

Chapter 21

Writing, Race, and Creative Democracy



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Abstract My chapter traces how my critical teaching and scholarship has sought to contribute to what John Dewey called creative democracy—first, in my explorations of how the teaching of writing might serve radical democratic ends and, second, in my examination of the complexities and conflicts of Whiteness and White racial identities. Along with sustained intellectual engagements with the writings of Mikhail Bakhtin and W.E.B. Du Bois (among many others), my hatred of school and my love of basketball are noted as significant influences on my living and learning.

One way to narrate my journey as a critical education scholar would be to emphasize *disjunction* rather than cohesion. If you split my career as a researcher roughly in half, then in the first part I established myself as a critical literacy scholar. I investigated and theorized the teaching and learning of writing in public school classrooms, paying particular attention to how gender and social class constitute children’s writing and their interactions with each other. Then, telling the story this way, in the second part I left the study of literacy to focus on race and education—specifically, how White people learn to be White in our White supremacist society and what this means for antiracist efforts in schools and teacher education.

However, I do not think of the story of my work this way. For me, my scholarship, throughout my career, has been grounded in, and has attempted to articulate commitments to, radical and creative democracy. By democracy, I do not mean a political system or form of government. The image or sound of democracy I have been pursuing is both humbler and harder. I have been guided by John Dewey’s (1951) sense of creative democracy as a “way of life”—a way of life that Dewey thought was “controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature” (p. 391).

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In other words, my current work on race and education expresses the same long-term commitments as my earlier work—to better understand what helps and hinders democratic education and living.

I was born and raised in a small, rural, working-class community in Wisconsin, and I am sure that many different aspects of what I lived and learned there contributed to what became my radical commitments. For now, I will highlight two. First, I grew up among people who talked things over, together, as they responded to problems and challenges confronting them. Though I could not have described it this way at the time, I listened to and eventually joined my parents, aunts, and uncles in meaningful versions of what Dewey called *deliberation*. For Dewey, deliberation was a playing out, a rehearsal, of what would happen if we pursued this or that path. However, this deliberation was not some mechanical projection of profit or pleasure or pain. Instead, as Dewey (1922) wrote:

To every shade of imagined circumstance there is a vibrating response; and to every complex situation a sensitiveness as to its integrity, a feeling of whether it does justice to all facts, or overrides some to the advantage of others. Decision is reasonable when deliberation is so conducted. (p. 194)

A second (and perhaps even more powerful) influence on me, growing up, was school—or more precisely, *my trouble with school*. For me, from the beginning, school meant adults attempting to control my body, making me sit still, face forward; school meant adults demanding that I talk quietly and not laugh, loudly (like my father did). I put it this way in an autoethnographic piece I wrote about Whiteness and social class:

I was already engaged in the struggle that has defined my life in school, all the way from elementary through graduate school, and on into my life as a professor. I was struggling with the offer, made by school, to join the middle class. I was struggling with its demand that I remake (or at least hide) my working-class insides. (Lensmire, 2008, p. 310)

It is not so surprising, then, that in my early teaching (with 7th graders) I gravitated toward approaches that rejected the tight control of student bodies and voices, which rebelled against machine and factory qualities of schooling. My first guides in experimenting with alternative pedagogies were advocates of writing workshop or process approaches to the teaching of writing—approaches that emphasized experience and non-conformism, and with strong affinities to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and American Romanticism. Later, as I began teaching in college classrooms, my progressive teaching practices would be built upon and radicalized in engagements with critical pedagogy and feminist teaching and theory.

If my teaching was grounded, in part, in a rejection of traditional schooling, my eventual research was as well—and not just in terms of the *what* I was studying. I started my doctoral program at Michigan State University in 1986. And even though there was a well-established, year-long sequence in educational ethnography that I took in the college of education my first year, quantitative approaches to the study of education—especially what were called “process-product” studies—certainly felt dominant. They also felt like traditional schooling to me, felt hostile to life.

Thus, it is surely *not* the case that I *chose* ethnography after a careful weighing of the merits of various methodologies or that I *chose* ethnography because it was an appropriate methodology for the questions I wished to answer. Instead, I chose it quickly, instinctively, and for the same reasons, I think, that I had tried to teach in progressive ways.

I did a critical ethnography for my dissertation, which became my first book, *When children write: Critical re-visions of the writing workshop* (Lensmire, 1994). I wrote myself into enough problems in that first book that I needed to write a second book, *Powerful writing/Responsible teaching* (Lensmire, 2000), in order to work myself out of at least some of those problems. In this second book, I explored and criticized the learning environments created within writing workshops by imagining them as *carnivals*, as theorized by Russian philosopher and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1984b). This analysis enabled me to both affirm and question the guiding vision of these approaches to teaching and learning literacy—children writing themselves and their worlds on the page, within a classroom setting that liberated student intention and association.

I also examined teaching and the teacher's role in such spaces. Bakhtin's work was again important—this time, his celebratory reading of Fyodor Dostoevsky's fiction. For Bakhtin (1984a), Dostoevsky's novels featured strong characters who, in dialogue with each other and the author, articulated a plurality (a *polyphony*) of worldviews and truths—and this in sharp contrast to the *monologic* novels of most other writers, novels with a single worldview (that of the novelist) mouthed by servile characters. I looked to Bakhtin's appraisal of Dostoevsky in order to criticize how progressive and critical approaches to literacy have envisioned teaching and the teacher. I imagined the teacher as a novelist—a Dostoevskian novelist—who created a polyphonic classroom-novel and took up dialogic relations with student-characters. With this metaphor, I began to revise the roles and responsibilities of workshop teachers.

Over time, I realized that in this work on writing and its instruction, I had been willing to take up issues of social class and gender, but had shied away from race and racism. After finishing my second book, and at about the time that I was leaving Washington University in St. Louis to come to the University of Minnesota, I dedicated myself to learning about race in the United States and its relations to schooling and teacher education.

I did not want to take up race in a cheap or facile way, so it took me a number of years to read myself into and begin to position myself in relation to various and extensive literatures (and, of course, this labor continues). Eventually, I centered my learning about race in critical Whiteness and cultural studies—especially work coming out of labor history that was inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois's (1935/1992) idea, in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880*, that White workers were paid “a sort of public and psychological wage” (p. 700) by White elites that did little to alter their material condition, but that enabled White workers to think of themselves as different from and superior to Black people. In addition, the writing of Ralph Ellison (1953/1995, 1986) on the scapegoating rituals that fortify White Americans'

sense of self, as well as Thandeka's (2001) psychoanalytic and historical rendering of White racial identity, became crucial to my theorizing.

This short account of how I came to race and racism in my scholarship is reasonable enough, but it omits a crucial underpinning to my study and learning. A better way to narrate this would be to add that, during my time as an assistant and then associate professor at Wash U (that's what we called it), I lived in Black neighborhoods and, during the summer, played basketball three or four nights a week on outdoor courts where I was usually the only White player among Black teammates and opponents. I was lucky enough to have Black colleagues at Wash U who wrote brilliantly about race, such as Garrett Duncan and Gerald Early, and I learned much from them. So it is certainly fair to say that my *intellectual* engagement with race and racism had already begun in St. Louis. But the most significant engagements were probably more *bodily* ones. Unconsciously (sometimes more consciously)—as I ate and laughed and hollered with my neighbors in our backyards, and as I coordinated the movements of my White body in relation to Black bodies on the basketball courts in Heman Park—I was learning not only about who my neighbors and friends were, but also about who I was as a White man. As always, my body was ahead of my conscious thought, my experiences ahead of my ability to understand and theorize what was happening and what it meant. As Dewey (1916/1966) put it:

Activity begins in an impulsive form [and] does not know what it is about; that is to say, what are its interactions with other activities. An activity which brings education or instruction with it makes one aware of some of the connections which had been imperceptible. (p. 77)

As my reading and study caught up with my living, I realized that I would need to go backward to go forward. I knew that I wanted to do an interview study with White people, in order to write about White supremacy and White racial identity. And I knew that I wanted to find a way to write in which I did not, as author, separate myself from or suggest that I was superior to the people I was writing about (something you see, over and over again, in books written about White people by White antiracists). I realized that I should go home.

So I did.

I interviewed 22 White people, aged 18 to 83. Across two or three open-ended interviews totaling three to six hours, we talked about how they thought the German and Polish origins of the town of Boonendam (a pseudonym I created from an Ojibwe word meaning to forget or to give up thinking about something) influenced their lives there. I asked them to try to remember the first time that they realized they were White and to narrate experiences in which race somehow mattered or was important. We talked about how they and their community had responded to people of Color in various situations and across different historical events, including the controversy surrounding Ojibwe efforts in the 1970s to claim fishing rights on nearby lakes and rivers, and their interactions with recent arrivals to the area, especially Hmong and Mexican Americans hired to work on local farms.

Drawn from this larger interview study, as well as autoethnographic writing, my recent book—*White folks: Race and identity in rural America* (Lensmire, 2017)—

focuses on the experiences and stories of eight White people (including me) from Boonendam, Wisconsin, and explores the complex social production of White racial identities. The book is about becoming a White person in a White community, but demonstrates just how dependent White racial identities are on racial others, even in segregated White spaces.

Unfortunately, my book is timely. As racial actors in the United States, White people do not understand themselves or their country very well. We may try to take up colorblindness as a sensible, moral stance and hope that we had achieved a post-racial society with the election of our first Black president. But then how do we make sense of all the violence being waged against people of Color, make sense of all the news (that is not new) in our country?

Furthermore, the current dominant critical framework for understanding racism and Whiteness—a White privilege framework, popularized by writers such as Peggy McIntosh and Tim Wise—provides precious little help to those who want to understand and intervene in how White people learn to be White, how we come to think and feel and act as we do. Within a White privilege framework, White people are conceptualized as little more than the smooth embodiment of privilege.

Something more is needed—a way of conceptualizing White people that is unafraid to confront, head on, the violence at the core of White racial selves, but that also illuminates conflicts and complexities there. What's needed is a way of understanding White people that recognizes the profound ambivalence that characterizes White thinking and feeling in relation to people of Color—not just fear and rejection, but also envy and attraction. If, as Antonio Gramsci (1971) thought, the “starting point of critical elaboration is . . . ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory” (p. 324), then in *White folks* I attempt to create inventories and understand traces, as regards the historical process of becoming White in a rural community in the United States. My hope is that the storytelling and theorizing I do in this book will support the development of more effective antiracist pedagogies, and that it will help us imagine and live out better ways of working with and mobilizing White people to take up antiracist and social justice action.

Inevitably, unavoidably, narratives reveal some things and hide others. My account of how and why my journey as a critical researcher and educator played out as it did does not escape this fact.

One goal I had in telling my story was not to write as if ideas and books were the only important characters. I love reading. Serious, sustained study has been crucial. Without the writings of Du Bois and Bakhtin and many others, I would not have written what I have written, done what I have done, and become what I have become.

That said, my hatred of school and my love of basketball have been just as important in propelling my life (and story) forward.

And, of course, once I say this, once I assert this, it becomes apparent immediately that there is more going on in this hatred and love than is immediately apparent—that

this love and hatred must be interpreted, theorized, become educative so I can see how they interact and connect with other things and activities.

Lurking in my hatred of schooling is a working-class kid's nascent critique of capitalism. And my love of basketball surely expresses, among other things, an attraction to Black ways of moving in the world and the fact that playing basketball has taught me about what it means to be free—where freedom is not the absence of constraint but the power to do something, create something, in community with others.

My story is one of movement, then, of the thinking body leaping forward, half aware of what it is doing and why, and of movement among story and interpretation, practice and theory, living and learning.

Suggested Readings

Ellison, R. (1995). *Shadow and act*. New York, NY: Vintage International. (Original work published 1953).

I have found Ralph Ellison's collection of essays to be incredibly helpful in understanding race and Whiteness in the United States. Two aspects of these essays that are especially important are how complex and conflicted racial identities are assumed to be by Ellison and the fact that, at every moment, he is concerned with what all of this means for democracy.

Thandeka. (2001). *Learning to be White: Money, race, and God in America*. New York, NY: Continuum.

I would be hard-pressed to name another book that is as effective at theorizing White racial identity—not only in terms of societal structure and history, but also at the level of intimate, everyday relations and interactions.

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