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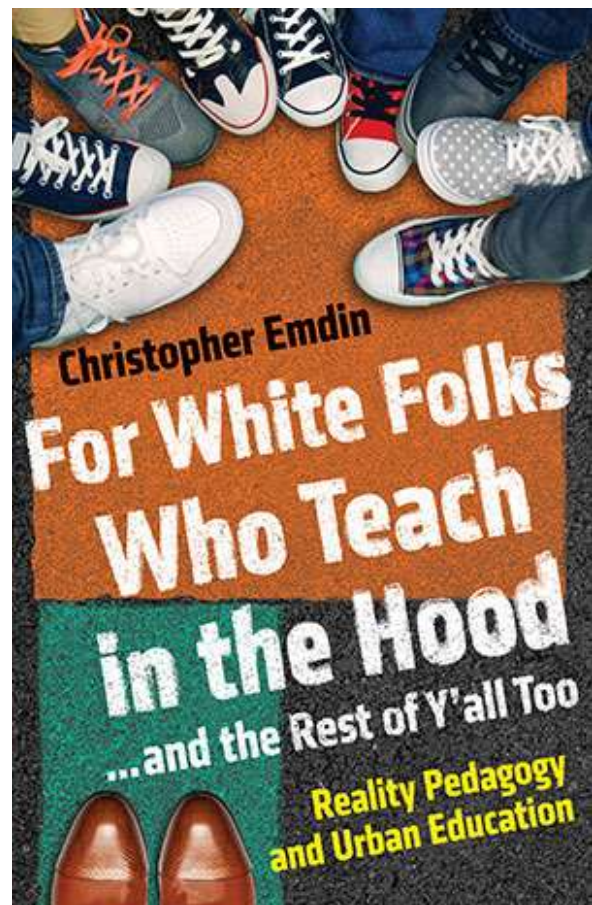
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In the summer of 2016, the world witnessed viral videos of police officers shooting unarmed black men and #BlackLivesMatter protests shutting down highways in several major cities. Many of us recognize that schools cannot solve the problems of deep-seated institutional and structural racism in this country, but as Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) notes, they are nevertheless a part of a socially-unjust equation of urban life – “those who failed in the schools justified their destruction in the streets” (p. 33). *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood* – featured across a variety of popular media outlets – is an attempt to intervene and disrupt this equation by offering educators pedagogical tools to make urban schools better spaces for children from diverse backgrounds. In what follows, I first present an overview of the book’s key points, then I analyze its strengths and possible shortcomings.

The book speaks to educators teaching in urban contexts and presents a case for a type of pedagogy that allows a teacher to



connect better with diverse students and to help students from underserved communities thrive in school contexts. The entry point into this pedagogy is the notion of “neoinogeneity.” Emdin proposes to identify urban youth as “neoinigenous” due to the similarity of their experiences with Indigenous groups: both groups have been marginalized by schools, silenced by teachers, or colonized through educational institutions. As long as schools are driven by “an imaginary white middle-class ideal” (p. 9), the “neoinigenous” will continue to experience oppression by being perceived as unsalvageable failures. These problematic perceptions held by many teachers in urban contexts will continue to get in the way of these students’ opportunities for meaningful learning experiences.

To counteract oppressive practices and to help teachers tailor their teaching to the needs of the neoinigenous, Emdin proposes to employ “reality pedagogy” – “an approach to teaching and learning that has a primary goal of meeting each student on his or her own cultural and emotional turf” (p. 27). According to Emdin, reality pedagogy emerges out of educators’ commitment to camaraderie, courage, and Pentecostal teaching. From this perspective, camaraderie requires “entering into the spaces in which [students] reside” (p. 26) and acknowledging their “soul wounds” (p. 27). Courage demands that educators confront fear-based narratives about urban students and take the position of “an ally who is working with [the students] to reclaim their humanity” (p. 40). Finally, drawing on the style of dynamic interactions common in Black churches, Pentecostal teaching interweaves moments of reflection and call-and-response in order to communicate to students that their engagement matters in the learning process.

With these commitments as its foundation, Emdin suggests that reality pedagogy consists of “Seven C’s”: “cogenerative dialogues, coteaching, cosmopolitanism, context, content, competition, and curation” (p. 60). Each element emerges out of Emdin’s analysis of

students’ everyday practices, providing the teacher with concrete tools for tapping into students’ funds of knowledge and performative repertoires to reimagine how school learning can be made meaningful in urban contexts. Most of the chapters in the book deal with each of the “Seven C’s” offering specific strategies for implementing that element in the classroom. First, drawing on the lessons from students’ participation in rap cyphers, Emdin urges educators to engage students in *cogenerative dialogues*. In small groups of three or four, students meet with the teacher to “engage in a cogen as a type of cypher” (p. 65) in order to design a plan for improving their classroom experiences. The plan is implemented and future meetings are dedicated to discussing whether the plan is bearing the desired result or whether it needs to be modified. Second, Emdin invites educators to *co-teach* with their students, showing the depth of insight that a teacher can gain by letting students draw on their everyday experiences to create nontraditional forms of teaching or to communicate complex concepts to their peers. Important in this approach is the teacher’s own willingness to treat students as experts and learn from them. Third, the notion of *cosmopolitanism* is used to describe practices that establish family-like structures in the classroom, so that students can support each other “in navigating the academic and social challenges” (p. 124) and feel responsible for what is happening in their classrooms.

Focusing on *context and content* next, Emdin suggests that educators should connect to students’ networks, get involved in students’ communities, and become embedded in students’ neighborhoods, so that they can use “context as a pedagogical tool” (p. 137). Having first-hand experiences in students’ lives outside of school can help an educator make deeper connections with class content. Using examples of community hip-hop battles, Emdin advocates for class *competitions* that replicate those practices for the service of students’ academic learning. Teachers (and administrators) should also recognize the value

that students' clothing and speaking styles carry in students' communities. Instead of ridiculing students for their clothing choices, teachers should consider what those clothes are intended to convey and what changes in their own clothing styles they could make to become close to their students. As to students' language use, Emdin suggests that teachers create intentional structures and implement practices that will help students see words from different registers for the same concepts to support their *code-switching* practices. Finally, Emdin recommends constructive use of social media in the classroom that would allow students to "curate" their experiences and provide windows into their worlds. Together these elements work to recognize realities of students' lives and cultural practices in order to decolonize schooling and restore the joy of learning for urban youth.

An indisputable strength of this book lies in its insights into how students' cultural practices can help teachers connect better with their students. It complements suggestions put forward by Mitchie's (2009) *Holler if You Hear Me* and Howard's (2006) *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* by providing concrete scenarios of pedagogic practices teachers can employ. Rich descriptions of classroom events, detailed narratives of urban teachers' struggles, or stories of insightful revelations are helpful for grounding these practices in the realities of urban teaching. Accounts of Emdin's experiences as a teacher, researcher, and teacher educator draw the reader into the world of urban teaching, in which Emdin serves as a hopeful guide. In presenting step-by-step instructions for how to organize cogenerative dialogues, for example, Emdin not only helps the reader envision how to implement this practice in a classroom but also how to believe that change for the better is possible. For an anxious beginning teacher, the accessible language, descriptive detail, positive outlook, and practical suggestions offer a great potential for improved practice.

Yet, the book presents some challenges for me. While strong in presenting

practical solutions, its theoretical underpinnings waver throughout. Throughout the book, Emdin makes an argument for moving away from the "colonizing processes" (p. 173) of traditional schooling. Even though Emdin draws on some Indigenous scholarship, the absence of references to postcolonial or decolonial studies is striking. Subsequently, different chapters engage theory unevenly and draw on concepts not always consistent with the argument of decolonization. For example, neoindigeneity is connected to Anderson's imagined communities, students' networks are explained through Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social capital, and Durkheim's "collective effervescence" is used to describe the joy of teaching and learning accomplished through context-content connections. This eclectic proliferation (and inconsistent application) of theoretical constructs points to "conceptual confusion" common in multicultural literature (Grant, Elsbree, & Fondrie, 2004, p. 198) that in this case stems primarily from a lack of a unifying theory.

The key concept of this work – neoindigeneity – is a case in point. The coining of this new term to describe the experiences of urban youth lacks the solid theoretical grounding, as Anderson's work on imagined communities deals with the emergence of nationalism, rather than with the marginalization and silencing of non-dominant groups. While I agree with Emdin that educators should meet students' needs with approaches drawn from the reality of students' lives, I am less convinced that lumping all diverse youth under the term "neoindigenous" will be helpful for accomplishing this goal. It is worth keeping in mind that the wounds of the colonized are not the same as the wounds of diasporic communities with which many African-American, Latinx, and Asian American students can identify. An invented term that erases these differences could be detrimental to these groups. Moreover, referring to urban youth as "neoindigenous" obscures the diversity within urban contexts;

evoking “students’ neoindigeneity” essentializes those students’ experiences. Does the construct of neoindigeneity account for the experiences of English language learners or special education students in urban contexts? Does it recognize the intersectionality of students’ multiple identities? Does it acknowledge the sexism and heteronormativity of hip-hop culture that all students allegedly belong to?

A potential danger of this framing is that the problematic categories currently in circulation (such as “gang-bangers”) can become substituted for new categories (“Hip Hop Heads”) that homogenize students’ experiences and present them as known objects, rather than unknown subjects of their own being and becoming. Instead of setting an educator on a path of learning and discovery, the book runs the danger of locking educators into a new set of stereotypes. Had the book been grounded in either postcolonial or decolonial studies, it would have been possible to acknowledge similarities of different students’ experiences as subaltern subjects in a racist system of domination (Chen, 2010). This would allow the author to attend to the cultural hybridity, fluidity, and intersectionality of students’ subaltern identities, to the liminality of their experiences, or to the path towards their collective emancipation (Bhabha, 1994; Chen, 2010). Without this grounding, however, these opportunities are lost and deeper theoretical implications of this work are harder to draw out.

Conceptual confusion, however, limits not only the theoretical depth of this work, but also some of its practical implications. More specifically, Emdin’s use of cosmopolitanism to describe students’ commitments to classroom responsibilities is quite misleading. As problematic as the notion of cosmopolitanism might be (see Mignolo (2011) for a critique of its imperialist and colonialist roots), “connectedness and common purpose” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 11) with humanity at large is at the heart of the term. Flipping this notion to describe a

completely opposite practice – of defining one’s world by the four walls of the classroom or school – can be quite damaging. Ta-Nehisi Coates’s description of his struggle with having to learn French in an urban Baltimore school is helpful for understanding the difference between these meanings:

All of it felt so distant to me. I remember sitting in my seventh-grade French class and not having any idea why I was there. I did not know any French people, and nothing around me suggested I ever would. France was a rock rotating in another galaxy, around another sun, in another sky I would never cross. Why, precisely was I sitting in this classroom? (Coates, 2015, p. 26)

In this context of abstract knowledge of another world, Emdin’s use of cosmopolitanism as responsibilities in the classroom fails to address the question of why that particular student has to be in that particular classroom. Cosmopolitanism in its more traditional meaning, however, is helpful and necessary in this context to help some urban students see that there is a bigger world out there to which they can belong, to which they can strive, and from which they can draw new meanings for their lives. Under the influence of his more cosmopolitan wife, Coates eventually travelled to France and fell in love with the French language. Being in Paris helped him experience a different world – a world free from fear of police violence against a black body. That experience, among other things, allows him to write differently about change – another world is possible and the struggle for it is worth every effort. This is the power of cosmopolitanism in action – visiting another world and reimagining your own world with new insights and new perspectives. Redefining cosmopolitanism as a set of classroom responsibilities robs urban students of an opportunity to experience a different world beyond the bounds of their neighborhoods. To clarify, this critique is not

about the practice itself – it is of paramount importance to help students experience family structure and deep connections with their classmates; rather, it is a critique of reinventing words to describe practices in ways that can be potentially detrimental for students' futures. If cosmopolitanism in the sense of belonging to a bigger world was discussed in addition to the community-building activities (as it is currently used in the book), this conceptual confusion would pose no threat for the book's practical implications.

While Emdin puts significant effort into decolonizing teaching, insights drawn from postcolonial literature suggest that this effort might not produce the desired results. When oppressive interactions between White teachers and diverse students occur, they often stem from teachers' unacknowledged assumptions about their own position at the top of human hierarchy where the path to progress and improvement of students' social condition could only lie through students' emulating teachers' experiences rather than teachers' emulating their students' experiences. One postcolonial scholar suggests that "the decolonization work performed by the colonized will not be complete without the colonizer's deimperialization" (Chen, 2010, p. 23). In other words, it is impossible to decolonize the practice of teaching, without deimperializing the White subject engaged in that teaching. Unless White educators start by critically examining the reasons for why they think certain practices should look a certain way (White supremacy and hegemony of White norms), unless they undertake specific steps to shun "an imaginary white middle-class ideal" (Emdin, 2016, p. 9) that currently drives their work, it is unlikely that their teaching can be decolonized. Apart from presenting alternatives to these ideals, the book does little to topple the underlying hierarchies that brought us to the deplorable state of urban schooling in the first place. Ultimately, while the book is helpful in providing teachers with strategies to try out with students, it is less helpful in engaging a teacher in "learning to

learn from 'below'" (Spivak, 2012, p. 347), as the first precondition for the ethically responsible and answerable engagement with the Other.

Finally, while the book argues against prior colonizing practices, it is not clear how the actual process of educational decolonization could occur. If schools were set up to colonize and deculturalize diverse students (Spring, 2007), then what could be alternative purposes of schooling? This is a particularly important question to consider in the context of overall alienation from schooling in the capitalist society where it is not clear what returns an investment into one's education can bring (MacLeod, 2008). What can teachers of any race say in response to students' simple question: "Why should I be in this place called school?" With a lack of job opportunities across the economy, with no foreseeable change coming to urban communities, with the continual perpetuation of police brutality against black and brown bodies, what are the reasons for students in urban contexts to take school seriously? With a change in day-to-day running of the classrooms, as Emdin suggests, teachers can restore the joy of learning in their students, but is that enough when the myths of meritocracy, the American Dream, democracy, or even basic human rights no longer hold?

While the book reads as an inspirational journey towards a more effective teaching of urban youth, I am wondering how scholars and educators can know that reality pedagogy has improved students' experiences beyond the influence of Emdin's own charisma. In this regard, I look forward to scholarship and research that documents how White teachers engage with reality pedagogy, how their diverse students respond to their teaching, and what ultimate results this pedagogy produces when it is transferred to new contexts. A more just world is possible and perhaps this book is a helpful step towards it.


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