

Introduction

Ann: How We Came to Write This Book

One July day toward the end of the millennium I asked the students in my Cultural and Linguistic Diversity course—pre-service and experienced teachers—to finish writing their responses to a video we had just seen and then to take a break. They knew that when we reconvened, Sekani Moyenda, an African American woman who teaches in an elementary school that serves predominantly poor Chinese immigrant and African American families, would make a presentation to the class.¹

We were a little more than halfway through a three-week summer school version of the course I usually teach over a fifteen-week semester. I had been teaching this course, required of all new elementary school teachers in California, four times a year for the past six years.

Sekani had been a student in the course the previous semester. I invited her to speak because, after completing the course, she told me it was her opinion that graduates of our teacher education program hadn't been adequately prepared for the realities they would face as teachers of African American, Latino, Asian heritage, or poor white children. She added that, based on her observations of teachers at her school, other teacher credential programs weren't doing any better. She was convinced that many of the teachers who successfully completed a credential program, if they remained in teaching,² were more likely to contribute to the destruction of these children over decades-long careers than to their academic and personal growth and power.³

I believed there was far too much truth in what Sekani said and that my course was not exempt from her criticism, so I asked her if she'd like to take two and a half hours of class time to address the

students in any way she chose. The day before her presentation Sekani had informed me that she planned to engage the class in a simulation she had created for the occasion to provoke thinking about discipline in classrooms where many of the children are African American and poor. She planned to call the presentation “Boot Camp for Teachers.” I really had no idea what was going to happen in the class. The only thing I knew for sure was that we would not be bored.

By the time the Boot Camp presentation was over and the students had gathered up their papers and left the room, I was reeling from the classroom trauma that the students’ encounter with Sekani had provoked. During the session two of the white women in the class shed tears, one of them fled the room before the presentation was over, and a heated argument erupted between Sekani and Jim,⁴ a white man who had volunteered to play the role of teacher in the simulation. Their voices had reverberated down the hall.

That evening, Jennifer, a white student, would write: “It was one of the most valuable classes I have ever had.” Another white student, Denise, wrote: “I am upset and enraged by the message I heard from today’s guest speakers.” Isiah, the only African American: “Sekani touched a nerve in our classmates. . . . She gave them more in two hours than they will get from any course or class at the university.” The day after the presentation, Wong Wan Shan, an immigrant from Hong Kong, wrote: “Teachers . . . must never at any one time while inside a classroom be carried away by our emotions. Yesterday, for that short period of time, the guest speaker let her emotions take over. . . . We are all eye witnesses to the result. . . . The original good intentions of the guest speaker got totally washed down.”

Sekani’s presentation challenged and disrupted the ways most of the students and I saw ourselves as present and future teachers. It also provided the opportunity for the students, Sekani, and me to explore the depth, dimensions, and significance of racism to a degree that was unprecedented for all of us.

The race and ethnicity of the students in the class were typical of teachers in California.⁵ Three quarters were of European descent. The other quarter identified themselves as Chinese or Chinese American (a group that included recent immigrants from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China), African American, Filipino, Latino/Latina (Mexican American or Chicana/Chicano), or of mixed or biracial heritage.

These students would be teaching young children whose racial and ethnic heritages are as diverse as any in the world.

My primary objective for the entire course was to encourage the students to rethink their assumptions about race, class, gender, culture, language, and sexual orientation that predispose them, like most teachers, to reproduce rather than challenge injustice as they teach. I wanted the students to learn to recognize forms of injustice, including those that are least visible. I wanted them to become aware that as teachers they will have endless opportunities to choose between collaborating with or challenging individuals and institutions that encourage indifference to victimization. I wanted them to refuse to take injustice and exploitation as inevitable, and to act on that awareness.

Sekani had made her presentation toward the end of the course, after students had explored in some depth their racial autobiographies—what and how they had learned, particularly as children and young adults, about race and the racial hierarchy into which they had been inducted. We had already studied personal and institutional racism, internalized racism, and white privilege, investigations that have become legion among many teachers of cultural diversity courses.⁶ Thus, the layers and permutations of the various forms of racism that surfaced during Sekani's presentation were both disturbing and surprising to Sekani and to me, and to the students as well. The encounter between Sekani and the class challenged our views of ourselves and the kind of society we live in, and our presumptions of our racial innocence as well.

The idea to write about the encounter came to me a few weeks after the course was over, while, as a result of a three-week house exchange with some Italian teachers, I was sitting on the patio of a seventeenth-century house in a medieval village perched high above the terraced hills of Tuscany. Why was I, thousands of miles from where the event had happened, still thinking about it? Because it was as puzzling as any event that had occurred in any course I had ever taught or taken, and I had a hunch that looking closely at it would move my understanding of my teaching into a different realm.

I also thought that understanding what had happened and writing about it might be useful to others—teachers of diverse racial and ethnic heritages, and teachers of these teachers—who, with or

without their awareness, grapple daily with race and racism in their classrooms. And because for a long time I have been aware that people outside the field of education understand far more about racism in the criminal justice and health care systems than they do about how it is played out in schools, I also wanted to write for them, in the hope that they would gain a better understanding of how racism operates in schools, which, after all, belong to all of us.

It was important to me to find a way to write about the encounter and its aftermath that did not portray it solely from *my* point of view, so that both I and my readers would be challenged to look critically at *my* “take” on what had happened. It occurred to me that Sekani, who had formerly experienced the course as a student and whose economic background and racial/ethnic experience differed so greatly from my own, might be willing to share with me the telling of the story. I wanted to write some form of narrative because years of teaching had convinced me that abstract textbook expositions, no matter how wise, rarely penetrated deeply either the hearts or minds of student readers.⁷

As I sat on that terrace in Tuscany, I was aware of some of the problems Sekani and I would face if we were to tell the story together. One would be figuring out how to capture our collaboration in a way that both preserved the differences in our perspectives and conveyed our influences on one another’s views as these would surely evolve over time.

Of even greater concern to me was the power differential inherent in a collaboration between an African American teacher of children and a white university teacher. Could we tell the story in a way that did not privilege my use of the languages and theories valued by those who selected books to use in the diversity courses that were proliferating around the globe over Sekani’s powerful but academically marginalized ways of expressing her understanding?⁸ Could we structure what we would write in a way that encouraged our readers to be aware that in this situation a white academic is in danger of having the last word?

When I returned to California, I proposed the project to Sekani. She seemed as fascinated as I was with the encounter, and we agreed to try to make sense of it together. (Though she seemed to be quite

eager, months later she confessed she had had serious doubts about whether I would really follow through on the project.) That fall I pieced together excerpts from students' journal responses to the encounter and its aftermath, and Sekani and I began a conversation that was to continue over several years.⁹

My interest in understanding what had happened in the class was neither idle nor academic. Stark realities spurred me on. Poor children and Black and brown children *of every social class*, by many indicators—academic achievement, suspension, dropout, attendance, and college attendance rates—were continuing to fall further behind white middle-class students with each additional year of schooling.¹⁰ The underachievement of African American students in particular remained both persistent and pervasive.¹¹ These patterns paralleled and were not unrelated to many extra-schooling demographic facts: the lower life expectancy of African American men;¹² higher imprisonment rates and, in the juvenile “justice” system, stunning disparities in treatment of Blacks and Latinos;¹³ and increasing discrimination against Black and brown home buyers,¹⁴ to name just a few. The flip side of those “disadvantages”—white, social, economic, and political privilege of which the recipients are almost entirely unaware—remained a cornerstone supporting this racial status quo.¹⁵

As we were writing, a flurry of reports appeared in the national news documenting race and class differences in school success, and these disparities became, at least temporarily, of national concern. There was no dearth of proposals for addressing the problem: more standardized and centralized testing, national standards, an end to social promotion, zero-tolerance discipline policies, prescribed curricula, vouchers, and charter schools. At the same time, the State of California had begun to organize the way schools' academic performance was reported, so that schools with high proportions of poor children could be compared to one another. This way of reporting suggested that the ubiquitous race and class disparities were simply facts of life. Nowhere in the mainstream conversation was it suggested that institutional racism might contribute significantly to the disparities.¹⁶

I do not think schools can be transformed into institutions that promote social justice by requiring teachers to take diversity courses;

research suggests that the effects of most of these courses are neither profound nor lasting.¹⁷ But I do think that if teachers gain an emotional as well as an intellectual understanding of how racism and the other “isms” work, the chances that they will continue to pass on to future generations the systems of inequality that structure the society they live in can be reduced. This applies not only to white teachers but also to teachers of color, who, like their white counterparts, often bring with them blindness to racism and unexamined and dangerous notions about members of their own group, as well as groups of people who are different from themselves.¹⁸

Diversity courses often focus on racial/cultural differences in learning and communication styles. Though I think an understanding of such differences is important, I am convinced it is of little value if teachers do not understand how institutional racism has powerfully shaped both their views of and aspirations for the children they teach and their attitudes toward their students’ parents. I am certain that any teacher who sees Black and brown and poor children and their parents as “less than” cannot possibly teach these children successfully.¹⁹

I am not claiming that changing what happens in schools will eliminate social injustice. Black male high school and College graduates will continue for the foreseeable future to earn less on average than their white counterparts,²⁰ and middle-class Blacks and Latinos will still encounter racism at every turn no matter how equitable their schooling might be.²¹ But I believe it is within the power of self-reflective teachers and teacher educators to contribute to the creation of a more just and joyful world.

I hope the stories we tell illuminate how and why schooling continues to contribute to the reproduction of inequality and suggest what teachers, parents, and other citizens can do to interrupt this process. I also hope our stories of one group of individuals working through their views of race will serve as mirrors that help readers reflect upon themselves.

Finally, I intend by telling these stories to honor and share with others the insights of the students in the diversity class, the youngest of whom was twenty, the oldest of whom was in his fifties, who brought vast and varied experience from far corners of the globe. I also hope *Taking It Personally* will convey how looking closely at

teaching can bring about new ways of seeing and understanding, and encourage readers who are teachers to become teacher researchers themselves.²²

Sekani: Why Should You Read this Book?

It's 2:00 A.M. Occasionally, I wander around the house. I've been without focus or purpose for the last four hours. If you were in this room with me right now, you might say I was enjoying a much needed rest; I'm relaxing. But in fact, I am having one of my chronic free-floating anxiety attacks. Emotional chaos and confusion have gripped me to the point of inactivity. The only feelings I can identify are fear and grief. But I cannot understand the root of these feelings. I can't sort, focus, or identify them enough to do something with them. Although my body needs to move and get some exercise, all my energy is being consumed by these anxieties. I feel like a car that I've revved up but can't get moving. I am fatigued.

I'm thinking all these disjointed thoughts:

"At least my left leg doesn't hurt right now. Hope I hear some good news Monday when I get the results of the MRI. I don't know if I want a nerve graft if I am found to be a candidate. That will mean I will be out of work and school in the spring. Shit, I just had surgery in June.

"I don't have any money again. I wonder how long it will take me to get my transcripts at the end of this semester? How long will it take once I take them to the district to get my salary adjusted? I love my new computer, but between paying for the loan and my medical expenses—this sucks. I need to find a house I can afford; paying all this rent is killing me. How am I going to get the new modem since this one doesn't work? I have to cancel my massage. I don't have enough money to pay for it.

"I need to learn how to use Filemaker Pro. What happened to the Timeliner? They said it would arrive in a week. Why can't I get the color orange in Microsoft Draw—what's the deal with that?

"God, Mom's gonna drive me crazy with her worrying when she sees me in this leg brace. I'm just glad I don't see her on Thanksgiving. That is entirely too depressing and terrifying. I'll spend the holidays at work, as usual. I need a life. I gotta lose weight. Will I ever have sex again? I have to start wearing my glasses when I use the computer."

On and on this goes until I get so fed up with myself, I shut down. I go numb. If I have learned anything about these times, it's to stay away from people. I know, isolation is not a good thing, but what can anyone do for me right now? Assure me that I'm paranoid? Eventually these feelings become unbearable. I start turning to different ways to deal with them. I've tried sleeping. But I am not waking up feeling any better. I've tried working. Somehow feeling like I'm doing something important gives me some sense of self and meaning. But, except for mundane tasks, I can't think of anything to do that could effectively distract me. I'm single, pushing forty, have no man or family—and, oh yes, I am now going through the “change of life.” Why the fuck do they call it that? My life hasn't changed because I'm now barren. That's the problem; some part of me always feels barren. Devoid of fertility. Valueless and insignificant. Unable to find any permanence of self.

In an effort to preoccupy myself, I pick up Ann's latest draft of our book. The subject of racism can always get me going, and perhaps in engaging it I can find some inner peace. I read the criticism some of the students made about my presentation to Ann's class, and it stings. The journals cut to the quick, and when I'm in moods like this I believe every negative assessment of myself by these people. Is it true? Am I trippin'? Am I filled with rage, racism, and “insensitivity”?

I was glad to make the presentation to Ann's class. I wanted to bring a dose of reality to these future teachers. I knew who they were and had my own opinions about what they needed, because for the past few years I had been sitting in classes with them. I created a role play that recreated the classroom I had just finished trying to manage. I set the “teacher” up to fail, because teachers entering such worst-case scenario classrooms *are* set up to fail, and these classrooms are teachers' worst nightmares. I wanted these teachers to see what it *felt* like to be in a chaotic classroom environment, and I wanted to initiate conversation and generate questions about how they would actually deal with it. I did not go with the intention of making two white women cry, and one of them walk out, and one white male bluster and blow his stack. I simply wanted the students to get a feel for what would be the results of trying to apply their

abstract, liberal, Eurocentric, often unconsciously racist ideologies in the classroom.

I now see that many of my responses to the students during the presentation were rooted in my need to speak my mind. I was unable to do so where I taught. I had already lost one (nonteaching) job because I had used the R-word to name what I knew was happening. I liked teaching at Rosa Parks and wasn't willing to lose my job because I confronted teachers on their assumptions about how to teach Black children. So, as I see it now, I was glad to have the opportunity to—How shall I say it?—share my issues.

Ann and I were initially amazed that the presentation had triggered the racist conditioning with which most of the students had to one degree or another long been infected. It was only through the process of writing this book that I have come to understand how all my life I have triggered the inner defense mechanisms of white people who consciously or not suffered from racism. I have been getting on white people's bad side since elementary school, but I really didn't understand what it had to do with racism, until now.

When Ann suggested we write this book together (I have to admit I did not at the time actually believe it would happen), I saw it as an opportunity to investigate some of the relationships between racism, racists, and my race, and how they all collide. So this book is, for me, both about the effects of my presentations on the college students and about the impact writing this book has had upon me.

I read Ann's introduction and autobiography. It's ironic that her description of herself is not the person I see. Tuscany? I didn't know she went to Tuscany. I listen to her description of her thoughts, feelings, and history, and I feel far removed. Not just from her experiences, but from this person she describes herself to be. Who is this woman who can afford to go to Tuscany? More importantly, why don't I feel or see this person?

I realize after rereading parts of the draft that I have to follow my healthier instinct—to write. I have been writing a journal since I was about twelve years old. I still have my first diary. I need to write. I have no idea how much of it should be in a book for public consumption. But I feel that if I write now to someone—even Ann—who would read this, I could start to sort out my own confusion, pain,

and chaos. I realize that, once again, I can do this by self-reflection. By comparing my present state of mind with Ann's.

A friend of mine, who, like Ann, is Jewish, told me that he thought that I was consumed by racism because it gave my life meaning. He said, "What would you do with yourself if racism didn't exist?" He describes a story about a man working on a door. For years he works meticulously going over and over it, redecorating it, carving it, and reshaping it. Finally, one day, someone asks him when he will be finished. He says, "When someone takes it away from me."

White supremacy is my enemy. But an enemy's only real power is your weakness. While I sit here in my isolation, depression, loneliness, and, yes, bitterness and anger, I have to acknowledge two important things. One, a part of me is indeed consumed by this force we call racism. I think it, feel it, look at it, kick it, open it, slam it, or run into it every day. Second, I didn't choose this door. This door has been put before me and for the rest of my life, I will not be able to move it. *This is not my choice*. Racism will not be eradicated in my lifetime. As long as I am Black in America, I will have to deal with it. Racism has diminished the quality of my life and, more importantly, has damaged me. There is no denying that other issues in my life contributed to my injury, and I need to focus on those as well. But there is a significant difference between those other issues and racism. Racism doesn't stop. Poverty and deprivation cause injury, but for me, these have stopped. Family traumas (not unrelated to racism, however) have caused emotional injury, but I'm an adult now, and with psychotherapy the effects of these have diminished. Even my own bad habits, engrained as they are, I can stop. But I have been unable in all my life to avoid racism for more than one day, because it is a pathology that white Americans either refuse or are unable to manage. Unless I stay indoors and don't answer the phone, watch TV, listen to the radio, or read the paper, I have no choice but to engage it in my daily life.

Just writing this makes me tired.

To be honest, even after reading her autobiography, I still don't understand why Ann is willing to assist me in fighting against racism. In fact, today, I'm too tired to care. I'm just glad to have the help.

"I don't like white folks!"

Now, if you are white and you are shocked and surprised by this admission, this is the very book you should be reading. If, after you read it, you find yourself able to understand why a Black woman in America *doesn't* like white people, then the time you have spent reading it will have been worthwhile.

You're going to read a book written in part by a Black educator who at various times in her life has declared herself a militant and an intellectual insurrectionist. Others might call me progressive, radical, extremist, or militant (although not often giving the term "militant" the same positive connotation I give to it). This might be a good time, before you read on, to think about what all that means to you. If you are planning to become a teacher, what will it mean to you if you find yourself teaching in a predominately Black school where you will be working with a parent, staff person, teacher, or administrator, like me? If you are a white parent or a parent of color, what does it mean to you to know that someone who shares my views may teach your child?

What is startling to me is that most white readers, and readers of color as well, have probably not yet really come to grips with the ramifications of crossing the great racial divides to teach in schools filled with people of races and ethnic cultures that are different from their own. I surmise this from having been, during the past three years, in classes with people who are probably very much like you. People of color have goals and objectives that have been shaped by experiences very different from one another's and from those of white people. You will have to change some very fundamental ways of thinking if you are to have any chance of becoming successful teachers of children from diverse backgrounds.

Do you want to change? Do you really want to begin to doubt most of what you take for granted to be just, right, and true? Are you ready to learn that much of what those of you who want to teach thought you had to offer may be of little consequence to those you mean to serve? Are you ready to learn that you have to *earn* the trust of parents, children, and teachers whose racial identities are different from yours? Are you ready to listen to and learn from them?

Most white people and many people of color aren't. Every day many young white women and men, and middle-class, assimilated teachers of color as well, march with credential in hand to classrooms where most of the children are poor Blacks, Latinos, and Asian immigrants, only to have their authority mocked and their requests ignored. They are confused and terrified by their treatment, and, although they may give it their best shot, many "burn out" and quit in less than five years. Others become inadequate administrators who retaliate against every Black and Latino student who has ever humiliated them. And some stay on in the classroom to do ongoing psychic damage to these children as punishment for the children's and parents' lack of gratitude without ever realizing it, or worse yet know they are doing it but are never made to account for this abuse.

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In each of the two years before the "encounter," I had been asked to take over what I now call "crisis classrooms." The first time this happened, I was teaching with an emergency credential. That means I had been deemed qualified to teach on the sole basis of passing the California Basic Educational Skills Test and had taken only one education course. Five white teachers had quit en masse the day before school started and gone to work in the suburbs to punish the Black principal for not providing them with the resources to which they felt they were entitled. The fact that lack of resources is part and parcel of working in public schools populated with poor Black and Chinese students was secondary to their professional ambitions and personal needs.

None of the teachers who quit had had any skills for managing our children. Despite their adamant insistence that their students were learning and doing fine, every formal and informal assessment showed that about 80 percent of *their* African American students were not on grade level and were therefore incapable of the performance they had boasted about.

After the start of the academic year it also became clear that a few students had problems attributable to other factors than the troubled and chaotic classrooms to which they had been assigned. Some of them had specific learning disabilities or were experiencing horrendous home lives that by their very nature would preclude them

from learning. No one had identified the problems and sought help. Perhaps the teachers had thought this behavior was normal for “these children.” None of this was a surprise to me.

Before the principal asked me to take over, sub after sub after sub, each with an emergency credential like mine, had come in and only made matters worse, to the point where the classrooms had become holding pens.

In the three years since I first gave the presentation, I have taken over crisis classrooms two more times. I seem to have developed a reputation as the one to call when a classroom has fallen apart. When the white—or in one case, Chinese—teacher left, I had to take over not only because of a shortage of qualified permanent teachers, but also because, with rare exceptions, the white teachers or substitutes sent by the central office to take over classrooms were ill prepared to teach and completely unconcerned about the welfare of our children. I doubt that many of these substitutes would have been allowed to return a second day to a school with a white or more affluent and parent-involved population.

With each passing day, as they faced a succession of inexperienced, ill-prepared teachers, the children in these crisis classrooms were falling further behind their peers who attended schools where most of the students were middle-class whites and Asians. It was from the despair and legitimate outrage of this situation that I accepted Ann’s invitation to make a presentation to her class.