Book Review of Christine Sleeter’s *White Bread: Weaving Cultural Past into the Present*

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Book Review of Christine Sleeter’s *White Bread: Weaving Cultural Past into the Present*

**Abstract**
This is a book review of Christine Sleeter's new novel *White Bread: Weaving Cultural Past into the Present*. This review extolls *White Bread* as a significant contribution that aids in White teachers’ race-cognizance and race-visible teaching. After providing necessary background on Sleeter, the review situates *White Bread* as reflective of four key dimensions of her critical multicultural research. Importantly, Sleeter’s fictionalized representations in the novel show what committed and effective teachers actually do when teaching across race, culture, class, language, and other differences in public school classrooms. Overall, the review recommends *White Bread* as a “must read” for professional development consultants, teacher educators, administrators, and teachers interested in race-visible teaching and learning.

**Keywords**
Christine Sleeter, multicultural education, White teachers, race-visible teaching
Christine Sleeter, more than any other teacher educator, has worked consistently in the field of critical multicultural education toward preparing preservice and professional teachers, especially White teachers attempting to teach across cultural differences in public schools. Currently Professor Emerita at California State University Monterey Bay, Sleeter has provided another breakthrough for critical multicultural education in her new novel, *White Bread: Weaving Cultural Past into the Present*. This novel takes readers on a personal journey with a White fifth-grade teacher named Jessica as she discovers her own cultural family history and develops race-cognizant understandings of teaching and learning in her predominantly working class Latino school. *White Bread* immerses White teachers in a personal search to recover their own lost cultural identities as they strive to understand the cultural identities of their students.

After discussing Sleeter’s research as it informs and contextualizes her novel, this review extolls *White Bread* as a significant contribution that aids in White teachers’ race-cognizance and race-visible teaching. *White Bread*, as the balance of this review demonstrates, stories the complexity of White teachers’ journeys toward race cognizance and race-visible teaching practices, and in doing so, the novel provides an important synopsis of what committed or effective White teachers of diverse students actually do in classrooms. The accessible storied synopsis of Sleeter’s lifelong research commitments makes *White Bread* a “must-read” for preservice and professional teachers, school administrators, and teacher educators who are committed to teaching and learning across cultural differences.

As a fictionalized account of her lifelong research commitments, *White Bread* draws on and imaginatively articulates four dimensions of Sleeter’s research. *First*, Sleeter’s (Grant & Sleeter, 1986; Sleeter & Grant, 1987/2008) work in the 1980s provided the foundations of contemporary thinking...
on multicultural education. In varying forms and models, multicultural education provides one component of teacher education and professional development in the present (e.g., Banks, 2004; Cochran-Smith, Davies, & Fries, 2004; Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation [CAEP], 2013; Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005). *White Bread* is a continuation of Sleeter’s commitment to the tradition of critical multicultural education she helped originate.

Second, Sleeter’s work (1992, 1993, 2001) provided initial forays into what is currently called “White teacher identity studies” (Jupp, 2013, p. 103). White teacher identity studies, correctly identifying White teachers’ White privilege and race evasion in first wave research of the 1990s and early 2000s, has more recently moved toward second wave White teacher identity studies. This second wave of White teacher identity studies recognizes White privilege and race evasion as starting points but moves toward understanding complex processes of race cognizance and race-visible teaching and learning in schools. *White Bread*, in its narration of the protagonist Jessica and her journey, is squarely located in second-wave concerns of developing race-cognizant teachers and race-visible teaching and learning.

Third, Sleeter’s (2009, 2010) research supports understandings of social justice education. Social justice education, now varied in focus and a separate area of inquiry, focuses not just on teaching the standards in inclusive ways but rather on the theory and practice of enacting social justice teaching in classrooms (e.g., Ayers, Quinn, & Stovall, 2009; Fehr & Fehr, 2010). *White Bread*, in its resolution, articulates White teachers’ professional development and thought processes that can make them advocates for social justice in schools.

Fourth, Sleeter’s (2011) research supports understandings of ethnic studies curriculum. Ethnic studies curriculum, the center of controversy in Tucson public schools and a recent ballot initiative in the California legislature, drives the intentional integration of students’ backgrounds and critical knowledges into public school teaching and learning (e.g., Tinatinco-Cubales et al., 2015). The advancement of ethnic studies curriculum in California provides one political context for *White Bread*.

Rightly published as part of Patricia Leavy’s social fictions series on Sense Publishers, *White Bread* provides a fictionalized account that very much synthesizes Sleeter’s life-long and complex body of research referenced above. Storying the challenges of a second-year White teacher named Jessica, *White Bread* begins with Jessica asking herself the reflective question, “Who were those kids, and who was I to them?” (p. 2). As part of a public school faculty serving a predominantly Latino and working class community in California, Jessica desires to improve her teaching after her challenging first year. In taking on this reflective task, she begins to confront the reality that teaching and learning in public schools make new personal, cultural, and professional demands on her. Confronting these new demands places additional stress on her relationship with her husband Tim, who is from a working class White background.

Provoked by Esteban, a community activist and colleague, Jessica initially reacts to the question of her own racial identity and background by defensively responding, “I’m just plain white bread American, that’s what I know and that’s what I teach” (p. 3). To this privileged and race-evasive answer, Esteban responds by challenging Jessica to take up a journey of self, cultural, and historical knowledge that includes family history, critical revisionist history, and Chicano history as key resources, and Esteban becomes Jessica’s mentor, work friend, and romantic “crush.” Serendipitously, Jessica finds a bundle of letters written between her ancestors Mary and Annie, and in so doing, she fully takes up Esteban’s invitation to more carefully study her past in culturally relevant
and historically specific ways. In committing to self-study and identity change, Jessica begins to distance herself from her husband Tim whose working class White background predisposes him toward individualism and bootstrap “success” stories.

Importantly, as part of her historical research, Jessica uncovers the anti-German hysteria during World War I that systematically served to deculturalize her immigrant family of their German language and ethnic traditions resulting in her present day “White Bread” culture cleansed of her cultural heritage and historical identity. In learning of her family’s deculturalization, Jessica also comes to understand the structural inequalities, prejudices, and organized White lynchings of African Americans that took place at the same time amidst the silence of her ancestors. Recovering the intellectual curiosity that drove her into teaching in the first place, Jessica’s study of historical resources and family history allows her to understand what is covered up and lost in terms like “White Bread.” However, the plot thickens as Tim, more estranged than ever at Jessica’s identity changes and personal study, leaves her for another woman right at the moment that Jessica discovers that her crush on Esteban was just a fantasy. Certainly, much lies in the balance for Jessica’s students and her school community as she struggles to do the anti-patriarchal and anti-racist identity learning.

Equally important to narrating Jessica’s identity learning, White Bread provides a fictionalized account of research on committed or effective White teachers. As represented in Jessica’s story in White Bread, committed or effective White teachers:

- **Critically understand** their own background and how it comes to bear on teaching and learning in their classrooms;
- **Study the history** of their students and their students’ communities on local, state, national, and international levels;
- **Create relationships with students and parents** as part of an interactive social dialogue about their students’ learning and the curriculum;
- **Take on race-visible and culturally relevant teaching** in personal and critical ways that engage their own and their students’ backgrounds as areas of personal and social critique;
- **Teach through students’ backgrounds** by contextualizing and thematizing subject area teaching in communities’ cultures and histories; and
- **Become political advocates** on behalf of their students in concrete and meaningful ways as part of a larger process of self and community engagement and collaboration.

While fictionalizing White teachers’ race cognizance and race-visible teaching and learning, Sleeter’s White Bread also provides an important summary of research on what is to be done in classrooms. For additional educational resources for and implications of White Bread, teacher educators and staff developers may see the Instructor’s Guide written by Sleeter (2015).

Sleeter’s White Bread, in extending the four dimensions of her research into a fictionalized account, provides an important new resource for preservice and professional teachers, administrators, and teacher educators. In sum, White Bread packs a career’s worth of committed research on White teachers’ identity.
change and teaching across cultural difference in public schools into a readable novel. Read it, teach it, and, most importantly, apply its knowledge in classrooms.

REFERENCES

James C. Jupp, a faculty member in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Georgia Southern University, has spent 18 years in majority “minority” Title I schools teaching predominantly Latino students and has spent the last decade on research on teaching and learning across race, class, language, and other differences. His main line of research focuses on White teachers’ racial conscientization and race-visible teaching and learning in urban public schools.

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