

The Emperor Has No Clothes: Teaching about Race and Racism to People Who Don't Want to Know

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

In this chapter, Okun issues a charge to all who teach about race and racism. "Because many students enter the classroom with the belief that racism is a thing of the past, we must become deeply immersed in [our] own antiracist education and practice" (p. 105). The critical goals of all of these processes are application/action, active incorporation of antiracist practice in personal and professional lives, and visioning, developing transformative possibilities for social justice. While this book is situated from Okun's work as an educator and trainer, her insights regarding critical conversations and transformations regarding race and racism could have broader appeal for those in educational leadership, policy, and cultural studies and many others in educational spaces, places, and contexts.

FULL TEXT

Tema Okun's book, *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Teaching about Race and Racism to People Who Don't Want to Know*, begins with a short summary of the famous piece of the same name by Hans Christian Anderson to illustrate matters of race and racism and the ways in which individuals participate in this "charade that harms us all" (p. xviii). To Okun, the book represents a very real and personal story of her own identity and vision. Okun writes of the boy who exposes the nakedness of the Emperor, "The boy is who I aspire to be and who I want my students to become, clear about the deceits we are told by the cultural elite (the tailors, their front man the Emperor, as well as his henchman) who weave noxious web of lies (the race construct) to pad their pockets while we (the townspeople) participate" (p. xviii).

Dialogic in nature, all five chapters and the epilogue are written in a conversational tone that mirrors the title on race and racism. The reader is consistently engaged in a dialogue with the author as highlighted in the title of the book. The book includes a preface that provides key explanations and terms and constructs such as culture, privilege, and social justice. The author makes clear how she conceptualizes these often-contentious terms and their centrality to her antiracist work. Okun heavily incorporates personal stories and vignettes based on private and professional experience such as those as a child, doctoral student, antiracist trainer and teacher. Each chapter ends with a conclusion and an illustrative poem about the nature of each chapter. Some of the poems include Okun's own, and highlight the narrative, philosophical/spiritual tone that she strikes in much of the book while highlighting practical and personal examples of doing race work.

In Chapter 1, "The tailor's weave", Okun discusses white supremacy culture. Okun begins the chapter by defining culture and how this definition of culture manifests itself in oppressive and dehumanizing ways, and how this articulation of culture reproduces itself. The author illustrates specifically how white supremacist culture in the form of capitalism and profiteering, individualism and cultural norms, and binaries in such functions as cultural hierarchies, serve to reify and maintain white supremacy.

In Chapter 2, "Refusing to see", the author discusses her notion of "privileged resistance" of those who benefit from white privilege and their refusal to "acknowledge its personal, institutional, and cultural impact" (p. xxv). Through her definition and discussion of race, Okun explains how privilege has operated in history and how these

individuals reproduce the harmful cycle of racism in contemporary society. In this chapter, Okun particularly highlights what she sees as forms of white denial-privileged resistance, silencing and shifting, marginalizing, trivializing, rationalizing entitlement, victim blaming, claims of reverse racism and/or no racism-that operates in white supremacist ideology. In this chapter, the author also offers an unpacking of white supremacist identity and the ways in which it is developed and examples of guilt and shame that an individual experiences as a result. In addition, Okun offers strategic approaches to engaging and giving attention to the harmfulness of white supremacy and egalitarian, sustainable, and loving” (p. 70) to the problem and solutions.

In Chapter 3, “A different parade”, the author uses many constructs to articulate what she terms “cultural shift”. The most historical in nature, this chapter highlights specific cultural and institutional changes and social movements in American society and organizations that have dismantled racism’s manifestations and impact. However, the author also discusses those shifts in which white supremacy culture has reinforced dominant power culture norms and stifled awareness and resistance. Okun takes the position that debunking these “myths of majority” require vision in the “promise of possibility that makes transformative change possible” (p. 85). By studying historical movements of change, “we can learn how movements emerge, gain strength” (p. 98) and receive energy for contemporary change efforts and cultural shifts.

Chapter 4, “Aspiring to see: a process of anti-racist pedagogy”, highlights Okun’s work in classrooms. In particular, Okun gives voice to the many students she has taught and gives the reader “a sense of their various identities” (p. 103). In this chapter, Okun issues a charge to all who teach about race and racism. “Because many students enter the classroom with the belief that racism is a thing of the past, we must become deeply immersed in [our] own antiracist education and practice” (p. 105). This antiracist education and practice is focused on teaching as a process and a product and builds and encourages relationships as a foundation for critical conversations. The chapter also provides a deep analysis that deconstructs and disrupts the “whys” of certain societal conditions. Okun outlines strategies that provide opportunities for reflections on feelings and self-awareness regarding race on the part of the teacher and the student, and the use of diverse methods in the classroom. The critical goals of all of these processes are application/action, active incorporation of antiracist practice in personal and professional lives, and visioning, developing transformative possibilities for social justice.

Chapter 5, “Reflections on the parade: what i know for sure”, takes its title and its tone from Dorothy Allison’s (1995) memoir, *Two of Three Things I Know for Sure*. Allison recounts the things she has learned about life over the years. In the same way, Okun recounts in this chapter experiences during her many years in doing race work. Okun speaks of the moment when she realized that she must approach the problem of racism with love and the imperative “to both be and teach love [that reflects] a universal instruction” (p. 135). She reflects on the importance of timing in the antiracist process. She highlights that even in the quest of uprooting racism, that some individuals are yet able to hear, the timing is not right, and to focus time and attention on what can be impacted at the time. “Feeling our way through” is sometimes more important than a rational, intellectual approach.” Moving out of conditioned thinking is a process; it does not happen in a single moment in time” (p. 153). Okun shares that she has learned many individuals, including herself, hold contradictory beliefs and are “racist and antiracist at the same time” (p. 155). In the process of becoming antiracist and creating justice, Okun posits that this praxis is a collective endeavor. Cultural turning for her and those that she teaches involves becoming more critical and compassionate and to “stand outside dominant culture conditioning”, think about others, and critically pursue justice and radical thinking (p. 143).

The Epilogue concludes with Okun’s alternative ending for Hans Christian Anderson’s famous tale. Reaffirming her experience and commitment to antiracist practice and pedagogy, the author envisions a time when individuals recognize their nakedness and no longer participate in racism and “make the world we want, one pulsating with joy, justice, and love” (p. 170).

Tema Okun engages race and racism and has written a book that is part reflective experience, part pedagogical framework, and part philosophical treatise. With the writings of Rinpoche to Langston Hughes, Okun weaves a very complex “race story” with emotional and poignant insights on her experiences teaching about race and racism.

While not everyone will connect with the way Okun weaves through anecdotes and stories, practical wisdom, and literary musings to illustrate the problem of racism in society; many will relate the intent of the book to focus on “liberational pedagogy with an antiracist lens” and the bridging and transformation practice it offers.

At various points in the book, Okun states, “Everyone in society is confused about racism” (Okun, 2010, p. xxiii). She highlights that on various sides of the anti/racist spectrum, we all participate in the perpetuation or dismantling of racism. However, in spite of this point, we must offer analysis and strategies to build a “just and loving world, with all the complexities and challenges such a vision brings” (p. xxx).

While this book is situated from Okun's work as an educator and trainer, her insights regarding critical conversations and transformations regarding race and racism could have broader appeal for those in educational leadership, policy, and cultural studies and many others in educational spaces, places, and contexts.

DETAILS

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