

White's the Difference

BY REBECCA BARRETT FOX

WHITE BOY: A MEMOIR

by Mark D. Naison. Temple, 2002.

I knew that I would be the only white person in the classroom the day I began teaching at an urban community college, but, despite all the reading I had done on the topic, I wasn't prepared—especially for the sudden visibility of my whiteness. My students assured me that my race was nothing, that, in fact, they did not believe in racism, that race itself was a construct and that, like Martin Luther King, Jr., they wanted to judge me not by the color of my skin but by the content of my character—and, in the case of this classroom, which focused on college preparation and study skills, by how much I could help them.

Yet my race was an issue, much more so than it was at the overwhelmingly white classroom I taught in at the local state university, where I could talk about race in theoretical ways that challenged my white students' thinking but did not threaten their power in any material way. And while my students assured me that my whiteness didn't matter, I knew that it did—because I was often on the outside of their jokes, outside of their discourse, outside of their concerns. Empathy was not enough; I needed to share at least some of the experiences of my students.

Autobiography became a way for us to communicate. While my African American students often deflected my efforts to establish camaraderie, preferring, in general, a more formal student-teacher relationship, a

demand that I, in response, often resisted, they loved to tell stories. In the sharing of our stories, we found not only common experiences but common concerns. Stories about car repairs or lousy landlords became opportunities not only to practice basic budgeting skills and time management strategies but also chances to discuss institutional racism, the economics of the inner city, and empowerment. Autobiography permitted me

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JON FARLEIGH, ILLUSTRATION FOR GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S *THE ADVENTURES OF THE BLACK GIRL IN HER SEARCH FOR GOD*

to do the job that I was hired to do—teach college survival skills to the most under-prepared of students—while also building an atmosphere of

encouragement, empathy, and energy.

Unfortunately, I had to learn this lesson before reading Mark D. Naison's *White Boy: A Memoir*, the 2002 autobiography of a Jewish kid who grows up loving African American culture, despite the fears of his parents, and pursues an academic career in African American studies at the time when the discipline was only beginning to emerge. Had I read the book sooner, I would have found someone who modeled the confidence and humility that I needed as a white teacher in a traditionally African American space. While Naison is not full of practical advice for teachers in this position (or for African American colleagues wrestling with their own feelings about the issue of a "white" man in a "black" field) or especially self-reflexive about his shortcomings (particularly his reliance upon his masculinity, heterosexuality, and physicality for feelings of self-worth and, at times, dominance over others), *White Boy* effectively blends social history and autobiography together in an engaging tale that begins in post-War New York City, with its changing neighborhood demographics, through the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, into the development and eventual codification of the African American studies program at Columbia, where Naison has always taught, and the broader university world.

A record of the historical events is useful enough, but what marks Naison's book as of particular interest is not necessarily what Naison himself witnessed as a Jewish kid growing up in an increasingly

black New York or as a partner in a biracial relationship or as an activist or as an academic worker foraging into a hostile field, nor is it his own ideas about teaching, which are not related in detail or considered in depth. Instead, the many potential ways that his book can be used in a radical classroom are what make it valuable.

White Boy should be read by those, like Naison, who at times question their own position as white and male in the academic world, and it should be read by those academic workers who are not white and male but ask the same question about their white male colleagues. Questions of authority and authenticity, central to *White Boy* but never fully articulated, are especially difficult for those teachers who believe neither in authority nor authenticity yet feel ourselves—as I did at the start of my experience as the white teacher of students of color—incompetent and false when interacting with students different from

us, especially when we are discussing issues of difference.

Similarly, Naison's book can be used by teachers working in classrooms where racial difference—or, indeed, lack of racial variety—is a central characteristic of the composition of the class. Had I asked my students of color to read *White Boy*, I might have helped them understand my own discomfort and their own role in easing my discomfort. I might have been able to help them articulate their own concerns about white authority in the classroom. Had I asked my the students in my mostly white classroom to read the book, they might have learned to interrogate themselves, their motives and priorities and assumptions as they learned about black culture and history within the confines of a white classroom from a white teacher.

Most of all, students can learn the power of autobiography. As I enter the first year composition classroom

year after year, my distaste for the personal narrative has grown intensely. Too often, students report personal events whose meaning is lost to anyone beyond themselves. Much of the time, students struggle to balance narration and self-reflection, and my use of texts by Richard Rodriguez, Malcolm X, and Richard Wright only seems to alienate my white students, who remain convinced that autoethnographies are for people of color or some other minority group. By demonstrating how whiteness matters—that is, how his whiteness affected his love life, his relationship with his parents, his academic career, his social life, his hobbies—Mark D. Naison's accessible *White Boy* can help white students find confidence to speak about issues of race, leading to a more honest treatment of this important topic in classrooms composed of all kinds of students. **RW**

Call for Papers

"Women, Tenure, and Promotion"

Special Issue of the *National Women's Studies Association Journal* [2007]

Co-editors: Dr. Ines Shaw and Dr. Sharon Leder, Nassau Community College, and Dr. Betty Harris, University of Oklahoma.

Deadline for Submissions: 1 May 2005

After more than three decades of women's studies in the academy and a steady increase of women faculty in higher education across the disciplines, it is appropriate to take stock of what we have learned and what still needs to be accomplished. Contributors may consider the following:

Status of Women and Changing the Structures:

How can academic structures change so that a) women rise through and occupy all ranks in equal proportion to men, and are not stuck in the lowest ranks with the lowest salaries? b) joint appointments and shared courses become regular systemic options? c) committees and administrations are monitored for accountability in promotion and/or tenure (p&t) decisions? d) campus Affirmative Action offices actively encourage, defend, and insure gender equity?

Mentoring: What type of mentoring a) really advances the attainment of p&t for all women? b) helps service and activist contributions count for p&t?

Student Evaluations/Faculty Ratings: What can counteract negative consequences of gender, race, and ethnic bias in student evaluations of women faculty in p&t decisions?

Court Trends: How can knowledge of current trends in gender discrimination lawsuits prepare women for litigation?

Tenure and Promotion Struggles and Denials: a) What factors halt women faculty's paths to tenure or promotion? b) How may criteria for p&t change so that teaching and service scholarship count as "real" scholarship? c) How may criteria change so that interdisciplinary, feminist and activist work count toward p&t? d) What roles do personal and family life play in women's struggles to gain p&t? e) How are women's physical and mental health, financial status and professional life affected by denials of p&t, and by strategies they employ in response? f) What are the financial, educational, and human costs of not tenuring or promoting women faculty?

A 150-word abstract should be submitted with a completed essay of 20-30 pages, including abstract, notes, and references—two copies to Dr. Ines Shaw, English Department, Nassau Community College, One Education Drive, Garden City, NY 11530, and one copy to Dr. Betty Harris, Women's Studies Program, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019. NWSA Journal Style guidelines are available at www.nwsaj.eng.iastate.edu. Inquiries can be directed to Dr. Ines Shaw at shawi@sunynassau.edu.

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