

BOOK REVIEW/CRITIQUE DE LIVRE

VIRGINIA LEA & ERMA JEAN SIMS (EDS.). *Undoing whiteness in the classroom: Critical educultural teaching approaches for social justice activism*. New York, NY: Peter Lang. (2008). 276 pp. \$35.95 (Paperback). (ISBN: 978-0-82049-712-9).

What do we talk about when we talk about “whiteness”? What does it mean to “undo” or unlearn whiteness? Emerging from the critical and theoretical discussion of whiteness as a category that signifies the structural, cultural, economic and political advantages and privileges that come from appearing to have “white” or lighter skin (see Carr, 2008; Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004; Lipsitz, 2006; Wray, 2006), Virginia Lea and Erma Jean Sims’ *Undoing Whiteness* promotes art as a critical pedagogical tool to work through social justice issues in the American classroom. The editors clearly identify the purpose of this collection: to challenge the increasingly mainstreamed and standardized curricula, assessments, and instruction which whitewash over the myriad of ethnic, socioeconomic, cultural and gendered differences (to name only a few intersections) in contemporary American schools through critical “educulturalism.” Educulturalism uses art-based methodologies that encourage learners to unlock the “unconscious,” to explore and understand the construction of the social and cultural status quo, and to develop their agency, “insight and voice” (p. 18; see also Roediger, 2006; Sleeter, 2005; Tabb, 2006). Critical educultural education works to challenge the inequitable practices that marginalize those who do not fit into the category of whiteness.

Lea and Sims employ the term whiteness to address the privilege that an uneven amount of white people have systematically benefitted from, rather than qualifying the word whiteness with the word “hegemony” (p. 2). As such, the editors refrain from diminishing potential intersections between class and race, gender, sexuality, language use, etc., as not all white people benefit from Lea and Sims’ particular definition of whiteness. Lea and Sims’ collection is embedded within a distinctively American historical and political context, but looks also to Canada through Karen McGarry’s chapter which destabilizes whiteness and challenges the “myth” of Canadian multiculturalism (p. 122).

Undoing Whiteness in the Classroom is organized into 14 chapters that theorize hegemonic whiteness as it is enacted in school (Chapters 1-2), and how it is overcome through the use of arts-based teaching methods that use poetry, children's literature, music, film, visual art and performance (Chapters 3-6; 9-10). The remaining chapters (Chapters 7-8; 11-14) focus on a critical analysis of the "cultural shape we're in" (p. 203), employing Mesoamerican pedagogy to teach for justice, and critically examining the self (and our assumptions) to undo whiteness.

One of the strengths of the collection is its tangible application to the classroom; it demands the fusing of theory and practice. In Chapter 3, Lea and Sims use poetry to identify and decenter whiteness, citing the power of subjectivity that poetry explores through the example of Manyarrows' 1995 poem, *See No Indian, Hear No Indian*. Manyarrows' poem names the hurt of colonialism, the politics of remembering, and the telling of hurtful memories, which encourages empathy and demands reconciliation for the truths told.

In Chapter 4, Rosa Furumoto speaks to teachers directly, offering specific questions that educators can ask themselves to help improve their practices. She suggests that educators first question themselves and their own schooling experiences of discrimination and privilege. Next, she guides educators through a "critical/multicultural/anti-bias" phase where they are asked to critically engage with the marginalization of Chicana/o/Latina/o students and families in schools and think through the ways that they might be made to feel foreign and unwelcome. Lastly, Furumoto asks educators to engage in the "creative transformative" phase where educators move from criticism to action, reworking their curriculums to become more inclusive where possible. Engaging in educultural work is a learned process, which Furumoto makes clear.

In its entirety, the collection fuses theory, art and practice in an attempt to encourage teachers to incorporate critical viewpoints and to challenge the dominant discourses in their teaching. Without the connection between theory and practice, this work does not make it into the classroom. Despite claims to "multicultural education," curricula often leave students with limited perspectives on local and global experiences. Lea and Sims' collection offers opportunities for reluctant pre-service (and in-service) teachers to bring diverse perspectives into the classroom in an engaging, pedagogically sound, and authentic manner. It clearly demonstrates the power of arts as an effective teaching tool; beyond self-exploration and an alternative approach to hegemony, educulturalism encourages youth to imagine and enact an inclusive society where they create oppositional spaces to fight for equality and justice (Giroux, 1997).

Undoing Whiteness in the Classroom should be included in any progressive Bachelor of Education program: it directly challenges the widely held notion that whiteness is—or should be accepted as—normative, while simultaneously

promoting the use of educultural inquiry to develop critical consciousness and encourage social justice activism amongst both teachers and learners.

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