

Parting Words

White Erasures Part 2:

“Uses” of Critical White Studies, Reflexivity, and Hope

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Having acknowledged my three White *erases* in the spring “Parting Words,” I make “use of” Whiteness literatures to address two questions: 1) Why do Whites evade race? and 2) How does Whiteness play out in lives and institutions like schools? I examine my experiences as a teacher and student in public schools.

When I came back to Austin to study at the University of Texas after having lived in Mexico for ten years, I realized immediately how messed up race matters were in Austin and, I now know, other southern urban areas in the United States. I was thrust into an urban classroom teaching sixth and seventh grade with upwards of 95 percent Mexican, Mexican-American, and African-American students of poverty—which wasn’t so different from my working conditions in Raymondville, (South) Texas where the community was 98 percent Mexican and Mexican American and 100 percent students of poverty.

But the big difference in Austin was the level of dysfunction between school and community. The downtown, high minority Title I school I worked in was not a safe place for students or teachers. The first month I worked there I learned it was a custom among the eighth graders to start fires in the bathrooms, to walk in gangs telling teachers and administrators to “suck dick” if corrected, and to call in bomb threats that robbed us of hours of instruction. Of all the dysfunction I experienced that first year teaching in downtown Austin, three points stand out.

First, 22 teachers out of 40 did not return after the end of that year—leaving only me and one other teacher in the language arts department. Some of the teachers who left had taught for ten years, and they just called it a “retirement.” The other teacher who stayed became the department head.

Second, during the last several weeks of school, the stack of discipline referrals on the vice principal’s desk was about a foot and a half high—which allowed him to process only intoxications and fights. Any other disciplinary infractions were just “in the stack.”

And third was the dread that most of us who taught core classes felt upon reporting to work—a mixture of exhaustion and intimidation in relation to the power students had over us. One of the few Mexican-American teachers on staff loudly quipped one morning in the Lounge, “Why is it always *morning*?” Everyone exploded in laughter, having had their feelings, anxieties, and trepidations expressed over coffee.

A new administration improved the situation a great deal over the next three years, which to me meant that the “dysfunction” was largely the consequence of adults not taking care of the institution of school and making it serve the community. For the school to work, *all* adults mattered; everyone had to be good.

All of this stood in contrast to my experiences as a teenager growing up in a virtually all-White neighborhood. The institutions that I attended, especially high school, were orderly places where students were safe for the most part (except for the existence of drug dealers), places where children were challenged to learn and study in traditional ways, places that sent more than 96 percent of their graduates to post-secondary education. This contrast between going to a virtually all-White high school and then teaching in an urban middle school that failed, temporarily at least, in serving poor students of color politicized me and sharpened my commitment to racial justice in my teaching. My memories of attending school

contrasted sharply with my experiences of teaching, where my students of color “enter[ed] into the process of school learning through the perceptions and definitions of school learning as... ‘acting white’” (Ogbu, 1987, p. 166).

Basically, I came to understand how Whiteness channeled me toward academic “successes” and college and how those same constructions channeled many of my students toward menial service positions in organizations where there is a

racialized employment hierarchy. ...As you Work Your Way Up the hierarchy toward the better paid and more satisfying jobs, the color slowly turns lighter until by the time you get to the top, it is Almost All White. (Scheurich, 2002, p. 4)

The answers to the two questions I raised at the beginning of this essay are intertwined. Institutions like schools, as they are conceived and many times administrated and enacted in their day-to-day practices, favor White folks like me, especially middle class ones. Whites’ “successes” in these societal institutions are not exactly “pre-determined,” as Whites struggle and work hard for “successes,” but Whites’ successes are co-constructed, channeled, often *explicitly tracked*, and finally “over-determined.” Many Whites don’t like to recognize this, so they evade questions of racial, cultural, linguistic, and other identities as they relate to educational successes.

Reflexivity

So what’s the use?

What are the “uses” of understanding Whiteness?

Whiteness, as I have lived, reacted to, and now understood, makes my work as a teacher emerge from a privileged place. In entering schools and classrooms, I am—when I’m “on”—many identities: good teacher, authority, researcher, smart person, passionate discussion leader, just disciplinarian, empathetic interviewer, lesson maker, task master, project planner. All of these roles place me in a power position across difference before I enter into relationships with students in classrooms. Whiteness also makes me complicit with and allows me to struggle against institutional and societal power relations.

Working within this troubled category of Whiteness as a teacher requires a reflexive stance *with* those with whom I work. Reflexivity, in its broadest sense, refers to self-awareness, understanding of the teacher’s position, co-creation of classroom spaces along with students, and an awareness of the implications of the knowledges I teach. This reflexive stance is part and parcel of teaching and learning that implies dialectic knowing, dialogue, caring, and, finally, working the “self-other” hyphen.

Dialectic knowing is based on interactions between teachers and students (Freire, 1998a [1969]; Freire, 1998b [1970]; Lather, 1991). Rather than the teacher depositing knowledge with students, dialectical knowing involves interactions “that invite reciprocal reflexivity and critique” (Lather, 1991, p. 59). The tendency of dialectic knowing in the classroom “as much with the teachers-students as with the students-teachers is to establish an authentic form of thought and action” (Freire, 1998b [1970], p. 90).

At the center of dialectic knowing is dialogue (Freire, 1998a [1969];


Freire, 1998b [1970]; hooks, 1994) that can be used to overcome differences in power relations “as a means for the transformation” (Freire, 1998b [1970], p. 163). Dialogue, especially across difference, is a key process because when we engage in dialogue “we can begin as teachers ... to cross boundaries, the boundaries that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing, and a host of other differences” (hooks, 1994, p. 130).

Also at the center of dialectic knowing are caring relationships. The caring relationship “involves stepping out of one’s own personal frame of reference and into another’s” (Noddings in Goldstein, 1998, p. 247). This intermingling of frames requires that “the one caring meets the cared for with engrossment ... with full attention and with receptivity to his perspective and situation” (Goldstein, 2002, p. 12). Caring relationships in reference to the classroom “encourage students to work within a collective structure” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 60) that focuses on developing a community or family feel in the classroom.

Yet dialectic knowing requires continued reflection. Michelle Fine’s “Working the Hyphens” (1994) explores the possibility-impossibility of speaking *with* and *for* the other across differences: “If poststructuralism has taught us anything, it is to beware of the frozen identities and the presumption that the [self-other] hyphen is real, to suspect the binary, to worry the clear distinctions” (pp. 151-152). As Fine (1994) argues, we need to make our differences work in generative, productive, and creative ways—toward creative identities for all, not *static* or *fixed* identities.

Hopes

There is no easy answer about how to work across difference in education. I know when I enter classrooms, reach across the boundaries of my Whiteness and privilege, and connect with students, my students have the power to engage minimally or in good faith, to disrupt my lessons or learn them. In the times when it’s all working, my students are reading poetry, doing research, discussing primary documents—there is an intense experience of hope for the possibility of the first person plural: we.

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