Unhooking from Whiteness

CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE: CURRICULUM STUDIES IN ACTION

Volume 6

Scope

"Curriculum" is an expansive term; it encompasses vast aspects of teaching and learning. Curriculum can be defined as broadly as, "The content of schooling in all its forms" (English, p. 4), and as narrowly as a lesson plan. Complicating matters is the fact that curricula are often organized to fit particular time frames. The incompatible and overlapping notions that curriculum involves everything that is taught and learned in a particular setting *and* that this learning occurs in a limited time frame reveal the nuanced complexities of curriculum studies.

"Constructing Knowledge" provides a forum for systematic reflection on the substance (subject matter, courses, programs of study), purposes, and practices used for bringing about learning in educational settings. Of concern are such fundamental issues as: What should be studied? Why? By whom? In what ways? And in what settings? Reflection upon such issues involves an inter-play among the major components of education: subject matter, learning, teaching, and the larger social, political, and economic contexts, as well as the immediate instructional situation. Historical and autobiographical analyses are central in understanding the contemporary realties of schooling and envisioning how to (re)shape schools to meet the intellectual and social needs of all societal members. Curriculum is a social construction that results from a set of decisions; it is written and enacted and both facets undergo constant change as contexts evolve.

This series aims to extent the professional conversation about curriculum in contemporary educational settings. Curriculum is a designed experience intended to promote learning. Because it is socially constructed, curriculum is subject to all the pressures and complications of the diverse communities that comprise schools and other social contexts in which citizens gain self-understanding.

Unhooking from Whiteness

The Key to Dismantling Racism in the United States

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FOREWORD

I grew up in a small town with little racial diversity. My brother and I were most often the only Black kids in varied crowds of White peers. Each year brought altercations rooted in racial bias and bigotry. The easy fights were the physical ones. Though this combat resulting from covert racism taxed the body, consequences were far less damaging than the effects *covert* racism had on my humanity, my soul, my mind. After these battles, my mother did her best to help me process my experiences, and, more importantly, to assist me in identifying the psychosis of my assailants. This process of identification, this ability to distinguish the enemy, has proven valuable as I traverse through myriad manifestations of systemic, individual, covert, and overt racism as an educator.

The ability to recognize and categorize oppression is rare given the current times. White supremacy is pervasive and often undetected. Its slick and mostly silent *modus operandi* affords an anonymity that often precludes people from naming the sources of their oppression. The assaults are most often swift and stinging, leaving the assaulted wounded and wondering, unable to accurately identify the assailant. This book offers a line-up of likely suspects.

A list of suspects is developed to explain the discriminatory treatment minoritized[1] people in the United States often experience. Employing autoethnography, Whiteness is examined through the personal stories of eleven diverse authors. Their racial backgrounds, their lived experiences complicate perceptions of racism and trouble common tropes and frameworks typically used to understand race and racism. These explanative and counternarratives are important—especially now. Many want to believe that we live in a colorblind, post-racial society, yet oppression vigorously, creatively remains in most American institutions—especially schools. With race diminished as a viable mitigating factor influencing people's life trajectories, these authors contend that the marginalized are often left searching for explanations, looking for the source of the subjugation they suffer, and worse yet, internalizing felt hatred they experience. This work confronts those sources and explores the kind of conflict most avoided—self-conflict necessary for intrapersonal change.

This book is unique in that White supremacy is discussed, as a transferable equalizer. Cheryl Harris[2] positions Whiteness as property. Possession of this property, adoption of the norms and values of the dominant culture, affords benefits to those minoritized people who assimilate. The advantages, of course, do not equate to those with a White birthright; however, life is definitely different for those who cloak themselves in Whiteness and adopt the ways of white folk. The transformational power of Whiteness is alluring to minoritized people in search of a better life.

Even with my adverse encounters with White extremists and my mother's diligence in ensuring my knowledge of significant contributions made by people who look like me, schooling and societal messages that delineated and reinforced my racial inferiority led me to internalize racism, practice varying degrees of self-deprecation,

and identify with Whiteness. Abandoning accountability to the collective, a value most aligned with the ethos people of color live by, I competed and won. The prize? I joined and contributed to oppressive systems. I found a success adopting Whiteness. Like the authors, I won by investing in the monocultural ethnocentrism I later interrogated and worked hard to unhook from.

Like me, these authors have their own stories, their own experiences with whiteness. They each offer perspectives of Whiteness and detail their varied journeys toward unhooking from Whiteness and its privileges, renouncing the advantages conformity to White supremacy has afforded them. Each author has made a commitment to antiracist work in unique ways, and their voices come from diverse cultural, racial, and professional historical spaces. This commitment to disconnect from privilege is wrought with complex contradictions as they continue this work while still enjoying and employing the accouterments of the Academy, one of the quintessential and iconic fortresses of White supremacy. Theirs are on-going journeys of evolving hypocrisies, tempered by reconciliations made with self in their battles against multiple forms of expedient systemic oppression. These stories have generalizable struggles from which we may all learn if we dare to endeavor in this work.

Read these stories with a self-critiquing lens. Consider the words of these writers with a frame of self-reflection. You're sure to find the stories compelling. As you turn the pages, read your own story within the lines offered. Do not neglect this opportunity to self-reflect. Engage yourself, your life's details. Search out your attachment, your dependence, your complicity with White supremacy and Whiteness, your participation with oppression. Examine your sources of privilege not just for the sake of knowing, but for the sake of leveraging that capital for the uplifting of those in need, those without your advantages, your influence, your voice.

Analyze Then MOVE

Do something. Move past what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. termed "the paralysis of analysis".[3] Read this book and know. We who know are then called to be people of conviction, not conformity. The knowledge of your role in promulgating White supremacy, your perpetuation of Whiteness from the ivory towers of the Academy, for example, should propel you to action. Social justice demands loyalty to the moral imperative of nonconformity. Schooling institutions, which portend to laud independent thought, are wrought with pressures to conform. Like me, like these authors, resist. Be not seduced by symbols of success fashioned by the dominant culture. Be willing to risk the comfort and security positioned in Whiteness. Determine your own metric by which you measure your accomplishments—your consistent work unhooking from Whiteness and abolishing White supremacy. Unhook and connect to humanity.

Rema Reynolds, Ph.D.
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Spring 2013

NOTES

[1] *Minoritized*, unlike minority, emphasizes the process of *minoritizing* and insists that the relative prestige of cultures are constituted in social relations of power and agency (Mukherjee, et. al., 2006). Those who are *Minoritized*, unlike minority, emphasizes the process of *minoritizing* and insists that the relative prestige of cultures are constituted in social relations of power and agency (Mukherjee, et. al., 2006). Those who are minoritized are subordinated in power relations by those belonging to the dominant culture (Tettey & Puplampu, 2006).

[2] Harris, C. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review, 106*, 1709–1791.

[3] King, M. L., Jr. (2012). *A gift of love: Sermons from strength to love and other preachings*. Boston: Beacon Press.

CLEVELAND HAYES, BRENDA G. JUÁREZ,
MATTHEW T. WITT & NICHOLAS D. HARTLEP

1. TOWARD A LESSER SHADE OF WHITE

12 Steps Towards More Authentic Race Awareness

INTRODUCTION: HOW THIS ALL GOT STARTED

The impetus for this chapter was an email conversation between two academic colleagues at the University of Inland, both male, one Black (Malcolm[1]), the other White (Paul), and the response by a third faculty member from another college (George, who is also White).

It all started when Malcolm walked out of a teacher education diversity meeting in protest after a White faculty member made a flip comment about diversity (Juárez, Smith, & Hayes, 2008). Paul, being the instructor of the diversity class in the teacher credential program, subsequently engaged with Malcolm via email, setting the tone for what followed. Ultimately, after a series of email exchanges, Paul characterized Malcolm as a "Black Supremacist." Paul's comments, abbreviated, are as follows:

> I know that you are incredibly angry. Believe me: we all know that. It is always extremely evident how you feel. I personally perceive you to be an angry black supremacist, if there is such a thing. And I have to keep asking myself what I would do if you were a White supremacist instead, and my answer is the same: anger will not change anything. It never has. It never will.

Malcolm shared this email response with George, a White faculty member of another college. George emailed back to Malcolm with this tongue-in-cheek response:

> I didn't know you were a Black supremacist. Wow. It all makes sense now. What a relief. At first, I thought Paul was forcing equivalence between Black supremacist and White supremacist in a way only a White Ph.D. could pull off. Which would make Paul look really, really silly in a kind of spooky way, kind of like: [quoting Martin Luther King from Malcolm's email footer notes] "Nothing in the entire world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity." Owww!! Oooops!! Whip me, beat me, make me conscientiously stupid!! Thanks, Paul, for leading the way with the first step backwards in the 12 Step Program for Whiteness. Remember: the first step backwards is the most important, and, unlike other 12 Step Programs, it's really not that hard to take. And remember White brethren: this is really critical for maintaining White privilege. So stand up to the Man and his Black

C. Hayes and N.D. Hartlep (Eds.), Unhooking from Whiteness:
The Key to Dismantling Racism in the United States, 1–16.

> supremacy. Stand up, and walk backwards. Stand up White people! Stand up and walk the other way; because the farther you walk, the blacker the Black supremacist gets. It's weird, but true. He looks blacker from a distance. And that's what we all want, right? We all want to stop denying who we really are and just walk backwards.

The University of Inland is a small private college in a suburb of Los Angeles. Paul, who is White, teaches the diversity class in the teacher credential program. Malcolm, who is Black, teaches the single subject methods course, but is an education anthropologist and sociologist. Paul is what Hayes & Juárez (2009) classify as a "good" White person trying to get a "good White people's medal" from Malcolm.

The idea for the title of the chapter came from the exchange between Paul and Malcolm, an exchange that struck the authors as emblematic of what passes for "authentic exchange" in the academy: a tokenized exchange that is demonstrably one-sided and one-way.

HOW TO READ THIS CHAPTER

Following Thompson (2003), we put Whiteness at the center of our examination of Malcolm's professional experiences as a teacher educator for social justice. For the purposes of this paper, Whiteness is defined as an identity that is neither problematized nor particularized within discourses on race because it assumes a status of normalcy (Chaisson, 2004; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Tate, 2003). Malcolm's questioning of Paul's desire for a "good White people medal" challenges the legitimacy of Whiteness. Paul's actions toward Malcolm, by contrast, fail to question Whiteness and thus reinforce it as legitimate and normal.

Malcolm's counter-narrative is a composite story made up of characters and events based on actual individuals and situations to represent a particular kind of experience common to and recognized by many scholars of color within higher education. In this chapter, we explore how a critical reading of Malcolm's lived experiences can become a learning tool for creating more authentic conversations around democratic and inclusive forms of teaching and learning.

The diversity of the four researchers is identified because we draw from one of the central tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which is to cross epistemological boundaries: CRT borrows from several intellectual traditions, including liberalism, feminism, and Marxism, to construct a more complete analysis of "raced" people. Apropos how CRT is interdisciplinary, the authors' experiences, expertise, and disciplines come together in this essay (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Tate, 1997). Each of us is committed to ending the racial oppression of those who claim not to be "one of those White people" but then accuse someone of being a Black supremacist.

We used our experiential knowledge of Whiteness and racism to develop our twelve-step program towards more authentic race awareness. The twelve steps, in the context of this chapter, are a set of guiding principles outlining a course of action as a way to address Whiteness. The intent of the chapter is not to attack

White people, as Whiteness is not about White people but is a mindset. Nor is the intent to imply that Whiteness is a psychological disorder. Rather, this paper intends to confront the socially constructed and constantly reinforced power of white identifications and interest (Bergerson, 2003; Gillborn, 2005). Our intent is to attack not individuals but an institution rooted with teacher education candidates and White faculty members who employ a wide range of speech genres and discourses to speak of self-declared marginalization that allows them to fend off the moral entanglements of White privilege and White racism (McCarthy, 2003). Using the 12-step metaphor, our critique of Whiteness is aimed at addressing equity issues and examining institutional practices (Green, Sonn, & Mastebula, 2007; Juárez, Smith, & Hayes, 2008; Tate, 2003).

COUNTER-STORIES AND CRITICAL STORYTELLING

How does Malcolm's counter-story connect people's daily lives with the privileging of Whiteness within U.S. society and its institutions? Counter-stories bridge the gap between societal structures of Whiteness and everyday life by revealing the ways institutional forces influence and guide individuals' daily interactions and practices.

Critical race counter-storytelling, in turn, is a method of recounting the experiences and perspectives of racially and socially marginalized people. Counter-stories reflect on the lived experiences of people of color as a way to raise critical consciousness about social and racial injustice. Counter-stories serve as an entry point for illustrating how poor and working class Black families fight interlocking race, class, gender, and spiritual oppression (Knight, Norton, Bentley & Dixon, 2005; Parker & Stovall, 2004; Yosso, 2006). Counter-stories, according to Delgado (1989), can be loosely described as the stories of out-groups, that is to say, groups whose marginality defines the boundaries of the mainstream—whose voice, perspective, and consciousness have been suppressed, devalued and abnormalized.

THE RESEARCHERS

Cleveland is a Black male from the southern part of the United States. He teaches in the teacher education program at the University of Inland. He received his Ph.D. in social foundations from the University of Utah. His research interests are Critical Race Theory, Whiteness Theory, and Social justice in teacher education. Although he works in a teacher education program, he does not classify himself as a teacher educator.

Brenda is a White female from the Midwest. She is also a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. She too received her Ph.D. from the University of Utah and is a social justice educator. She began her higher education career in a Teacher Education program at Brigham Young University.

Matt is a White male from the Pacific Northwest. He completed his undergraduate training at one of the most liberal universities in the country. He completed his

Ph.D. at Portland State University. Matt has background in urban studies and public administration; his scholarship examines how Whiteness shapes public institutions outside of education.

Nicholas is a Korean Adoptee from the Midwest. He is a trained elementary education teacher. He completed his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Nicholas has a background in Asian American studies, and his research interests include unhooking from Whiteness as coalition building and disrupting the model minority stereotype. He is a transracial adoption and model minority stereotype critic (Hartlep, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d, 2013e, 2013f).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE WHITE PROBLEM

What is it, then, about the democracy-racism paradox that connects democratic ideals to racialized exclusions? In 1968, after four years of inner city upheavals and riot, the U.S. National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (aka "the Kerner Commission"), which was authorized to report and give recommendations for addressing these matters to Congress and the President, delivered—without mincing rhetoric—this summary: "Segregation and poverty have created [within] the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most White Americans. What White Americans have never fully understood – but what the Negro can never forget – is that White society is deeply implicated in the ghetto: White institutions created it, White institutions maintain it, and White society condones it" (Kerner, 1968, p. 2, as cited in Massey & Denton, 1997, p. 3). A three-pronged juggernaut of racist home mortgage lending policies, race-tiered public school financing, and Jim Crow-derived employment standards persisting through the 20th Century and beyond, are the White institutions to which the Kerner Report addressed its indictment. Nearly a half century earlier, the Chicago Commission on Race Relations had derived virtually identical conclusions following a riot there in 1919 after the drowning of a black youth by White assailants. Karl Marx once limned, "History repeats twice; first as tragedy, then as farce." The persistence of racialized exclusions within the context of much vaunted democratic ideals would seem to give testament to Marx's dictum.

Even by 1968, as Freund (2004) notes, "the structure of most federal housing and development agencies had barely changed, and the assumptions about the dual housing market, so long entrenched in practice and in bureaucratic culture, continued to guide federal operations" (p. 4). Moreover:

> For by the 1960s, state policy had not only helped to create a racially segregated, "dual" market for housing. It had also—quite paradoxically—helped convince whites that the government had done no such thing: that the growth of all-white suburbs and the concentration of black poverty in central cities were simply products of consumer choice in a free market for homes. …In short, federal policies had been instrumental to building both the segregated metropolis