

## Preface

### *Another Kind of Public Education*

On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., and delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech to an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 people gathered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. One line stands out: “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”<sup>1</sup> Some would say that the outcome of the 2008 presidential election has been either the realization of King’s dream or evidence of its failure. We can speculate endlessly about how and why Barack Obama won and John McCain lost, but this may not be the best use of our time. For the United States and the globe, too much is at stake to concentrate too closely on winners and losers.

Quite frankly, no one wins and everyone loses if the social issues that face growing numbers of the world’s population are not given serious thought. We know the list—environmental degradation, illiteracy, poverty, HIV/AIDS, a global fiscal crisis, hopelessness, and

violence in all its forms—these issues all require critical analysis coupled with new action strategies. No one wins and everyone loses if we continue to think of the world's population itself as divided into winners and losers. Who wins, for example, if the children and youth of the world lose?

This framework of winners and losers is unlikely to shed light on the complex issues of our times. In this context, political parties or any other group that claims to have quick and easy solutions may itself be part of the problem. When times are tough, people look to leaders to give them hope and tell them what to do. It is seductive to see our most cherished leaders as responsible for solving problems—vesting them with authority enables us to praise or blame them for the answers they propose and the results they do or do not produce. Yet the more sobering realization is that they can only lead us where we are willing to go. We each must learn to think for ourselves as individuals, but we also must learn to act collectively. We are each unique, yet we are also part of something bigger than each of us.

I think that the United States is at a turning point in its history, and it should look to the lessons of world history for guidance. Blind faith in strong leaders has gotten many groups of people into trouble. In countries where a small group seizes power and imposes its will on an unwilling populace, we recognize that shift of power as an illegitimate coup. But we are less skilled at seeing how individuals and groups manipulate structures of power for their own ends, often within legitimate structures of government. For example, the National Socialist German Worker's Party (better known as the Nazi Party) was elected to office in Germany in 1933. There was no palace coup—the Nazis did not seize power by force. Instead, a legitimate democratic election brought them to power and, once in office, they so quickly changed the rules of the game that they eviscerated the meaning of democracy.<sup>2</sup> There are numerous cautionary tales like this about democratic power being wrested from an unwilling public, or worse yet, willingly relinquished by a public that confused its own interests with those of

its elected officials. In democratic societies, people who passively follow the rules and uncritically obey their leaders open up their countries to undemocratic outcomes. Unquestioned obedience may be the best way to run an army, but it can be the death knell for democracy if a citizenry chooses this path.

The United States prides itself on being one of the greatest democracies of all time and calls upon each individual citizen to defend democracy from its enemies. These enemies, however, do not include the historically imagined enemy of brown or black youth, more often depicted as America's problem than its promise. These enemies do not include the nameless, faceless, yet ethnically imagined terrorists that we have been encouraged to fear in the post-9/11 environment. Rather, the greatest internal enemy of American democracy is more likely to be an uninformed and uncritical American public that can be manipulated by soothing political slogans, feel-good photo ops, and endless rounds of shopping.

What the United States needs is another kind of public education—one that encourages us to become an involved, informed public. What this country needs is a recommitment to schools and other social institutions whose mandate lies in delivering the kind of public education that will equip us for this task. We miseducate the public and students when we dumb down big ideas and shy away from politics. We do not need a public that stands on the sidelines, cheering political candidates like they were heavyweight contestants in boxing matches; or a public that passively listens to political commentary with an ear attuned for the latest putdown. Voting, for example, is more serious than calling in one's opinion to *American Idol*, or text-messaging one's fan favorite to *America's Next Top Model*.

In *Another Kind of Public Education: Race, Schools, the Media, and Democratic Possibilities*, I argue for another kind of education, one that better prepares the American public for democratic action in our contemporary social and political context. Two core questions shape this entire project. First, what kind of critical education might the

American public need to picture new democratic possibilities? Second, what changes can we envision in schools and in other important social institutions that might provide this critical education? Because these questions can never be answered in any one book, I focus my discussion in this book on four important themes.

First, I emphasize the persistent effects of race in a seemingly color-blind society. Because of its history, race has been tightly bundled with the social issues of education and equity in the U.S. context. Moreover, in the current, seemingly color-blind context where the next generation of Americans is increasingly of color, the United States must find a way to build a democratic national community with an increasingly heterogeneous population. Rather than equating excellence with elitism—the posture that encourages keeping people out—we might define excellence as being compatible with diversity. Only by involving a range of points of view in the democratic process will the United States get the kind of innovation that it needs. I posit that grappling with this deeply entrenched challenge to U.S. democracy should yield provocative ideas and new directions for dismantling similar social inequalities.

Second, I focus on schools as one important site where these challenges are negotiated. Because public schools in America are vested with the responsibility of preparing each generation of new citizens, schools are inherently political. I also focus on pedagogy as a crucial component of democratic practice. Teachers perform vitally important duties that go beyond simply delivering job skills or acting as simple conduits for information. Rather, teachers are frontline actors negotiating the social issues of our time. Teachers are the ones whom black and brown youth turn to for guidance for upward social mobility. Teachers can be facilitators or gatekeepers of fundamental democratic ideals.

Third, I focus on the media. If you define public education as public institutions teaching us about our place in the world, schools are by no means the only institution educating young people and

the broader public. In this book, I would like you to watch out for how kids get another kind of public education, beyond school-based learning, from the media. Whether we like it or not, for youth, the media provides an education that often contradicts and supplants school-based learning. New technologies are the currency of youth, and a critical education requires a media literacy that prepares youth to be critical consumers of media as well as cultural creators.

Fourth, I speak to and about youth. When I think about the American public, I visualize a heterogeneous population of youth, characterized by vast differences in wealth, religion, appearance, sexual orientation, gender, linguistic competency, immigrant status, ability level, ethnicity, and race. Some are in schools, others are not, and all are trying to figure out their place within American democratic institutions. I see the talent and potential in this heterogeneous population as crucial for American democracy. Yet I also see tremendous differences in opportunities that are offered to youth. In this context, just as school is inherently political, so is this youth population.

As young adults in early-twenty-first-century America, youth see the challenges that face them—a deep-seated worry about the uncertain future that awaits them in such volatile times; a growing disenchantment with the seeming inability of the United States to provide equal opportunities to a sizable proportion of its youth of color; their impatience with parents, teachers, clergy, and others who struggle with the rapid technological shifts that brought the wonders of the Internet and cell phones. But mostly, the politically savvy among them see the significance of themselves as the next generation of leaders.

Youth will not be following us. Rather, we will be following them. I want them to be prepared to lead me in directions that eschew complacency and put some genuinely new ideas on the table. I do not want to follow them down a path of hopelessness; rather, I want to look to them to envision and take action for new possibilities that I could not consider in my life. Therein lies the critical significance of delivering

another kind of public education to youth. They will inherit not only social issues, but also the responsibility for addressing them. To meet these challenges, youth will need another kind of public education that equips them with tools to take informed action.

As you read, I'd like you to keep in mind several factors that shaped this book. First, *Another Kind of Public Education* grew out of my activities as a public intellectual and sociologist of race. The issues that I investigate come not primarily from academic settings but also from the ordinary conversations of everyday life. I talk with different kinds of people on a regular basis about a wide range of topics. I don't seek out issues—rather, they come to me through my talks on college and university campuses, conversations with friends and neighbors, chats with people standing in line in supermarkets and airports, and commiseration with people after my exercise classes. Because I have been working on the ideas in this volume for some time, the arguments presented here have been honed through dialogue with a variety of people.

My career as an educator constitutes a second factor that influenced this book. I have spent over twenty-six years teaching in public state systems of higher education. Before that, I spent four years as a university administrator and six years teaching elementary and middle school in the community schools movement of Boston, Massachusetts. As a lifelong educator, I understand how important teachers are at all levels of education. I also see how education is vitally important to solving the crucial social issues that confront democratic societies such as ours. Thus, I write not only as a scholar of education, but also as a practitioner. In this book, I draw upon many examples from my own teaching, not as examples of best practices to emulate, but rather as examples to carry the main ideas of my argument.

Third, this book had a specific catalyst, a factor that influenced how I wrote it. *Another Kind of Public Education* was developed from

a series of lectures that were originally given in spring 2008. When I received the invitation to speak to the public as part of the *Race, Education, and Democracy* lecture series at Simmons College, I had been thinking about these ideas for some time and had this title in mind for the actual book. The invitation to participate in the lecture series could not have come at a better time. The chapters presented here reflect a choice of language and tone commensurate with the lectures. Unlike much of my other writing here, I occasionally use a more personal, informal style. Whenever possible, I have also incorporated some of the many rich ideas that characterized each lecture's question-and-answer period. The fact that these were lectures helps explain my ambition for the book—to bring to a general audience a line of thinking and ideas that are usually talked about in scholarly conversations. I remind readers that public dialogue and debate is the cornerstone of democracy, and I was fortunate enough to develop this book in that context.

Fourth, I should point out that this approach to using conversations with a wide range of people and, in this case, the more focused dialogues of the *Race, Education, and Democracy* series constitutes a contemporary expression of a long-standing thread within American democratic social thought. In writing this book, I consulted not just current debates about education but also a broader conception of public education that draws inspiration from traditions of American pragmatism. John Dewey's work on democracy and education, as does that of W. E. B. Du Bois, Jane Addams, and Alain Locke among others, has a special place here. In the early twentieth century, thinkers such as these emphasized the significance of educating the American public for democracy in a rapidly changing society. We face similar challenges today. I draw inspiration from and amplify their historic calls for linking democracy and education. I place myself (modestly, but ambitiously) in a tradition of public intellectuals speaking to these issues.

Finally, the intertwining themes of race, schools, the media, and

youth are woven throughout the entire book. The volume focuses on racism and its effects on American youth, yet I suggest that if we can diagnose racism, we can envision new democratic possibilities. In what ways do schools perpetuate racism and other forms of social inequality, and what can parents, schools, teachers, and students do about it? How might youth in a consumer society speak the truth to a powerful media that now holds sway? What will it take to prepare youth from heterogeneous backgrounds for the challenges they will face in sustaining democratic institutions?

Each of the four chapters explores some aspect of these questions. In chapter 1, "What Does the Flag Mean to You? Education and Democratic Possibilities," I sketch out the big questions about race, education, democracy, and possible paths for the future. In chapter 2, "Social Blackness, Honorary Whiteness, and All Points in Between: Color-Blind Racism as a System of Power," I introduce a domains-of-power framework to analyze racism in a seemingly color-blind society. In chapter 3, "Would You Know It If You Saw It? Practicing Resistance in a Seemingly Color-Blind Society," I explore how the domains-of-power framework might help us think through anti-racist practices in educational settings. In chapter 4, "Somebody's Watching You: To Be Young, Sexy, and Black," I take a closer look at African American youth, one important population that is most heavily affected by these changes, as well as the media as one important site where these themes are played out.

Writing the bulk of this book without knowing the outcome of the November 2008 elections was a real nail-biter for me. With hindsight, I am glad that I did not know. Not knowing required that I thought more broadly about the core ideas of my argument, the ideas that are larger than any political party, any media figure, and the specific expression of broader issues concerning democracy as they are expressed at this historic moment. At the same time, two major events of fall 2008 that may define this historical moment have direct implications for my arguments. The election of Barack Obama as the

first African American president of the United States constituted a historic moment for American democracy. This was a time for celebration and a reminder of the promise of American democracy. The global fiscal crisis that grew in importance in fall 2008 also has significant implications for the arguments presented here. The job loss, credit crunch, and mortgage foreclosures suggest that economic issues will rise in significance in the near future. I make reference to these events when possible in this book. But because I do not engage either of these events in depth, I encourage readers to think about how current events that have unfolded since fall 2008 shape the main ideas presented here.

Today we confront our particular variation of the struggle to craft an American democracy that builds upon new opportunities (such as the 2008 election) and that simultaneously is adequate to the challenges of our times (namely, the global fiscal crisis). We can learn from the achievements and unsolved problems of prior generations who grappled with the same overarching questions, but we must craft our own answers to the problems of our times. There are no easy solutions. Instead, there is the need for another kind of public education so that we, as a public, are up to the challenge.