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What's Race Got to Do with It? The Dynamics of Race Relations in the Oakland Teachers' Strike

PATRICIA A. YOUNG
California State University, PO Box 6868, Fullerton, CA 92834-00335, USA (e-mail: pyoung@fullerton.edu)

ABSTRACT *This article analyzes the racial dynamics and relations evident in the 1996 Oakland, California teachers' strike. Striking and non-striking teachers openly articulate their involvement in the strike and their relationships with colleagues. In this strike, the majority of African-American teachers crossed strike lines while the majority of European American teachers walked the strike line. The analysis of teacher speech revealed that the concept of race is multidimensional as it consists of identity, meaning, history and social complexities that become formed, transformed and mutated through race-speaking.*

It was another clear sunny day in Oakland, California. The sun stood high and the shadows long. Annie slowly drove her shiny black Volvo into the school parking lot. Viviann whispered to me in a tone of discontent, 'This is the woman who pushed me.' Everyone watched as Annie's car rolled into the driveway. With her window down, Annie, a mahogany colored 45 year-old African-American woman, gazed at the strikers behind her dark shades. Viviann, about a foot away from Annie's stare, eyeballed her back. Lillian, Lydia and Viviann, all European-American women, moved within ear's distance of Annie. Annie exited her car.

Striker voices: Oh the mentor teacher is in on time today, yeah the evil eye … , you're a blood sucking leech and a scab!

[*Annie walked into the strikers' space. She stood on the asphalt of the driveway; the strikers stood on the sidewalk.]*

Annie: //And you know what, that's a racist statement!
Lydia: It is not!
Annie: That's a racist statement!
Lydia: You grabbed this woman for no reason!
Annie: That's a racist statement. She shouldn't of [*sic*] stood in my way!

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Lydia: You grabbed her!
Annie: She shouldn't of [*sic*] stood in my way!
Viviann: [*interjecting*] I walked … parking lot!
Annie: The next time I'll stomp her. The next time I'll stomp her!
Lydia: You will not stomp anyone! You will be arrested!
Annie: Stand in my way again! Stand in my way again! Stand in my way! Stand in my way!
Lydia: You will be arrested! I wouldn't stand in your way!
Annie: You need to be in here teaching because your kids don't know nothing! [*Viviann and Lillian: interject with something but it is unclear]* They don't know anything! [*silence*] They can't read! They can't write! They can't do nothing!
Viviann: // … Okay! Okay!
Annie: It is sad! It is sad!
Lillian: Yeah you are sad! You're a blood sucking leech!
Lydia: Go somewhere else scab! We don't want scabs! We don't want people like you around! You're disgusting!
Lillian: You are!
Viviann: Okay! Okay!
Annie: [*walking into the building*] You have a good day!
Viviann: Okay! Okay! Believe me we will!
Lydia: [*yelling louder*] Oh yeah! … woman! You can only do stuff with might! Might makes right!
Lillian: [*yelling louder*] That's right and you're a mentor teacher! And you showed a fine example keep it up!
Viviann: [*yelling louder*] Control that emotion Annie!
Lydia: [*yelling louder*] You can be arrested! Is she sick or what?
Viviann: //Tell me more Annie! [laugh] [*To a passing student—sweetly*] Good morning sweetheart. [*Moments later—to herself*) … You know what, put your hands on me Annie, please. And I'll take care of you.
Mary: You should file charges.
Viviann: I will. [*Giggles in the background*]
Mary: Assault charges. That's assault if you push somebody.
Lydia: … She wants to hit us … How is calling her a thug racist … I didn't say anything about what color she was.
Viviann: I know/… she sees us being out as not caring for the students in this neighborhood and in that sense that's what she's saying … [*Viviann speaks to me*] And you see what I mean that it's not a professional issue it's an emotional issue. And we've hit the point where everything is emotional.

This scene was captured while I interviewed striking teachers in the 1996 Oakland, California teachers' strike; this was day 14 in a 26-day strike [1]. Annie was an African-American non-striker, and Lydia, Lillian, Viviann, and Mary were European-American strikers.

This discourse exchange demonstrates how individual perceptions about race were 'reflected' and 'refracted' (i.e. revealed and distorted) through teacher speech (Volosinov, 1973, p. 23). Teacher speech, in this example, focused on race perceptions, stereotypical points of view, the peripheral victim, and the confusion about race. Annie viewed the actions of the strikers to be volatile so she reacted in a similar manner by voicing her opinion about the name-calling. Annie squalled back at the strikers, 'That's a racist statement.' The word 'scab' attacked Annie's identity. The word, combined with its invocation by the European-American strikers, brought meaning to Annie unbeknownst to the strikers. For Annie, the word scab would begin to unravel her history and her ancestors' history. It would reveal that this strike had complexities far beyond that which she could comprehend.

The strikers perceived Annie's action of crossing the strike lines to be unprofessional, un-team-mate-like, against the rules of striking. Annie refused to participate in an assimilating action; therefore she was made an outcast. These teachers had individual perceptions of the right actions in a strike based on their histories (professional, personal and familial), ideologies, social networks and political views.

The teachers' speech also revealed stereotypes that are associated with African-Americans. For example, the comment by a striking teacher, 'Oh the mentor teacher is on time today,' alludes to Annie's habitual lateness. This statement plays into the racial stereotype that African-Americans are frequently late. Another racial stereotype perpetuated in the text suggests that when African-Americans get angry in a strike situation, their next action is that of violence. Lydia states, 'She wants to hit us.' Considering Annie's past actions of pushing Viviann, Lydia draws this conclusion and her colleagues agree that Annie seems dangerous; therefore, assault charges should be filed. Historically, the behavior of African-Americans in strikes has been characterized as aggressive and violent and their skin color and appearance as intimidating (Cantor, 1969).

These examples of teacher speech also involved the peripheral victim—the children. When Annie charges toward one striker saying that her children can't read, write, or do anything else, this is connected to the belief of some African-American teachers, particularly teachers at this school, that European-American teachers cannot teach or manage African-American children (Perkins, 1989; Murphy, 1990). Another example of the peripheral victim's involvement is evident the moment the yelling stopped. Viviann addressed a child who was entering the school. She said, 'Good morning sweetheart'; then she returned to her thoughts about 'taking care' of Annie. Children became the peripheral victims that stood alone on the boundaries of teachers' thoughts.

The confusion about race is exhibited in these excerpts of teacher speech. Lydia shouts, 'Go somewhere else scab. We don't want scabs. We don't want people like you around. You're disgusting.' These statements spoken by one person to another are derogatory. However, statements like these, when spoken by a European-American to an African-American, take on racist overtones based on the historical treatment of African-Americans in labor strikes (Carter, 1971). A second illustration pertaining to the confusion about race reflects in this dialogue of Lydia. As she squeezes together her eyebrows, she ponders, 'I didn't say anything about

what color she was.' Race is thought only to equate to skin color. This confusion about race replicates itself throughout this strike.

This study examines teacher speech to determine how race is woven into this teachers' strike and how perceptions about race are revealed and distorted through identity, meaning, history and social complexities (Omi & Winant, 1994). The focus is on black and white racial groups because there were no other racial groups emphasized by the media or the union during the strike. This sampling of voices from the strike is not meant to be representative of all striking or non-striking teachers who participated in the 1996 Oakland teachers' strike. However, the discourse of teachers in this study gives voice to those who tried to speak out but were silenced and those who feared speaking. Further, this research reveals how the area of race and teacher strikes is underexamined and that this area of research is important to the fields of teacher education, educational history, race relations and educating poor and minority children.

Strikebreakers

A worker crossing a picket line during a labor action inherits the title of strike-breaker. However, strike breaking began as a way for African-Americans to gain entry into industry (Greene & Woodson, 1930; Northrup, 1944; Weaver, 1946; Cayton & Mitchell, 1970; Spero & Harris, 1974). From 1855 to 1914, blacks participated as strikebreakers in most industrial fields—automobile, railroad, meat-packing, steel, coal and ore mining (Greene & Woodson, 1930; Cantor, 1969; Cayton & Mitchell, 1970; Spero & Harris, 1974). Strikebreakers performed two roles, either remaining in work as others walked out or replacing striking workers. As early as 1855, black workers were replacing striking workers (Spero & Harris, 1974).

In Cantor's (1969) analysis of the black worker in Chicago between 1894 and 1919, he documents the first time black strikebreakers were involved in a strike for the meat packing industry and the time 'Negro' (i.e. Nigger) and 'scab' became synonymous. He cites the July 19, 1894 issue of the *Chicago Record* newspaper as reporting:

> Swinging from the cross tree of a telegraph pole … near the entrance to the yards, the effigy of a Negro roustabout was suspended. A black false face of hideous expression had been fixed upon the head of straw and a placard pinned upon the breast of the figure bore the skull and cross bones with the word 'nigger-scab' above and below in bold lines. (p. 89)

According to Cantor (1969), it was not the 'words but the image of blacks as a "scab race" that became indelible' (p. 93). Cantor examined the factors impeding union-ization of blacks and found that black workers suffered mistreatment by unions and white workers (Spero & Harris, 1974), economically benefited from their non-union status, were manipulated by management and experienced hatred by white workers. Spero and Harris (1974) characterize the southern black worker who migrated north as one who distrusted white labor but maintained a dependence on the white master.

They describe the black worker as being loyal to persons or the employer, ignorant of labor unions, compliant to authority, and happy to be employed.

The histories of strikebreakers include both white and black workers. In the late 1920s, black workers had been implicitly and explicitly involved as strikebreakers in labor actions. However, researchers agree that the role blacks played as strikebreakers has been exaggerated (Marshall, 1967; Spero & Harris, 1974; Perlo, 1975). Spero and Harris (1974) argue that more white labor participated as strikebreakers than black. When blacks engaged in the role of strikebreaker, they were resented and 'far more conspicuous'—easy to notice (Marshall, 1967, p. 19); their color made this inevitable (Spero & Harris, 1974). Blacks, as strikebreakers, actually increased the number of jobs made available. However, during lay-offs, the jobs of blacks were 'abolished, re-created and whites hired thus causing permanent displacement' for black workers (Northrup, 1944, p. 79; Spero & Harris, 1974).

Spero and Harris (1974) found that the black worker fought on both sides of the strike line; however, they have always been regarded as an 'exception. He and his few fellows are lone individuals' (p. 132). This example parallels that of the teaching profession, and in particular black teachers, in this strike action. Teachers work predominately in isolation and make decisions based on their 'boundedness'—protected space (Lortie, 1975, p. 171). Their decision to strike or break strike lines indicates their individuality of person and work, but ultimately their powerlessness to control this situation (Woodson, 1934; Lortie, 1975). However, for the black striker or non-striker, it does not matter which side of the strike line you undertake—your segregation by the American system of labor relations and race relations is inevitable.

Method

The site for this study was an elementary school in Oakland, California. This predominately minority community houses people whose economic status is low-income or below the poverty level. Rolland K. Moore Elementary has a population of 514 students, of which 3.1% are Latino, 90.8% African-American, 0.6% European-American and 5.5% Asian.

The participants in this study are six faculty members on the staff of the school. Table I outlines these key informants and other significant data for this group, such as name, sex, age, race, grade taught, number of years teaching, and number of years teaching in Oakland.

Data collection took place from mid-February to the first week in April 1996. On Thursday, February 15, 1996 there was a 2-day walk-out that escalated into a full fledged strike. The strike ended on Tuesday, March 19, 1996, 23 school days later. During the 1995/96 school year, a total of 26 school days were lost; during three of these days, teachers participated in walk-outs.

The observations, informal interviews and formal interviews took a total of $16\frac{1}{2}$ hours in data collection. Many teachers were interviewed informally during the strike; however, this study focuses on six key informants who volunteered for a formal interview that took place on-site during or after the strike. The key infor-

TABLE 1. Key participants in the strike

Name	Sex	Age	Race	Grade taught	No. of years teaching	No. of years teaching Oakland
Strikers						
Lydia Carlton	F	43	EA	2	18	18
Viviann Peters	F	23	EA	5	3	3
Debra Willis	F	51	AA	1	26	26
Non-strikers						
Annie Alleton	F	45	AA	4	15	15
Leslie Sears	F	58	AA	K	26	24
Trisha Warren	F	28	EA	1	5	5

mants answered a set of predetermined questions about the strike, teacher relations and race. I was able to gather this information because I worked in the school as a graduate research assistant before the strike began.

Findings

At this school, the teachers divided across racial and political lines. The majority of the strikers were European-American and the majority of the non-strikers were African-American.

Racial Identity

Omi and Winant (1993) argue that the longevity of the concept of race and the effects of 'race-thinking and race-acting' ensure that race will remain an aspect of 'social reality' throughout the world (p. 5). They further argue that race and identity are one and the same. You cannot have an identity without race and you cannot be of a race without an identity. To be without race is to be without an identity. Omi and Winant's (1993) research indicates that the 'socially constructed status of race' or what they term the 'racial formation process' is not an 'independent variable' (p. 6). For these researchers, race consists of identity, meaning, history and social complexities that continually transform and mutate (Omi & Winant, 1994).

In America today, defining one's racial identity is woven into the fabric of this capitalistic system. Racial identification is required on the census, applications (employment and school) and voter registration forms. In this racialized society, even individuals ask, are you black, white, yellow or brown? If you do not identify yourself, someone places a label on you. 'Oh she is Latina.' 'How do you know?' 'She just looks it.' You must fit into a category or slot. One's racial identity, whether defined or not, is placed on how one looks rather than how one defines oneself. When teachers began to examine their racial or ethnic identities, this is what they said:

> I have some Native American … background so I don't consider myself European-American. [*giggle*] But I appear to be that I am quite pale and I have red hair. (Lydia/EA/striker)
>
> I have this button that says *it sure is hard being black but it sure feels good.* [*laugh*] So I feel real good about it. I feel very good about being African-American. (Annie/AA/non-striker)
>
> … It just dawned on me … I looked around … I was the only white or European-American teacher … I don't want people to think that because I'm white and from Marin [2] [that] I have a rich family—I'm a snob or certain things that are related to white people from Marin. (Trisha/EA/non-striker)
>
> I'm black and I'm proud! (Debra/AA/striker)
>
> … I always know the color of my skin. (Leslie/AA/non-striker)

Lydia, a European-American striker, affirmed her true racial identity to be Native American and then began to define her identity according to biological features. She stated, 'I am quite pale.' Lydia sought to connect to her unknown and unnoticed identity as a passive descendant of Native American blood. Moreover, she thought that connecting to this identity would affirm that she was not racist but a part of the races; that although she looked white, she connected to her inner ethnic self. Given the strike situation of polarized strike lines, maybe Lydia thought connecting to her ethnic identity somehow made her less white—that she was not totally part of the dominant culture. Lydia sought to portray herself as a minority in this situation, or more so, someone whose rights were disenfranchised.

Annie, an African-American non-striker, found a sense of pride in her race and heritage. First, Annie defined herself according to her racial identity, 'black.' She denotes being black with having and living a hard life—a life well worth living in the long run. Annie found strength in her blackness and in her racialized struggle. Then Anne became ethnically and politically specific by defining herself as African-American. Again, the connection to her ancestry, African and American, made her feel good about her identity and the struggles her people have overcome.

Trisha, a European-American non-striker, first recognized her race as being 'white,' then she moved to define herself by a more ethnic term (i.e. European-American). The stigma of being 'white' as a term defining a group that was doing wrong or harm in this situation was deflated by her move towards a more ethnic, non-threatening term. Against the background of other African-American strikers, Trisha wanted to assimilate in terms of ethnicity and social class. She said that she did not want to be labeled as a stereotypical 'white' person. In this situation, Trisha wanted to relinquish the power that was innate to her American white being and become an 'other.'

Debra, an African-American striker, defined her race by stating a popular slogan used during the 1970s black power movement—'I'm black and I'm proud.' This term recognizes the color of one's skin as being beautiful versus abhorred by society

and individuals. It affirms one's empowerment through racial identity, self-pride and socio-political struggle. The phrase also invokes the feeling of superiority in terms of the beauty of the people, strength of the individual, and accomplishments of the race.

Leslie, an African-American non-striker, found comfort in her self-confidence about her skin color; she stated, 'I always know the color of my skin'. This alludes to the assumption that Leslie believes racial identity is tied to skin color. Leslie found comfort in her history as a black woman and as one who never defined herself as anything else. Nor could she ever define herself as anything else given the color of her skin.

Race Relations

Race, as a social construct, continued to mutate beyond racial identity as it became defined in its social, historical and political contexts. How these teachers began to relate to one another became the focus of teacher speech:

> I don't speak to them and I don't work with them and I don't deal with them at all. (Lydia/EA/striker)

> If you were sitting on a keg of dynamite out in the desert, that's how it is right here sitting on a keg of dynamite waiting to explode. (Leslie/AA/non-striker)

Lydia, a European-American striker, has shut down communication between herself and the non-strikers. Her choice to be silent reveals that neither a true line of communication nor a valid working relationship ever existed between her and the non-strikers. Lydia remarks, 'I don't deal with them at all.' Although Lydia was a colleague, her relationship with non-strikers must have been very superficial. Thereby, the strike was just a catalyst where this group's inability to communicate and interact was revealed and distorted.

Leslie, an African-American non-striker, uses an analogy to describe the volatile atmosphere; in a monotone voice, she harps that it's like 'sitting on a keg of dynamite waiting to explode.' Leslie felt powerless as factors outside her control (i.e. union negotiations) had her fate in their hands. Whether on or off the strike lines, teachers were disempowered to make changes.

The dynamics of race relations continued to be manifested through the spoken word. These examples of teacher speech reveal the enactment of racial thinking and racial acting through racial discourse:

> I told them in the meeting I wouldn't care if they spoke to me as long as I'm black and breathing. (Leslie/AA/non-striker)

> I feel as though they didn't want to come in and teach these kids anyway … I have always noticed that … Caucasians tend to … hop on the bandwagon for anything as long as they can do it in a group they're fine … I don't think they were striking for lower classroom sizes. I think the

> main thing for them was the money … they say that these kids were so bad and they don't know nothing and they have to work so hard. And I think … that's why they were out there … during the time that they were out on the strike lines they were probably their most effective the entire year because the strike was effective. (Annie/AA/non-striker)

> I really think it's just the individuals that work at this school. That it doesn't really have to do with the fact that they are African-American. No matter what ethnic background they were they would have returned. It's really their personalities … they tend to be a kind of self-centered group … Not seeing a political action as something they would want to be involved in because they probably tend to be more people who just … stay in their own … actually in a working relationship they're pretty much like that … they don't really work with other teachers very much. (Lydia/EA/striker)

> … they looked really arrogant and cocky you know, they'd laugh after they'd scream like that and look really smug and that [laugh] bothered me you know like they were so much better … .You know one time I got out of my car. And it was obviously planned and they all just started laughing all the way as I walked into the building. (Trisha/EA/non-striker)

Leslie, an African-American non-striker, uses her racial identity to reaffirm her detachment from the strikers. She would not care to communicate with these strikers as long as she is 'black and breathing.' Leslie's racialized response demonstrates her anger towards her 'white' colleagues. Her blackness and her life breath are used as objects that these white teachers, but more so the dominant culture, cannot take away. That is, her black skin and life are both eminently tied to her spirit. Historically, America has taken much away from African-Americans, but Leslie holds sacred that which is indelibly hers—her identity, dignity and life. Some African-Americans use the phrase 'all I have to do is stay black and die' to affirm what they possess (blackness) and that which is inevitable (death).

Annie, an African-American non-striker, describes the collaborative power of the 'Caucasian' strikers to achieve their goal of economic advancement. She sees their strike effort to be one of financial gain rather than in support of the educational needs of poor (black) children. Historically, European-Americans have been characterized as people who value wealth and power over the human condition (Perkins, 1989; Omi & Winant, 1994). Annie states that the strikers were basically ineffective in educating poor and minority children; more so because they did not want to educate these children. They were more effective at a political action (i.e. the strike) that was supported by the dominant culture. This support empowered striking teachers, and in this case it gave white teachers license to dominate like the constituency they ultimately represented.

Lydia, a European-American striker, chose to see the African-American teachers at her school as not representative of all African-Americans. Then she interrupts this thought by saying, 'No matter what ethnic background they were they would

have returned.' First, Lydia saw race as a factor, then she changed her mind and thought that the actions of these people were one of personality versus 'race acting' (i.e. something that black people do). According to Lydia, the 'black' non-strikers are 'self-centered,' not collaborative, 'stay [with] their own' and unwilling to take a political stance. As a people, Lydia has characterized a group of unsocial, non-political black teachers. The identification with one's racial group on a social level seems to confuse Lydia. Why do groups of people who have similar histories, life experiences, social circles, language and culture want to be together? The socialization of blacks amongst themselves is seen as a non-assimilation action, more than a form of resistance [3] or racial identification, since assimilation into the dominant culture is desired by other groups. 'They [blacks] don't really work with other teachers much,' says Lydia. Politically and socially, Lydia views these black teachers as a group which has isolated itself from its white colleagues and the political action of the strike. The history of labor relations between blacks and whites has stereotypically characterized blacks as a group of people who were unwilling to participate in political actions (Cantor, 1969; Spero & Harris, 1974).

Trisha, a European-American non-striker, sensed the dominance—the empowerednessof the strikers. As a political action, striking was the more American thing to do; it was going along with the program. Trisha's feelings of ridicule were ones of first, self consciousness and second a developing race consciousness. That is, it was a white on white attack, so its impact as a racialized event was and is de-emphasized. Her hurt feelings by the actions of her white colleagues were not discriminatory but a blow to her newly racialized ego. She stated, 'like they were so much better.' Maybe for a moment, Trisha understood the concept of superiority or the 'wrath of whiteness'.

The voices of Teachers Continued as they tried to sort through their actions and interactions:

> … it showed me how deep people's emotions run … other people [referring to her fellow strikers] were so serious about it … it became their life almost … they seemed real bitter and had so much anger towards people who crossed the line. (Viviann/EA/striker)

> They were the ones who were blocking. No you can't come in. They'd get a black child and stand in the middle of the driveway with the child. (Annie/AA/non-striker)

> And they're wearing their T-shirts … saying I was not a scab … you can look at the people that's wearing them. It's the same little group—a little hatred group. They acting just like the Klu Klux Klan. (Leslie/AA/non-striker)

> Teachers are people … teachers have different personalities and I've been [in] Oakland Public Schools 26 years and this was my fourth strike. And every time we go out there the people who have certain personalities act the same way. *It's not the strike it's just their personality. You know the way they acted during this strike was the way they acted during the last strike* … they'd

> come down to strike school and most of the time *they didn't tell me anything they did*. They would tell me what someone else had done … . It's like they said one person had run up on them on the line and said [mocking] oh you're all a bunch of criminals and none of you should be teaching black children … all white teachers sitting on the sidewalk and she's a black teacher … And then I was like, that's not like her. You know she doesn't like confrontation … Everybody said no. She just went off. Then I find out that the day before they had put glue in the door locks of her car … It was just told to me like somebody was just acting totally crazy. They didn't tell me any provocation that was going on. (Debra/AA/striker)

Although Viviann, a European-American striker, was engaged in walking the picket lines, she was able to reflect on the behavior of her picketing colleagues. Viviann believed that it was not the strike action that caused conflict, but that there were really deep feelings of anger and fear that already existed. The strike just brought these emotions into view. Viviann remarks, 'they seemed real bitter and had so much anger towards people who crossed the line.' What specifically were these striking teachers bitter and angry about—teaching at an urban school, being unable to move to a better school, or maybe the strike was just a vehicle for hatred, discrimination, racism?

For Annie, an African-American non-striker, the strike began to emulate history. Annie found that the positioning of a black child as a barricade symbolized the power of white women over black children. That is, white teachers were trying to claim possession of something that was not theirs legally or rightfully. The history of African-Americans records periods where the dominant culture has exerted its power over black children. The strikers' culturally unconscious act of possession offended Annie. Once again, the dominant culture would stand as oppressors or benevolent benefactors when it came to issues related to black children.

Leslie, an African-American non-striker, found the actions of the strikers to be racist. Again, their racial dominance would be flaunted as some striking teachers wore their 'I was not a scab' T-shirts the day after the strike ended. For Leslie, these strikers emulated the actions of white supremacists and were therefore what she called 'a little hatred group.' Leslie believed that the actions of these teachers was another bold statement of their perceived superiority as white people as opposed to their disempowered role as teachers.

Debra was the only African-American striker to participate in the strike schools that were held at a local community center; she did not walk the strike lines. Her first statement that 'teachers are people' speaks to how good people can become consumed by a socio-political event. Debra saw the actions of the strikers who walked the strike line to be indicative of their personalities, not of the strike or race. Her fellow strikers were people who demonstrated a similar pattern of behavior in previous strikes. What infuriated Debra was that her fellow strikers told her what the non-strikers did but not what they, the strikers, did. This misinformation was also relayed about the incident with Annie (the AA/non-striker). Annie was perceived as the attacker who lashed out against the strikers, calling them 'criminals' who should

not be teaching black children. Debra later found out that Annie's car had been vandalized and that this incident may have provoked the confrontation. For Debra, participating in the strike school was a safe, non-threatening action since most of her African-American colleagues crossed the strike lines. Debra chose to dissociate herself from the scene, and listen to the gossip as it came to her. After four strikes, Debra could only see a safe haven through passive participation in the strike. An active participation meant to engage in name-calling against her African-American colleagues and that was not an acceptable action she could take. In this situation, to call a black person a 'Nigger' in front of white people is the ultimate betrayal of the race.

Name-calling as a Racial Action

Certain words used during the strike have a long historical past; in particular, the word 'scab' has a torrid background and merits further explanation. The term scab or strikebreaker describes workers who cross a strike line during a labor dispute. In the 'Strikebreakers' section, I described the history of the word scab in relation to 'black folk.' This is the 'white folk' version.

The history of the word in the labor movement began when William Green, President of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) called his long-time supporter, John L. Lewis, 'the Judas Iscariot of the labor movement' (Hand, 1942, p. 235). John L. Lewis was the President of the United Mine Workers. Consequently, in 1935, the two men split over the question of craft versus industrial unionism. Lewis formed a separate organization known as the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) (Hand, 1942; Halsey *et al.*, 1983). These unions are presently known as the AFL–CIO.

According to Hand (1942), there are many legends behind the name Judas Iscariot. The medieval legend is that Judas was abandoned at birth and was found and raised by the Queen of Scariots. The Queen had another son whom Judas mistreated and eventually killed. Judas's travels later led him into a confrontation with his biological father, Reuben. Not knowing Reuben's true identity, he killed his father over a piece of fruit. Judas married Reuben's wife, his biological mother. Upon discovery of his parents' identities, Judas went to Jesus to seek pardon and forgiveness. Judas became a disciple of Jesus and later betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver. Thus, the name Judas Iscariot is usually associated with that of betrayer—or scab.

In 1910, Jack London defined a scab in a flyer entitled *Definition of a Scab and those who employ him*. It read:

> A scab is a two-legged animal with a cork-screw soul, a water-logged brain, and a combination backbone made of jelly and glue. Where others have hearts, he carries a tumor of rotten principles. No man has a right to scab as long as there is a pool of water deep enough to drown his body in, or a rope long enough to hang his carcass with. Judas Iscariot was a gentleman compared with a scab. For betraying his master, he had character enough to hang himself—a scab hasn't. Esau was a traitor to himself. Judas Iscariot

> was a traitor to his God. Benedict Arnold was a traitor to his country. A strikebreaker is a traitor to his God, his country, his family and himself.
>
> PLEASE HELP US! DO NOT BE SERVED BY SCABS AT THE BRASS RAIL RESTAURANT.

The term nigger and scab became synonymous in the *Chicago Record*'s 1894 description of a scarecrow resembling a Negro that hung at the cross-tree of a telephone pole (Spero & Harris, 1974). This history pre-dates Jack London's 1910 definition of a scab. Therefore, the use of the word scab in labor movements originally translated into 'nigger-scab' (Cantor, 1969, p. 89).

Name-calling is a ritual of most strike actions. In the Oakland situation, the racial action of name-calling carried different histories, meanings and social complexities for each individual:

> ... they called you a lot of names. I mean dirty names. (Leslie/AA/non-striker)
>
> ... the names that people were called were personal attacks ... this was a dispute between the district and the union and our bargaining team and so it's kind of like we're *demeaning* ourselves by calling each other derogatory names ... that's what's expected during a strike so that's what happened ... Scab is used in this country by people who are mainly union people to describe people who cross the picket line ... it's not a racial term, it's an ethnic term ... yeah scab is derogatory. (Viviann/EA/striker)
>
> I feel that ... the people who were calling me scabs were the people who had a problem with my ethnicity ... they said things like you're a disgrace ... we need to get rid of you ... and the only people who were saying that was the Caucasian teachers ... I had feelings for years that they were racist ... [Then referring to the word scab] it means that you're the lowest of lowest ... that you're dirt ... And I take offense in that because I don't feel as though I'm scum ... I don't feel as though I'm unintelligent ... calling me a scab is just like calling me a nigger ... (Annie/AA/non-striker)
>
> ... sometimes I questioned my actions ... in calling names ... And I have to say that I felt bad calling people names who were African-American because I felt like ... They probably had a different feeling about being called names than a Caucasian would because of racism. So sometimes I felt sort of bad but then ... one day I got very specific and said they were leeches [uncontrollable giggles] because that way I felt that I was at least saying what I thought, you know, I even gave a dictionary definition of what a leech was ... but still on some level I felt bad. That perhaps as African-Americans, because most of them were, that they would feel the sting of Caucasians saying things to them and any other time in the past from my understanding ... I mean in a sense ... I would think I might internalize it that way. You know just trying to think about how it might be if I were African-American even though this was a labor dispute ... was somewhat different. It still made me think. (Lydia/EA/Striker)

When Leslie, an African-American non-striker, cried, 'They called you a lot of names. I mean dirty names,' she captured the anger that was raging inside her over the insidious act of name-calling. For Leslie, the name-calling was hateful and reminiscent of history repeating itself. That is, African-Americans being called out of their given name by white folks.

Viviann, a European-American striker, admitted that the name-calling was meant to invoke 'personal attacks'; however, she never fathomed that an attack on an individual was really an attack on the group (non-strikers, African-Americans or teachers). That is, an attack on one non-striker affects the behavioral actions of the group. An attack on non-striking African-Americans is not just an attack on an individual but that race of people. That is, usually an African-American in any social situation becomes a representative for the group, not just him or herself. Although calling an African-American teacher a scab seemed like an individual attack, that name-calling riveted throughout that person, that person's history and throughout the African-American community. Finally, an attack on teachers continues to taint the profession and degrade women (white, black etc.), as the teaching profession is predominately female.

Viviann believed that the language used demeaned the strikers; however, it was a strike and 'that's what's expected.' She stated, 'scab is used in this country by people who are mainly union people to describe people who cross the picket line … it's not a racial term, it's an ethnic term.' The social complexity and meanings behind Viviann's language indicate that she felt justified in using a negative connotation based on history's use of the word and its perceived de-emphasis as an ethnic term. Had 'scab' been perceived by her as a racial term, maybe she would have thought it inappropriate to use. Nevertheless, Viviann did find the word 'scab' to be 'derogatory' but not vile enough to discontinue its use. In Viviann's mind, she was able to justify herself, her language, and actions even though it hurt many people.

Annie, an African-American non-striker, felt the name-calling attacked her racial identity and herself. She stated, 'the people who are calling me scabs were the people who had a problem with my ethnicity.' Historically, African-Americans have endured social and political unrest in the USA (e.g. civil rights movement) that consisted of oppressive name-calling and social actions against person and people. For Annie, this name-calling brought home the fact that it was the 'Caucasian teachers' who were engaged in sprouting hate messages. Annie believed this behavior of the white teachers toward a black woman was a racist act. Referring to the word scab, Annie felt that the word was offensive based on its silenced racial history. Annie remarked, 'Calling me a scab is just like calling me a nigger.'

Lydia, a European-American striker, perceived that African-Americans have a different feeling about being called names than Caucasians 'because of racism.' Name-calling is perceived as a non-violent action; however, the roots of its history in the USA are very much tied to race relations and violence. Lydia poignantly characterizes name-calling for African-Americans as the 'sting of Caucasians.' Although Lydia felt bad about the name-calling, she continued and justified her actions as part of the labor dispute. In Lydia's speech, she has stumbled upon the

racial formation process (i.e. meaning, identity, history and social complexities) on its micro-social level. For her, although it was wrong to engage in name-calling, it was part of the labor dispute. Then Lydia recognized whom she was in this event, a white woman, yelling at black women. Lydia's racial identity was tied to her actions, thereby adding to a history of social actions against black people in the history of labor disputes and race relations. 'I questioned my actions … I felt sort of bad.' Lydia began to connect the action of name-calling to its history and social complexities: 'they probably had a different feeling about being called names than a Caucasian because of racism.' The racial formation process has manifested itself in this discourse.

The Confusion about Race

What had race to do with this strike? When asked this question, the six teachers immediately responded based on their perceptions about race. This is what they stated:

> I've heard a lot, I've read a lot about the race issue. I don't know what it means that I'm the only white teacher here … but I think there's a small part of it that's race. I don't know how to explain it or how it fits in but I think a small part of it is. (Trisha/EA/non-striker)

> … it bothered me at first because I felt that … perhaps this is a racial issue. But I looked at it truly for what it was and for what the true reasons for this whole strike was and it's not a racial strike … if it was, things would have been very different … I think that … it was based on people's personality, not necessarily their race even though that is a reality and it comes into play … some people might have felt differently about serving their community and felt that they needed to cross the picket line to do that. Whereas others might have felt that being out on the picket line was the way to ultimately serve the community in terms of the short term or the long term. But … I think that it's based on people's personality. (Viviann/EA/striker)

> As far as I was concerned, it wasn't about race. But it seemed to turn to race because its seems as though all of the black teachers came in and the white teachers, one call herself white she's not white stayed out [referring to Viviann]. So that way they had one … white teacher that came in. So like it pits like black against white. No it was not a racial issue and I never felt as though anyone was doing anything to me because I was black. No it was because I chose to teach while they chose to walk the picket line … I know who I am and I'm very proud of who I am. I know what I can do and my skin color has nothing to do with anything because I am a person that happen to be this color, that happen to be a Creole, that happen to live in America and race has nothing to do with it. And I'm not like some people that need self-esteem, I could give some away. No I have no problem with race at all. (Leslie/AA/non-striker)

> I mean the strike was [pause] not a thing to do with race … I mean … [the strike] was just something they used to divide and conquer. And then I was like, God Dang, I seen divide and conquer all my life … and this time it didn't have anything to do with race either except the majority of the … folks who crossed the lines were black. If the majority of the … folks who crossed the lines had been white, it would have been the same thing. (Debra/AA/striker)

> I got wind of the fact that this district and some of the Caucasian teachers are trying to make a racial issue out of it because … if you really look at Oakland Public Schools, the only teachers … that were in are the African-American teachers and I don't know if that's true or not. I just know that I'm in. I know who's in here at Rolland K. Moore School. But I feel that it's not right of them to put a racial thing on it. (Annie/AA/non-striker)

> I just feel that in a labor dispute … that it's just … going to happen. We feel that … they're doing us *wrong*. We feel we're right. And they feel we're wrong and they're right. And so the conflict is just going to happen. I didn't feel that anybody said anything racial. I really didn't. I did not hear anything like that … I was accused of saying something racial because I said that a certain person was a thug for hitting one of our teachers who was on the line and they threatened to beat us up again. And you know, I certainly didn't intend it that way, I simply think of that word … to mean … anybody who was hitting me. It had a different meaning to her basically. And you know I feel bad for her if she really feels that … if a white person would say someone is a thug that [whispering] they were only thinking of African-American. (Lydia/EA/striker)

These excerpts of teacher speech demonstrate that the concept and definition of race is a confusing one. Although Trisha, a European-American non-striker, heard about race being an issue in the strike, she admits that she doesn't know what it means. Then she states that maybe 'there's a small part of it that's race.' Viviann, a European-American striker, did not see the strike as a 'racial strike' but a situation based on personalities. She believed the personalities of all the African-American teachers was what prompted them to cross strike lines—that their collective action or political organization as 'black' women should be ignored by history. Leslie, an African-American non-striker, made conflicting statements throughout her interview. She stated, 'my skin color has nothing to do with anything' and 'race has nothing to do with it.' However, she continued to clarify her racial identity and point out other people's race (e.g. 'one call herself white'). The color of skin was always a point of emphasis in her speech. Debra, an African-American striker, claimed it was the 'district and some of the Caucasian teachers' who were making race an issue in the strike. They were the ones who brought race into the equation. The fact that district-wide African-American teachers were crossing strike lines, according to Debra, should be disregarded. Again, their (i.e. black women's) collective political

action was ignored because it was not the action desired by the majority. Annie, an African-American non-striker, exhibited conflicting interpretations of race throughout. She believed the issue of race was something instigated by the district and the white teachers. Lydia, a European-American striker, was stuck on being accused of saying racist things during the strike. For her, the accusation made her conclude that people thought she was racist. Her fear of the label was evident when she pondered in the beginning scene, 'How is calling her a thug racist ... I didn't say anything about what color she was' and then in her interview Lydia states, 'And you know I feel bad for her if she really feels that ... if a white person would say someone is a thug that [whispering] they were only thinking of African-American'.

Clouded by the event, their actions and their speech, these teachers demonstrate their confusion about race. What they failed to realize in this lesson is that 'race matters' (West, 1994).

Conclusion

Race became the dirty word no one wanted to talk about. The striking and non-striking teachers could not clarify what race meant, much less how it was woven into the structure of schools or schooling. In this study of teacher speech, race was viewed on a micro-level. That is, that of the individual versus macro, that of society or larger powers. The micro-analysis revealed that people's perceptions about race are distorted, confusing. These individuals were not sure what race was, how it was woven into their actions, or how macro-racial dynamics influence the micro. For them, their school became an igloo—an isolated capsule of the world where 'race-thinking' and 'race-acting' could not exist (Omi & Winant, 1993, p. 5). This perception is a lie. These excerpts of teacher speech revealed that the concept of race was formed, transformed and mutated through race-speaking.

The strike was a catalyst through which pre-existing 'historical contexts and contingencies' and 'socially constructed' racial experiences (Omi & Winant, 1993, p. 6) were revealed and distorted through race-speaking. If, as Michael Apple (1999) states, 'schooling has much to do with power', then a strike action perpetuated in and on urban schools has much to do with power and little to do with educating poor and minority children (p. 5). All of these things contribute to the failure of race relations, teacher relations, and the political and professional status of teaching. I do not foresee any quick solutions to repairing race relations. Truly, I do not believe there is a foolproof solution. As teacher strikes become the norm to achieve political and economic gains for educators, the fate of urban schools and communities is at stake. Teacher strikes in urban neighborhoods must be reconsidered because the children are the ultimate victims in these race wars.

Notes

[1] Background statistics on the 1996 Oakland teachers' strike. Oakland Unified School District is one of the 10 largest school districts in the state of California. This district is located in Oakland, an urban city in northern California (Hill, March 8, 1996). There are approximately 51,706 students and 2,259 teachers in this school district. The *San Francisco Chronicle*'s March 3, 1996 article by Annie Nakao reports the racial and ethnic breakdown

of students as 53% black, 20% Asian, 19% Latino, 7% white and 1% Native American and teachers as 49% white, 34% black, 10% Asian, 6% Latino and 1% Native American.

Since June 1984, Oakland teachers had been working without a teacher's contract. Negotiations between Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) and the union, Oakland Education Association (OEA), were unsuccessful at ratifying a contract, so in November (28–29) 1995, teachers staged a 2-day strike. Unable to obtain a suitable contract, the teachers staged a 1-day walk-out on January 30, 1996. When negotiations did not produce a settlement, teachers found themselves on the strike line for 23 consecutive days, beginning February 15, 1996 until March 19, 1996. The final settlement was based on three goals: (1) the reduction of administrative spending and the reallocation of these monies; (2) smaller class sizes; and (3) increased teacher salaries (Weld, February 15, 1996; Bazeley, February 15, 1996; Bazeley, February 16, 1996).

The document entitled *Summary of Agreements between Oakland Education Association and the Oakland Unified School District*, that was distributed to teachers after the strike ended, includes a preliminary consensus on the following issues. The final agreement gave teachers a one-time bonus of $2700–3200, depending on education and units beyond the bachelor's. For 1997–98, the teachers' pay schedule would receive a 4% increase. In 1998–99, another 4% increase would incur, with starting salaries at $30,524 and a maximum of $57,385. Class reductions would include, 1996–97: Kindergarten, 26:1, Grade 1, 28:1; 1997–98: Kindergarten, 24:1, Grades 1–3, 27:1, Grades 4–5, 29:1 (Bazeley, March 20, 1996). On March 18, 1996, OUSD and OEA made the aforementioned contractual agreements that may have been modified in later proposals. This proposal did not include any provisions for the reduction of administrative spending or the reallocation of these monies.

[2] An upper middle-class suburb of California.

[3] See Signithia Fordham's work on resistance in *Blacked Out: dilemmas of race, identity and success at Capital High* (1996).

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