

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Photos from "True Pictures"

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PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN: SUBJECTS UNKNOWN (BOXERS), QUARTER PLATE AMBROTYPE, C. 1860-65. COLLECTION OF GREG FRENCH.

"Photos from "True Pictures." Gregory Fried. *Common Place*, Vol.11, No. 2. www.common-place.org/vol-02/no-02/fried/ Accessed February 10, 2002.

A white teacher in a mostly white suburban public high school in Pennsylvania, I was researching Frederick Douglass when I came across Gregory Fried's online article "True Pictures," which included photographs that Frederick Douglass himself had hoped would draw attention to the arbitrariness of race, and I decided to use them in class.

On the day of the lesson, I handed each student one of the pictures. I explained to them that these pictures were taken around the time of emancipation (1863, to be precise), and that Frederick Douglass had hoped to use them to educate people against slavery and racism.

Then I gave them three minutes to describe the image and explain how Frederick Douglass might have wanted to use these in an anti-racism / anti-slavery campaign. I allowed them a few minutes to react and interpret, alone or in small groups. Afterwards, I asked them to share their responses. Students unanimously agreed that the picture of Isaac and Rosa arm in arm was symbolic of interracial harmony, depicting black and white together in youthful innocence. With the other photo, students assumed the children were teaching the man to read -- white kids working to help the downtrodden black man.

Once students aired their reactions, I explained that every person pictured was a freed person, a former slave. They had all been "black," made to live as slaves, unable to pursue their rights through legal institutions. So were they in fact black, or were they white?

Following this exercise, the debate was tightly focused on what qualifies a person for their race. No one claimed colorblindness -- they had already revealed assumptions about race in their answers. Furthermore, their ideas about how the photos would be used demonstrated that race (and racial uncertainty) is exactly what makes them powerful images in the first place. Therefore, race is assumed and interpreted by all parties, regardless of whether they consider themselves prejudiced. We then moved on to discussing how, with all this uncertainty, we ever decide that any person is of a specific race. Students debated whether ancestry, color, or culture is the key.

If they argued that ancestry is the source, I asked them about adoptees. Imagine that Rosa had been adopted in infancy and raised white. What if she and her family believed she was white, even though her biological father was black? Can a person be black and not even know it? Most students agreed that Rosa would be white in that scenario. If so, does

that mean there is no connection between race and ancestry? Here students argued that ancestry does not always decide race identification -- skin tone matters a lot too.

Of course the color argument is also flawed. When students answered that black people are people with black skin, I asked them to define the exact range of tones. What about darkly tanned white people? Both Malcolm X and Frederick Douglass were light skinned, but everyone calls them black. And where does Michael Jackson figure into this? And what of the emancipated slaves in the pictures? Ultimately, students admitted that people with darker skin may live a "white" life, and people with very light skin may live a "black" life.

The third and final argument grounds race in culture, claiming it as a matter of behavior and speech. When students offered this argument, I had them explain to me how a white person "acts black." What are the behaviors? They described speaking Ebonics, blasting Hip Hop, and wearing low baggy pants. But why do they call that acting black? If culture is the defining quality, wouldn't that person just become black? What if a white person were also the adopted person discussed above, with direct African ancestry? Who would argue that a person with African ancestry is not in fact black just because they don't act black?

In my tenth grade English classes, I have followed up this session with narratives of freed people such as Douglass. His narrative suggests that he was his master's son -- students readily connected that fact to the one drop rule and its implications. I also found that the exercise makes a great basis for discussing Mark Twain's *Pudd'n Head Wilson*, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and many short stories that involve race ambiguity, such as Langston Hughes's "Who's Passing for Whom?"

Ultimately, the purpose of the lesson is not to give easy answers about race, but rather to deconstruct race, to reveal the contradictions and problems inherent in this socially constructed category. Ideally, this preliminary examination of the social construction of race will lead to continued searching and questioning, building the students' resistance to easy and simplistic answers.



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