



Posted November 12, 2003

**Fine, Michelle & Weis, Lois. (2003). *Silenced Voices and Extraordinary Conversations: Re-Imagining Schools*. New York: NY: Teachers College Press. 208 pp.**

**Reviewed by**

**P. Kamara Sekou Collins**

In their progressive book, *Silenced Voices and Extraordinary Conversations: Re-Imagining Schools*, Michelle Fine and Lois Weis offer a historically grounded intellectual tour of the troubles germane to stagnant, non-transformative educational practices that continue to plague contemporary U.S. public schooling. They present a body of counter-hegemonic, counter-nihilistic, essays that share and celebrate some of the delights located in the practices of several dedicated, progressive-minded educational communities determined to create more critically reflective citizens via one of America's few remaining "public" spaces--the public school.

Their project is a well-crafted attempt at directing the attention of pre-service, new, and veteran educators to the historically systemic and socially unhealthy nature of oppression of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and disability. The arguments presented and unpacked in this book combine a deep understanding of the discursive nature of historical oppression overwhelmingly reproduced and sometimes resisted in U.S. schools, and the wide range of societal implications of such hegemonic and counter-hegemonic practices.

The book is a collection of essays published elsewhere over the past two decades and is organized into two parts. Part I, entitled "Scenes of Silencing," consists of essays which were written mostly in the 1980s, while Part II, entitled "Scenes of Extraordinary Conversations," represents a more recently written set of essays. The essays that form Part I of the book are "arranged so that they begin primarily within this 'reproductive'

frame, with chapters on silencing, privilege, and schools' refusal to interrupt dominant--and oppressive--voices. You will read quite pronounced 'reproductive' tendencies in these early essays that address practices of silencing, triumphant voices of White male privilege, and persistent expressions of racism and homophobia" (p. 5). Part II of the book moves into sites of what the authors "refer to as 'extraordinary conversations,' inviting new and veteran educators to imagine and construct with youth classrooms, schools, and communities peppered with questions about power, consciousness, and identity" (p. 5). The latter essays present Fine and Weis' work through co/team authorship with educators and youth workers integrally connected to their ethnographic sites of study. The text describes these educators and youth workers as those who "dare to interrogate gender, race, ethnicity, and social class as intellectual and political work . . ." (p. 5).

### **Part I: Scenes of Silencing**

**I**n the first chapter, Michelle Fine examines what she considers a standard educational practice of *silencing* students and community voices in the public school arena. As the chapter opens, Fine defines *silencing* as signifying "a terror of words, a fear of talk" (p.14). What I believe to be a very powerful symbolic visual representation of this phenomenon can be found on the book's cover--as it displays the picture of an adolescent-looking African-American female with her mouth peculiarly covered by a portion of the book's title.

In this opening chapter, Fine uses her ethnographic skills to study the unfortunate consequences of silencing at a comprehensive public high school in New York City. Interestingly, and very tactfully, Fine crafts the essay to reflect *silencing* not only through the lens of what doesn't get talked about in schools, but also through the interrogation of how students, teachers, parents, and community members voices' of critique are systematically expelled and/or rendered deviant when such discourse challenges official school knowledge. To avoid the ethnographic critique of non-reflexivity and vulgar voyeurism, Fine appropriately provides a reflexive postscript to the chapter. Both authors continue to provide reflexive narratives in other portions of the book as well.

Stemming from scholarly work previously published in the late 1980s, Michelle Fine authors the second chapter of the book as well. Chapter 2 nicely captures the diverse perspectives on adolescent sexuality, fueled by the power struggles regarding sex education in U.S. public schools. This particular chapter is informed by "a study of numerous current sex education curricula, a year of negotiating for inclusion of lesbian and gay sexuality in a city wide sex education curriculum, and interviews and observations gathered in New York City sex education classrooms" (p. 38). Fine reveals the voices of a diverse group of adolescent schoolgirls--thereby giving voice to those usually silenced through the hegemonic forces that define parameters of official school knowledge regarding sexuality. Although more conceptual elaboration is warranted, Fine attempts to unravel what she terms the missing discourse of desire clouded by the triumphant antisex rhetoric of contemporarily abstinence-only sex education curricula. Fine argues that, "adolescents are entitled to a discussion of desire instead of the antisex rhetoric which controls the controversies around sex education . . . . The absence of a discourse of desire, combined with the lack of analysis of the language of victimization, may actually retard the development of sexual subjectivity and responsibility in students" (p. 66). Fine further suggests that "the silence of a discourse of desire buttresses the icon of woman-as-victim. In so doing, public schooling may actually disable young women in their negotiations as sexual subjects" (p. 56). Conceptually, Fine's articulations of the need for a discourse of desire may not be persuasive enough to counter the narrowly conservative and commonsensical logic that undergirds the rhetoric of antisex/abstinence-only advocates (see, Apple 2000).

Lois Weis' writings begin to weave into the book's tapestry on *silencing* as she authors Chapter 3, which is entitled "Constructing the 'Other': Discursive Renditions of White Working-Class Males in High School." In one of the most captivating chapters of the book, Weis uses data from a larger ethnographic study to unpack the construction of this particular identity. Through thickly descriptive field notes and interviews, Weis teases out many discursive intricacies of white working-class, high school male identity moving such an analysis beyond what might be refuted as "steamy liberal-femiNazi rhetoric" invoked by academics for the purposes of white male bashing. Chapter 3 presents a meticulous scholarly analysis of power and domination which can truly move new, veteran, and pre-service teachers farther with respect to dismantling the

hegemonic forces so deeply interwoven in the day-to-day lives of white working-class adolescent males.

In connection with the poignant insights presented in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 closes out Part I by raising the question, "What does the school do to encourage and/or block the formation of the identities such as those outlined in Chapter 3?" In this chapter Weis argues "that the school embodies and promotes a contradictory attitude toward schooling and school knowledge, with a stress on the form of schooling rather than the substance of learning. Second . . . that the school, through its routine practices, serves to encourage the maintenance of separate identities along gender and race lines, thus encouraging, perhaps unintentionally, the construction of 'other' discussed in the last chapter" (p. 89).

The authors anticipate possible critiques that may be leveled against their project in a follow-up chapter further interrogating the many key issues such as "othering," privilege, and domination analyzed in Chapter 3. Their work diminishes the possibility of such critique. It was a must that this text interrogate the hegemonic nature of public schooling on a broader, institutional level and in a way that brings working-class white male identity construction into even clearer focus. Chapters 3 and 4 add another layer to the critical theory landscape, further complimenting the projects of scholars such as Frankenberg (1993) and McIntosh (1995).

## **Part: II Scenes of Extraordinary Conversations**

Chapter V opens the door to a livelier, more optimistic exploration of school sites imbued with pedagogies of hope. In the first of three public schools observed in the second portion of the book, Michelle Fine joins with the teachers she is observing to author the chapter. Fine refers to the teachers as "committed adults who push the boundaries of what 'would be' . . . [and] who intentionally and self-consciously challenge the reproductive instincts of public education . . ." (p. 110). While many U.S. localities have abandoned the dreams of integrated schooling, this chapter focuses on a New Jersey high school that "has worked to keep the dream of integration alive . . . 'albeit' . . . not without troubles, not without disappointments, not without a court order" (p. 115). The chapter presents an ethnography of a yearlong commitment by teachers to succeed in a de-tracked ninth grade world literatures class. Veteran teachers

will appreciate the authors' un-sugarcoated narrative of the fortitude required to educate for critical democratic consciousness in the midst of a deeply split school board and some irate parents. In addition to offering insights to veteran teachers, this chapter's revelations of the courage required to teach critical democracy may be eye-opening for new and pre-service teachers--challenges perhaps even too risky for newcomers to the profession (see Palmer 1998). Ethnographic data presented in Chapter V successfully convey how all children learn when who is "smart" gets redefined and when voices imbued with the cultural capital of the U.S. middle and upper-middle class meets head-on with dissent from students of working-class and poor families.

Chapter VI reads like the logical counter-narrative to the hegemonic *silencing* around sexuality explored in Chapter II. Weis's co-author for this chapter, Doris Carbonell-Medina, constructs a counter-hegemonic site within a larger school in the guise of an abstinence-based sex education project. Educators interested in understanding the *silencing* effect engendered through the contemporary push of abstinence-only education, even at the federal level, will benefit from the insights encapsulated in Chapter VI. Moreover, it would be wise for education professors to pair these chapters as course readings for pre-service teachers exploring the highly politicized issue of sexuality and education in U.S. public schools.

The book closes with a final chapter devoted to "Revisiting the Struggle for Integration." The ethnographic data generated through a New Jersey middle school Civil Rights oral history project provides the backdrop of this counter-hegemonic site of public schooling. This chapter successfully chronicles the 9-week cycles of 2-hour Friday's oral history class and neatly identifies the critical turning points and unresolved issues inherent in progressive pedagogical practices--even when embraced by a school's leadership. The authors paint an ethnographic portrait of the way youth, when put in optimal learning situations, reconstruct their sense of self and gain meaningful knowledge and useful skills--all of which will become the solid foundation for their future mobility. This chapter is inspirational and appropriately concludes the text by giving its intended audience a message of hope.

Fine and Weis set out to juxtapose two paradoxical roles of schooling: "reproducing and legitimizing large-scale structural inequalities, along the axes of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and disability" and, at the same time, "offering opportunities

for individual mobility" (p. 9). I think this book is successful at this important endeavor. One of the biggest strengths of this work is Fine and Weis' unapologetic stance regarding educational reform voiced during the last two decades as represented in this text. This work advances the field of critical educational theory for those progressive educators, education professors, and pre-service teachers who want to transform our world for the betterment of all, especially those dealt horrible hands in this card game of life.

## References

- Apple, M. W. (2000). The shock of the real: Critical pedagogies and rightist reconstructions. In P. P. Trifonas (Ed.), *Revolutionary pedagogies: Cultural politics, instituting education, and the discourse of theory* (pp. 225-273). New York, London: Routledge Falmer.
- Frankenberg, R. (1993). *The social construction of whiteness: White women, race matters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McIntosh, P. (1995). White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondence through work in women's studies. In M. Anderson and P. Collins (Eds.), *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Palmer, P. (1993). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

---

Currently, Dr. Paul Collins is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Education at Baldwin-Wallace College. He teaches courses in Educational Foundations as well as Early Childhood Education. His pedagogical and research interests lie in the areas of critical transformative educational leadership, Afrocentric discourse and the intersections of education and social justice.