



Breaking the Code of Good Intentions: Everyday Forms of Whiteness. Bush, Melanie E. L. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2004. 302 pp.

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Melanie Bush, Assistant Professor at Adelphi University and long-time educator, administrator and activist at Brooklyn College, explores the ideological “wall of whiteness” and points out the “cracks” through which these walls can be broken down to achieve a more just and racially inclusive society. We can learn from Bush’s work the rationales behind “sincere fictions” (Feagin, Hernan and Batur: *White Racism – the Basics*, Routledge, New York, 2001, pp. 4-5) of whiteness, and how these buttress a social order where white domination hides behind a veneer of self-serving but seemingly good intentions. To those of us who are teaching the controversial and complex subjects of race and inequality, as well as to our students, this book provides stunning insights, revealing perspectives and concrete suggestions.

Bush firmly locates race thinking within a class analysis. Focusing her study on Brooklyn College students, she combines quantitative surveys of student attitudes with student and staff focus group interviews about the results of these surveys. She reveals the ideological framework and narrative strategies of students’ understandings of whiteness as it is manifest in their views on race, poverty, wealth, education and other key sites. Bush analyzes students’ comments carefully, listening for the larger narratives that structure their logic and probing their ambiguities. While decisive in pointing out pervasive notions, she also pays careful attention to the heterogeneities in views, and the cracks and inconsistencies that provide points for interventions.

Brooklyn College, an institution with a commitment to multiculturalism, is situated in a multi-ethnic and multiracial urban center. Yet, at Brooklyn College this diversity is uneven, and many of its commuter students are exposed to others from different ethnic and racial backgrounds there for the first time. While bringing people together is an important step towards breaking down racial barriers, Bush also shows how this merely superficial interracial contact sometimes produces or entrenches white students’ notions of white superiority, based on a “knowing them” feeling which prevents further inquiry and serves as a shallow justification for the status quo.

One of the highlights of her book is her attempt to link discourses of race with discourses of nation, a connection often missed in studies of whiteness and race, despite being central to whiteness’s symbolic underpinnings. In her analysis of the inventory of patriotism and nationalism in the United States, she clearly reveals students’ deeply held convictions for democracy, equality and freedom as the essence of American values and contrasts these convictions with statements of students of color, who express their dismay about lacking the most basic freedom (i.e., the freedom to determine their own identity). Equally revealing is the



degree to which students have internalized and naturalized patriotic symbols like the flag and its emotional and ideological associations, which help sustain a notion of the nation as white. Directly linked to this symbolic apparatus of whiteness/Americanness is the implicit association between race and social critique—to be critical of the status quo or the nation is to be unpatriotic, unAmerican, and non white. This sentiment is more pronounced since 9/11, but has a much longer and deeply entrenched tradition within the U.S. racial discourse. Bush's study shows us the contradictions in the ideological frameworks students present, often unnoticeable to themselves. However, she argues that it is these contradictions that also provide a starting point for critical reflections and for rethinking what can and should be, rather than defending "what is" as unalterable.

For anthropologists of education, this chapter also provides a critical new reading of our disciplinary obsession with Ogbu's immigrant versus involuntary minority thesis. Although Bush does not directly engage this body of work, her data comparing immigrant students with U.S. born students and white immigrants with non-white immigrants reveals the stunning degree to which whiteness trumps other aspects of identity, most noticeable in the glaring gap between white and black immigrants' beliefs of fairness, justice, and the "American Dream."

One of the reasons why studies of educational institutions are so important to understand and to engage with as sites for social change is, as Bush reminds us, that colleges are not only places for individual benefits of higher learning for the individual, but are a "benefit to society as a whole in enriching the quality and vitality of communities and fostering engagement in democracy and civic involvement" (p. xiii-xiv). This view, so central to DuBois' critique of Booker T. Washington's notion of social progress appears to be increasingly revolutionary in a time where universities are becoming more and more consumer driven institutions, in which learning is expected to be mainly a transfer of skills and where voices about a supposed liberal takeover are increasing.