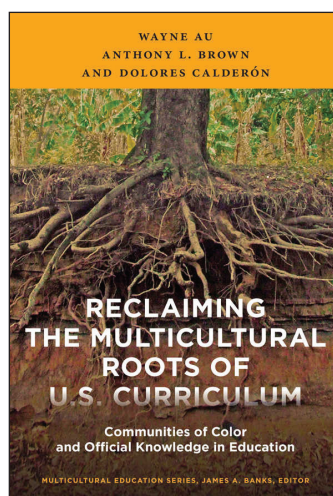


# Democracy & Education

## Disrupting Whiteness in Curriculum History A Book Review of *Reclaiming the Multicultural Roots of U.S. Curriculum: Communities of Color and Official Knowledge in Education*

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**T**HROUGH INTENTIONAL NAMING or engagement with discourses relevant to progressive educators, curriculum history is commonplace in educational studies. However, extant discourses of curriculum history fail to explicate how education in the U.S. has and continues to function as a colonizing tool, with curriculum as its main weapon. Furthermore, narratives of curriculum history largely ignore the curricular endeavors that originated and took shape, both from and within communities of color in resistance to colonized mainstream education. Much like their K–12 counterparts, foundational curriculum history texts used in undergraduate and graduate educational studies tend to gloss over discourses of power, colonization, racism, and discrimination (Brown & Au, 2014). Thus, the current and accepted curriculum of curriculum history remains whitewashed, often championing the exploits of White progressive educators with scant attention given to women or critical intellectuals of color (Brown & Au, 2014). In *Reclaiming the Multicultural Roots of U.S. Curriculum: Communities of Color and Official Knowledge in Education*, Au, Brown, and Calderón (2016) challenge the whitewashed master narrative of curriculum history with a text that foregrounds communities of color—namely Indigenous, Chinese American, Japanese American, Mexican American, and African American—as essential to the production of curriculum in U.S. education. In an effort to diversify the canon of curriculum history scholarship, Au, Brown, and Calderón



trace the multilayered experiences with racism and discrimination in educational contexts yet also highlight collective resistance through the form of curriculum formation and theorizing that emerged from communities of color.

They established several theoretical approaches in their introductory chapter that are vital to discerning how the text forms across centuries and the complex socio-histories of ethnoracial groups. The authors drew from DuBois's (1903/1994) notion of “a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 3). This “peculiar sensation” is central to understanding how Au, Brown, and Calderón (2016) came to author this book as scholars of color who study and teach curriculum history yet feel unsettled with the master narrative of curriculum history. Au, Brown, and Calderón also referred to the “peculiar sensation” as a means for explaining how Indigenous peoples, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans grappled with the identity challenges presented

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through institutional discrimination and racist curricular constructions. Relevant to the “peculiar sensation,” the authors positioned Whiteness as central to the book in two ways. First, Au, Brown, and Calderón explicated how Whiteness and silence undergird the extant canon of curriculum history. Second, the espousal of Whiteness and silence is also used to frame the obfuscation of curricular discourses and epistemologies from communities of color which were subsequently deemed insignificant to curriculum formation. Finally, using cultural memory and critical race theory’s (CRT) recognition of revisionist history (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), the authors drew from Mills’s (1998) revisionist ontology to illustrate how communities of color resisted subperson curricular narratives and reconstructed ontologies through the formation of their own curricula. In this vein, the book itself can also be perceived as a revisionist ontology effort.

Relying upon the aforementioned theoretical approaches as an axis, each chapter documents the distinct experiences with discriminatory curricular practices. Chapter 2 focuses on the struggle for Native American curricular sovereignty. Brown, Au, and Calderón situated this struggle within the larger sociopolitical context of anti-Indigenous policy and settler colonialism. Doing so allows the reader to see how discussions of Indigenous education and curriculum emerged alongside Anglo efforts to politically colonize multiple Indigenous groups. Hence, curriculum as a weapon of colonization becomes clear. Au, Brown, and Calderón suggested two lenses through which the reader can view the weaponizing of curriculum from an Indigenous context. They used the concept of curricular genocide to “refer to the attempted use of curriculum, in this case by the federal government, churches, and other Western institutions in the United States, to colonize and challenge the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples” (pp. 24–25). Drawing from historical narratives of boarding schools, the authors detailed how the curriculum of boarding schools—both in a traditional and in an environmental sense—aimed to attack and erase Indigenous cultural identity. Contrarily, the authors argued that Indigenous groups also relied upon curricular self-determination as a mechanism for “asserting control” (p. 24) and reappropriating colonized curriculum for their own agency, purpose, and maintenance of cultural identity.

The authors began chapter 3 by situating Chinese and Japanese American curricular discourse within the sociopolitical context of the late 19th century through the 1930s. Conjuring DuBois’s (1903/1994) question “How does it feel to be a problem?” (p. 3), anti-Chinese American and anti-Japanese American curricular and educational policy passed by White structures are described as rectifying the “Asian problem.” Another recurring question used to frame Chinese American and Japanese American curricular discourse was the question of what Chinese American and Japanese American children should learn. Therefore, Au, Brown, and Calderón (2016) explicated the transnational nature of Chinese American and Japanese American curricular endeavors. These efforts often entailed the use of native Chinese and Japanese textbooks to maintain cultural identity through the learning of history and language. In the case of Chinese

Americans, “this curricular commitment to cultural maintenance was [also] shaped by the context of White supremacy and anti-Chinese racism,” which ensured that Chinese “were never fully accepted within the identity of ‘American’—they were a problem . . .” (Au, Brown, & Calderón, 2016, p. 61). Due to differing political relationships between the U.S. and Japan, however, the question “what should Japanese children learn?” was much more complex as Japanese American schools aimed to maintain cultural identity but grappled with Americanization.

Continuing with the effort to ground curricular discourses within the sociopolitical, chapter 4 situates Mexican American curricular experiences alongside discourses of off-White status and racial ambiguity. Drawing from the work of legal scholar Laura Gomez (2007), Au, Brown, and Calderón (2016) detailed how the racially ambivalent social construction of race for Mexican Americans—often through state and federal court jurisprudence—directly contributed to curricular discourses in the Southwestern U.S., namely Texas and New Mexico. In some cases, this meant pursuing the assimilationist aims exemplified by organizations such as the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). LULAC, along with other organizations and interlocutors who clung to off-White status, challenged Mexican American curricular and educational segregation along the basis of being White. Thus, their curricular demands catered to White dominant curriculum. Conversely, Au, Brown, and Calderón explicated the intellectual and pragmatic efforts of critical educational intellectual George I. Sánchez, who challenged the eugenics ideology of Mexican American inferiority. Eugenics ideology directly led to a bifurcated curriculum in Anglo schools, in which Mexican American students undertook a vocational-like curricular track. Sánchez would argue for an equitable curriculum for Mexican American students based on their status as persons, not on the claims to off-Whiteness.

In chapter 5, Au, Brown, and Calderón (2016) detailed 20th-century African American curricular discourses within the sociohistorical context of the nadir period of race relations. Chapter 5 deviates from previous chapters in two ways. First, and as I alluded to, the authors provided sociohistorical in addition to in-depth sociopolitical context for understanding African American curricular discourses. Second, African American curricular discourses primarily emerged through traditional modes for examining “official knowledge” (Apple, 2000), namely textbooks and children’s literature. Operating under the same theoretical axis, Au, Brown, and Calderón explicated how anti-Black ideologies were promoted in children’s picture books, nursery rhymes, and school textbooks. They argued that these anti-Black constructions were used to (a) reproduce scientifically racist ideas of Blacks as inferior, or subhuman, and (b) diminish the role of racism in the story of African Americans in the U.S. As in other chapters, the authors documented revisionist ontology efforts vis-à-vis African American curriculum theorizing through outlets such as academic journals (e.g., *The Journal of Negro Education*), children’s literature (e.g., *The Brownie’s Book*), and the production of African American history textbooks and encyclopedias.

Overall, *Reclaiming the Multicultural Roots of U.S. Curriculum* illustrates the theoretical parallels in curricular discourses that exist across various ethnoracial and sociohistorical contexts. Albeit, Au, Brown, and Calderón (2016) captured the curriculum histories of multiple communities of color within the same scholarly space without essentializing across and within historically marginalized groups. Additionally, Au, Brown, and Calderón offered a complex and nuanced history of curriculum history that problematizes the White male canon of curriculum history. Their text should not be misconstrued as an effort to rescue historical narratives from obscurity but rather as one to reclaim what has always been there, silenced through Whiteness.

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