Book Review of Christine Sleeter’s

*White bread: Weaving the cultural past into the present*1

By James C. Jupp


Perhaps more than any other scholar, Christine Sleeter has consistently advanced a body of critical multicultural research for teaching and learning across difference in public schools, and in the present, she continues with a steady stream of presentations, scholarly articles, research symposia, books, and most recently, a novel. Currently Professor Emerita at California State University Monterey Bay, Sleeter has provided another breakthrough for critical multicultural research with her pedagogical novel *White Bread: Weaving the Cultural Past into the Present*. As the balance of this review explains, Sleeter’s novel belongs on teacher education course syllabi, and ultimately, in the hands of preservice and professional educators. This review, which extols Sleeter’s novel without condition, does so for two reasons. First, the novel provides key narrativized content for capacititating preservice and professional teachers’ journeys toward cultural competence and political advocacy in public schools. Second, the novel provides a synthetic representation for the most up to date research in White teacher identity studies that

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1 This is an advanced draft of the book review that will be published in the newly established *National Youth At-Risk Journal* along with an interview with Dr. Sleeter. For more information regarding the journal, follow this link: [http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/nyar/](http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/nyar/)
an informed teacher education practitioner might leverage for teaching and learning with preservice and professional teachers.

Before reviewing Sleeter’s novel, it is important to situate the novel within her on-going contributions to critical multicultural research literatures. Given the trajectory of Sleeter’s contributions over the last three decades, it is impossible to provide a complete overview of her contributions to the research literatures here, so I provide just a synopsis characterizing several key contributions. Her early contributions provided early theorizations of multicultural education (Grant & Sleeter; 1986; Sleeter & Grant, 1987/2008), foundational research in White teacher identity studies (Sleeter, 1992, 1993, 1995), understandings of the narrowing and whitening effects of curriculum standards (2002, 2004), and comprehensive literature reviews on multicultural teacher education (Sleeter, 2001, 2007, 2008). Her more recent contributions emphasized social justice education (Sleeter, 2009, 2010), theorizations of ethnic studies (Sleeter, 2011b, 2013), and understandings of White identity through critical family history (Sleeter, 2008, 2011a, 2014). Sleeter, in addition to these key contributions, has published twenty books expanding the research lines laid out above, and her textbook *Turning on Learning* (Grant & Sleeter, 2009) has gone through five editions in the last fifteen years. Sleeter’s *White Bread*, the focus of this review, emerges from her recent research on White identity through critical family history.

*White Bread*, a novel published as part of Patricia Leavy’s social fictions series with Sense Publishers, provides key narrativized mimetic content for capacitating preservice and professional teachers’ journeys. *White Bread* narrates the story of Jessica, a struggling second year teacher, who takes up the challenges of cultural competence in planting the question “Who were those kids, and who was I to them?” (p. 2). Working in a predominantly Latino urban
elementary school in California, Jessica finds out that teaching and learning make new demands on her personal, professional, and social identities. Provoked and inspired by her mentor and Chicano activist colleague Esteban, Jessica undertakes a journey of coming to understand White identity and cultural competence in teaching and learning. At first tongue tied regarding White identity, Jessica responds to Esteban’s provocation by saying “I’m just plain white bread American, that’s what I know and that’s what I teach” (p. 3). To this pat and race-evasive response, Esteban challenges Jessica to situate her teaching within a serious study of herself, her students, the community, revisionist US history, and Chicano history.

Reinvigorating the intellect and curiosity that drew her into teaching in the first place, Jessica responds to Esteban’s provocation and begins the journey towards cultural competence. The first part of Jessica’s journey attends to understanding her White identity and the Latino identities of her students. Serendipitously, Jessica finds a bundle of letters between Mary and Annie from whom she realizes she must be a descendant, and she begins an honest and personal research project into her family’s past. In doing the family research, Jessica begins to see the anti-German sentiment during World War I that resulted in the subtraction of her German heritage and language. Learning in her research that she was part of German Methodist communities once spread all over the Midwest, Jessica learned not only of the forced cultural subtraction of her German heritage and language but also of structural inequalities and violence that assailed African Americans in the Midwest at the same time. Studying White and African American historical contexts, Jessica begins to unpack what is hidden in the term “White bread” that she had used to describe herself previously. In addition to understanding White identity in social and historical context, Jessica also challenges herself to come to know her students and their parents’ culture, heed Esteban and other school activists’ leadership, and study revisionist

However, in addition to self, social, and historical study, Sleeter’s *White Bread* also unpacks Jessica’s affective learning. Inextricably tied to Jessica’s study of her White identity and the Latino identities of her students outlined above, Jessica takes on the personal-affective journey very often ignored or omitted in transmissive approaches to multicultural research. Importantly narrated and included here, Jessica’s self, social, and historical study has real consequences in her personal life, relationships, and marriage. Further opening a breach between her White working class husband Tim, Jessica defends her family history research, her study interests, and the attentions to her students, their families, and community. Finding Jessica’s research and study incomprehensible, Tim feels disgraced and humiliated by the suggestion of studying the history of his working class family background that includes his father’s disappointments and his mother’s sordid background and quiet submission to abuse. Confronted with Tim’s incomprehension and distance, Jessica at first fantasizes of escaping with Esteban only to face her own naïve self-deception about Esteban’s affections. Finding no easy way out of the loneliness of Tim’s incomprehension and rejection, Jessica is left to do the anti-patriarchal White identity work and study outlined above with the help only of her school colleagues. What happens to Jessica, her family history research, the study of students and their parents, and her reading of critical histories hangs in the balance of her affective learning and ability to be courageous regarding the difficult knowledge she is learning and the new identity she is taking on. What is left in the balance of Jessica’s journey is a White teacher who has begun the journey
of cultural competence and political advocacy. For the children and community, the stakes are high as many White teachers in Jessica’s school work from deficit understandings of children, school, and community. In addition to these narrative and affective contributions, the novel provides even more for preservice and professional teachers.

Consciously or unconsciously, Sleeter’s *White Bread* also provides a synthetic representation that drives at pedagogical insights from the most up to date White teacher identity studies sometimes called *second-wave* White teacher identity studies. The teaching of the novel provides teacher education practitioners along with preservice and professional teachers the opportunity to study and engage in the most recent pedagogical insights from White teacher identity studies. Briefly summarized, Sleeter’s *White Bread* portrays and works through three main insights from the most up to date research on White teachers’ race-visible cultural learning. First, by situating Jessica’s White identity within historical and social intersections including her immigration history, social class, language, and geography, the novel resonates with recent research on White teacher identity that emphasizes identity complexity in pedagogical ways (Asher, 2008; Jupp & Slattery, 2012; Jupp, 2013; Laughter, 2011; Lensmire, 2011, 2014; Lensmire & Snaza, 2010; Milner, 2008, 2011; Raible & Irizarry, 2007; Ullucci, 2010, 2011, 2012; Zingheim & Goltz, 2011). Additionally, by narrating Jessica’s identity challenges, the novel resonates with recent research on White teacher identity that suggests a process orientation for learning cultural competence (Bueler, Ruggles Gere, Dallavis, & Haviland, 2009; Horton & Scott, 2004; Johnson Luchuk & Mosley, 2011; McDonough, 2009; Mosley & Rogers, 2009). Finally, by narrating Jessica’s cumulative education with her students, their parents, colleagues, and mentors, the novel resonates with recent research on White teacher identity that drives at Deweyan experiential learning as necessary for White teachers’ coming-to-know cultural
competence (Adair, 2008; Denevi & Pastan, 2006; Milam et al., 2014; Moule & Higgins, 2007; Pennington & Brock, 2012; Safford & Longwell-Grice, 2011; Seidl & Hancock, 2011; Ukpodoku, 2004; Waddell, 2011).

So, besides providing an important narrative and affective representation for White preservice and professional teachers’ learning, Sleeter’s White Bread – in the hands of an informed teacher education practitioner inclined toward research-based practice – can serve as a synthetic representation for teaching and learning about the most recent pedagogical insights from White teacher identity studies. Because it provides both narrativized mimetic content for capacitating preservice and professional teachers and a synthetic representation of the most up to date research in White teacher identity studies, this is a must read book for teacher educators committed to advancing cultural competence and political advocacy for their students.

Buy it, read it, and use it with your students!
References


Rivera, T. (1971). *Y no se lo tragó la tierra/And the earth did not devour him*. Houston, TX: Arte Público Press.


