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Culture Wars in Education: Whiteness, APUSH, and the Pursuit of Property

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Abstract Submission

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Abstract

This work examines an artifact of K-12 educational discourse within which structural and cultural aspects of society merge to reinforce current social power dynamics, specifically whiteness as a norm within U.S society. My intention here is to add to the wealth of literature aimed at decentering whiteness by furthering our understanding of how, while often unnoticed, whiteness works to privilege by framing societal perceptions and ascribing meaning based on a person's race (Crenshaw, 1997; Gilborn, 2005; Haviland, 2008; Leonardo, 2010; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Shome, 1996; Warren, 1999).

To do so, I will perform a rhetorical analysis of a Jefferson County Board of Education meeting (Jeffco BOE) that took place in Golden, Colorado on October 2, 2014. My analysis will argue for that meeting as offering emblematic glimpse into how whiteness is protected vis-à-vis the competition for property. In the case of the Jeffco BOE meeting, I take knowledge and U.S. history as forms of material property. More specifically, knowledge is the perceived opportunity to better one's position by earning college credits while still in high school, and history is a collection of narratives that emphasize or deemphasize crucial moments within the nation's past.

In Jefferson County (Jeffco) as in many states across the country, opportunities for students to earn college credits while still in high school come via their enrollment in an Advanced Placement U.S. history (APUSH) course. In such courses, students prepare to take the College Board APUSH exam. The College Board is the non-profit organization that designs the nation's SAT and college-credit-earning AP program exams. A passing score on its APUSH exam

would earn high school students college credits. Put another way, students could take the APUSH and test out of an entry-level U.S. history course required by an institution for higher education.

With this in mind, I argue, it is useful to think of property on two interconnected levels. First, it is important to think of college credits, which of course hold monetary value, as property. Second, and perhaps more profoundly, it is crucial to think of the perceived right to own the guiding educational narrative of U.S. history itself, a narrative explicitly tied to what it means to be American and what it means to be patriotic, as property. And so, both college credits and history have value and with them, they bear the perception of ownership.

In sections that follow, I will shed light on how these understandings of property are catalysts in an ongoing struggle, or culture war, between opposing moral visions for control of how the nations' past is taught in K-12 history and social studies courses and subsequently how it is recalled by future generations (Hunter, 1991). My rhetorical analysis attempts to excavate the ways in which the rhetoric espoused at a Jeffco BOE meeting works to cloak whiteness even when it is the inclusiveness of the historical narratives of 'Others' that has prompted the initial debate. To explain how the meshing of property and patriotism clouds and subsumes whiteness as the norm in U.S K-12 educational discourse and to examine the educational benefits associated with white privilege that position it as an inherent asset capable of advantaging people in their pursuit of properties such as knowledge, I will utilize Derrick Bell's theory of interest-convergence. Bell (2004) argues that historically whites concede gains to minorities if and only if whites themselves perceive a material benefit in doing so (p. 49).

Before moving forward, I must note that, in this essay, it is not my intention to ignore issues related to class in U.S. society of which race has often been just a marker. Class will be included

in the discussion in the “Context of the Artifact” section though perhaps too briefly for the tastes of some. For those who hold such a position, I offer this: my goal here is to put forth an argument that aims to understand how race remains and has consistently remained a marker of class throughout American society. K-12 educational discourses, I argue, provide a rich ground to do such exploration. That said, I focus my lens on the underlying issues pertaining to race within the existing power structures of U.S. society, one of which involves the education of our nation’s youth. My perspective is in keeping with that of Gloria Ladson-Billings, former president of the American Educational Research Association, who wrote, “class- and gender-based explanations are not powerful enough to explain all of the difference (or variance) in school experience and performance. Although both class and gender can and do intersect race, as stand-alone variables they do not explain all of the educational achievement differences apparent between whites and students of color” (Ladson-Billings & Tate IV, 1995, p. 51).

Context of the Artifact

Every rhetorical situation contains a set of constraints made up of personas, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence. (Bitzer, 1992, p. 8)

Whether, as the quote above suggests the exigence—the urgent problem addressed by speakers within a given rhetorical context—is resolved or not matters little within the scope of my overall argument, one that claims whiteness remains obscured even as rhetors attempt to resolve a perceived exigence (Bitzer, 1992, p. 5). Still, to fully appreciate a speaker’s persuasion, and whatever it may or may not deemphasize, it is important to first lay out a healthy understanding of the situation that “calls the discourse into existence” (Bitzer, 1992, p. 2).

As Bitzer (1992) wisely suggests, it is often the situation that constructs the arena for rhetorical address (p. 2). In keeping with this mindset, this section is devoted to offering, at very least, a rudimentary understanding of “the context of meaning” within which the speeches delivered at a school board meeting in Golden, Colorado were located (Bitzer, 1992, p.2). That said, I fully admit that the context I present in this section only encapsulates a relatively abridged collection of the possible events that unfolded to bring about the rhetoric and narratives espoused at the meeting; however, my hope is that this section, which is dedicated specifically to events immediately influencing the persuasion enacted by those who spoke at the meeting during its public comment section will paint a full enough picture and provide a transparent enough window to support my arguments.