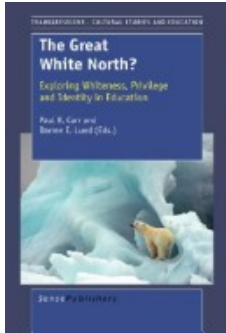


Professional Book Review

Carr, Paul & Lund, Darren E. (Eds.). (2007). *The Great White North? Exploring Whiteness, Privilege and Identity in Education*. Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers. 264 pp., ISBN 978-90-8790-142-4 (pbk). US\$ 49.00/EUR 45.00

Reviewed by Jonathan Gayles, Department of African-American Studies, Georgia State University.



The editors identify a clear purpose for this important text. This purpose is disruptive in that *The Great White North* seeks to disrupt the “common sentiment that binds Canadians together,” which is “the self-assured notion that Canada does not suffer from the same racial problems as in the U.S.” (p. 3). Throughout the 17 entries, the authors pull back the veil on the true reality of race in Canada. It appears that Canadians share more in common with their southern neighbors than they would care to admit. I am guilty of the same misconception about Canada and consequently found this book both dismaying and, to a much greater extent, instructive about the pandemic of Whiteness beyond the United States.

This text is part of Sense Publishers’ “Transgressions: Cultural Studies in Education” book series. It is organized into five sections that address and engage aspects of Whiteness that, while not discrete, are coherently framed by the editors. “Conceptualizing Whiteness” provides the reader with the most personal treatment of Whiteness in the text. The narrative in this section is centered in the authors’ own examinations of the influence of Whiteness in their personal and professional lives. “Whiteness and Indigenous Peoples” identifies academic points of conflict between White Canadians and Indigenous Peoples. This section includes reflexive consideration of what it means to be White in an Indigenous teaching environment, White resistance to acceptance of responsibility for historical and present-day subordination of Indigenous Peoples, and the challenges of being an Indigenous academic. “Deconstructing and Developing White Identity” reflects upon the processes through which critical engagement of Whiteness can be generated and encouraged. Attention is also given to the barriers to the development of this critical engagement. “Learning, Teaching, and Whiteness” examines the obstinacy of Whiteness and the manner in which White Canadians contribute to the entrenchment of Whiteness. “The Institutional Weight of Whiteness” examines the institutional functioning of Whiteness and the manner in which Whiteness operates as a normative institutional reference to which all are expected to conform. This chapter further examines the institutional challenges Whiteness presents in diverse settings.

The Great White North makes an important contribution to the growing body of “White studies” literature. First, it pulls Canada down from an imagined pedestal of racial tolerance, inclusion, and cultural pluralism. Canada’s place on this pedestal is

due, in part, to the escape of enslaved Africans to Canada during chattel slavery in the United States (Riddell, 1920). Despite the horror of chattel slavery, Canadian Blacks are no strangers to racism, even historically (Winks, 1997). Within this free/slave dichotomy, it is easy to elevate Canada in comparison to the United States. In revealing Canada as *The Great White North*, it is therefore much more difficult to dismiss Whiteness as a “U.S. problem” that exclusively reflects the bloody racial origins of the United States. In this sense, Whiteness is successfully attached to people (not nations) and as such, our understanding of the responsibility and ability of people to act against Whiteness is enhanced. This is affirmed through the reflexivity that intersects the majority of the entries in the *Great White North*. Further, in attending to pedagogy, technology, ethnicity, religion, and policy among other domains within which Whiteness operates, *The Great White North* offers what approaches a panoptic treatment of Whiteness. Within this treatment, two entries are particularly salient.

“The Parents of Baywoods: Intersections between Whiteness and Jewish Ethnicity” by Cynthia Levine-Rasky is an important examination of the interplay between Whiteness and Jewish ethnicity in a Canadian community and also complicates simplistic White/Other dichotomies. The author asks:

If an ethical Judaism is grounded in social justice emerging from a collective memory of oppression, how can Jews explain their [academic] success and others’ relative lack of success? What happens when Jews need to extend their understanding of oppression and social justice to other groups? Is this possibility limited by their equally compelling desire to integrate, literally to be forgetful of who they are? (p. 141)

While it is impossible to answer such weighty questions in the limited space afforded within this edited volume, Levine-Rasky does an excellent job examining the desire for a “balanced” ethnic identity and a “balanced” demography in the participants’ communities and schools. Here, “balanced” does not mean an equal representation of racial, ethnic or religious groups. Instead, consistent with the privilege that Levine-Rasky identifies, “balanced” essentially means within an acceptable range that is ultimately defined by the Jewish parents of Baywoods. Within this community, some Jews participate in both exclusionary and inclusionary practices as they seek to maintain a coherent heritage while successfully interacting with a society within which Jews remain “othered.” Levine-Rasky skillfully demonstrates the manner in which some Jews exert privileged status as they act to limit the degree of “diversity” to which they are subject.

Laura Mae Lindo’s “Whiteness and Philosophy: Imagining Non-White Philosophy in Schools” is another particularly strong entry. She successfully supports her argument that

[I]f the secondary school philosophy teacher takes seriously the goal of taking up hegemonic notions of Whiteness that have beleaguered the discipline of philosophy, then students may be provided with the tools to re-think and re-evaluate hegemonic ideologies both within and outside of their school culture. (p.196)

Beginning with a troubling anecdote of a personal experience with racism with which I can relate, Lindo reveals the degree to which Whiteness influences broad assumptions about Canadian education and philosophy itself. Further, and most importantly, she argues for more critical attention to this Canadian “public secret” (p. 197) in pursuit of a philosophy that is ultimately more inclusive and, perhaps, more accurate.

No text is perfect. Despite its strengths, *The Great White North* does have a weakness. Ten pages offer each author precious little space to address the important and expansive issues that reflect the book’s core theme. With few exceptions, each author spends far too much time framing the literature review and/or the methodology, considering the limited space available. While I understand the importance of the kind of academic rigor that is suggested by such traditional approaches to scholarly arguments, it appears that too much attention is given to framing each presentation. The strength of the core content of each entry warrants much more space for the authors’ exploration of Whiteness.

Despite this one limitation, this text will serve researchers and instructors who are interested in Whiteness extremely well. In a post-secondary classroom setting, *The Great White North* would be a valuable supplementary text. Its breadth more than compensates for the brevity of each chapter. Finally, while Canada is the text’s focus, stateside scholars interested in Whiteness would certainly be well-served to purchase *The Great White North*. It is a solid treatment of a problem that is not bound by national borders.

References

- Riddell, W. (1920). The fugitive slave in upper Canada. *The Journal of Negro History*, 5(3), 340-358.
- Winks, R. (1997). *The Blacks in Canada: A history*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.