

Book Notes

STORYTELLING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: CONNECTING NARRATIVE AND THE ARTS IN ANTIRACIST TEACHING

by Lee Anne Bell.

New York: Routledge, 2010. 131 pp. \$29.95.

In our so-called postracial society, we have trouble talking about race, even in spaces intended for such conversations. In *Storytelling for Social Justice*, Lee Anne Bell expands our understanding of storytelling as a vehicle for race talk, builds a typology of stories to conceptualize racial discourse, and reaffirms the role of the arts in creating community. For educators who have struggled with race—and talking about race—in their personal lives and their classrooms, for social scientists who want to see how empirical and theoretical works influence pedagogy, and for the general reader who wants to learn about storytelling, this book is a great find.

Storytelling for Social Justice considers “the stories we tell ourselves and each other about race and racism in our society” (p. 4). Storytelling is a universal human experience through which we learn, maintain culture and community, and bridge collective realities with individual experiences. For Bell, stories are also analytic tools with which we can unpack and dismantle racism. She subtly differentiates storytelling’s capacity to reinscribe social forms and hegemonic ways of thinking *and* to enable critical consciousness and alternative visions for human relations and societal structures.

In Bell’s typology, there are four kinds of stories: stock stories, concealed stories, resistance stories, and emerging/transforming stories. Stock stories reproduce racism and white privilege; they are a “set of standard, typical or familiar stories held in reserve to explain racial dynamics in ways that support the status quo” (p. 29). The characteristics of stock stories, such as the American Dream, are that they are collectively maintained but told by individuals; they neutralize challenges to authority and validity; they can perpetuate stereotypes while “absolving” the storyteller of the charge of racism; and, thankfully, they can be destabilized. The second type of story, the concealed, shakes up the status quo. Concealed stories “narrate the ways that race differentially shapes life experiences and opportunities, disputing the unblemished tales . . . propagated by stock stories” (p. 43). They are everywhere but hidden in plain view; it takes work and effort to uncover them within ourselves and to hear them in others. For Bell, stock and concealed stories are two sides of the

same coin—we can examine stock stories by asking what is concealed, or we can take concealed stories and ask what they reveal about stock stories.

Resistance stories can emerge from concealed stories when they are documented and passed down, or they come from artists, educators, and activists who challenge racism. Resistance stories—such as the full story of Rosa Parks, which includes the organized collective planning of many people, not just the actions of an individual brave woman—are considered by Bell to be a heritage and a resource. They have “the potential to inspire and mobilize people . . . to instruct and educate, arouse participation and collective energy” (p. 62). What differentiates resistance stories from emerging/transforming stories is the fact that the latter are new; they have not been heard before. Emerging/transforming stories build on concealed and resistance stories to “catalyze contemporary action against racism . . . subvert taken for granted racial patterns and enable imagination of new possibilities for inclusive human community” (p. 75). These stories tell the experiences of people in the present and the different ways that their lives reimagine categories, boundaries, and relationships.

The arts help create and cultivate counterstorytelling communities. The sensory engagement, aesthetic experience, and intellectual insight of the arts open the mind, provide critical perspectives, let us embody our experiences, and stimulate deeper learning. Throughout the book, Bell refers to the Storytelling Project, a pedagogical model for teaching about race and racism through storytelling and the visual and performing arts. She provides numerous examples of arts-based activities that form this model, such as memory work, artifact sharing, and spoken word. Through these activities, Bell and her colleagues worked to unsettle themselves and their participants, hoping to transform their understandings of racism.

Storytelling for Social Justice acknowledges that talk, by itself, is not enough to dismantle racism. But those who believe in the critical examination of how we talk about race and racism will appreciate this book as a way “to see ourselves and others more clearly” (p. 4). Through stories, we can start the work.

I.A.L.

QUALITY EDUCATION AS A CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT: CREATING A GRASSROOTS MOVEMENT TO TRANSFORM PUBLIC SCHOOLS

edited by Theresa Perry, Robert P. Moses, Joan T. Wynne, Ernesto Cortés Jr., and Lisa Delpit.

Boston: Beacon Press, 2010. 192 pp. \$13.00.

In 2005, Robert Moses—esteemed civil rights activist and educator—put out a rallying call for a new national civil rights movement. With his signature boldness and vision, Moses called on youth and adults, educators and organizers, researchers and community members to “use the Preamble to the Constitution as an organizing tool with which to assemble a twenty-first-century