

# ‘A World of White and Snowy Scents’: Teaching Whiteness

by Dave Iasevoli

“I used to live in the world,” begins a character in Ntozake Shange’s *For Colored Girls*, “but then I moved to the North Country.”<sup>1</sup> The “North Country” of the Adirondack Park is just three hours out of New York City, but it resembles lost worlds of hundreds of years past. I knew and loved the region because of camping and hiking trips that began in my 20s, and a recently purchased vacation home within the Adirondack Preserve. My previous world included 25 years of teaching in New York City public and private schools and, later, a career as an English education instructor on such racially-integrated campuses as City University of New York’s Queens College and Columbia University’s Teachers College. Now, I am an assistant professor for SUNY Plattsburgh on its branch campus in Glens Falls, just south of the Adirondack Park. The local folk, those who live here year-round and whose ancestors have lived here all of their lives, joke that I have gone native.

My neighbor, a man whose family traces its roots back to this hamlet for more than a century, calls us city people “Hebes.” “I don’t mean any offense, that’s just what we call ‘em.” When I asked Art<sup>2</sup> about the word, he said, “Sure, it’s short for ‘Hebrew,’ ‘Jewish,’ but it ain’t racist. I’m not racist. It just means that most people up here are poor compared to the city people, and most of them are Jewish. So we call ‘em ‘Hebes’ up here.” I stared at him. “We also say ‘chocolate people’ but it ain’t racist. Hell! I even have some Black or half-Black cousins. They understand.”

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I want to understand. I want to know more about the appreciation of and respect for pluralities, in places where differences in race and ethnic background are rare. Given the lack of regular and even intimate contact with a variety of peoples, what can we expect? Further, with the de facto separation of races in many rural area of the United States, what does race mean to a White teacher? I argue here that even when student populations tend to look monochromatic, a teacher's responsibility is to overcompensate and teach as if their classrooms were integrated. The title of this essay comes from a line in Wallace Stevens' poem: "Still one would want more, one would need more,/More than a world of White and snowy scents."<sup>3</sup>

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This is my home, now, the North Country, and I wanted to see, during my first semester of classes, if some of the concepts integral to teaching diversity to students in New York City resonated here. For the course "Introduction to Comparative Education," I assigned Lisa Delpit's now-classic *Other People's Children*<sup>4</sup>, and anticipated that students would take issue with her arguments. They did not disappoint. Most of the 15 teachers in my class complained about Delpit's "one-note" tirade against White teachers who do not know how to teach Black children. Several labeled Delpit "racist" and two of them recalled their experiences as undergrads in a course where "White guilt" became the true main ingredient of the curriculum for them. These teachers suggested that racism in the U.S. was in its death-throes—that the major battles for civil rights had resulted in fair treatment of students from any background. They were tired of sensitivity workshops and diversity training. We looked at Delpit's argument that says:

...we should strive to make our teaching force diverse, for teachers who share the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of our increasingly diverse student bodies may serve, along with parents and other community members, to provide insights that might otherwise remain hidden.<sup>5</sup>

Much might remain hidden, indeed, when White teachers work with diverse populations, but much more is bound to remain unearthed and never brought to light when White teachers teach classes that are exclusively White.

We read Delpit's text in a course on comparative education, which demanded that we explore the childrearing practices and schooling in non-U.S. cultures. But we regularly circled back to our own backyards, vis á vis schools in urban settings, such as where I taught for so many years. The teachers in this class had no trouble with Delpit's advisory here: "We all interpret behaviors, information, and sit-

uations through our own cultural lenses; these lenses operate involuntarily, below the level of conscious awareness.<sup>76</sup> Yet, they remained antagonistic towards the author's contention that members of the dominant culture would always suffer from certain shortcomings when they tried to teach Black students. In other words, my class of White teachers agreed that many cultural biases exist that may remain below the surface in our teaching, but they resisted an engagement with the possibility that we—as members of the dominant culture—lacked the ability to teach other people's children with empathy.

In her discussion of *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison

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writes of an "association of Blackness with strangeness, with taboo; it is something Whites can appropriate, because it's the one thing they lack. Whiteness is a deficiency."<sup>77</sup> I wonder about White teachers' perceptions about their own race as a deficiency. In our class on comparative education, I asked the teachers to imagine these different discourses: you are the one White person in a roomful of Black students; you are the one Black person in a roomful of White students. I asked them to write about their pedagogy in these hypothetical situations—what would you do differently, if anything? All of these teachers were flummoxed; they had never before considered such situations. Most of them started to respond that they would not do anything differently—that kids are kids, no matter their race. So, clearly, they took stances opposed to Delpit's.

Then, nearly half the class began to talk more discursively about the necessity of acknowledging differences. One woman said, "Listen, I know that a class full of Black kids is going to look on me here as a hillbilly—a redneck, even. 'You listen to country?' one kid asked me once. Yeah, I like country, and that labels me a redneck to most Black people." We entered into a free discussion about White stereotypes: we can't dance, no rhythm, we all ride tractors (!), bland food, rich, we spoil our children, everything comes easy. This discussion threatened to become a kind of rant, when one student (bless her soul), brought Delpit back into the picture, by citing one of her aspects of power: "The culture of the school is based on the culture of the upper and middle classes—of those in power."<sup>78</sup> This teacher pointed out that no matter who voices stereotypes about whom, Whites still occupy the central positions of power in this nation.

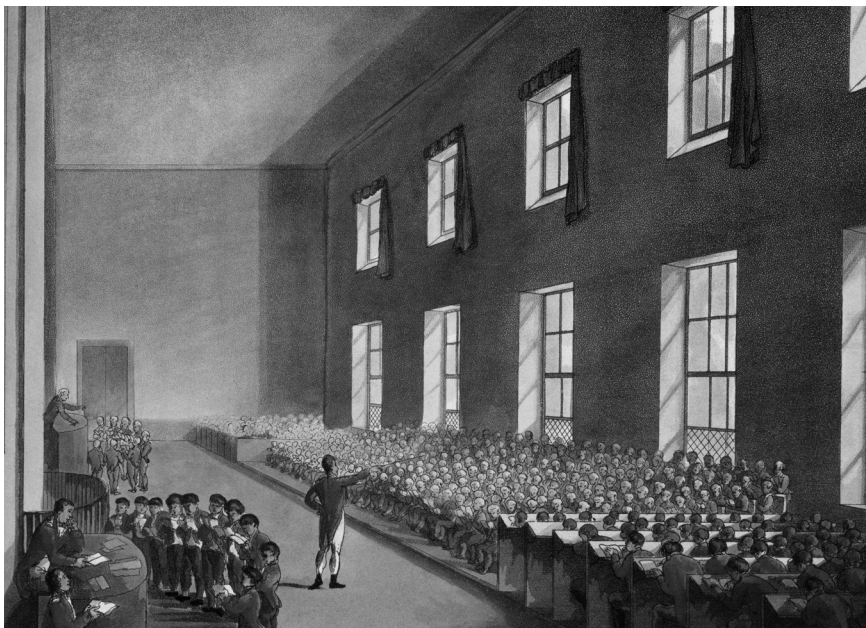
In our next session, I brought in one of the recommended readings for the course, Kozol's *The Shame of the Nation*.<sup>9</sup> I wanted these students to dwell within

the shocking subtitle for a spell: *The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. “Apartheid” remains one of those trigger words that always hits hard. Throughout this work, Kozol argues that in the half-decade since *Brown v. Board of Education*, our nation and our dominant culture have given up on the integration of schools: “Segregation, rarely discussed, scarcely even acknowledged by elected officials and school leaders ... is incompatible with the healthy functioning of a multiracial society.”<sup>10</sup>

At the time, the possibility of electing a Black president seemed remote, at best. Obama’s star had just begun to rise, and only a few of the students knew his name at the start of the course. Some students pointed to the successes of charter schools in Washington and Philadelphia (where Delpit taught), and Black students’ improved standardized test scores. Kozol addresses this phenomenon:

“Even many Black leaders ... have given up on integration. ... They argue ‘a Black child does not need White classmates in order to learn.’ So education policies ... ‘now aim to raise scores in [the]schools that Black children attend. ... That effort will be flawed even if it succeeds.’ The 1954 decision ... ‘was not about raising scores for children of minorities but about giving Black children access to majority culture, so they could negotiate it more confidently.’”<sup>11</sup>

One woman brought up access to minority culture—and the co-existence of hip-hop alongside country music in Upstate New York. We discussed the lack of a two-way street here: just because many Whites embrace elements of Black culture does not mean that Blacks have access to the privileges of the dominant culture. Nonetheless, the majority of teachers in this course insisted that separate did



not necessarily mean unequal. I suggested that integrated classrooms, however difficult to teach and reach every student, meant better classrooms.

Every one of the 15 teachers here had heard of Dave Chappelle. Two of them, including the woman who liked country music, had avidly watched his show. I warned the class that Chappelle was strong stuff, and offered them the opportunity to leave. All stayed in the room. I showed a segment, about a blind, old, racist man, "Clayton Bigsby,"<sup>12</sup> who counts himself a member of the Ku Klux Klan, as a "Black White-supremacist"—and who does not know that he himself is Black. On his way to a book signing, Bigsby's car stops at a light. A Mustang convertible pulls

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up alongside, with a trio of young White men listening to rap. Bigsby expresses his outrage: "Why'n't you jungle-bunnies turn that music off! Niggers make me sick! Woogie-boogie niggers!" The young White man in the driver's seat asks his buddy, "Did he just call us 'niggers'?... Awesome!" He exclaims exultantly that a Black man "sees" them as niggers, and the two men in the front seats exchange power punches. The teachers in my class laughed at this; then one woman's voice rose above the laughter. "It's not funny—it's true." I suggested that it can be both. We have to laugh at hate speech rooted in ignorance but we have to teach how to end it, too.

**A**nother attempt to integrate the North Country appeals to me. I signed up to become a member of the local volunteer fire department as soon as I moved here permanently. My hope is to alter at least a few perceptions on the part of the year-rounders that city people have no interest in the day-to-day life of the community. In one session, about knots and ropes, the instructor took us through tying figure eights, Becket bends, and bowlines. We students held up this last knot for the instructor's inspection. As he made his way around the tables, we noticed the same phenomena: there were nearly 30 nooses dangling around the room. "When do we learn the hangman's noose?" a student queried. "No hangman's nooses," responded our teacher. "That'll get you kicked out of this class. That's one thing that is outlawed by all the fire departments." He paused. He had the class' attention. "Hangman's nooses caused a lot of trouble for fire departments." I sensed a collective wink move through the classroom; this might have been my imagination. But in the subsequent session, during a lecture about forcible entry into burning structures, the instructor alluded to a section of Glens Falls that is populated mostly by Blacks and Latinos: "Always exercise caution once you get the door

open. You never know what you're gonna find inside. You know what I mean. Those people ...." He shook his head. The class nodded.

During a discussion in my class about poor urban students' experiences with the penal system, I posed the question, "Could this happen up here?" One student responded, "It's already happening! Those people bring their ways up here—there's drugs all over Glens Falls!" A silence ensued. I considered the imperative to push the student to state explicitly what he meant by "those people," but I did not say anything. No one did. We all knew what he was saying.

Two words can kill any possibility of understanding between us: you people.

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*In the North Country, the extreme Whiteness of the field makes me, a city person, a darker brother, at best.*

When I taught for two years on Rikers Island, New York City's jail facility, I learned within a few days about the damage these words can create. I wanted to assign homework to a small group of English/language arts students, and tried to joke about the inappropriateness of "home" in this setting. "You people cannot do homework, of course, so what shall we call this?" One student suggested simply "work," but another, Jamal, just repeated "you people." Then there was silence. "You people.' I hate that! My grandmother always used to tell me about White people calling her 'you people.' She right. Honkies still call us 'you people.'" I tried to backpedal, too late. Jamal forced me to realize that these words crush—they epitomize the dynamic of master-slave relations.

In the jail, the students, predominantly Black and Latino, made me conscious of my Whiteness, even though my paternal grandfather, I learned in early middle-age, came out of Morocco to marry a Southern Italian woman. Color and race rest uneasily upon a relative spectrum. On Rikers Island, the field accentuated my Whiteness. There was no way around this facticity, even when students remarked that I could "talk Black." In the North Country, the extreme Whiteness of the field makes me, a city person, a darker brother, at best.


So, you may wonder, why remain in this strange land? I could try to wax poetic about the stark beauties of the Adirondacks, its quiet and smells and serious winters—a world of snow for at least five months. Instead, I'll point to the challenge of teaching teachers here, where we flub and fluff in our discussions about "multi-culturalism and diversity" because there is so little diversity of backgrounds. And I suggest that just this challenge counts as the most central axis upon which genuine change—improvements—can occur in our schools.

There is no magic about teaching this relativity, the field-dependency of race

and background. How long now have we known that the lack of experience with pluralism leads to closed minds? So what has changed in day-to-day interactions? More pertinently: what has changed in diversity courses?

Delpit points to the growing culture clash in urban schools—more new teachers are White, whereas greater proportions of the students are Black and Latino. This phenomenon may not occur in the North Country, nor in most rural areas of the nation, for many decades hence, but there are some signs of change. I suggest that all upcoming teachers, from all backgrounds, should be required to complete at least one field-work experience, or student-teaching placement, in a classroom where they will be the other.

I refute those teachers' insistence that the wars against racist practices, particularly against Blacks, have ended.

When Barack Obama neared securing the nomination of his party, my neighbor Art and I discussed his prospects. "I tell you, if he gets elected, he won't last one month." I knew where Art was going with this, and I remained mute. "Someone will take him out. I swear to you, there are some guys up here—they won't stand for a Black president." These words, these sentiments, these calcified prejudices, still chill the mind. "Not me," he added after a beat, "I am not racist." He is not alone in his limited vision of the United States, the segregated version. You have to wonder who taught him, back in the day. 

## ENDNOTES

1. Shange, *For Colored Girls who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*.
2. All names have been changed.
3. Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 194.
4. Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.
5. *Ibid.*, 181.
6. *Ibid.*, 151.
7. Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, 65.
8. See note 4 above, 25.
9. Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*.
10. *Ibid.*, 20.
11. Richard Rothstein, cited by Kozol, *ibid.*, 229.
12. *The Dave Chappelle Show*, "Frontline: Clayton Bigsby."

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