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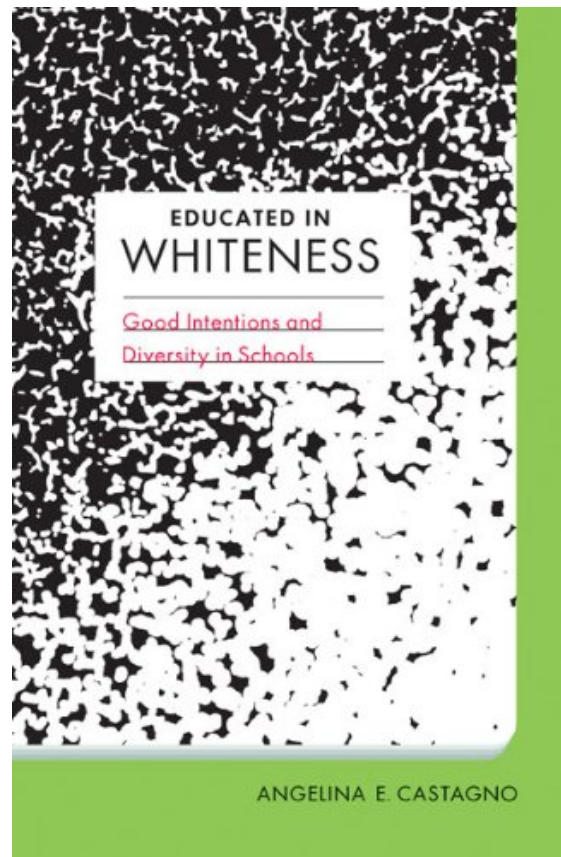
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Reviewed by Dennis J. Seese
American University
Washington, DC

Educated in Whiteness is the product of Professor Angelina E. Castagno's thorough ethnographic examination of how the ideology of whiteness operates in two demographically and socioeconomically distinct secondary schools in the 'Zion School District' in Salt Lake City, Utah. Defined as "structural arrangements and ideologies of race dominance" (p. 4) that seek at their core to perpetuate inequities and maintain a racialized, hierarchical status quo, Castagno is interested in analyzing how whiteness exists and continues to paradoxically exert its power through the many commonly accepted, widely implemented policies and strategies designed specifically to address the substantive lack of equity in our nation's schools. One of Castagno's major discoveries/points of emphasis is the damaging role—what she depicts as—a pervasive "culture of niceness" plays in sustaining this systemic inequality.

Much of Castagno's research was conducted during the 2005-2006 academic year and is built upon immersion in the classrooms of twenty-four teachers across the two schools, 'Spruce' and 'Birch.' The book was also constructed from an additional wealth of formal interviews with over forty teachers and



administrators in addition to regular attendance at all manner of district board meetings, assemblies and professional development events. The first four chapters of *Educated in Whiteness* draw exclusively upon this material while Chapter Five “Obscuring Whiteness from Liberalism” is built from more recent interviews conducted between 2010-12 wherein the author returned to Birch as an external evaluator to examine the impact a federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) was having on the school. In addition to foregrounding the theory of whiteness as a functioning ideology that “maintains power and privilege by perpetuating and legitimating the status quo while simultaneously maintaining a veneer of neutrality, equality and compassion” (p. 5), Castagno’s ethnography is heavily informed by the tenets of critical race theory (CRT). The book’s chapters all explore a discursive set of conceptual concerns that explicitly illuminate how whiteness manages to function smoothly through the dense clouds of largely well-intended equity language and policy. The discursive concepts explored sequentially are: interest convergence and responsibility; ‘colorblind difference’ and ‘powerblind sameness;’ silence and politeness, equity and meritocracy; and individualism and liberalism. These theoretical concepts are expansively fleshed out with Castagno’s carefully cultivated ethnographic data to advance her critique of mainstream equity work.

A key insight that quickly emerges from the work is the subtle yet damaging conflation of the concepts (and, of course, the words that signify them) of ‘equity’ and ‘equality.’ After noting the omnipresence of “the language of ‘equity’” within Zion School District’s central office, Castagno writes “equity and equality were collapsed into the same idea, making them synonymous, so that fairness and justice (equity) is equated with sameness (equality) (p. 30). This is a widespread philosophical conundrum that afflicts many educators and existing equity work models. How can equity work be carried out effectively when it is fundamentally misunderstood by so many administrators at its very core? It also fits into one of the larger arguments that Castagno advances throughout the book, which involves the perils of myopically focusing equity initiatives on individuals with an overriding, counter-productive focus on individualism as opposed to

macro/structural initiatives designed to eliminate systemic inequality on a societal level. Castagno emphasizes the centrality of this concept to the overarching design of *Educated in Whiteness*, writing “most discussions of diversity, race and equity tend to focus on individuals, and the identities of individuals, but this book asks readers to shift the focus to institutions and ideologies” (p. 8). The damage caused by obsessive focus on the individual is manifest everywhere from the widespread utilization of specific pedagogical and disciplinary approaches to the standard practice of hiring one person to facilitate and oversee equity work in a given district or school. For example, Castagno observes “hiring one person to serve as *the* leader for diversity and equity efforts often results in the isolation of both the person and the efforts” (p. 30). This is an acute observation that becomes worrisome when considering the sheer number of schools who tackle equity work with such a singular model but is made even more dire when considering such “diversity related positions are often the only higher-ranking leadership positions held by people of color, which serves to exacerbate their marginalization and increase the likelihood of their failure” (p. 30). Castagno’s critique of individualism relative to equity work builds to a crescendo in chapter five when she returns to Birch during the bitter maelstrom of the current school-reform movement.

For most educators in Zion being ‘nice’ had developed into a shield, vigilantly protecting them from doing the often uncomfortable and unsettling groundwork that might conceivably begin to lay the foundation for an equitable future, according to Castagno. Besides the avoidance and unwillingness to name daily instances of racism and discrimination, in Castagno’s view much of this supposed ‘niceness’ rested upon deficit frameworks that also served to shield educators and institutions from disproportionately poor outcomes that overwhelmingly afflict low-income communities and communities of color. Here again the concept of individualism is identified as a method with which responsibility for inequitable outcome is diffused and shifted back upon individual students or specific families and communities. The difficulty in substantively redressing the corrosive impact of ‘niceness’ becomes apparent when Castagno locates

niceness as operating through and undergirding beloved, collectively revered concepts such as meritocracy, equality and more recently colorblindness. These concepts combine to form the very core of a constructed, idealized American identity to people on both sides of the ideological and political divide that traverses modern America. The argument that views equality and meritocracy as foot soldiers of whiteness becomes problematic for a number of reasons, primarily though because Castagno increasingly associates it exclusively with liberalism, particularly in the last chapter, while it can be argued that the concept of meritocracy is just as or even more fundamental to modern conservative psychology and thought, making it one of the few remaining universal American values.

Castagno begins to launch a relentless critique on “the insidiousness of our allegiance to meritocracy and equality,” (p. 112) particularly after becoming acquainted with the Zion School District’s admiration of and closely hewn adherence to the premises of Dr. Ruby Payne’s *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Castagno explicitly labels meritocracy and equality the “ideological workhorses of whiteness” (p. 112). This critique of meritocracy, while well reasoned and supported by reams of data demonstrating how dramatically underserved students of color and low socioeconomic status are, collides with deeply held, cherished notions of what it means to be an ‘American,’ notions the pervasiveness of which Castagno seems to drastically underestimate. The easy stridence with which she recommends discarding such a key facet of the American identity narrative is jarring and unrealistic, serving to weaken the overall strength of her argument. Castagno ridicules repeatedly and rather dismissively the entire notion or possibility of a ‘meritocracy’ existing in schools, urging teachers to discard notions of meritocracy outright, only slightly, grudgingly countenancing the thought that some educators might well truly believe in the notion themselves, writing “Spruce educators were firmly rooted in meritocracy and assumed equal opportunity existed both within and outside of their school” (p. 114). Again, Castagno seems unwilling to grasp the true depth of meritocracy’s (whether rightfully viewed as a hollow sham or not) hold in the American collective consciousness. In some ways what she is suggesting is the very deconstruction of

the American psyche, which is understandable as some facets of our collective identity are in desperate need of renegotiation. Unraveling the idea of meritocracy from the larger American identity will be an arduous task and the prescription, even a brief one, of how to manage such a herculean feat would have been a welcome addition to *Educated in Whiteness*. She returns to this impasse in the book's conclusion, noting that "educators are just as invested in dominant American ideologies and institutions as any other individuals in our society," perhaps "even more invested in things like equality and meritocracy" due to how public schools are positioned in our society. It is a welcome admission on the part of the author whose overall point that they may also serve to "obscure systemic inequity" is well made and well taken. Sometimes, however, during the course of the book the subtle intractability of this problem is undersold and teachers are judged rather harshly for their unwillingness to critique and deconstruct ideas they may well wholeheartedly adhere to.

Castagno also glimpsed manifestations of whiteness in the tension between Zion educators, attempts to value 'powerblind sameness' and 'colorblind difference' at the same time, often shifting their allegiance to one or another ideology "depending on the context and particular demographics of the students being taught" (p. 48). The tension inherent in these sudden shifts often produced a dissonance or niceness that failed to address equity in any meaningful manner, according to Castagno's observations. 'Powerblind sameness,' or "denial of power related difference" (p. 50) was particularly prevalent in the Zion School and was manifested in the efforts of many educators to craft 'universal lessons' presumably devoid of any cultural specific context. Perhaps more troubling was many educators understanding of multicultural education as simply a difference in learning styles. According to Castagno, this provided teachers a way to "avoid talking about power-related differences among their students and instead maximize the similarities between them" (p. 52). This arrangement further allowed 'teachers to talk about students in nice ways—ways that avoided reference to power related aspects of their identities,' (p. 53) ultimately protecting "whiteness because race and structural arrangements of power are obscured" (p. 53). These

delicate, yet powerful machinations of language are masterfully explored to reveal the surprising ways whiteness is perpetuated in schools. During the course of these explorations Castagno observes that they allow educators maintain the belief that schooling is apolitical, a critical observation that again demonstrates how incredibly entrenched these problems are, as most teachers are loathe to concede or even conceive of their classrooms as political zones. An interesting angle for further research would be considering what classrooms would look like if a majority of teachers were to conceive of their classrooms in such a manner. However, like Castagno's view of meritocracy, the wish to overtly politicize schools and classrooms would likely meet an extremely fierce resistance and the book stops short of outlining how such things could successfully be undertaken.

Perhaps the most powerful and disheartening section of *Educated in Whiteness* is chapter three where silences around race and sexuality are explored in great detail. Castagno relays a number of troubling anecdotes where students said or otherwise displayed racist behavior and were not adequately disciplined. Even more alarming is Castagno's recording of a relatively benign and interesting racial dialogue between Latino and Pacific Islander students that were shut down by an educator in the name of niceness so that others may not be offended. These types of silencing serve to starkly illuminate the damage 'niceness' inflicts on students curious and eager to talk about race in ways that educators can't after years of being shielded by the vagaries of politeness. Fitting within the larger pattern of Castagno's observations these appeals to niceness served whiteness by socializing inquisitive students in the norms of politeness, neutralizing their ability to advocate for systemic change. Sadly, homophobia was rife in both schools. Castagno reports observing more than fifty instances of homophobic comments that went unanswered by educators (p.98). This is simply astonishing. The most common response from Zion teachers was to admonish students to be more polite and refrain from using words the teacher's didn't approve of. It's hard to see how being 'polite' in this context does anything but create a terrifyingly negligent, hostile and unsafe atmosphere for LGBT youth. Castagno situates these silences and this

peculiar form of ‘politeness’ as being in the service of a heteronormative status-quo that solidifies whiteness.

Castagno’s ongoing critique of individualism is developed in a fascinating and unanticipated fashion in chapter five. But once again it must be noted that the author is critiquing the “primacy of the individual,” (p. 139) another concept that is absolutely sacrosanct to Americans. As previously mentioned, Castagno identifies individualism as a key pillar of classic liberalism, a liberalism “characterized by a number of ideas and values that might otherwise be understood as wholly American” (p. 139). At least in this instance the deep-rooted nature of individualism in American thought is properly noted to add necessary context to how difficult it may be to achieve solutions to the problem Castagno is critiquing, in this case: individualism. She goes on to examine liberalism and more specifically neoliberalism’s impact on the current school reform movement, lamenting that neoliberalism has solidified a tendency, noted elsewhere in the book, wherein individuals (whether administrators, teachers or students) “are held staunchly responsible for failure that is institutionally predetermined” (p. 138). This is a clear-cut and provocative example of how an emphasis on the individual can indeed operate in the service of whiteness. She then traces the discourse of individualism within the language of Education Secretary Arne Duncan to demonstrate how recent efforts to improve education such as *Race to the Top* are heavily imbued with liberal thought dependent upon appeals to the individual. Taking these readings further, Castagno points out that this framework still emphasizes individual successes and failures “that mask the institutionally sanctioned inequity and whiteness that continue to operate through this well-intentioned program” (p. 142). Professor Castagno then takes this focus to its logical extreme, observing that the operative neoliberal school reform framework, a framework predicated on competition between schools for desperately needed funding, has successfully transformed schools themselves from institutions to individuals. In one of the book’s most arresting passages, Castagno notes “just as educators once talked about remediating at-risk students, policy makers now talk about remediating at risk-schools” (p. 145). This is a chilling transformation, an individualism that negates actual individuals, turning

schools into individuals seeking compassion instead of being “institutions that we must make sure are serving all people equitably” (p. 145). It’s a brilliant observation of perhaps the most complex, damaging example of how whiteness functions through well-meaning policy alternatives. Castagno observes a divided school full of overwhelmed administrators, burned out teachers and edgy students all at cross-purposes with one another. Teacher after teacher speaks of the school’s treacherously low morale. With sadness, but not surprisingly, even this state of affairs being described in disconcertingly familiar neoliberal terms by administrators as “part of the process” (p. 159). The “divisiveness and struggles” just a necessary symptom of neoliberalism’s patented, vaunted “creative destruction.”

Overall, *Educated in Whiteness* is a considerable scholarly achievement. A rational, robust and unconventional critique of equity work in schools that uncovers some painful truths about standard approaches to equity and diversity work in public schools. Castagno’s analysis of ‘politeness’ and its function as a masking agent for the perpetuation of whiteness should be read and considered by all practitioners who value and strive towards creating a legitimately equitable future in our nation’s schools.

About the Reviewer

Dennis J. Seese

Research and Instruction Librarian


American University

Dennis J. Seese is a research and instruction librarian at American University in Washington DC. He earned his MLIS from the University of Pittsburgh and is currently pursuing an MA in History at American University. He has been professionally engaged with academic education and information technology issues for years. His research interests include the changing nature of cognition in the era of digital media, service and experiential learning and the evolution of library instruction on modern campuses. He has published reviews in *Library Journal* and *Educational Media Reviews Online (EMRO)*, in addition to writing for venues as diverse as the *Huffington Post* and *ESPN.com*

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