimination.

'Radical multiculturalism'

I decided it would be more fruitful to direct our attention less towards issues concerning 9/11 and the war, and to focus instead on discrimination – not only as it applied to Muslim-Americans, but as it might be an issue in all their lives. I began by presenting to the students their own uncritical talk about freedom, with the goal of linking it to their discriminatory views. As might be expected, the children had picked up on the current rhetoric about freedom to justify both the war and the events of September 11th. Across the board, the students believed that the World Trade Center was

attacked because 'we have freedom', that we were at war 'to get freedom'.[6] Jumping off from their own universalistic definitions of freedom, I led into a historical inquiry as to the exclusionary nature of freedom in the history of the United States (see Foner, 1998). I addressed the struggles of Native Americans, African-Americans, women, immigrants and labor leaders to challenge the boundaries of freedom, as well as the definition of freedom itself. I also tried to make clear Foner's (1998, 2001) timely insights of how the racial dimensions of freedom and nationalism are exacerbated during periods of crisis through a discussion of Second World War internment of Japanese-Americans. Whereas one of my immediate goals in all of this was to connect our historical inquiry with the present discrimination faced by Muslim-Americans and those that 'look like them' as well as the students' own discriminatory attitudes, I chose not to limit our conversations to this group so as not to reinforce some students' 'Otherizing' practices, as shown above.[7] My attempt to make things concrete was to have students craft their own stories about a discriminatory event. This process took several days of brainstorming, revising, and editing during which I would continually give feedback to individual students and the entire class.[8] This project was hopefully an exercise in learning for the students, but, for the purpose of this investigation, it also reveals how the students understand the issues of our entire inquiry. I see these stories as indexing how students experience the issue of discrimination, either as victims, witnesses or perpetrators.

The students' stories

Although I led a short group discussion on the differences between the institutional and individual forms of discrimination that we had been studying, all but two chose to write stories about individual forms of discrimination, as children of this age tend to write about things that are more concrete in their daily lives. Thus these coded stories reveal how students see and experience the issue of discrimination personally. Indeed, half of all the created characters that were victimized were of the same race or ethnicity as the author, and half of the students that did not infuse their characters with some aspect of their subjectivities created characters that were Muslim or were from Bangladesh. Table 1 summarizes each of the students' stories in terms of the main character/victim of discrimination and the perpetrator of the discriminatory act.[9]

Two of the African-American girls in the class wrote stories about white-on-black violence. For instance, Latisha's story is about a character named Joe who got beat up 'by a lot of white kids'. In the end, 'all the black people had a meeting. They were fighting back. And they won.' Notably, this is the only story that has grassroots political resistance in response to victimization. Sheri's story about a black woman and her daughter getting shot by a white man ends on a less positive note – 'the police came but they didn't

Table 1 Students' stories

Student	*Race/Ethnicity/Country of origin*	*Discriminated characteristic of main character*	*Relevant characteristic of perpetrator*
Sherezad	Bangladesh; first generation	Unmarked girl	Unmarked girls
Farana	Bangladesh; immigrated within past three years	Bengali girl wearing head-covering	Unmarked other girls
Amena	Bangladesh; immigrated within past three years	Bengali girl	'Black man'
Sabrina	Haitian; immigrated before school age	N/A	N/A
Sheri	African-American	'Black' kid	'White kids'
Jorge	Latino, second/third generation	'Gang member'	Police
Marisela	Latino; first generation Dominican	'White' girl	'Black people'
Sodiq	Nigeria; immigrated before school age	N/A	N/A
Auriana	Ecuador; immigrated within past three years	Dominican girl	Unmarked 'pilot' of an airplane
Chaya	Guyana; immigrated within past three years	N/A	N/A
Susanna	Latino; Puerto Rican	Bengali girl	Unmarked man
Danny	Latino; Puerto Rican	'Fat' boy	Big-eared boy
Marisela	Latino; Puerto Rican	Bengali girl, 'black' and 'ugly'	Unmarked boy
Anupa	Guyana; immigrated before school age	Girl 'from Africa'	Unmarked 'kids'
Anthony	Jamaica; immigrated over three years ago	Bengali woman, language status	Unmarked man
Latisha	African-American	'Black' woman and her daughter	Unmarked man
Joseph	Latino; first-generation Dominican	Young Dominican man	'American' men
Jonathan	Latino; Puerto Rican	Muslim woman and her daughter	Unmarked 'guy'
Jesmin	Bangladesh; immigrated via the United Arab Emirates within past three years	Bengali girl	'Black boy', her fellow classmate Anthony
Chaitram	Guyana; immigrated within past three years	Immigrant boy told to 'go back to your country'	Unmarked boys

Continued

Table 1 *Continued*

Student	*Race/Ethnicity/Country of origin*	*Discriminated characteristic of main character*	*Relevant characteristic of perpetrator*
Daniel	Guyana; first generation	N/A	N/A
Sonia	Guyana; immigrated within past three years	'Japanese-American' boy	Unmarked boys
Matthew	Latino; first-generation Ecuadorian	'José who came from Peru'	Unmarked boys

know [what] happened'. Sheri's story took place on 'March 3, 1776', and conforms to the pattern of some students supposing racial violence is a thing of the past.

The Latino students who used their own ethnicity had perpetrators who were either unmarked or simply 'American', as in Joseph's story about a 20-year-old named Tommy 'that goes to his job everyday'. The men who 'were saying the F word to him' and eventually shot him 'were Americans'. What is interesting to note is that the three Latino students who created main characters conforming to their own ethnicity were all either first generation or immigrants themselves. Of the seven students who are Puerto Rican or second or third generation, none created characters that were Latino. Marisela, after many drafts of stories about friends fighting with each other, finally crafted a story where a girl was not allowed to see her mother in the hospital – 'The man said you can not come in the room because you are white and there are only black people.' There were other instances where Latino students referred to themselves or other Latino students as 'white' or as having 'white-skin'. While they often remarked on their national origin, there was also evidence that they had some sort of pan-ethnic identity, which they referred to as 'Spanish'.[10]

Chaitram was the only Guyanese student whose character was possibly related to himself. His story is about a boy told to 'go back to your country'. Chaitram was one of the students who was having difficulty crafting a story; throughout the week he said he 'didn't know what to write'. His story was written during a class session when I was discussing coded racist speech and acts such as anti-immigrant and English-only initiatives. This conversation was effective in that many of the students have heard this kind of racist speech, but had not connected it to the issues we were writing and talking about. Six other students incorporated such coded speech into their writings, a few of whom were also having difficulties writing a story.

It is interesting that none of the five Guyanese students chose to write about Muslim discrimination, as in our conversations and in their written responses they were (with the exception of the two Muslim girls) the most vociferously racist against Muslims in general and the Bengalis specifically.

Perhaps they were trying to distance themselves from the Bengali students because they were being identified with them, as discussed above.

Half of the students who did not infuse their main character with their own subjectivities instead created a Muslim or Bengali character. This is significant if we hold to the assumption that the children tend to write about the concrete rather than the abstract, or what they may have experienced in their daily lives. It should not be surprising then that three of the four Bengali girls used Bengali characters in their stories, two of which are woven with true events. Farana's is one such story, although she added her own little twist at the end.

> One day my cousin went to her class. 4 girls came and tell her 'why [do] you wear this scarf?' She tell them this is our religion. They told her 'You look ugly with your scarf.' And they told her to take it off. They were teasing her. . . . Then the next day the girl forgot to wear her pants and everybody was laughing at her and she was crying. Then my cousin tell her 'when somebody teasing you, you cry but do you know how people feel when you teasing them?'

Jesmin is also from Bangladesh, but came to the USA via the United Arab Emirates where she lived for two years. She is also Farana's cousin. While Jesmin tried to craft a fictional story, she shifted into the first person. You will be hearing more about her fellow classmate Anthony.

> One day Yeasmin was at the lunchroom. A boy named [Anthony] [said] that in Bangladesh people don't live in houses they live in the woods on the floor. They're nasty. They're ugly. They're stupid and they don't know anything. They're poor. They speak a stupid language. And that boy is a black boy. . . . And this is the person who teased me . . .

Anthony indeed caused quite a few problems in the class, but unlike some of the other students who were using racist and xenophobic speech, he went about it in a covert manner. I only found out from students complaining directly to me. My one-on-one talks with him did not seem to matter either – it was only when his friend Matthew (a very 'cool' kid) humiliated another student for using racist speech that Anthony's harassment seemed to decrease, according to the reports of his victims. Anthony was born in Jamaica and came to the USA about four years ago. However his immigrant experience has obviously not made him any more sensitive. Although black Caribbean-Americans' resistance to being identified as black Americans has been documented as one of the relevant identity paths for black immigrants (Kasinitz, 1992; Waters, 1999; Zéphir, 2001), it is clear that blackness gives Anthony a way to be 'American'. Anthony never talked about his early childhood in Jamaica, nor did he ever contribute anything in our class discussions of our or our family's experience with immigration or migration. It is interesting that his story picked up on the language difference of the Bengali victim – as that is an issue not applicable to him. His story is about a girl who gets cut by a man while walking down the street.

> She said why did you cut me and the man said because you are from Bangladesh and you speak a different language and you are in America and you should speak English.

The last two stories that I will include here are especially interesting because of the racialization of the victim, more so when they are juxtaposed. Marisela, Puerto Rican and proudly so, wrote a story about a 14-year-old girl from Bangladesh. On her way to school a boy said to her: 'You are very ugly and very black. . . . You are the ugly girl. You are an ugly Bangladesh. You got that dress because my sister put it in the trash . . .' Ameena, who is from Bangladesh, also wrote a story about a girl from Bangladesh.

> My friend was going to the store to buy some clothes. Her name is Sume. She is smart. She has black hair and brown eyes. . . . When she walk[ed] to the store she was looking at the clothes. Suddenly she saw a black man. He told her that he will kill her. She was white and he was black. She yell[ed] for help and the manager came. . . . The police came to arrest the black man. She was so happy.

That Marisela's Bengali character is 'black' and Ameena's is 'white' is another instance of the (dis)order of the children's understanding of the racial structure. Indeed, this is the point that I want to emphasize – that however the children may racialize themselves, their peers, and others in their world, there is nothing coherent or definite about the children's view of the racial order. Race is a somewhat messy principle, but still a principle that they are constructing and resisting out of the raw materials of their lives – and the larger racial polarity/hierarchy of white/black, while not quite clear, is still one such material.

Conclusion

In this article I have tried to show the connection between the students' hazy understanding of a far-away enemy and their categorization of their South Asian diasporic classmates, in the context of their overall racial understandings. Briefly I have outlined how, in this neighborhood that is almost 100 percent minority, the South Asians (including Guyanese) are constructed by blacks and Latinos as a brown foreign Other, while some Latinos refer to them as black. The Bengalis in turn distance themselves from black people, while the Guyanese resist being categorized with the Bengalis, vociferously putting forward their own racist views. I have called attention to the impact that learning about war, and a brown and foreign enemy, has had in this neighborhood where some children are made to feel they belong by excluding others, and other children are pushed beyond the margins of belonging. The events of September 11th brought home war in a very specific way to these children – learning about war is always learning about an enemy, and this 'enemy' is very much a racial one:

brown, foreign, strange and Muslim. And while the children do not consider their Muslim classmates as 'evil' or as 'terrorists', their identities are taken note of as never before. Students who are themselves immigrants or bilingual perpetrate hateful acts towards their classmates, even the children that are lumped together with these students. But I want to make clear that the specific dynamics that I have described is a description of the local level in East New York, a neighborhood with few whites and a neighborhood where a large portion of the newest immigrants are from Bangladesh.

Thus far, I have primarily discussed only one relatively small realm of the local level of experience – the racializations of a group of children's discourse and friendship networks within the institution of the school. Based on this research, I have staked a rather large claim – that the lumping of Arabs, South Asians and Muslims is a 'new' racial formation in the 'post September 11th' world. How can this claim be substantiated?

It is quite easy to dismiss these dynamics, putting them down to the students' immaturity or ignorance of these matters – that is, until one confronts both the acts of violence daily being perpetrated against 'browns' or 'nonwhites/nonblacks' since September 11th and the racist practices of the state and other major institutions. As pertains to interpersonal violence, a report compiled in the immediate aftermath of September 11th (SAALT, 2001) shows that, rather than being a scattered and random phenomenon, the violence inflicted upon Muslims, South Asians and other 'brown' peoples was much more widespread than it was presented to be by the mainstream media. By looking instead to local press, SAALT uncovered 645 incidents of backlash in the week following September 11th alone, which does not include police reports not covered by the media and the many other incidents that presumably went unreported. While it is obvious, as the SAALT report points out, that 'perception played a major role in determining backlash victims', in support of which they cite incidents where the victims were not Muslims or Arab-Americans, the issue is obviously not who has been 'correctly identified' or not. Rather there are larger issues, exacerbated and uniquely intertwined in the aftermath of September 11th: the racial structure of the United States and the precarious and at times paradoxical position of South Asian-Americans and Arab-Americans within it (Kibria, 1999; Koshy, 1998, 2001; Naber, 2000; Prashad, 2000; Shilpa et al., 1999), coupled with the profound historical misunderstanding and vilification of Muslims and the Arab world in the American popular understanding (Shaheen, 2001). In this respect, the state could be considered the most powerful actor in the racial drama.

The persecution and degradation of civil liberties faced by members of this group at the hands of police, airport security, the Justice Department, Congressional legislation and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) further substantiates that the events of September 11th have facilitated the consolidation of a new racialized category of those who 'look' like

the enemy (Ahmad, 2002; Volpp, 2002). In reaction to the practices of racial profiling of public institutions and private citizens, some members of this group have stood up to declare themselves mistakenly identified (e.g. Sikhs who protest: 'We are not Muslim!'), while others have participated in multi-racial, multi-ethnic activities of grassroots organizations to protest the domestic atrocities of the aftermath of September 11th.[11]

By now it is quite banal to point out the diversity between those lumped together – the crosscutting lines of class, gender, nationality, religion and language among them. It is not essence but political relations and processes, conflict and struggle, that constitute race. While shared experiences of oppression do not *necessarily* build unity, that is one trajectory amongst others. Whatever long-term effects this new racism of a not-white, not-black but brown and foreign Other will have on future coalitions and race relations in America remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that this cultural and political economy of fear shows no trace of subsiding – duct tape, orange alerts and evacuation drills are daily reminders that somewhere among us an enemy lurks.[12] Glued to the news of our own disaster on CNN, we are comforted by an advertisement for a home radiation detector – one that can detect traces of radiation long before we would even hear of the attack on CNN! As the alarm beeps, the white couple jumps into their SUV, whizzing off to the mountains, leaving the city and its Others far behind.

Notes

1 The broad range of advice and directives for educators can be categorized in three ideal-types: radical, neo-liberal and neo-conservative. Three publications can serve as paradigmatic cases of each of these categories. They are, respectively, *Rethinking Schools*, the *New York Times* and *Scholastic Magazine*. All have dedicated sections of their website to September 11th and the ensuing 'war on terrorism'. Available online: *Rethinking Schools* [http://www.rethinkingschools.org/special_reports/sept11/index.shtml]; *New York Times* [http://www.nytimes.com/learning/teachers/lessons/archive.html (search terrorism or September 11th)]; *Scholastic Magazine* [http://teacher.scholastic.com/professional/breaking_news/leading.htm.].

2 This is a pseudonym. All names have been changed to protect the anonymity of the school, teacher and students.

3 Compare District 19's achievement to other schools in the New York City Board of Education [http://www.nycenet.edu].

4 Especially in this and other 'failing' or 'high-need' schools, much attention is devoted to the raising of test scores. Students and teachers are inundated with school and district-wide pre-tests, post-tests, testing of individual skills ('main idea', 'drawing conclusions', etc.) as well as increasingly scripted teaching methods. So intense is this pressure on the participants of the school that, for example, in the school year of 1997–8 the new superintendent prohibited all class trips so that everyone could concentrate on testing.

5 Results of testing are aggregated by class and often presented next to the individual teacher's name, often bringing into question the teacher's ability if the class did not score as well as other classes. In pre- and post-test situations, which represent how much the students improved on a particular skill, this phenomenon of 'accountability' or blaming the teacher is further exaggerated.

6 The students' families also used this discourse of freedom. In the first two weeks of my research, the students, with my guidance, made up questions to interview their family and friends about the war. While we came up with 20 or so 'good' questions, most of the students asked their interviewee about six questions. Many students did more than one interview; their subjects were mothers, older siblings, aunts, grandmothers, family friends and their own friends. The one question that most students asked in their interviews was: 'Why do some people hate the US?' The responses were, across the board with only one exception (from a student's tutor who answered: 'They maybe hate the US because they think the US has helped their enemies and has put them into poverty'), that people were jealous of the US because of our wealth, our technology, our equality and our freedom.

7 Countering the sense that groups fought and 'now we have freedom', and talking about current forms of racism, proved to be the most difficult and sensitive aspect of my teaching/fieldwork.

8 For instance, I noticed at the beginning of our project that three or four students were confusing forms of discrimination with other forms of teasing and fighting amongst friends. Another point that I had to address with the whole class was the endings of their stories. All of the students' stories ended on a terribly negative note – their main character dead, beaten up, or running home and crying. I reminded them of the resistance to discrimination that we had discussed, and although this was not quite applicable to their personal stories, the endings changed to characters fighting back, telling authorities, confronting the perpetrators, etc.

9 Of the 23 students, four students did not do the work involved, no matter what tactics I resorted to. Of the 19 stories that students wrote, nine used their own race or ethnicity, six did not, three were about non-racial discriminatory forms of teasing or did not make sense (friends fighting, a boy getting teased because of his weight, a girl not allowed in a hospital because 'she is white'), one was about a gang member getting ignored by the police when he was shot (which was apparently a true story), and one was ambiguous about the racial or ethnic identity of the victim.

10 See Oboler's 'Hispanics and the Dynamics of Race and Class' (1995: Ch. 5), which deals with her research on how first-generation immigrants from Latin American used, negotiated and resisted the pan-ethnic label of Hispanic.

11 For instance, the organization DRUM (Dezis Rizing Up and Moving) attempts to build coalitions of South Asian, Arab, Muslim, black and Latino organizations. See the DRUM website [http://www.drumnation.org]. For information on their community projects directly related to the aftermath of September 11th, see: [http://www.drumnation.org/911selfdefense.html]. These projects include the 'Racial Violence and INS Disappearance Hotline', 'YouthPower! Self Defense & Know Your Rights' and 'Multi-Racial Anti-War Organizing'. Also see Varghese (2002).

12 Davis (2001) contextualizes the current 'globalization of fear' in his historical parody/critique of the apocalyptic currents within cities. His point is to link this fear with the unprecedented surveillance that urban dwellers are currently experiencing.

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■ **Maria Kromidas** is a graduate student in the anthropology program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include race and ethnic relations, critical pedagogies and the politics of urban education. A product of the New York City public school system herself, she hopes to apply these interests in her future research there. *Address*: Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th St, New York, NY 10027, USA. [email: mk861@columbia.edu]