

Preface

I have always been fascinated by the brilliant theater piece *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, by Ntozake Shange. I was first drawn to this powerful work by its colorful cover, and I fell in love with it when I began to read the powerful prose. As a teenager, it was the title that affected me most. Seeing the word *enuf* in print, on the cover of a book, meant the world to me. It was bold and provocative—and it comforted me to know that someone from outside the four-block radius I called home knew this word. *Enuf* and *enough* are very different words. They have the same meaning, can be used in the same context, but each has very different significance to those who employ them. *Enuf* sits comfortably in the subtitle of a book like *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*, allowing the work to call out to those for and about whom it is written. Its presence in the book title indicates that there is no political correctness, no tainting of the truth, and no hiding of what needs to be said. It prepares the reader for the substance of the text.

In many ways, this book draws from the traditions set forth by Shange. While it is neither a collection of poems and stories nor a theater piece, its intentions are similar. The title works toward invoking necessary truths and offering new ways forward. It is clearly intended for “white folks who teach in the hood.” But it is also for those who work with them, hire them, whose family members are taught by them, and who themselves are being, or have been, taught by them.

In short, this book is for people of all colors who take a particular approach to education. They may be white. They may be black. In all cases, they are so deeply committed to an approach to pedagogy that is Eurocentric in its form and function that the color of their skin doesn't matter. When I say that their skin color doesn't matter, I am not dismissing the particular responsibilities of privileged groups in societies that disadvantage marginalized groups. I am also not discounting the need to discuss race and injustice under the fallacy of equity. What I am suggesting is that it is possible for people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds to take on approaches to teaching that hurt youth of color. Malcolm X described this phenomenon in a powerful speech about the house Negro and the field Negro in the slave South. He described the black slave who toiled in the fields and the house Negro who worked in the white master's house. He noted that at some point, the house Negro became so invested in the well-being of the master that the master's needs and concerns took preeminence over his own needs and that of the field Negro. This is the equivalent of the black educator so invested in the structure and pedagogies of the traditional school system that the needs of black and brown students become secondary to maintaining the status quo. For the "white" educator, this investment in traditional schooling is often generational, following the beliefs of parents and grandparents with college degrees and ideas about what school should look like. The point here is that there are both black and white people who can be classified as "white folks"—in that they maintain a system that doesn't serve the needs of youth in the hood.

"The hood" is often identified as a place where dysfunction is prevalent and people need to be saved from themselves and their circumstances. The hood may be urban, rural, densely or sparsely populated, but it has a number of shared characteristics that make it easy to recognize. The community is often socioeconomically disadvantaged, achievement gaps are prevalent, and a very particular brand of pedagogy is normalized. In these communities, and particularly in urban schools, African American and Latino youth are most hard hit

by poverty and its aftereffects. For example, in Atlanta, 80 percent of African American children have been reported to live in conditions of high poverty, compared with 29 percent of their Asian peers and 6 percent of their white peers. In fact, the largest twenty school districts in the nation enroll 80 percent minority students, compared with 42 percent in all school districts. In cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, and Miami, urban schools enroll less than 10 percent Anglo students, even though the teachers are overwhelmingly white. In New York public schools, over 70 percent of high school youth are students of color, while over 80 percent of public high school teachers in the state are white.

While some may use these statistics to push for more minority teachers, I argue that there must also be a concerted effort to improve the teaching of white teachers who are already teaching in these schools, as well as those who aspire to teach there, to challenge the "white folks' pedagogy" that is being practiced by teachers of all ethnic and racial backgrounds.

INTRODUCTION

Commencement

I sank, exhausted, into the backseat of a small sport utility vehicle as it pulled onto a sparsely populated Wyoming highway, finally getting some rest after a long day. As I opened the window to get some air, the desert breeze awakened me to the most beautiful sunset I had ever witnessed. The sky was a mix of purple, blue, and pale orange, made even more vivid by the light brown dust on the side of the road and the gray asphalt stretching out ahead. Soaking up that beautiful sky, I thought about the teachers I had met that day. They were mostly white middle and high school teachers who taught science and mathematics to Native American students. I had been invited to Wyoming to deliver a lecture about ways to improve teaching and learning in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and spent almost forty-five minutes after the hourlong lecture answering a host of questions about strategies for engaging students and teaching them more effectively.

As I marveled at the passing scenery, two things occurred to me. The first was that these teachers had a genuine love and concern for their students. If they didn't, they wouldn't have shown up at my lecture and asked so many questions. The second thought, which seemed initially to be unrelated to the first, was that I was driving over land that belonged to the same Indigenous Americans whose descendants

I was preparing these white educators to teach. As the colors of the sky slowly deepened, I thought again about the follow-up questions the teachers had asked: How do we get disinterested students to care about themselves and their education? Why are our students not excited about learning? Why aren't they adjusting well to the rules of school? Why are they underperforming academically? These questions were remarkably similar to the ones the mostly white teachers in my workshops in urban areas like New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles routinely asked me. Apparently, they mattered here in Wyoming as well.

I had done my best to address the teachers' questions carefully and consider their evident frustrations. In an effort to not offend, I steered clear of the elephant in the room—that is, the very obvious racial and ethnic differences between these mostly white teachers and their mostly Indigenous American students. Instead I shared a number of teaching strategies that I knew from experience worked for all students. I mentioned hands-on activities and guided inquiry in science, real-life applications and modeling in mathematics, and ways to incorporate writing across the curriculum. As I shared these strategies, I felt like I was connecting with the teachers. I had given them new information and helped them to approach their classes differently. After the lecture, many thanked me for my words and suggestions. A few even asked for links to articles so that they could learn more. That's usually a good sign. I was content that the lecture had gone well, and I reveled in that feeling as I left to embark on the next phase of my trip.

But now, traveling through the Wyoming landscape, it struck me that although the teachers had gained insight about their profession, it wouldn't be much help to them if they didn't fully understand their students. I had given them tools to pacify their concerns, but nothing to truly get to the root of their problems. After all was said and done, I wasn't sure that the teachers knew or cared about the origin of their challenges: the vast divide that existed between the traditional schools in which they taught and the unique culture of their students.

That afternoon, I was reminded of the book *My People the Sioux* by Indigenous American writer Luther Standing Bear. In this book, which was published in 1928, Standing Bear describes the beauty of the Sioux territory, the very land I was now traveling through. Long before I visited Wyoming, sitting on a park bench in the Bronx, Standing Bear's words had both physically and intellectually transported me to this place. When I read his book, I saw in my mind the physical landscape that now surrounded me. The skies, the sun, and the clouds felt familiar. More importantly, his illuminating words enabled me to draw connections between the teaching and learning of populations like Indigenous Americans and the urban youth of color in my hometown.

Lessons from the Sioux

With the rumbling of a New York City commuter train above, and the Bronx skyline before me, I read Standing Bear and became fascinated with the ways of the Sioux. His stories of Native American life and the unique traditions of his people reminded me of my youth in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, and in the Bronx. As he described the distinct codes and rules of engagement of his people, I saw analogous images from the hip-hop generation. In one memorable passage he describes a solemn occasion commemorating a death, where a Sioux elder holds the bowl of a smoking pipe first to the heavens, then to the east, south, west, and north, and finally down, in the direction of Mother Earth. Reading this, all I could think of was the men in my urban neighborhood who lift liquor in brown paper bags to the heavens and to the earth in times of sorrow or to memorialize a member of the community. As a young man, I had always been fascinated by this lifting up and pouring of liquor "for the brothers who ain't here" by older members of the community. At the time, I couldn't identify why I was drawn to this practice, but I knew it signified something powerful. The meaning didn't become clear until I read Standing Bear's words about the role of elders, reverence for the land, and the powerful community practices around sorrow and healing. His

descriptions of the Sioux opened up and deepened my understandings of life in the Bronx.

In his book, Luther Standing Bear poignantly describes his experience as a student at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School—the first institution designed to “educate the Indian.” Established in 1879 in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, the school was founded by Richard Henry Pratt, a US Army officer who had served in the Indian Wars and believed that his experience with the Native peoples he had formerly captured and imprisoned equipped him to educate them. The white teachers he recruited sincerely believed in Pratt’s vision. For them, it was because of Pratt’s genuine concern for the Indigenous Americans that he had found it in his heart to give them a better life through education. It was this idealism that led educators to leave positions at other schools to be a part of the experiment to “tame the Wild Indian.”

The Carlisle School employed a militaristic approach to “helping” the Indigenous Americans assimilate to white norms. For students, the authoritarian “care” that was shown to them at school stripped them of their culture and traditions, considered primitive and inferior. Unfortunately, because many of these students were far from the support of their Native communities, they were forced to assimilate to the culture of the teachers and the school so as to avoid the harsh punishments that would otherwise be levied on them. As the teachers worked to “tame and train” students who were described as “savage beasts,” students struggled to maintain their authenticity amid the efforts to make them “as close to the White man as possible.”¹¹ This tension between educators who saw themselves as kindhearted people who were doing right by the less fortunate, and students who struggled to maintain their culture and identity while being forced to be the type of student their teachers envisioned, played a part in the eventual recognition that the Carlisle School was a failed experiment.

The teachers who were recruited to the Carlisle School were in many ways like white folks who teach in the hood today. Written accounts from that era confirm that Carlisle teachers saw themselves

as caring professionals, even though students described many of them as overly strict and mean-spirited disciplinarians. One teacher wrote in the school paper, *The Red Man*, that the students had “unevenly developed characters, strong idiosyncrasies and a lack of systematic home training.” His only praise for the indigenous students was their “native unconscious keenness.” Another teacher described a teaching culture in which “the students are under constant discipline from which there is no appeal.”¹² This culture of unrelenting discipline was presented by educators as benefiting the Carlisle School’s challenging population. The Carlisle system had a goal to “make students better,” but this goal was predicated on the teachers’ understanding that the students came to the school lacking in socialization, intellect, and worth. The school celebrated teachers’ rigidity and strictness out of a belief that this was the type of training that would be successful in acculturating indigenous students to white society.

The use of strong discipline with respect to “challenging” youth continues to be celebrated today, as illustrated by a highly publicized video in April 2015, during the protests that erupted in Baltimore, Maryland, in response to the death of a young black man while in police custody. In the video, the child’s mother is recorded beating and cursing at her son for taking part in the protest. While it is obvious from the recording that the mother was concerned for her child and maybe even feared for his safety, she showed this concern by berating him in public. The media praised the “riot mom” for how she addressed the situation—she was widely hailed as “Mother of the Year”—but in so doing perpetuated the narrative of young black boys requiring a rough hand to keep them in line.

Consider a teacher who graduates from a teacher-preparation program and has job prospects at both an affluent suburban school and what can be described as a poor urban school. Before the teacher can consider the two jobs, she must reckon with certain criteria beyond content knowledge, academic credentials, and teaching experience. In the more affluent schools, one’s ability to teach the subject material is prioritized, and so is a caring temperament. In this case, care is demonstrated by a teacher’s patience and dedication to teaching,

In urban communities that are populated by youth of color, there are other, and oftentimes unwritten, expectations like having strong classroom-management skills and not being a pushover. In this case, care is expressed through "tough love."

In my role as a teacher-educator, I often give an assignment to aspiring teachers that includes writing an autobiography and teaching statement to explore what brought them to the field of education. For those who go on to work in urban schools, I am always fascinated by the ways that these teachers' descriptions of themselves and their craft highlight their concern for urban youth, empathy for their living conditions, and a desire to help them have more opportunities. As I watch them transition from aspiring teachers to practitioners, I see how this "care for the other" couples with expectations of managing and disciplining students, and the ways that they unintentionally become modern incarnations of the instructors at the Carlisle School through a tough-love approach to pedagogy. As I follow these teachers into classrooms and study the ways they interact with their students, I find that the students' descriptions of their schools and teachers are similar to the ways that Indigenous Americans at Carlisle described their schooling experiences. Many urban youth of color describe oppressive places that have a primary goal of imposing rules and maintaining control. Urban youth in contemporary America use language similar to Carlisle students like Standing Bear and student turned teacher Zitkala-Sa, who highlighted the ways that the school disrespected the students and their home cultures. These students' words stand in sharp contrast to those of their teachers as expressed in autobiographies and teaching philosophies.

The ideology of the Carlisle School is alive and well in contemporary urban school policies. These include zero tolerance and lockdown procedures. A student in a school I recently visited described the innocuous term *school safety* as a "nice-sounding code word for treating you like you're in jail or something." In urban school districts across the country, school safety personnel are uniformed officers who are part of the police force and often engage in discriminatory practices that reflect those in the larger community.

Like teachers who were drawn to the Carlisle School, white teachers are recruited to work in poor communities of color through programs like Teach for America, which tout their exclusivity and draw teachers from privileged cultural and educational backgrounds to teach in the hood. These programs attract teachers to urban and rural schools by emphasizing the poor resources and low socioeconomic status of these schools rather than the assets of the community. Adages like "No child should be left back from a quality education" and "Be something bigger than yourself" draw well-intentioned teachers desiring to save poor kids from their despairing circumstances. This is not a critique of Teach for America per se—as it serves a need in urban and rural communities. However, it and programs like it tend to exoticize the schools they serve and downplay the assets and strengths of the communities they are seeking to improve. I argue that if aspiring teachers from these programs were challenged to teach with an acknowledgment of, and respect for, the local knowledge of urban communities, and were made aware of how the models for teaching and recruitment they are a part of reinforce a tradition that does not do right by students, they could be strong assets for urban communities. However, because of their unwillingness to challenge the traditions and structures from which they were borne, efforts that recruit teachers for urban schools ensure that Carlisle-type practices continue to exist.

A fundamental step in this challenging of structures is to think about new ways for all education stakeholders—particularly those who are not from the communities in which they teach—to engage with urban youth of color. What new lenses or frameworks can we use to bring white folks who teach in the hood to consider that urban education is more complex than saving students and being a hero? I suggest a way forward by making deep connections between the indigenous and urban youth of color.

Connecting the Indigenous and Neoindividual

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples defines the indigenous as people whose existence in a certain

geographic location predates the region's conquering or occupation by a colonial or imperialist power, and who see themselves as, or have been positioned as, separate from those who are politically or socially in command of the region. This definition, while it glosses over the nuances of what it means to be indigenous, nevertheless provides an outline and lays out the criteria for understanding who is and who isn't indigenous. It touches upon indigenous peoples' close ties to their land, their physical and mental colonization, and their position as distinct from those who govern them. It posits that the indigenous have their own unique ways of constructing knowledge, utilize distinct modes of communication in their interactions with one another, and hold cultural understandings that vary from the established norm. Above all, the UN definition of the indigenous speaks to the collective oppression that a population experiences at the hands of a more powerful and dominant group.

When we think of the Indigenous American students of the Carlisle School, the UN definition fits perfectly. However, when this definition is stripped of its explicit association with geographic locations, it's clear that it can be applied to marginalized populations generally. Because of the similarities in experience between the indigenous and urban youth of color, I identify urban youth as *neoindividuals*. This connection between the indigenous and neoindividuals follows from what Benedict Anderson, professor of International Studies at Cornell University, describes as imagined communities that transcend place and time, and connect groups of people based on their shared experiences.³

I first articulated the need for positioning urban youth as neoindividuals in a paper written for the American Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies in 2005. Since then, I've heard the term used loosely by academics in reference to the direct ancestors of those traditionally referred to as indigenous⁴ and also to a very specific Asian worldview.⁵ While multiple interpretations of what it means to be neoindividuals have value for understanding contemporary forms of oppression and expression, identifying contemporary indigenous as neoindividuals merely effects a renaming. For example,

Aboriginal Australians have inhabited that continent for some fifty thousand years. Recasting contemporary Aboriginal Australians as neoindividuals extracts them from their history and attempts to restart it. On the other hand, positioning urban marginalized youth as neoindividuals moves beyond a literal biological or geographical connection and into more complex connections among the oppressed that call forth a particular way of looking at the world. Identifying urban youth of color as neoindividuals allows us to understand the oppression these youth experience, the spaces they inhabit, and the ways these phenomena affect what happens in social settings like traditional classrooms. It seeks to position these youth in a larger context of marginalization, displacement, and diaspora.

Like the indigenous, the neoindividuals are a group that will not fade into oblivion despite attempts to rename or relocate them. The term *neoindividuals* carries the rich histories of indigenous groups, acknowledges powerful connections among populations that have dealt with being silenced, and signals the need to examine the ways that institutions replicate colonial processes. The neoindividuals will continue to exist, and need to be acknowledged, in classrooms for as long as traditional teaching promotes an imaginary white middle-class ideal. As long as white middle-class teachers are recruited to schools occupied by urban youth of color, without any consideration of how they affirm and reestablish power dynamics that silence students, issues that plague urban education (like achievement gaps, suspension rates, and high teacher turnover) will persist.

The neoindividuals often look, act, and engage in the classroom in ways that are inconsistent with traditional school norms. Like the indigenous, they are viewed as intellectually and academically deficient to their counterparts from other racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. Too often, when these students speak or interact in the classroom in ways that teachers are uncomfortable with, they are categorized as troubled students, or diagnosed with disorders like ADD (attention deficit disorder) and ODD (oppositional defiant disorder). The Association for Psychological Science recently shared a study finding that black students were more likely to be labeled as

troublemakers by their teachers and treated harshly in classrooms.⁶ Students who are treated harshly in classrooms are less likely to academically engage in classrooms, which results in their being perceived as academically inferior. For teachers to acknowledge that the ways they perceive, group, and diagnose students has a dramatic impact on student outcomes, moves them toward reconciling the cultural differences they have with students, a significant step toward changing the way educators engage with urban youth of color.

Addressing the cultural differences between teachers and students requires what educational researcher Gloria Ladson-Billings describes as culturally relevant pedagogy.⁷ This approach to teaching advocates for a consideration of the culture of the students in determining the ways in which they are taught. Unfortunately, this approach cannot be implemented unless teachers broaden their scope beyond traditional classroom teaching.

Cultural artifacts like clothing, music, or speech are aspects of indigenous culture that are generally not considered by teachers to be related to education, but are one of the first things a teacher identifies when interacting with neoindividual students. The wrong clothing or speech will get neoindividual students labeled as unwilling to learn and directly impact their academic lives much in the way that it affects the indigenous. For example, if one were to ask the average person in the United States, Australia, or New Zealand to describe the indigenous peoples in their respective countries, the responses would probably be very similar, and include exoticized references to scanty clothing, "odd" living arrangements, "strange" speech, "weird" customs, and "primitive" art and music.

Educational anthropologist Rosemary Henze, in her work with Kathryn Davis, describes the indigenous languages of Australia and New Zealand as having much complexity and nuance despite the fact that they are generally perceived as substandard in the countries where they are spoken.⁸ In much the same way, educators perceive neoindividual Spanglish (a mixing of Spanish and English) or patois as substandard. On a number of occasions, I've heard teachers mock neoindividual slang in front of students, even while they themselves

attempt to use it in an effort to look cool or gain "street cred" in other settings. A white female urban schoolteacher from an affluent background once told me that whenever she gets together with her friends, they say she's "been in the ghetto with the black kids for too long" because of her frequent use of "street slang." She giggled as she admitted that she sometimes "uses the kids' phrases on purpose" to get a reaction from her friends. This teacher, like many of her peers, exoticizes neoindividual language, but still holds a general perception that it represents lowbrow antiacademic culture. Ironically, when teachers try to use neoindividual language, they often find it challenging to do so properly. They fail to recognize the highly complex linguistic codes and rules one must know before being able to speak it with fluency—that is, in a way that teachers view as substandard! I make this point to stress that the brilliance of neoindividual youth cannot be appreciated by educators who are conditioned to perceive anything outside their own ways of knowing and being as not having value. This is similar to white teachers at the Carlisle School who sought to ban the language and customs of their indigenous students and replace them with "American culture." The University of Minnesota Human Rights Center describes this process as the silencing of voice and history that is part of the indigenous experience. I argue that enduring this silencing process is something that both the indigenous and neoindividual have in common, and should be used as a way to connect them.

Though there are obvious historical differences between the neoindividual and the indigenous, it is important to recognize that urban youth are working within what Maori indigenous professor Manuhua Barham describes as the "politics of indigeneity," which reinforces power structures that privilege certain voices while silencing and attempting to erase the history and value of others.

Consider, for example, the denial of the genocide of Aboriginal Australians by former prime minister John Howard despite reports and testimonials that confirmed the horrors they endured. This same denial exists today with neoindividual populations who are pushed out of schools and into prisons and who can clearly articulate the

personal devaluation they undergo in urban public schools. On a recent visit to a prison where I was speaking to young men of color who had been incarcerated for anywhere from two to twenty years, I struck up a conversation with a group of young men who described a number of incidents in their respective public schools that caused them to doubt whether or not school was for them. One story in particular resonated with me because of how similar it was to conversations I've had with other former urban public school students who have spent their lives doubting their own intelligence and making life decisions about what they can or cannot do based on something a teacher told them. This young man shared with me his experience in middle school, when a science teacher told him he was wasting his time going to school because all he would be when he got older was a gangbanger. He described this event and the older white male teacher in such detail, it was clear he had carried the incident with him for decades. I've heard versions of this story in rap songs, classrooms, prisons, and homeless shelters countless times. Despite its prominence, however, it is not part of the existent discourse on urban teaching and learning. When I mention it in academic circles, I am always challenged to think about it as the exception and not the norm. This denial of my reality in academic spaces signals more than individual denials of others' histories; it is a systemic denial within institutions built upon white cultural traditions that oppress and silence the indigenous and the neoindigenous.

When the indigenous and neoindigenous are silenced, they tend to respond to the denial of their voices by showcasing their culture in vivid, visceral, and transgressive ways. For Aboriginal populations, the *corroboree* is an event that transforms contemporary contexts via costume, music, dance, and ritual enactments. These celebrations enable participants to make a powerful political statement about how they are positioned in society and the importance of reclaiming their voices. These expressions of self are framed as entertainment or spectacles to be observed by tourists, as well as members of the dominant culture. As such they are an embodiment of what it means to be indigenous.

Like the indigenous, urban youth distinguish themselves from the larger culture through their dress, their music, their creativity in nonacademic endeavors, and their artistic output. In much public discourse, the ways in which they express themselves creatively are denigrated. For example, as a form of neoindigenous music, hip-hop is often dismissed by traditional cultural critics as "vulgar." The innovation and technical skill required to create and perform this music is secondary to its "message," which is often seen as threatening to mainstream culture and out of step with its values. Indeed, record companies deemphasize the music's "message" to white audiences, while pushing the dance moves and style of dress of hip-hop artists to market this music.

Like the indigenous, who have been relegated to certain geographic areas with little resources but still find a way to maintain their traditions, the neoindigenous in urban areas have developed ways to live within socioeconomically disadvantaged spaces while maintaining their dignity and identity. They are blamed for achievement gaps, neighborhood crime, and high incarceration rates, while the system that perpetuates these issues remains unchallenged. In urban schools, where the neoindigenous are taught to be docile and complicit in their own miseducation and then celebrated for being everything but who they are, they learn quickly that they are expected to divorce themselves from their culture in order to be academically successful. For many youth, this process involves the loss of their dignity and a shattering of their personhood. Urban youth who enter schools seeing themselves as smart and capable are confronted by curriculum that is blind to their realities and school rules that seek to erase their culture. These youth, because they do not have the space/opportunity to showcase their worth on their own terms in schools, are only visible when they enact very specific behaviors. This usually means they have the focus of the teacher only when they are being loud and verbal (often read by educators as disruptive), or silent and compliant (often read by educators as well behaved). Educators are trained to perceive any expression of neoindigenous culture (which is often descriptive and verbal) as inherently negative

and will only view the students positively when they learn to express their intelligence in ways that do not reflect their neoindigenity. Students quickly receive the message that they can only be smart when they are not who they are. This, in many ways, is classroom colonialism; and it can only be addressed through a very different approach to teaching and learning.

I do not engage in the work of connecting indigenous and neoinigenous either to trivialize the indigenous experience or exaggerate that of the neoinigenous. My point is to identify and acknowledge the collective oppression both groups experience and the shared space they inhabit as a result of their authentic selves being deemed invisible. Indeed, customs of the Maori in New Zealand vary as much from those of Indigenous Americans as urban youth from Los Angeles differ from their counterparts in New York City. However, their similarities are glowingly apparent if we choose to focus on them, and they offer a powerful new framework for urban education. The indigenous and neoinigenous are groups that have been victimized by different forms of the same oppression. The Bronx, New York, has no privilege over Gary, Indiana, just as Aboriginal voices have no value over the African indigenous. George Dei and Alireza Asgharzadeh, who have done powerful research on indigenous knowledge and postcolonial thought, argue that oppression "differentiates individuals and communities from one another" but "at the same time connects them to each other through the experience of being oppressed, marginalized, and colonized."¹⁰ This is the reason I connect the indigenous and neoinigenous.

Indigenous and diasporic scholars have consistently argued that the ways we view those we consider "indigenous" must move beyond prescribed definitions issuing from colonial and imperial constructs and toward a more inclusive definition that considers how people categorize themselves based on their shared experiences with imperialism and colonialism in their varied forms.¹¹ This definition allows us to see how the indigenous exist across diverse places yet remain connected. For example, the Aboriginal, the Maori, and the Indigenous American experience colonization and/or imperialism in

different ways across different contexts but each group underperforms when compared to their white counterparts.¹² These same achievement gaps exist between neoinigenous urban youth of color and their counterparts from majority-white schools with students of middle to high socioeconomic status.

Given the extended analogies between the indigenous and neoinigenous described above, and the ways that I have both experientially and theoretically showcased the connections between the two, it is clear that many teachers in urban schools today share the misguided, though caring, impulse that maintained poor schooling at the Carlisle School. The work for white folks who teach in urban schools, then, is to unpack their privileges and excavate the institutional, societal, and personal histories they bring with them when they come to the hood.

In this work, the term *white folks* is an obvious racial classification, but it also identifies a group that is associated with power and the use of power to disempower others. My use of the term *white folks* draws from the short story collection *The Ways of White Folks*, by Langston Hughes.¹³ These stories revolve around interactions between white and black people that can only be described as unfortunate cultural clashes. These clashes occur when the world of one group does not seamlessly merge with that of another group because of a fundamental difference in the ways they are positioned in the world. In each story, the black characters interact with white characters, ranging from the innocuous to the outrightly racist, with negative outcomes for the black characters. Hughes was deliberate in not painting all white people with a broad brush. He even has one of his characters mention "the ways of white folks, I mean some white folks." Despite this effort, Hughes constructs a context where the societally sanctioned power that white people have over black people results in drama, and some humor, but overall outcomes that are largely unfavorable for the black characters.

Drawing from Hughes's framing, I am not painting all white teachers as being the same. In fact, there are some people of color who engage in what Hughes would call "the ways of white folks."

However, there are power dynamics, personal histories, and cultural clashes stemming from whiteness and all it encompasses that work against young people of color in traditional urban classrooms. This book highlights them, provides a framework for looking at them, and offers ways to address them in the course of improving the education of urban youth of color.

CHAPTER 1

Camaraderie

Reality and the Neoindividual

I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.

—RALPH ELLISON

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* describes the complexities of blackness in America and captures the ways that the segregated South and its ugly history of racism had inscribed itself so indelibly into the psyche of the "more accepting" and progressive North in the 1950s that it rendered African Americans invisible. The book's protagonist is so shaped by the conditions of his time that he becomes a distorted version of himself, his "true self" rendered invisible. This haunting and powerful story resonates with the experiences of urban youth in today's urban classrooms. The poet Adrienne Rich affirmed this sense of negation when she observed that "when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing."¹

Consider a common scenario in urban schools, and one I have witnessed often, where the teacher and student have different conceptions

about what it means to be on time and prepared for class. For many students, being on time and prepared means being in or around the physical space of the classroom at the appointed hour and being able to access whatever materials are necessary for the day's instruction. This runs counter to a more narrowly defined, traditional perception of being prepared for learning, and can result in students being made invisible to the teacher. I experienced a perfect example of this "making invisible" process during a pre-suspension meeting for a student whose science teacher had accused her of being disruptive, unprepared for class, and habitually tardy. As the teacher began to describe the reasons for the suspension, the student stood up and said, "That's not true, that's just not true." Calmly, the principal asked the student to stop being disrespectful. The student looked bewildered and sat down with tears streaming down her face, biting at her thumb, her knee shaking so forcefully I thought she might knock the principal's desk over. At the end of the meeting, she snatched the pink sheet of paper that described the procedures for her two-day suspension and stormed out of the office. Her teacher seemed frozen to her seat as the scenario played out, unsure of what to do next.

A few minutes later, having heard the teacher's litany of complaints that had led to the student's suspension, I walked through the school building and spotted the student in the middle of a crowd of friends. They had rallied around her and seemed to be consoling her. When I asked her if we could talk, she looked up reluctantly and slowly walked toward me. As she did so, a bell rang signaling the change of classroom periods. The students who had gathered around their friend quickly dispersed, heading to their respective classrooms. I noticed that a significant number of them stood at the doors of the classrooms or lingered between the doorways, shouting greetings to their friends who were passing by. As we walked the hallway, she pointed to a friend who pointed back at her, then asked me, "Is he late? Is he unprepared for class?" She then motioned to another friend who was straddling the doorway to a class and asked, "Is she late? Is she distracting the class?" I didn't quite know how to respond and so I didn't. She took that to mean that I understood her. "Exactly,"

she said. "I'm always ready for that lady's class and she gets me suspended because she doesn't know what she's doing. She sees what she wants to see." As we talked more, I mentioned that the teacher said she never had her books with her for class. She responded that a friend shares her books with her and lends her something to write with whenever she needs it. For her, that made it obvious that she was prepared to learn. She then mentioned that she was always on time for class. "I'm always at the door when that bell rings. I'm always there." The student saw herself as prepared and on time, but the teacher did not see the student the way she saw herself.

The point here is not to debate whether the teacher or the student was right or wrong; there isn't a clear answer to that question. What's important to note is that the teacher in this scenario had rendered the student's self-image as "prepared and on time" invisible. That image had been replaced with one in which the student was seen as disruptive, chronically late, and unprepared, a distortion of the student's self-image. This was the case even though the student mentioned that she liked the subject being taught and was excited about what she was learning in her science class. This teacher, who struggled to get her students engaged in science, had alienated one of the few students who liked the class, because she did not fit the mold the school and the teacher had cast for what a good student looks and acts like.

The reality is that we privilege people who look and act like us, and perceive those who don't as different and, frequently, inferior. In urban schools, and especially for those who haven't had previous experience in urban contexts or with youth of color, educators learn "best practices" from "experts" in the field, deemed as such because they have degrees, write articles, and meet other criteria that do not have anything to do with their work within urban communities. In fact, many of us who think about the education of youth of color have developed our ideas about the field from specialists who can describe the broad landscape of urban education but are often far removed, both geographically and psychologically, from the schools and students that they speak and write about so eloquently.

Urban education experts typically don't live in urban communities. They don't look like the students they discuss in meetings and conferences, and when they do, they often make class distinctions that separate them from students. Most importantly, they don't consider their distance from these communities as an impediment to their ability to engage in the work within them. The leaders within the field of urban education can't fathom the day-to-day experiences of urban students who see themselves as ready to learn despite not being perceived that way. They don't see the deep connections that exist between urban experience and school performance; many more have come to view school as a discrete space, as if what happens outside school has little to no impact on what happens inside school. This discourse among "experts" (politicians, professors, media pundits) has made it okay for teachers to work within urban communities they either refuse to live in or are afraid to live in. The nature of how we view urban-education expertise has created a context that dismisses students' lives and experiences while concurrently speaking about, and advocating for, equity and improving schools. Consider, for example, the growing number of new charter schools in urban communities with words like *success*, *reform*, and *equity* in their names and mission statements, but which engage in teaching practices that focus on making the school and the students within it as separate from the community as possible.

I engaged in a Twitter debate with one of these educators recently and was astounded by the fervor with which he defended his school's practice of "cleaning these kids up and giving them a better life." With that statement, he described everything that is wrong with the culture of urban education and the biggest hindrance to white folks who teach in the hood. First, the belief that students are in need of "cleaning up" presumes that they are dirty. Second, the aim of "giving them a better life" indicates that their present life has little or no value. The idea that one individual or school can give students "a life" emanates from a problematic savior complex that results in making students, their varied experiences, their emotions, and the good in their communities invisible. So invisible, in fact, that the

chief way to teach urban youth of color more effectively—that is, to truly be in and in touch with their communities—is not seen as a viable option.

Physical Place and Emotional Space

To be in touch with the community, one has to enter into the physical places where the students live, and work to be invited into the emotion-laden spaces the youth inhabit. The places may be housing projects or overcrowded apartment buildings, but the spaces are what philosopher Kelly Oliver describes as *psychic*.² They are filled with emotions like fear, anger, and a shared alienation from the norms of school, birthed from experiences both within and outside the school building. The places transcend geography and are more about what is felt by being in a particular location.

The urban youth who inhabit these complex psychic spaces, and for whom imagination is the chief escape from harsh realities, walk through life wrapped in a shroud of emotions whose fibers are their varied daily experiences. The gunshot that rang past an apartment window (the experience) and the fear and anxiety that resulted from it (the emotion) creates a reality that is almost impossible for an outsider to fully comprehend. I remember being a tenth-grade student who attended a large comprehensive "specialized" urban public school. I took the train for an hour each day because the school I attended was better than the local ones in my neighborhood. One evening after a long day and what seemed like an equally long train ride home, I walked into my apartment building, and just as the large metal door closed behind me gunshots rang out just outside the door. I froze for a second, not knowing where the shots were coming from, when my younger sister, tugging at my arm, pulled me through the interior door of our apartment building as the shots continued to ring behind me. When I got into my family's apartment that night, and my sister described what had happened to my mother, she told me that I couldn't afford to freeze up in moments like that. I was told to be alert and drop to the floor at the sound of gunfire.

About a week later, I sat in my mathematics class as the teacher droned on about how to solve an equation. The class was silent except for the scratching of chalk against the blackboard as the teacher worked on the problem. A chair held the door open to let air into the classroom, but it wasn't enough to alleviate the stifling atmosphere in the boring class. As the teacher continued to write, a loud noise suddenly erupted from out in the hallway. Before I could even think, I jumped out of my seat and underneath my desk. I covered on the floor for what seemed like forever until I heard my entire class break out in roaring laughter. I emerged from underneath the desk to find my teacher standing in the aisle and another student admonishing me for trying to be the class clown. The teacher's left hand hit my desk with a light thud and his right one pointed toward the door as the words "Principal's office, now" rolled from his lips. The class continued laughing as I grabbed my books and headed toward the door. In that moment, I couldn't find the words to explain that the loud sound I had heard reminded me of the shootout that I had barely missed getting caught in a week ago. There was no way to describe that the trauma of my experience the previous week was what caused me to jump under the desk in fear for my life. There was no way that the teacher or the principal could ever understand what I was feeling in that moment unless they had experienced it, and so I coolly grabbed my jacket and books, put on a smile for my friends, winked at the teacher, and walked out of the classroom.

Much research has been done on post-traumatic stress disorder and its impact on those afflicted. We tend to associate PTSD with combat veterans, but too often we fail to recognize that young people experience trauma regularly in ways that go unnoticed or unrecognized. For example, a study I conducted with black males who had either attended or were presently enrolled in urban public schools revealed symptoms of PTSD among participants. My coresearcher on the project, PTSD specialist and psychologist Napoleon Wells, identified the students' avoidance of certain discussions and reactions to others as similar to the ways that veterans respond after exposure to trauma. In fact, the students' symptoms of fear, anger, and

powerlessness led to what Dr. Wells calls postracial tension stress disorder, which derives from youth seeing themselves as powerless in a world that conveys to them the message that race doesn't matter, at the same time it subjects them to physical and symbolic violence (at the hands of police and schools) because of their race.

In schools, urban youth are expected to leave their day-to-day experiences and emotions at the door and assimilate into the culture of schools. This process of personal repression is in itself traumatic and directly impacts what happens in the classroom. Students exist in a space within the classroom while the teacher limits their understanding to what is happening in the classroom place. Failure to prepare teachers to appreciate the psychic spaces students occupy inevitably limits their effectiveness. Some teachers understand that students come from places beyond the classroom and can acknowledge that these places have an effect on students and the spaces they occupy. However, many teachers cannot see beyond their immediate location (the school) and therefore have a very limited understanding of space. Many more are taught to ignore psychic space altogether, and therefore cannot fathom what it must be like for students to whom the classroom is a breeding ground for traumatic experiences. Once again, these students are unseen by teachers, mere reflections of teachers' perceptions of who they are. This is what Ellison described as people not seeing him but "surroundings, themselves, or fragments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me."⁹

The work to become truly effective educators in urban schools requires a new approach to teaching that embraces the complexity of place, space, and their collective impact on the psyche of urban youth. This approach is necessary whether we are talking about pre-service educators about to embark on their first year of teaching, those who have been in the field for a while, or the millions of people who have been drawn into the dysfunctional web of urban education as a parent, policymaker, or concerned citizen. Addressing the issues that plague urban education requires a true vision that begins with seeing students in the same way they see themselves.

Urban youth are typically well aware of the loss, pain, and injustice they experience, but are ill equipped for helping each other through the work of navigating who they truly are and who they are expected to be in a particular place. At seventeen years old, Youth Poet Laureate of the City of Oakland, California, Obasi Davis wrote the poem "Bored in 1st Period." Obasi, who is now a college student in a predominantly white institution of higher education, wrote this piece as a high school student seeing peers who are rendered invisible by their school and teachers even as he could see their true selves in plain view. In the excerpts of the poem reprinted below, the reader can see his deep analysis of his peers and the difference between who they are in the classroom (place) and who they truly are within a shared emotional space.

BORED IN 1ST PERIOD

Asia comes from repossessed dreams and nightmares that last as long as the absence of her father

I think that's the reason her clothes are always so Boa

Constricting any amount of longing she might have felt for him to me

Daniel spent his childhood running from Richmond bullets and the ghost of his dad

Daniel is a thug

He brags about seeing grown men ground to dust under heavy boots for their iPhones and their wallets

He rocks a long gold chain, a grill, and two diamond earrings with

every outfit

Daniel only cares about money

but I can see genius bursting from his pained skin

It is the deepest black, pure like Earth's blood

but for some reason, most seem to see it as an impurity.

He paints himself a gangster to cover what they call ugly

Jonathan chooses to come to class once a month or whenever we

have a sub
He shoots dice in the back corner of the classroom with Duma and Daniel

When I ask them why, they tell me money is everything.

It seems they are the products of a broken society and a torn home

My home is not broken

My parents are divorced but they get along

I haven't known death to come close,

and violence hasn't found me vulnerable

And then, while sitting in 1st period pretending to read Macbeth,

it clicked for me

My classmates and I are different

In the words of Dr. King our elbows are together yet our

hearts are

apart

I'm not asking for some all holy savior to come and cuddle us

into equality

I'm asking for you to understand our struggles and our hardships

To understand that if we have to learn with each other we should also

learn about each other so we can bring each other up

What Obasi describes in this poem is a reality that many who interact with students on a daily basis will never see. He describes students in a classroom (place) who exist in worlds/spaces wholly distinct from the classroom. He shows us that what educators and the world at large see when looking at students is often a distortion of their authentic selves. Furthermore, he alludes to the major premise of this work—that what lies beyond what we see are deep stories, complex connections, and realities that factors like race, class, power, and the beliefs/presuppositions educators hold inhibit them from seeing. Teaching to who students are requires a recognition of their realities.

John Searle defines reality as an agreed-upon outlook on or about social life based on how it is perceived or created by a group of people. He also sees reality as "facts relative to a system of values that we

hold."⁴ This definition provides a simple yet necessary framework for understanding youth realities—because it moves educators to focus on the ways that youth see the world and their position in it based on the facts, laws, rules, and principles that govern the places they are from and the consequent spaces they inhabit. This provides the educator with a very different vantage point for seeing them and gives information about place while providing insight into emotional space.

In order to fully understand youth realities, and make some sense of the powerful connection between youth realities, place, and space, I argue that educators need a new lens and vocabulary. This is why I argue for making connections between urban youth, or the *neindigenous*, and the indigenous. While the word *neindigeneity* may appear to the reader as yet another loaded academic term that has no significance in real urban classrooms, it is far from that. I use this term throughout this work as a way to make sense of the realities of the urban youth experience. Framing urban youth as *neindigenous*, and understanding that the urban youth experience is deeply connected to the indigenous experience, provides teachers with a very different worldview when working with youth. From this new vantage point, teachers can see, access, and utilize tools for teaching urban youth. An understanding of *neindigeneity* allows educators to go beyond what they physically see when working with urban youth, and attend to the relationship between place and space.

For the indigenous, the relationship to emotional space is a constitutive part of their existence. For these populations, when one is hurt, healing requires addressing both physical wounds and the "soul wounds." Healing the physical wound occurs in a certain place, but healing the soul wound requires being in a space. The psychologist Eduardo Duran states that counseling Native Americans and other indigenous people requires entering into the spaces in which they reside, because as Mark Findlay identifies, there are understandings that cannot be visible within the institutions (places) of the power wielder.⁵ This type of healing work is necessary for the *neindigenous* as well. Situations such as the suspension of the student who believed she was prepared for class and always on time result in soul

wounds that are bigger than the disciplinary issue itself and could be avoided if the teacher validated the student's emotion by allowing her to articulate her feelings. Recognizing the *neindigeneity* of youth requires acknowledgement of the soul wounds that teaching practices inflict upon them.

If we are truly interested in transforming schools and meeting the needs of urban youth of color who are the most disenfranchised within them, educators must create safe and trusting environments that are respectful of students' culture. Teaching the *neindigenous* requires recognition of the spaces in which they reside, and an understanding of how to see, enter into, and draw from these spaces. In the chapters that follow, I describe how educators may engage in this healing process through an approach to teaching I call *reality pedagogy*.

Reality Pedagogy

Reality pedagogy is an approach to teaching and learning that has a primary goal of meeting each student on his or her own cultural and emotional turf. It focuses on making the local experiences of the student visible and creating contexts where there is a role reversal of sorts that positions the student as the expert in his or her own teaching and learning, and the teacher as the learner. It posits that while the teacher is the person charged with delivering the content, the student is the person who shapes how best to teach that content. Together, the teacher and students co-construct the classroom space.

Reality pedagogy allows for youth to reveal how and where teaching and learning practices have wounded them. The approach works toward making students wholly visible to each other and to the teacher and focuses on open discourse about where students are academically, psychologically, and emotionally. In a *reality-pedagogy*-based classroom, every individual is perceived as having a distinct perspective and is given the opportunity to express that in the classroom. There is no grand narrative. Instead of seeing the students as equal to their cultural identity, a *reality pedagogy* sees students as individuals who

are influenced by their cultural identity. This means that the teacher does not see his or her classroom as a group of African American, Latino, or poor students and therefore does not make assumptions about their interests based on those preconceptions. Instead, the teacher begins from an understanding of the students as unique individuals and then develops approaches to teaching and learning that work for those individuals. This approach acknowledges the preconceptions, guilt, and biases a white teacher in a predominantly African American or Latino urban school may bring to the classroom because it considers the history of teaching and learning in contexts like the Carlisle School and consciously avoids replicating them.

In preparing teachers to teach in urban schools, I often show still images of students from classroom videos that I have collected over the last decade. The students in the images range in age from six to twenty-one and are all students of color from urban schools across the country. Each image shows students in varying poses of what could be described as disinterest. They range from heads rested on classroom desks or on palms that seem to be holding up much more than weary heads to students looking at the teacher with blank, emotionless stares. In one exercise, these images were presented to the teachers in whose classrooms the pictures were taken, and the teachers were asked to describe the students' realities. I would ask teachers to look at the images and describe what was going through each student's mind at the moment when his or her picture was taken. The responses from the teachers were quite similar and along the lines of "He doesn't want to be there" and "She is bored or angry." After this process, I provided teachers with transcripts from interviews with the students photographed, in which the students described what they were thinking and feeling at the moment their images were captured. Once this happened, the huge gap between how students experienced the world and how teachers viewed this same world became evident.

In one scenario, during a professional-development session where a large number of teachers from an urban school district gathered on a cold November afternoon, two images of an African American young man from a classroom in one of their schools were projected

onto a screen. In one image, he is staring emptily into space, and in the other, his head is resting on his desk. Responses from the group were immediate, and all described the young man in the photos as some variation of "disinterested" or "unmotivated." I then hit the button on my laptop that played the video of the moments before and after the two images were taken. In the video, the young man tries repeatedly to answer a question that the teacher had posed. He raises his hand, stares at the teacher to get his attention, and even yells out the answer after he is initially ignored. After multiple futile attempts to be recognized by the teacher, he puts his head down on the desk.

When I interviewed this student after I had seen the video, he revealed a deep desire to learn and an undeniable frustration with the fact that the structures in place in the classroom, like his seat being at the back of the class, the pace of the lesson being too slow, and the students not having the space to discuss the content with each other, wouldn't allow this desire to be met. He mentioned that he put his head on the desk in an attempt to control the anger and frustration that came from not being validated and not being taught well. He knew that if he responded angrily, he would be perceived as "mad for no reason" and probably "kicked out of the class or suspended like they usually do when you say something." In this scenario, the different ways that teachers experienced the student's reaction to the classroom highlights the need for understanding the authentic realities of young people. A conversation with the teacher about this video revealed that, according to the teacher, the student had to learn to control his excitement and had not shown that he was ready to learn. In this scenario both the teacher and the student are experiencing the same classroom in very different ways.

Addressing the tensions that come out of these two authentic yet very different realities requires an approach to teaching and learning that functions to bridge the differences in experience within the classroom while allowing the teacher and student to co-construct a learning space that meets their unique needs. Reality pedagogy focuses on privileging the ways that students make sense of the classroom

while acknowledging that the teacher often has very different expectations about the classroom. This approach to teaching focuses on the subtleties of teaching and learning that are traditionally glossed over by teachers and administrators while addressing the nuances of teaching that are not part of teacher-education programs and crash courses that lead to teacher certification. Reality pedagogy considers the range of emotions that new teachers experience when embarking on their careers but also acknowledges the experiences that veteran teachers may have had that left them jaded. Most importantly, it begins with the acceptance of the often overlooked fact that there are cultural differences between students and their teachers that make it difficult for teachers to be reflective and effective, while providing a set of steps that allow these misalignments to be overcome.

Reality pedagogy does not draw its cues for teaching from "classroom experts" who are far removed from real schools, or from researchers who make suggestions for the best ways to teach "urban," "suburban," and "rural" youth based on their perceptions of what makes sense for classrooms. Rather, it focuses on teaching and learning as it is successfully practiced within communities physically outside of, and oftentimes beyond, the school. Rather than give teachers a set of tools to implement and hope that these approaches meet the specific needs of urban youth and their teachers in particular classrooms, reality pedagogy provides educators with a mechanism for developing approaches to teaching that meet the specific needs of the students sitting in front of them. In the chapters that follow, we will delve into this approach and outline how it serves as a way for white folks who teach in the hood—and the rest of 'y'all too—to improve their pedagogy.

CHAPTER 2

Courage

Teach Without Fear

On my first day as a teacher, after the principal led me and three other beginning teachers on a final tour of the school, I joined the rest of the faculty in the auditorium, preparing for the students to arrive. As we waited for the doors to open, the other new teachers and I struggled to mask the emotions that rolled beneath our calm facades. At one point, we peered between the bars on the windows of the auditorium to catch a glimpse of the students who were lined up against a graffiti-stained wall outside the school building. There they stood, in their first-day-of-school outfits: brand-new gleaming sneakers in an array of bright colors and perfectly coordinated clothes, experiencing a bevy of emotions themselves, poised to meet their new teachers.

A few feet from the auditorium, metal detectors adorned the big metal doors that the students would soon walk through. As the queue outside the door grew, so did the sound of the students' voices, and with them, the tension inside the room as the huge clock on the auditorium wall slowly ticked to 8:30. A fellow new teacher, impeccably dressed in the principal's recommended khakis and blazer, looked up at me. "Do you hear them out there?" she asked nervously as the school doors opened and the students began to stream in.