A half-century ago, at the opening cusp of the American civil rights movement, the United States Supreme Court handed down a unanimous decision in the case of *Linda Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, striking down legal segregation in American schools. Popular perception holds that the decision was a moral landmark, that every member of the court recognized that this system of racial categorization was anathema to democracy. In reality, it was a feat of judicial engineering: Chief Justice Earl Warren took the unusual step of privately lobbying his fellow justices, arguing that history would look askance at anything less than unanimity on the matter. The *Brown* decision delivered in May 1954 had such a concussive impact socially that the court waited an entire year before prescribing how the ruling was to be enacted, and then did so by way of an intentionally vague program of desegregation occurring “with all deliberate speed,” meaning, literally, to slowly move as fast as possible.

America’s chaotic resistance to the demise of legal segregation has been well chronicled. Books detail the intransigence of Southern political leadership; documentaries capture the snarling fury of mobs that gathered to prevent integration in the deep South and the violent opposition to busing in the North. But what is far less recognized is the degree to which integration was as fraught a subject for many African Americans as it was for their white counterparts. Sarah Bulah, the black plaintiff in a desegregation suit in Delaware that eventually became part of the cluster of cases grouped under *Brown v. Board of Education*, faced intense scrutiny from African American neighbors who opposed integration; criticism from black teachers fearul that integrated schools would result in far fewer black educators being hired; and disagreement from her own pastor, who...
felt that segregation was the best of many flawed options. Their concerns were animated by a common underlying dilemma: in a racially stratified society, do black children fare better in racial isolation or in direct contact with white peers and largely white institutions? The common contemporary presumption is the latter, yet more than fifty years after the court’s decision, the racial composition of American schools—which are in many places more segregated now than they were then—remains as complex, intractable, and vexing a concern as it was when Justice Warren was cajoling his peers. The facile, enduring categorization of humanity based simply on skin pigment—a tendency whose foundations lie in superstition, not science—has retained its potency, its capacity to warp our perceptions and thwart our democratic and human aspirations down to the current moment.

In *Those Kids, Our Schools*, Shayla Griffin makes a vital contribution to our understanding of this aspect of race. As her examination of one high school shows, race does not exist as a quantifiable, tangible reality; it is made and remade following familiar precepts and patterns but combined in ways specific to the present. Jefferson High School, with its diverse population and middle-class black population, represents the ideal articulated by men and women who fought to dismantle the structures of segregation and inequality in the twentieth century. Yet, like an adaptive species thrust into a new environment, racism thrives in circumstances we once thought represented its ultimate demise. Blackness is recognized as a marker of poverty by both blacks and whites, even when the socio-economic realities of the student population contradict this assumption. Moreover, the black population is not insulated from the concerns most typically associated with black students in more economically challenged school districts. Here, too, they are suspended and expelled in numbers disproportionate to their white peers.

In recent years, school districts in Ohio, Connecticut, and New York have brought charges against low-income black parents who enrolled their children in affluent suburban districts rather than the poor, underperforming districts for which they were zoned. That parents have been arrested and in some instances sentenced to jail time for the crime of “stealing”
higher-quality education than their child’s socioeconomic status would otherwise afford them is morally obscene. That those children may then face the type of social minefield that Griffin elucidates highlights the extent to which race is this nation’s most enduring quagmire.

The ongoing problem of racial disparity plagues not only the educational arena—the recent housing crisis disproportionately affected black homeowners, even though homeownership is a primary marker of middle-class status; the criminal justice system is so thoroughly racialized as to not simply feature racial disparities but be defined by them. Yet, Griffin argues, understanding this process in our educational institutions remains particularly crucial. This ethnography yields a window into the ways race and its attendant disparities are re-created through social interaction, “humor,” and school policy. As she writes regarding students’ allegedly harmless practice of telling jokes based on racial stereotypes:

When Jefferson students said that “everyone got along” or that they were “beyond race,” they meant they were a part of a generation in which white people had permission to say biased, bigoted, prejudiced, discriminatory, and oppressive things with smiles on their faces, and people of color did not have permission to be offended by it. White students had both the privilege of not having to admit the racial prejudice they were perpetuating and of getting to determine whether or not the students of color they were targeting were responding to these attacks rationally . . . The burden of being “beyond race” was on the backs of students of color.

Faced with a rapidly swelling population of immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century, American schools were tasked with inculcating “American values” in the newly arriving children. The American creed of prosperity and social mobility derived its credibility from the schools’ capacity to provide their charges with education befitting the manifold opportunities the country offered them. But, as the paragraph above makes clear, our schools have been vectors of social bias too. The process by which the white people’s racial attitudes remain beyond reproach while the sensitivities of people of color are disregarded is not specific to Jefferson High School or the once-rural community in which it is located. “Those kids” remain the problem precisely because a half-century
of efforts have not liberated them from that category and the implicit bias
and skewed perceptions that come with it. Jefferson High School is simulta-
neously a single ethnography and a microcosm of the phenomenon we
might call *Those People, Our Country*. To the extent that we preserve hope
for changing this state of affairs, it is vital that we understand the under-
lying mechanisms. We have yet to devise a schematic for disassembling
what critic Wahneema Lubiano calls “the house that race built,” yet our
best hope for doing so is the diligent, careful, incisive analysis of studies
like this one.

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