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Dirt & Early Reading

Timothy J. Lensmire

I was thoroughly engaged by Clio Stearns’s article. I was especially struck by her accounts of early reading with her young daughter. Too often, as Stearns well knows, such scenes are rendered in overly simplified and sentimental ways. It is much better to register the simultaneous anxiety and envy that Stearns felt in relation to her daughter’s “inability to control herself”; much better to conclude, “Romantic it is, but it is not easy to be an early reader.”

Her work inspired me to tell another story of early reading, drawn from a larger study investigating whiteness and white racial identity in a rural, white, working-class community in the Midwest (Lensmire, 2010; Lensmire, 2011).

Delores (a pseudonym) had brought her young son and daughter to get their pictures taken. Her children had not had many (if any) interactions with African Americans, and the photographer was black. As Delores described the scene:

I had the experience of taking my children, when they were preschoolers, to one of those photographers set up at Penny’s or Kmart or wherever. And the photographer took the pictures and was showing us the proofs and he was African American and my daughter asked why his hands were dirty. Right away, he tried to cover for me and said, “That’s okay. I’m not offended.” And I took his hand and said, “His hands aren’t dirty. He’s African American and this is his name,” and I gave her his name. But I thought, for me, if she thought that was dirt—and she was old enough to know that I don’t go for dirt—that, no, his hands are not dirty. I will touch his hands.

Delores and other white people I interviewed from this community often reported being fearful of big cities, in part because people of color lived there. However, in this story, Delores’s interaction with the black photographer was not characterized by fear, but by something more like politeness, and perhaps even mutual, genuine decency. The photographer tried immediately to “cover” for Delores, to help her avoid feeling embarrassed because her daughter asked why his hands were dirty. Delores responded by holding the photographer’s hands and telling her daughter his name.

Delores’s young daughter had read the photographer’s hands as *dirty*, and, as Kovel (1970) reminds us in his classic book *White Racism: A Psychohistory*, dirt—or more correctly, a *fantasy about dirt*—plays an important part in white people’s racial imaginary. Kovel noted that:

Every group which has been the object of prejudice has at some time been designated by the prejudiced group as dirty or smelly or both... The English upper classes regarded the English middle and lower classes as dirty... and if the lower classes had “Untouchables,” as in India, they would have doubtless exercised the same privilege over the lowliest as did the various castes within Indian culture. Indeed, lowest in social scale connotes the idea of dirtiest and

smelliest, and untouchability sums up all these concepts in the framework of aversion. (pp. 81, 82)

Clearly, Delores understood this fantasy of dirt, and she took action to disrupt or disable the development of this fantasy in her daughter. It is striking to me—and an almost perfect counter to the aversion, the turning away from, that the fantasy of dirt encourages—that the crucial actions for Delores were to (a) hold the photographer’s hands and (b) tell her daughter his name. I interpret the latter as an act meant to individuate this man, to not allow him to be reduced to being merely a representative of an unworthy group (see Boskin, 1986, on the importance of names in US racial history). As for the former, Delores explained that her three-year-old daughter was old enough to know that she (Delores) did not “go for dirt.” She was anxious that her daughter understand that this man was not dirty. As Delores said later, “When [my daughter] made that comment, it’s just that she was wrong and I didn’t want her thinking there were dirty people in the world.”

In this scene of early reading, Delores was trying to help her daughter become the kind of white person who recognized the fundamental equality of all peoples. But it is significant that Delores used this black person to do so.

For we could read Delores’s story quite differently. In this alternative reading, Delores was presumptuous. She took the man’s hands without asking him whether or not he wanted to be touched by her, whether or not he wanted to participate in this lesson for her daughter on how to read other people’s skin. Delores was focused on her daughter, not the man. She used the man as little more than a prop to teach her daughter a lesson.

People of color, real and imagined, have been incredibly important for the meaning and self-making of white people throughout US history. As white people, we have obviously used people of color for their labor and our economic gain, but a major theme of my recent work has been exploring just how important people of color are to white people’s psychic and everyday lives—even in situations in which white people are mostly isolated from actual people of color (as is most often the case for white people in the United States). Indeed, novelist and essayist Ralph Ellison (1953/1995) thought that we should “view the whole of American life as a drama acted out upon the body of a Negro giant who, lying trussed up like Gulliver, forms the stage and scene upon which and within which the action unfolds” (p. 28).

To bring this back to Stearns’s rich and provocative article: Does Ellison’s proposal for how to read American life and history help us read and reread Stearns’s work in illuminating and generative ways? I think so.

As just one example, I wonder about the significance—for Stearns, for her daughter, and for us and our meaning- and self-making—that it is an *isolated white boy* who is the focus of concern in Raschka’s *Yo! Yes?*, and that this isolation is *overcome in relation to a black boy*.¹

It is difficult for me *not* to read Raschka’s text as participating in what Fiedler (1964) identified as a consistent theme of 19th- and 20th-century American literature and popular culture: a dream or myth of a “Garden of Eden with two Adams” (p. 129). Over and over, our novels and films feature pairings of a white male and a male of color, expressing what Fiedler called the “white man’s dream of reconciliation” (p. 109). (Think Queequeg and Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, or Twain’s Jim and Huck, or Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier’s characters in *The Defiant Ones*.)

For Fiedler (1955), this is a sentimental and outrageous dream, a dream with roots in white atrocities against people of color—genocide and colonialism and cultural eradication, slavery and lynching and Jim Crow. It is a dream born of fear that we, as white men, have cut ourselves off, forever, from the love of our brothers. As Fiedler put it:

Ishmael is in all of us, our unconfessed universal fear. . . that we may not be loved, that we are loved for our possessions and not our selves, that we are really—alone... Behind the white American’s nightmare that someday, no longer tourist, inheritor, or liberator, he will be rejected, refused, he dreams of his acceptance at the breast he has most utterly offended. . . Our dark-skinned beloved will take us in... He will fold us in his arms saying, “Honey” or “Aikane”; he will comfort us, as if our offense against him were long ago remitted, were never truly real. (pp. 150, 151)

I am grateful to Stearns for what she helps us understand about her daughter’s early and her students’ later reading, for what she helps us understand about being with and teaching the young. We need more accounts of reading and teaching that are like this, that attempt to render flesh-and-blood human beings who feel close to and distant from each other, who are excited by and alienated from what they are doing, and who are not always sure why. And as Ellison and Fiedler and many others remind us, this reading and teaching with the young is always taken up alongside and within older stories and scenes, with attendant lessons about old things like race.

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¹I follow Stearns, here, in assigning racial categories to the boys. As she noted, given Raschka’s minimalist text and illustrations “there is plenty of room for projection.” But I tend to read the boys as she did: “One boy in the illustrations looks black, the other white.”

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