Complicating "Whiteness" and Other Markers of Difference in Suburbia: The Case of Miller High, 1985–2000

by Caroline Eick

Abstract

This paper examines student cross-group relationships in a comprehensive high school in Baltimore County, Maryland, between 1985 and 2000. The findings of this research, situated at the intersections of three lenses of inquiry—oral historical analysis, ethnography, and critical studies—bring to light how institutional norms, broader demographic shifts, and newly migrated and immigrated youth's mistrust of one another and of the educational system combined to reshape race, class, and gender relationships in the hitherto predominantly "status quo" U.S. suburban school.

Key words: oral histories; youth experiences; diversity; comprehensive high school; immigrant youth; processes of integration.

Introduction

This historical analysis draws from a broader study that examines students' evolving relationships within a matrix of intersecting identities in a Baltimore County comprehensive high school in the state of Maryland between 1950 and 2000. In the larger study, three different groups of students emerge over time. Bound by different demographic configurations and different levels of school disciplinary measures, those groups constructed their peer relationships across social categories (gender, race, class, ethnicity, and religion) differently: the "Divided Generation" (1950–1969), the "Border-crossing Generation" (1970–1985), and the "Re-divided Generation" (1986–2000). The focus in this paper is on the Re-divided Generation of the late eighties and nineties during an accelerated transformation

of Miller Town from primarily middle-class and white to a multiracial and multiethnic population of disparate economic backgrounds.

The paper draws on collected oral histories of alumni who graduated between 1954 and 2002;[1] on informal interviews of Miller Town residents and of community leaders conducted over a two-year period, between 2003 and 2005; on archival research of town and county census data, county and state boards of education policy communications, and school and community newspapers and photographs; on systematic analysis of yearbooks for the distribution of students across extracurricular activities and curricular tracks by race and gender;[2] and on histories of peoples of Baltimore County and Miller Town.[3]

Miller High

By the end of the eighties and throughout the nineties, students attended a Miller High that served a community divided on one hand between black and white county "insiders," and on the other hand newly immigrated Russian and newly migrated African American "outsiders." A Russian immigrant youth might hear irate "insiders" shout "Russian go home,"[4] but irritations by "insiders" were directed mostly toward ex-city blacks, who doubled the population of black students at Miller High:

> By the 1990s the black population in Miller Town had changed a lot, because I don't like to say anything bad about it, but look at all the apartments. . . . We didn't know those people though. They were all newcomers. You've got to look at our situation. We grew up in the county. We kind of knew how things worked. We kind of knew what to do and what not to do. And then you've got twice as many people. . . . They came from the city. . . . (David Randle, African American middle-class/upper academic track alumnus)[5]

> In the nineties, that's when blacks that weren't raised here started moving here. . . . This area just exploded. In the nineties, the population probably tripled. I will quote you my buddy C.J. [black friend], he said to me, any time a county black starts hanging out with a black from the city, the black kid is either dead or in jail. . . . Every kid . . . soon as he started hanging out with non-county people, black or white, they were in jail or dead. . . . (Tim Whittle, white working-class/lower academic track alumnus)[6]

Miller Town at the end of the twentieth century, and almost overnight, had been transformed from suburban to urban-suburban, from predominantly white middle-class into a diverse population of disparate economic backgrounds, as both estate-like homes and section 8 apartments were erected.

The sudden demographic makeover; the presence of young people who had not practiced being in desegregated schools, namely black youth newly arrived from the inner city and immigrant Russian students; the explosion in student population in general, which resulted in crippling overcrowding; and the school's implementation of zero-tolerance policies contributed to students subsuming the previous generation's peer-group identities (i.e., potheads, eggheads, musicians, etc.) to those constructed around race, nationality, religion, ethnicity, and class.

> Everyone definitely segregated themselves . . . in the cafeteria . . . two tables of black kids, and then the Russian kids . . . definitely students grouped within their cultural backgrounds. (Betty Ames, white middle-class/upper academic track alumna)[7]

> I was culturally Jewish, not by ceremony. Russians in Russia, they were never allowed to practice their religion. They called themselves Jewish, they often didn't have a clue of what the holiday is about. . . . They come here, they can

> practice Judaism, they don't know what or how to do it. . . . The Russian kids are called Jewish because they are Russian, and because they are so loyal [to "Russianness"], they have to defend Judaism. (Ivan Strasky, Russian middle-class/upper academic track alumnus)[8]

Across these categories, students further divided as rule-abiders and rule-breakers. Rule-abiding students included those who belonged to religious youth groups; immigrant students seeking social mobility through lawfully sanctioned means; students deeply involved in community-service occupations; and usually high-profile students with means, the "preps," who continued as they had since before desegregation to craft the school's official representation to the outside world through yearbooks and social events.

Rule-abiding Jewish and Christian young people sought each other's company within their respective religious groups, often in protest against conspicuous consumption and use of drugs or alcohol. Student-organized religious groups were overwhelmingly white, as church-going young black people congregated outside school premises.

Rule-abiding Russian immigrant youth were strategic students for whom high school "was a means to an end." They were students mindful of doing whatever it took to get into good American colleges and who were apt to construct themselves as intellectually and constitutionally superior to other immigrants.

> My perspective, it is so much easier to be a Latino immigrant. You don't have to be that hard working or that intelligent to get here. In the general population that is Mexican immigrants, the really smart ones are the average ones. The Russian and Indian immigrants, people that had to cross the ocean, and had to deal with governments, the Iron Curtain, it was parents who were witty that found their way through that. (Ivan Strasky)[9]

Ivan understood the immigrant story as one of natural selection that privileged, in this case, his national group. Thus he attributed the fact that one "wouldn't find many Latinos in the upper structure" to the dual role played by genetics and role modeling.[10] Ivan's use of "overseas hardships" as supporting evidence for his assertion, however, suggested that he was not aware of the oppressive governmental regimes that many Latinos were fleeing or the life-threatening escapades they endured through routes more tortuous than a direct flight from Europe in the late eighties. As is perhaps often the case for children of immigrants who may feel responsible for vindicating

their parents' sacrifices and who were raised on hearty helpings of hardship stories that tell of all that was endured for their benefit, Ivan constructed his immigrant story as an epic, one he also constructed for Asian Indians, among whom he counted his good friend Prag.

Ivan, and students like him who attended the upper academic tracks, lived a school life isolated from and parallel to those attending lower tracks. Ivan's privileged position in the United States as a white, upper-middle-class male had not been challenged within the insular upper academic tracks, which Latino students did not frequent, at least not during Ivan's high school career. The fact that Ivan's friend was Prag, an immigrant youth from India, suggested that Ivan was organizing differences not racially, but in terms of immigrant status. Of note is that Prag shared with Ivan his upper-middle-class male status. One wonders then, if Latinos/as had attended upper tracks, how Ivan might have reframed his hierarchy of immigrant students.

Yet another segment of rule-abiding students included those who attended the standard, lower-track academic classes and who welcomed zero-tolerance policies. As had been the case for previous generations, it was within the standard-level courses that young people encountered one another less as competitive academic performers and more as representatives of diverse racial, ethnic, and socio-economic interests and struggles. It was therefore as black or white, Russian Jew or "redneck," subsidized apartment or middle-class suburban home dweller, that some of these students competed with each other, and not as college-résumé builders. It was within the standard-level courses that many of Miller Town's social wounds flared up, a place where young people lived closest to the economic realities of their town, as they worked before or after school hours as work-release students, part-time firefighters, burger flippers, veterinary technicians, waiters and waitresses at the higher-end restaurants, cashier tellers at local grocery store chains, and as employees at the many mall retail stores and corporate giants, from Target to Kmart to Home Depot, that by the nineties had spread around town. It is also within the standard-level courses that one was more likely to come across drug dealers and witness illegal behaviors.

> One of the older students brought a weapon to school, a really big gun. . . . (Heather Korn, white working-class/standard track alumna)[11]

Students who attended upper academic tracks would hear about only the violence that those in lower academic tracks experienced:

> I heard other people did drugs. . . . (Sue Cohen, white middle-class/upper academic track alumna)[12]

> I have heard stories about Mafia this and Mafia that. Russian Mafioso . . . Russian kids, they are smart, unfortunately [for] some, their business was drugs. (Ivan Strasky)[13]

Because encounters with violence were much more likely for those students attending the lower academic tracks, rule-abiding standard-class attendees perceived their high school's zero-tolerance policies as protective measures ensuring their well-being amid increased violence. These students were happy that "Mr. L., the principal, laid down the law and . . . you were never upset going through the hallways."[14]

As had been the case for the Divided Generation of the fifties and sixties, students of the Re-divided Generation experienced the parallel worlds that tracking engendered at Miller High. Without the mediating effect of peer-generated groups (the musicians, potheads, eggheads, motorheads, etc.) that in the seventies and early eighties created venues for amicably crossing race and class divides, students of the Re-divided Generation lived isolated lives along upper or lower tracks. Those attending gifted and talented or honors classes were less likely to experience firsthand incidents of racial and ethnic tensions. Those attending the "standard" classes, on the other hand, were more likely to experience firsthand these tensions.

> Twice in the course of my high school there was a big racial fight, between the black kids and the farmers. . . . Two kids from Miller High were sent to Springfield High, got expelled, and two others got expelled and were not allowed back. (Cherry Gate, working-class white/lower academic track alumna)[15]

> A few years after I went to school, yeah, my sister was supposed to graduate back in '96, and she actually got a death threat and she went to Springfield High. Uhum. She moved because she was scared to go and stay at the same school because at that point in time it was the racial fights going on. (Heather Korn)[16]

Nevertheless, if you were Russian, regardless of your status in the hierarchy of associations, you would know about the activities of all Russians:

> What has happened is at Miller High, there is a distinct community of students who would be called, quote, unquote, "rednecks," that is just what people generally say, people who are close-minded, hate Jews, hate blacks . . . so

> that sub-population at Miller High would threaten, by just being there, the Russians. . . . On occasion I have heard slurs about Jews directed at Russian students. (Ivan Strasky)[17]

However, unlike the Divided Generation of the early days of desegregation, who overtly respected teachers (even when they did not like them), the Re-divided Generation objectified teachers and school authorities: achievers saw them as a "means to an end"; standard-class attendees saw school authorities as ivory tower keepers of the law; and rule-breakers, Russians, African Americans, and "rednecks" saw them as "the system." Thus, by the nineties, segregation between teachers and students had also hardened. For a half-century at least, the Miller High cafeteria continued to be a herding-place where students were left to their own devices to establish relationships in isolation from their teachers, who ate in their own quarters. Thus students, segregated from their teachers during mealtime, a time conspicuously reserved, across cultures, for community and communal relationships, segregated even more rigidly as they sought familiarity and comfort. The teacher-student segregation came vividly to light in Ivan's description of his privileged position with teachers in a school system where relationships are constructed hierarchically. When Ivan shared, "I was president of my class, I'd always be in the lunchroom with the teachers," he made it clear that he was not part of the student-cafeteria crowd, but that he had access to the private world of faculty, who ate away from the students considered lesser in the hierarchy of relationships.[18] Is it any wonder then that violence among students most clearly showed in the cafeteria?

Although "preps" continued to be identified by their economic status and the high profile they assumed through their pervasive involvement in the school's extracurricular and social life, they did not enjoy the levels of participation in their organized social events that their predecessors had enjoyed. The worlds created by the preps, which had been patronized by the Divided Generation and tolerated by the Border-crossing Generation, were being boycotted by many non-preps of the late eighties and nineties.

Non-prep students of the Re-divided Generation symbolically rejected, through non-attendance, the worlds of the prep (most notoriously the prep-organized "prom"), the one peer identity primarily defined by "upper-class" socio-economic status, since by the nineties preps also included black and Russian students with means. In turn preps of the Re-divided Generation felt frustrated by the lack of student participation in events in which they invested great efforts to organize. They lamented how "school spirit was terrible."[19]

Alumni who were students of lesser means when attending Miller High shared their feelings about the preps and the conspicuous consumption they represented:

> I never hung . . . I guess with the popular group because I didn't believe in their status, the way of doing, the way of thinking—it was about the right clothes, the right makeup, the right hairdos. . . . They were up on the *Vogue* [*sic*] and stuff, you could feel they were snobs. My friend was also the same. . . . She stayed away from them [the preps], she felt the same thing I did, and the groups that were just basic regular people [felt]. You could feel that they [the preps] were snobs. In other words, they would make you feel that. Okay? (Cherry Gate)[20]

Although some wealthier African Americans counted among the preps, most African American students, including the black preps, segregated as black students who re-created, within the community of black students, the hierarchy of popularity espoused by white preps. Although in the seventies and early eighties many white and black students had subsumed race under "culture"—that is, that for them culture held greater sway than race in determining affinities and organizing social groups—a segment of African American young men and women, as well as a segment of the poorer white young men, did not differentiate race from culture. This fusion of race and culture became the norm for students in the nineties. Thus many young county blacks subsumed their own particular upbringings, and particular cultural values, under the racial category "black," and identified with ex-city black youth, often to the dismay of long-time black county residents, who lamented losing many of their young to what they perceived to be the bad influences of, and drug dealings imported by, city blacks. Many African American youth of the Re-divided Generation, unlike black youth of the preceding Border-crossing Generation, approached relationships between blacks and whites expecting racism. At the same time, many Russian youth displayed racist attitudes, as did those stereotyped as "rednecks"; and racial violence, in the Miller High of the nineties, surged, even as administrators struggled to image-manage public relations and to reframe racial incidents as general misbehavior:

> There have been a lot of times, oh, that black kid said something about the Russian kid, and then "you guys, after school, parking lot." Countless times. (Ivan Strasky)[21]

> It was a black girl and a little white girl who was very snotty, she made it known that she was very racist. She was

> in the cafeteria line, she looked at this girl funny, and the big black girl got ticked off because the white girl looked at her funny. Somewhere in the middle of everything, while we were eating lunch, you heard somebody scream, then you heard loud bangs. The [black] girl came up behind her, grabbed her hair, and slammed her face into the cafeteria table. They both ended up getting suspended, so it wouldn't look like a racial issue. (Heather Korn)[22]

Students who were "rednecks" in turn conflated being anti-black, anti-Russian, and anti-Jewish with being white American; and Russian immigrant students conflated being Jewish with being Russian, even as they recognized their detachment from the Jewish religion. Thus race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion, rather than shared affinities across those categories, became the familiar landmarks to which various groups of Miller High youth gravitated as they sought to belong at the turn of the last century. Ivan Strasky explained the black-Russian clashes by referring to the notion of *defending one's identity*:

> I don't think the African American community ever started anything. It was defensive, on the African American part, just as it was on the Russian part, just as it would be in any minority. Defend their identity. (Ivan Strasky)[23]

Conclusion

That students in the late eighties and nineties were remembered as rule-abiders or rule-breakers suggested an environment more akin to that of inmates in a prison than of students in a school. Moreover, remembrances of an explosive cafeteria where racial fights erupted and racial and ethnic threats and slurs were exchanged described the atmosphere of a prison mess hall rather than that of a place for students to congregate in safety to eat. Although there is little doubt that school authorities were taken aback by the sudden influx of very diverse youth, both immigrant and from the city, as they scrambled to build an annex, the segregating forces that had already been entrenched in the tracking structure came fully into view with the avalanche of newcomers to the county.

Institutional habits of valuing or devaluing students according to the subjects they took (i.e., upper-track student Ivan's privileged position with teachers), even as the institution offered the very subjects it devalued, or of herding students in impersonal spaces with no involvement on the part of faculty, restricted young people's

genuine opportunities for "intellectual and social engagement across racial and ethnic groups."[24]

Miller High students were more likely to engage with peers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds if they attended upper academic tracks, participated in sports, or were part of the group known as "preps." In the remembered experiences of those Miller High alumni interviewed, upper socio-economic status overpowered racial or ethnic background. Then too, if one attended upper academic tracks, one was less likely to experience or witness violence or racial tensions.

This analysis brings to light the divisive high school structures that have been inherited from the Progressive Era and that seem even more outmoded when compared to the developing habits, outside school bounds, of an emerging networked generation. At the end of the last century, Miller High's officially desegregated spaces had not translated into authentically integrated spaces. The very structure of Miller High intensified the fragmentation and balkanization of an increasing number of students from very different racial, national, ethnic, and class backgrounds.

Notes

1. Thirty-seven alumnae and alumni of different race and socio-economic backgrounds, identified through yearbooks and alumni directories as well as through snowball sampling, and who graduated from Miller High between 1954 and 2002, were formally interviewed in tape-recorded sessions that ranged from one to two hours, and informally through follow-up calls, visits, and e-mail communications. These alumni were chosen for their differences (gender and class just prior to 1956 desegregation; gender, class, and race following desegregation); and situated as males and females of different racial and economic backgrounds, across the decades, as much as possible. The decade boundaries emerged from changes in oral testimonies as well as corroborating changes examined in yearbooks. Of those alumni interviewed, ten graduated between 1985 and 2002. All proper names (including the school's) have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect those narrators unwilling to be identified with testimonies they felt would compromise their professional and familial relationships in the community. Some narrators have agreed to reconsider release of transcripts at a later date.

2. Miller High School yearbooks from 1954, '56, and '58; 1960, '62, '64, '66, and '68; and so on until 2002 were examined and descriptive statistics were derived for total populations of students as well as distribution of student population by race and gender; for distribution of students across race and gender in extracurricular activities and clubs (yearbook staff; newspaper staff; honor society; Future Nurses, Teachers, and Farmers of America; choir; thespians and jesters clubs; etc.); and across sports activities.

3. Archival research was conducted in the Baltimore County Board of Education archives in Towson, Maryland, where general county school policies

were examined; in the Maryland rooms of Enoch Pratt Baltimore City Public Library and of the University of Maryland College Park, where census data and Maryland State Board of Education communications were examined; in the library of Miller High School, where the school newspaper and archived alumni achievements and photographs were examined; and the "historic room" of Miller Town Community Library, where Miller High yearbooks and local community newspapers were examined. Histories and photographs of the evolving Miller High School, which began as an academy in the nineteenth century, and of peoples of the region, including oral histories of African American communities of the region, were also identified at the community library. There I was introduced to works by African American oral historian Louis Diggs, with whom I established an e-mail communication and who directed me to Annie Milligan, who in turn introduced me to the African American community of Miller Town. Holdings in the "historic room" of the community library primarily feature the histories of its white, middle-class citizens (one exception includes a reference to a Buffalo soldier buried in Miller Town). We are investing efforts to increase African American representation at the library.

4. Vera Debin (1995–1999), interview by author, January 15, 2004.

5. These reflections on changes in the community were shared by those alumni who themselves still counted as "old timers," and most of whom had graduated from Miller High in the seventies and early eighties. This particular quote is from an interview with David Randle, graduate of 1976, conducted by the author, November 7, 2003. David continues to be a resident of Miller Town, one who has firsthand witnessed changes in the community.

6. Tim Whittle (1978–1981), interview by author, June 28, 2004.

7. Betty Ames (1995–1999), interview by author, August 19, 2003.

8. Ivan Strasky (1998–2002), interview by author, November 6, 2004.

9. Ibid.

10. Exhaustion of research funds precluded collecting oral histories of the rising Hispanic population. Efforts were invested in recovering Russian voices first because Russians overwhelmingly represented the majority immigrant voice at the end of the last century in Miller Town. Since then, the Latino population has grown substantially.

11. Heather Korn (1989–1993), interview by author, February 25, 2003.

12. Sue Cohen (1991–1995), interview by author, 2004.

13. Ivan Strasky interview.

14. Cherry Gate (1988–1992), interview by author, October 23, 2003.

15. Ibid.

16. Heather Korn interview.

17. Ivan Strasky interview.

18. Ibid.

19. Betty Ames interview.

20. Cherry Gate interview.

21. Ivan Strasky interview.

22. Heather Korn interview.

23. Ivan Strasky interview.

24. See Michelle Fine, Lois Weiss, and Linda C. Powell, "Communities of Difference: A Critical Look at Desegregated Spaces Created for and by Youth," *Harvard Educational Review* 67 (2) (Summer 1997): 248–284. I contrast the notion of integration to that of desegregation, which refers foremost

to admission policies and processes to secure laws that ensure equal representation of students across race in schools.

Caroline Eick is an assistant professor of education at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

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