

White Women's Work: Examining the Intersectionality of Teaching, Identity, and Race

reviewed by Samuel Tanner – June 01, 2017

Title: White Women's Work: Examining the Intersectionality of Teaching, Identity, and Race

Author(s): Stephen Hancock & Chezare A. Warren (Eds.)

Publisher: Information Age Publishing, Charlotte

ISBN: 1681236478, **Pages:** 220, **Year:** 2017

Search for book at Amazon.com



White Women's Work: Examining the Intersectionality of Teaching, Identity, and Race is a collection that seeks to highlight and understand the nature of white women teachers. Its editors Stephen Hancock and Chezare A. Warren use their introduction to point out that it is important to recognize that, “[r]acialized pedagogical orientations, school policies, and classroom practices are underwritten by [w]hite, cisgender, feminine, and middle to upper class social and cultural norms” (p. viii). It is with these norms in mind that the editors seek to address the issue that white women make up the majority of American teachers. This becomes problematic when considering the increasing student diversity in American schools. The editors intend that their book “not only offers practical support and a strong critique of whiteness for reducing one’s teaching effectiveness, but that . . . [it] also offers hope” (p. xii).

The chapters in this collection are organized into three parts. The first three chapters explore white women and the culturalization of the schooling environment. The next four chapters focus on exploring white teacher image and identity. The final two chapters are situated toward disentangling race and whiteness to better ensure culturally responsive instruction. In total, nine chapters are included from a variety of authors.

It was not until I began Chapter Three that the magnitude of this work really started to hit me. Angela C. Coffee, Erin Stutelberg, Colleen H. Clements, and Timothy J. Lensmire are responsible for a devastating, beautiful, and complex chapter. The authors work forward from Erin’s memory, one that is unmistakably female. She is a white teacher who is overwhelmed by cramps, almost loses consciousness during class, and realizes that she cannot allow two of her students (they are both boys of color) to carry her to the school nurse. The authors believe that Erin’s decision was as much about a fear of a racialized other as it was about protecting the two boys from her school administrators’ scrutiny. This chapter unfolds through powerful multiple interpretations of Erin’s memory that work out issues of waste in schools, the white gaze, and teacher authority. Ultimately, Coffee, Stutelberg, Clements, and Lensmire contextualize or historicize Erin’s experience. They work forward to realize that, at least for a moment, Erin saw that a shared humanity existed between her and her students. The authors describe this as a “radical care” (p. 64) that, “might begin to peel away at the layers of authority, surveillance, hierarchy, and control embedded in her classroom” (p. 64). They also believe that authority and control are rooted in white supremacy. As a result, Erin’s experience has much to do with what white women can and cannot be in the classroom. Complex and honest writing like this helps to name, complicate, and disrupt the ways that white supremacy constrains what is included in American classrooms. In some ways, this is the work of all of the chapters of this book.

As the editors write, if they are serious about engaging white women teachers in critiquing whiteness to become more effective educators, the seventh chapter by Erin Miller helps us understand the enormity of this task. She uses ethnographic research to understand how her white children grow into their whiteness despite her intentions as a white antiracist parent. The author pays attention to the ways that her children both resist and accept white supremacy. Ultimately, Miller writes that even though her children “seemed to both reify and reject the dominance and superiority of whiteness” (p. 135), she “ultimately concluded that despite [her] attempts at what [she] saw to be antiracist parenting, it was not enough to stop the racist discourse that permeated [their] lives” (p. 135). The author’s work with her children profoundly names the difficulties we face in preparing culturally responsive teachers. If a parent who is committed to fostering antiracism with her own children cannot raise them to fundamentally reject white supremacy existing in the U.S., what hope do we have in conceiving of a pedagogy that can do this kind of work? If the compulsion that exists to accept the racial discourse that is permeating our lives is this strong, how do we resist it through teaching and learning?

This might seem like a gloomy way to write this review, but I do not think that this is the case. This book is a step toward conceiving answers to the questions that I posed above. I admire the editors for compiling this volume. When these chapters are read in relation to what Jupp, Berry, and Lensmire (2016) describe as the second wave of critical whiteness studies, they are hopeful. They write about the importance of not essentializing whiteness in our teaching and research (Jupp et al., 2016). Instead, many chapters in this volume complicate whiteness and white femininity in complex or disruptive ways. They can add to our efforts to conceive of a more complicated form of whiteness pedagogy. This is a type of pedagogy that might prepare our future teachers to disentangle white supremacy in our schools and society.

I am reminded of the end of Richard Wright's memoir *Black Boy* (1945/1988) as I consider the final chapter of *White Women's Work*. In this chapter, Kevin Lawrence Henry, Jr. and editor Warren write that, "there is no finality to justice work" (p. 196), but we must remain committed to "humanizing pedagogies and justice" (p. 196) and this will come "by acknowledging the way racialized oppression works, then striving to make sure it doesn't" (p. 196). This is a hopeful sentiment that addresses Wright's thoughts on race in America. I thought that Wright ended his memoir by worrying that whites were

as miserable as their Black victims . . . [i]f this country can't find its way to a human path, if it cannot inform conduct with a deep sense of life, then all of us, Black as well as white, are going down the same drain. (1945/1988, p. 453)

Wright's claim that we need to inform our conduct with a deeper sense of life to find a more human path in this country is extended by many of the chapters in this volume. Honestly sharing or making sense of how white women teachers and their students are constructed by white supremacy can help us imagine more humane ways to be in our schools. Perhaps in this way all of us can avoid going down the same drain.

References

Jupp, J. C., Berry, T. R., & Lensmire, T. J. (2016). Second wave white teacher identity studies: A review of white teacher identity literature from 2004 through 2014. *Review of Educational Research, 86*(4), 1151-1191.

Wright, R. (1998). *Black boy*. New York, NY: Harper Collins. (Original work published 1945)

Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: June 01, 2017
http://www.tcrecord.org ID Number: 22004, Date Accessed: 6/23/2017 1:47:15 PM

Purchase Reprint Rights for this article or review