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For White Folks
Who Teach
In the Hood
...and the
Rest of Y'all Too
Reality Pedagogy
and Urban Education

CHAPTER 1

Camaraderie

Reality and the Neoindigenous

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 cowered 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 figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me."[3]

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 preservice 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 coddle 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 neoindigenous, and the indigenous. While the word *neoindigeneity* 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 neoindigenous, 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 neoindigineity 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 neoindigenous 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 neoindigeneity 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 neoindigenous 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 pedagogue 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.