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REVIEW OF CRITICAL STORYTELLING IN UNCRITICAL TIMES: STORIES DISCLOSED IN A CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS OF EDUCATION COURSE. NICHOLAS D. HARTLEP AND BRANDON O. HENSLEY, EDS. SPRINGER, 2015, 107 PP.

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Critical storytelling seeks to bring new voices into the academic space and expose the many forms of oppression. Critical storytellers use personal narratives and experiences to bring historically marginalized voices into the academic conversation. They ask questions, offer alternate perspectives, and engage in deep reflection. Their actions challenge readers to decolonize their minds and curricula by questioning the accepted norms to transition beyond what, historically, we deem “good writing” while broadening our understanding of what education is.

Nicholas Hartlep and Brandon Hensley serve as decolonizers in their edited work*Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times*. Written by doctoral students in a Cultural Foundations of Education course, the academic and professional experiences collected within the book are as diverse as the students themselves, reflective of the student populations they serve. These identities came together to pull students from their comfort zones while creating a community of learners (p. xvii). The majority of the class engaged in critical storytelling, a process Smith (2017) defines as “mutual learning about each other and ourselves through sharing experiences of difference” (p. 292). This storytelling contributed to the final product, twelve chapters that lay bare oppression in bullying, marginalization, exploitation, sexism, racism, cultural imperialism, and violence. These forms of oppression are woven tightly into our society and culture. As we seek to disrupt norms that give haven to oppression, we must look inwardly and outwardly. I will review a few pieces that challenged me personally and professionally.

In “Letter to a Rural White,” Jamie Neville challenges the notion that racism must be overt to exist. Discussing Whiteness, Neville explains the ways that socialization, privilege, and hidden rules come together to form a colorblind myth. Neville explains that “colorblind narratives fail to account for the counterstories of racism” and issues a call to the rural White who insists that color does not exist to engage in discussions of privilege and take part in dismantling systemic racism (p. 3). This narrative is critical as we enter a time of even greater connectedness and increasing access for rural students. As a woman from a rural county, where I now serve as an instructor, I felt drawn to this piece. The slower pace of a small town can, and often does, disguise uneven access and unequal treatment.

In “Karma Doesn’t Have to Be a Bitch,” co-editor Nicholas Hartlep discusses a topic likely familiar to many readers: bullying. He notes his own experiences with a bully in high school. He leans into “justice-oriented citizenship,” which “required oppressed people to help educate their oppressors about the power of forgiveness and mercy” (p. 11). As leaders in education, we must take an active role in creating safe spaces for difficult conversations. I felt a connection with this piece as I too experienced bullying in high school and reflected on those years of harassment. The harassment was verbal and thus difficult for teachers to address. Hartlep highlights how traditional teacher preparation courses prepare teachers to continue perpetuating the system that “socializes ‘docile bodies’” (p. 8).

I also recall the powerlessness I felt. Reflecting now, I still feel the pain and trauma of hurtful words. My experiences reflect a more extensive system that measures, counts, grades, and monitors behavior, under the guise of education. These designs sustain inequality and force students to conform or risk becoming outcasts. Hartlep’s narrative challenges those who endeavor to teach to be critical of the system historically used to indoctrinate social norms that perpetuate oppression. The narrative calls on students, who will become teachers, to integrate justice-oriented teaching practices.

Kathleen O’Brien, a new teacher in a predominately White elementary school, recounts her frustration and sadness by the first-grade re-enactment of *Snow White*, that sharply created race lines. Black boys were silent, non-participatory trees while the White children carried out speaking roles and time in the spotlight. The play, put on by a seasoned teacher, challenged O’Brien to think critically about the “Mis-Education” in teacher preparation programs that do not include an anti-racist curriculum. Further, O’Brien stresses the need for a multicultural education to become a part of early socialization. This piece invokes the reader to look beyond the prominent faces and positions to consider those silent and unseen. We can all be engaged in anti-racist practices when we call attention to those who are not in the spotlight. Teachers can leverage their positions of power to disrupt

social norms.

Co-editor Brandon Hensley uses autoethnography to discuss the many differences between tenured faculty and the others in higher education. In sharing personal experiences, Hensley tells the story of many adjuncts who serve at the pleasure of the university but have no security. Chronicling the increase in neoliberalism, which he argues devalues those who are not in power positions, Hensley traces how student learning is sacrificed to the corporatized model of higher education. In this model, students become customers and faculty become dispensable cogs in the machine. Those most impacted are voiceless and powerless in the system. Adjuncts—semester-based contracted employees with no benefits—for example, are excluded from decision making. Hensley recounts a faculty meeting where a tenured White male noted that many of the students were like cordwood—uniform length wood pieces typically used as firewood. As an adjunct in the meeting, Hensley recognizes that adjuncts are treated as cordwood as well. His piece, “We Are Not ‘Cordwood’,” calls for social justice-oriented approaches in decision-making, which brings those who do not hold power to the table.

In “Mr. Dolce Gabbana,” Michael Cermak outlines his experiences navigating his administrative role in a nontraditional high school using the pseudonym: “New Deal High School.” This high school represented hope for a new way to teach students and prepare them for tech-based jobs in the area after graduation. The students enrolled were largely low-income and minority students who struggled to conform to and overcome bad experiences with traditional expectations of public education. Cermak outlines the presumptions of the students made by community members, the education board, and teachers in the school. Most significantly, Cermak details the story of how his Dolce & Gabbana glasses became a source of humor and a visible reminder of the class differences. White and from the Chicago suburbs, Cermak was forced to confront his power and privilege while driving a Black female student home. This essay challenges the reader to consider what they may take for granted—even a kind gesture can become suspect. Service, though with the best of intentions, can be undermined when “title, race, and authority … intimidate” those placed in our care (p. 83).

Critical storytelling dismantles hierarchical norms of education. This book is a narrative work of self-reflection and introspection. It is a call to social justice. It is a reminder and challenge to the writer and the reader to confront all forms of oppression. *Critical Storytelling in Uncritical Times* ultimately adds important voices and stories to the discourse. Anyone who teaches would benefit from taking time to read this work for ongoing introspection. These ethnographies can catalyze the disruption of norms.

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