

A VOLUME IN CRITICAL CONSTRUCTIONS:
STUDIES ON EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

rethinking social studies

critical pedagogy
in pursuit of
dangerous citizenship

e. wayne ross

Rethinking Social Studies

Critical Pedagogy in Pursuit of Dangerous Citizenship

A Volume in
Critical Constructions: Studies on Education and Society

Series Editor
Curry Mallot
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Critical Pedagogy in Pursuit of Dangerous Citizenship

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INFORMATION AGE PUBLISHING, INC.
Charlotte, NC • www.infoagepub.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

CIP record for this book is available from the Library of Congress
<http://www.loc.gov>

ISBNs: 978-1-68123-755-8 (Paperback)

978-1-68123-756-5 (Hardcover)

978-1-68123-757-2 (ebook)

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Printed in the United States of America

To

Kevin, Perry, Rich, & Greg

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FOREWORD

Peter McLaren

Constituting some of our most critical and politically active groups of scholars, social studies educators occupy a long-standing place and have played an increasingly revolutionary role within the critical tradition in education and are held—rightly so—in high esteem among critical educators. Which makes it surprising that the field of social studies education is not sufficiently recognized in the main for its contribution to educational transformation. This is, no doubt, due to the fact that the field of social studies has provoked considerable controversy in its redefinition of education as a field of conflicting and competing understandings of the role and purpose of schooling in a global capitalist society. It is, in the words of E. Wayne Ross, the most “dangerous” of all school subjects. On the one hand it is, as Ross declares, “the engine room of illusion factories whose primary aim in the reproduction of the existing social order”, and on the other hand, social studies is a field that is theoretically equipped to undress the pretensions of the ruling capitalist order—it’s fundamental pain, destitution and injustice.

The edifice of our democratic traditions is shaky, shifting and uncertain, on the brink of collapse. Strangely, we mistake this very tremulous condition itself for democracy because, as Ross has argued, we have created at best “a shallow, spectator version of democracy.” Our political pretensions—that we live in a country of free individuals where justice prevails under the rule of law—are, as Ross notes, the lies we tell our students (i.e., democracy,

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voting, democratic citizenship). Such pretensions are not merely assertions written in invisible ink or blandishments circulated through the corporate and social media, but are undergirded by relations and structures of power fully insinuated into the world ecology of human capital (Moore, 2015; Moore & Ahsan, 2015), in other words, into the logic of neoliberal economics administered by means of a market metric macrophysics of power and set of governing tactics that submits everything in its path to a process of monetization and that simultaneously transforms everything and everyone within our social universe to a commodity form (Brown, 2015).

The nightmarish evening of *Sturm und Drang*, November 11, 2016, marked the time that the fount of President-elect Donald Trump's controlled demolition of democracy—embodied in his racist dog-whistle pitch to “Make America Great Again”—entered the political unconscious of the United States as the official slogan of a new era defined by nativism, authoritarianism, racism, White supremacy, homophobia, and misogyny. Trump's new brigades of millennial bigots who are too young to remember the Civil Rights era, Nixon, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War have taught the left a hard lesson: that in order to move beyond the colonial inertia of the present, it is going to have to get over its obsession with an identity politics and divide-and-rule politics. Further, it must discover ways to forge a common alliance across racial, ethnic, and gender divides that can build mobilizations strong enough to rebuke and challenge the false flags and chaos that is coming down the beltway pike, a chaos that could eventually end in a crash of the currency system through the central bank and a global economic collapse unlike that the world has ever seen. Trump's narcissistic inability to be anything more than that which he claims to oppose is clearly evident to the discerning social studies educator. Trump, who wants the country to be run like his own private country club, is surrounded by hacks and quislings as eager to carry his gilded jock strap as his golf bags. With advisors appointed to the Trump transition team such as Kris Kobach, friend of White nationalist groups and the architect of the most racist law in modern American history, SB 1070, that passed in Arizona in 2010, giving police the right to stop you, detain you and demand proof of citizenship if you have brown skin and an accent—things don't look good for Latino/as. Expect Bracero-type programs to follow for those agri-capitalists who depend on undocumented labor in the picking fields (Miguel Zavala, personal communication). Shortly after Trump was elected several fliers created by hate groups were found on the campus of Texas State University. One of them read: “Now that our man Trump is elected and Republicans own both the Senate and the House—time to organize tar & feather vigilante squads and go arrest and torture those deviant university leaders spouting off all this diversity garbage.” Speaking of diversity, the diversity and pluriformity of all living creatures will stagnate as biological species

will continue to disappear more rapidly than ever under Trump's climate denial presidency. Perhaps a similar fate for the human species under such a vacuous demagogue such as Donald Trump is inevitable. But until then there will be plenty of golf courses from which the rich can choose as the planet sinks into oblivion.

There exists no law of history that stipulated a Trump victory but there are laws of tendency that exist that strongly suggest that unemployed, broken, and desperate people—in Trump's campaign, mostly White people—will attempt to bring down what it perceives as the elite political class for destroying their lives. One of the many problems with this strategy is that the White working class has looked to a billionaire real estate tycoon to save them. Their failure to recognize that the problem is not only with the political class or the ruling elite guiding the direction of the transnational capitalist class but with the social relations of exploitation of capitalism itself will unjustly inflict the poor with a prolonged and lingering tragedy for the foreseeable future. A more granular look at the results of this election reveals that it was not just the working-class who supported Trump, since the mean income for the Trump base was actually higher than the mean income for Clinton and Sanders supporters. In addition, many of Trump's supporters were well-educated, including 23% of non-White college graduates who supported Trump, and 45% of women with college degrees who also supported Trump (Rajghatta, 2016). For the well-heeled Whites who wanted to “make America great again,” on June 25, 2015, the United States Census Bureau released a report on the demographics of American children under the age of five. It reported that for the first time in U.S. history, the minority of this group is White (Thompson, 2016). This report appeared only one week after Donald Trump announced his candidacy for President of the United States. The specter of an all-minority future no doubt struck fear into the hearts of the White population and fuel injected this fear into the combustion chamber of their politics. For them, their fear was not mainly the corporate takeover of their lives, but the erosion of the American Dream, the dream of a society where White people would *de facto* be assured the economic security to which they feel entitled because of their race and providential history, which critics have long recognized as the history of settler colonizers responsible for the most heinous acts of genocide against non-White populations throughout Las Americas. After all, these were the “first beneficiaries” of the middle class (Thompson, 2016), those who most assiduously seek a scapegoat for their flagging hope for their families. Before the invention of the White race in Virginia's plantation colonies, as a means for the ruling class to maintain a buffer social control stratum during and after the civil war stage of Bacon's Rebellion (1676–77), after which time the term “white” first appeared in a 1691 Virginia law, White people in the U.S. were identified by the European

countries from which they immigrated (Allen, 2012). But it is important to underscore that not only White people supported Trump. People of color as well as Whites also supported Trump, they also wanted a change in the system that they felt was corrupted by professional politicians, even if change meant throwing a serial liar, self-proclaimed sexual predator, and human Molotov cocktail into the system. But the blame cannot rest solely with the Republicans or the Trump campaign exploding like a girandola with the most vile racist and misogynistic invectives imaginable. Like a chorus of Greek actors sporting their smiling prosopons, the Democratic Party power brokers in Washington hold significant responsibility for the outcome of the election. After all, they made it impossible for a Bernie Sanders victory and thus for the battle for the presidency to be fought by the working-class freed from the delusion that it could bring back the era of *Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver*, or *My Three Sons* through a series strategic policy maneuvers and trade deals. It also prevented, at least in the short run, an unequivocal endorsement of a path towards socialism, which is the only path available in order for freedom to flourish, the only path able to give definitive and lasting validity to democracy. If we do not fight for a system that creates the conditions of possibility for dignity, equality, and justice for the poor and excluded of this world then education will be accused by history of complicity and will be judged as irrelevant.

While international trade is always on the top of the agenda in any discussion of politics in the United States, such discussions are rarely ever situated within a larger debate over capitalism. Trump's complaints have been directed towards "cheating" on the part of China and in fact he has accused China of "raping" the United States as far as trade is concerned. On the one hand you have a state capitalist system which describes its economics as socialist building the world's fastest trains, longest bridges, and most modern airports and claiming the world's largest foreign exchange reserves (Baculinao, 2016). A country that spends "more on infrastructure than North America and Western Europe combined," a country that "has used more cement in three years (6.6 gigatons in 2011–2013) than the U.S. during the entire 20th century," a country that possesses "the world's longest sea bridge (26.4 miles), the Three Gorges Dam spanning the Yangtze River which is five times larger than America's Hoover Dam and a 12,000-mile bullet train network—which is longer than the rest of the world combined" and a country that boasts seven of the world's 10 largest and busiest ports (Baculinao, 2016). On the other hand, you have a free-market capitalist country whose infrastructure is in ruins, and whose president not only famously wants to ban Muslims from the United States, deport millions of undocumented residents and appoint conservative judges to the Supreme Court but who wants to improve U.S. infrastructure (which he describes as "third world") by bring manufacturing jobs back to

the U.S. while at the same time ushering in a tax reform plan that will bring about even greater levels of economic inequality. While some see Trump's statist rejection of free trade and global integration as the demise of neoliberalism, other critics such as Peter Hudis (2016) see this as a move towards "corporate capitalism with neo-fascist overtones" and "a reactionary move to atavistic nationalism, racism, and misogyny." Like the early demise of Keynesianism, the rightwing opponents of neoliberalism who cloak their agenda in racist and misogynist terms and seek to replace neoliberal capital with corporate capitalism is not a sign of progress but in fact a worsening of conditions for workers. Likewise, China's economic policies are creating more room for the creation of Chinese billionaires but at the same time creating a worsening climate for its workers who labor 12 to 14 hours a day for \$50 a month in sweatshops "where unions are forbidden and working conditions are unregulated" (Hudis, 2005). As far as international markets are concerned, in China the cost of production is often "less than that of the raw materials needed to create the same products back home." However, a "hunger for raw materials and products to fuel China's expansion is exacerbating the exploitation of labor and destruction of the environment" (Hudis, 2005). Many workers "have little or no access to health insurance in the factories along China's east coast and industrial accidents are endemic nationwide" (Hudis, 2005). China's growth, as Hudis notes, depends on its ability to attract foreign capital by keeping wages low (80% of world direct foreign investment outside the U.S. in 2004 went to China), and millions of workers in unprofitable state-owned enterprises are being laid off even as "ten million Chinese migrate from rural areas to the cities each year." China now has a migrant reserve labor force that totals 150 million, which Hudis (2005) describes as "the largest population migration in human history." A half a billion more peasants are expected to abandon their farms and move to urban areas in coming years so that they can be used as cheap labor in China's factories. I doubt that Trump possesses a similar vision for making the U.S. a manufacturing powerhouse again, but he remains unclear about how he plans to go about it.

E. Wayne Ross has written a book on education that, unlike others, directly confronts the economic challenges ahead. It is a brilliant book that needs to be read by educators and future educators, especially at this particular historical juncture when we must rebuild our ranks as critical educators and take our fight to new levels of struggle, and where we need to revisit critical pedagogy, the spur of which over the last several decades has been domesticated by liberal education. Ross has for decades fought on the side of the oppressed—both fighting for the poor and with the poor—and his work is a relentless reminder that we cannot give up our hope for a democratic future, as difficult as this challenge might seem, especially today. As educators and future educators, we need to release

our pathological claims to fractious, toxic and artificial boundaries that separate us based on what we perceive as the worthiness of humanity. We need to do more than break our codependency with capital and our “inner advocate,” the god of money. We need to work together to create an alternative social universe, a socialist society, freed from the bondage of capital. As Ross argues, we need to follow Marx in refusing to abandon hope in desperate times; we need, as well, the “courage of hopelessness” of which the philosopher Agamben speaks. For Ross, this means never abandoning critical utopian thinking. As Ross argues throughout this pathbreaking book, we need to create a new pedagogical imaginary in order to rethink the field of social studies.

Ross understands that reform and revolution need not work against each other. Reform and revolution are not to be viewed as conflictually disjunctive but rather dialectical. Using insurrectionary pedagogies, we can fight within the system against neoliberal education reforms—i.e., a “regimented curriculum, bureaucratic outcomes-based accountability systems, and corporatized educational aims”—as part of both a global and local reform movement. This challenge could not come at a more precipitous moment in world history, where fascism worldwide is on the rise. *Rethinking Social Studies* provides a new political platform for a “dangerous citizenship” that is committed to changing the infrastructure of education and in doing so providing the conditions for a new pedagogy of liberation. Throughout the pages of *Rethinking Social Studies*, Wayne Ross has articulated a critical pedagogical creed that all educators and future educators would do well to engage. It serves to inspire and to provoke, to solidify commitment and to chart a new path towards freedom, a path marked by hope, compassion and self and social transformation.

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PREFACE

Social studies is the most dangerous of all school subjects. Its danger, however, is a matter of perspective.

Like the schools in which it is taught, social studies is full of alluring contradictions. It harbors possibilities for inquiry, social criticism, liberation, and emancipation. Social studies could be a site that enables young people to analyze and understand social issues in a holistic way: finding and tracing relations and interconnections both present and past in an effort to build meaningful understandings of a problem, its context and history; envisioning a future where specific social problems are resolved; and taking action to bring that vision into existence. Social studies could be a place where students learn to speak for themselves in order to achieve, or at least strive toward, an equal degree of participation and a better future. Social studies could be like this, but it is not.

In practice social studies has been and continues to be profoundly conversing in nature. Social studies is the engine room of illusion factories whose primary aim is reproduction of the existing social order, where the ruling ideas exist to be memorized, regurgitated, internalized, and lived by. If you don't eat your meat, you can't have any pudding! If you do not memorize these facts and accept these myths as truths so you can pass these exams to get those credentials, then you will not get any pudding. That is the way the world works. And good social studies teachers are here to make the meat palatable because they want everyone to be able to have some pudding.

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Social studies, too, often teaches myths instead of encouraging critical explorations of human existence. Schools are fundamentally authoritarian, hierarchical institutions; they produce myriad oppressive and inequitable by-products; social studies is an integral component in this process.

The challenge, perhaps impossibility, is discovering ways in which schools in general and social studies in particular can contribute to positive liberty; that is, a society where individuals have the power and resources to realize and fulfill their own potential, free from the obstacles of classism, racism, sexism and other inequalities encouraged by educational systems and the influence of the state and religious ideologies. A society where people have the agency and capacity to make their own free choices and act independently based on reason not authority, tradition, or dogma.

Does that sound too idealistic to you? Utopian even? I would not be surprised if it did. Many of my students (and more of my colleagues) say the same. They argue for the importance of being “realistic” or “adjusting to circumstances as they are” as if the actually existing social studies classes in all their boring and socially reproductive glory are natural phenomenon beyond human capacity to change. I can understand this point of view, but cannot embrace it. You can just throw up your hands or argue for being realistic; but in the face of a world filled with injustices, I do not believe sustaining the status quo is an admirable goal and neither is sustaining a social studies that offers conventional (non)explanations of the world.

In 1843, Arnold Ruge overcome with revolutionary despair wrote a letter to Karl Marx lamenting the impossibility of revolution because the German people were too docile: “our nation has no future, so what is the point in our appealing to it?” To which Marx replied “You will hardly suggest that my opinion of the present is too exalted and if I do not despair about it, this is only because its desperate position fills me with hope.” This is an example of what philosopher Giorgio Agamben has called “the courage of hopelessness.” The courage of hopelessness is an optimistic response to pessimistic circumstances. The equivalent of responding to the criticism that you are “being too idealistic” with “be realistic, demand the impossible!”

The hegemonic system of global capitalism dominates not because people agree with it. It rules because most people are convinced “there is no alternative.” Indeed as I argue in this book, the dominant approach to schooling and curriculum, particularly in social studies education, is aimed at indoctrinating students into this belief.

Utopian thinking allows us to consider alternatives, such as the pedagogical imaginaries that this book explores, in an attempt to open up spaces for rethinking our approaches to learning, teaching, and experiencing the world. These imaginaries are necessary because traditional tropes of social studies curriculum (e.g., democracy, voting, democratic citizenship) are essentially lies we tell ourselves and students because democracy

is incompatible with capitalism; a capitalist democracy creates a shallow, spectator version of democracy at best; democracy as it operates now is inseparable from empire/perpetual war and vast social inequalities.

We certainly have plenty of fuel for our hopes. The challenge we face as social studies educators is to not warm our students' hearts with empty hopes, but rather confront what are seemingly hopeless times for freedom and equality with a pedagogy and curriculum that come from a courage of hopelessness.

This book aims to rethink social studies so it becomes a site where students can develop personally meaningful understandings of the world and recognize they have agency to act on the world, to make change. Social studies should not be about showing life to students, but bringing them to life. The aim is not getting students to listen to entertaining lectures, but getting them to speak for themselves, to understand people make their own history (even if they make it in already existing circumstances). These principles are the foundation for a new social studies, one that is not driven by a standardized curriculum or examinations, but by the perceived needs, interests, and desires of our students, our communities of shared interest, and ourselves as educators.

Rethinking Social Studies is organized into three parts. Part I, "Redrawing the Lines," expands on the basic premises discussed previously. Chapter 1 presents a description and critique of a traditional social studies education. The chapter deconstructs the ideology of neutrality, which is frequently taught as part of social studies teacher education and examines the deleterious effects of conceiving of learning and citizenship as spectator projects. Chapter 2 presents a case study of a right-wing think tank report on social studies as an example of the politics of the social studies and its connections to movement conservatism. By taking a close look at neo-conservative efforts to control the field and destroy the (at least theoretical) pluralism that has long characterized social studies, we can better understand the normative nature of social studies and the inadequacy of adopting a neutral stance as social studies educators. Chapter 3, "Insurrectionist Pedagogies and the Pursuit of Dangerous Citizenship," is in many ways the heart of the book. This chapter presents an analysis of neoliberal education reforms in North America. Part of a Global Education Reform Movement (GERM), these corporate-driven reforms include three key strategies: (a) school choice and privatization, (b) human capital policies for teachers, and (c) standardized curriculum coupled with an increased use of standardized testing. The idea of "dangerous citizenship" is presented as a possible antidote to the stultifying effects of GERM on the freedom to think, learn, and teach social studies outside of a hegemonic worldview that is authoritarian and harbors racially, sexually, and class-based discriminatory traditions. Various possibilities for creative disruption of dominant assumptions and

practices of social studies teaching and curriculum are presented as imaginaries for what might become insurgent pedagogies that foster dangerous citizenship.

The chapters in Part II, “Social Education and Critical Knowledge for Everyday Life” explore questions such as, What is social justice? Chapter 4 takes a look at the relationship of social justice and power and argues that social justice requires much more than adopting a new vocabulary, and a socially and culturally inclusive curricula, rather it requires a revolution of everyday life.

Chapter 3 asks, What is critical pedagogy? Then takes a critical look at an approach that is filled with contradictions, and too often comes across as either a theory-laden field for left-wing academics, or a radical idea that is domesticated by liberal teachers and teacher educators, or both. The chapter emphasizes the importance of everyday life and becoming as part of what it means to practice critical pedagogy.

Why is class an invisible concept in social studies? What would social studies look like if we put class at the center of the curriculum? Chapter 6, “Why Teaching Class Matters,” describes both the invisibility of class in the social studies curriculum (and research) and presents an example of how class can be (and is) used as the organizing concept for a high school American studies course. Chapter 7 analyzes the American empire—making connections between politics, foreign policy and the economy to illustrate the really existing class war in the United States (and the world)—as the context for the political and pedagogical project that is teaching and organizing for social change.

In an era marked by regimented curriculum, bureaucratic outcomes-based accountability systems, and corporatized educational aims, how do you keep your ideals and still teach? The answer to this question is multifaceted; but as argued in Chapter 8, there are at least two necessary, if insufficient responses. First, working in opposition to the mainstream of educational practice requires a question-posing approach. Second, collaborative thought and action are crucial to the understanding and transformation of educational practices and social relations. Two counterstories are presented in this chapter. The first is based on the individual perspectives of two novice teachers. The second is the counterstory of a collective known as The Rouge Forum.

I often ask the social studies teachers to write about and examine the beliefs that inform their practice as educators. This task is useful in unearthing unstated assumptions that underlie our classroom practices, broader beliefs regarding the role of schools in society, and reasons we teach what we teach. In Chapter 9, I have taken my own assignment and completed it, presenting “my pedagogical creed” (based on the framework of John Dewey’s famously titled article). My hope is that you will be inspired to

write your own pedagogical creed as a way of analyzing and gaining insight into your practice as a social studies educator.

Part III, “Beyond the Classroom,” extends some themes from earlier in the book and provides an overview of key ideas found in Parts I and II (plus a few new ones). Democracy within the social studies curriculum is too often presented in its most weak and superficial form; that is, as the process of electing representatives and learning the functions of government. I say, “Don’t vote, engage politics!” Chapter 10 presents one approach to political engagement: writing for popular media. Chapter 11 is my own “educational autobiography,” another assignment I ask my students to complete, this activity aims to make sense of our current assumptions, thinking, and practices as educators by historicizing and analyzing their preconditions. The idea is that if we can better understand the sources of our present thinking and practice, we can then better understand our present circumstances and more clearly envision how what we think and do today can help us achieve our goals in the future. The book closes with an interview conducted by Carlo Fanelli in which I discuss a wide range of topics, including corporate education reform, critical pedagogy, and educational and political activism. In many ways this interview is an overview and summary of ideas from the previous chapters.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As researcher, teacher, and book and journal editor, I have had the privilege and honor to collaborate with many fine educators and scholars. When considering my work, it is impossible to separate ideas and accomplishments that could be described as my own from those that are the result of collaboration with others. Mark Twain said,

There is no such thing as a new idea. It is impossible. We simply take a lot of old ideas and put them into a sort of mental kaleidoscope. We give them a turn and they make new and curious combinations. We keep on turning and making new combinations indefinitely; but they are the same old pieces of colored glass that have been in use through all the ages. (Paine, 2006, p. 103)

Twain is right, but only up to a point. If we continue to manipulate that kaleidoscope at some point, we will witness something entirely new, yet carrying forward aspects of what it was. We can understand and change the world and in the process we create ourselves anew. This is what I have experienced in my collaborative relationships with others, and it is important for me to acknowledge those folks who contributed to who I am today as a person, a teacher, and a scholar.

This book emphasizes my collaborations with Kevin D. Vinson, Perry Marker, Rich Gibson, and Gregg Queen.

Kevin and I have had a long and fruitful collaboration as writing partners, but most importantly as friends. I came to know him when he submitted

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an manuscript to a journal I was editing, and I like it so much I had to call him up and talk about it. That was, of course, back in the day when people actually called each other on the phone. Our interests and thinking have been so intertwined over the years, that each of us has written pieces then given the other credit for writing. We allowed ourselves the conceit that our relationship was not unlike Lennon and McCartney, without the hits.

Perry and I met as graduate students when Ohio State University and Indiana University regularly held colloquia for social studies students and faculty. Since then we have worked together on nearly 20 presentations, articles, and journal issues. Perry's work as a social studies teacher educator and curriculum scholar is the exemplar of critical, democratic praxis, and I have long admired his dedication to both the ideals of democracy and his students. But most of all I appreciate his friendship, particularly his willingness to engage with me in spirited discussions of politics and baseball, which are often fueled by bourbon whiskey.

I was chairing the question and answer part of a conference session when this fellow wearing a black leather jacket stood up and asked a question that pulled the rug out from under the assumptions of all the prior presentations. Afterwards, I chased the guy down and found out his name was Rich Gibson, and soon learned he was a full-time troublemaker and revolutionary. We began working together almost immediately, helping to found the Rouge Forum and writing articles for newspapers, political and academic journals, coediting books and journals. He has been my mentor on Marx, martial arts, spaghetti westerns, revolution, and all things Detroit (and I reciprocate by sharing obscure blues, R&B, and rockabilly recordings with him).

Greg Queen was Rich's graduate student and in my mind one of the most unique and accomplished high school social studies teachers ever. He has provided leadership for social change in his community and nationally as the community coordinator for The Rouge Forum. His teaching embodies a critical, revolutionary spirit, and he has been honored for his dedication to teaching against the grain with the National Council for the Social Studies' Academic Freedom Award. Greg does what most social studies teachers are afraid to do: objectively teach the unvarnished truth of United States history. When my students say nobody can teach that way and keep their job, Greg is the person I point to.

The influences of Kevin, Perry, Rich, and Greg are easy enough to spot in the pages that follow, but I must acknowledge a number of others who have influenced my thinking and practice as an educator.

As a social studies educator I am deeply indebted to my professors, particularly Richard C. Phillips (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) and M. Eugene Gilliom (The Ohio State University), and to my teachers at

Independence High School in Charlotte, NC, the epitome, in a curricular sense, of the “shopping mall” high school.

I have learned much from many superb colleagues in the field of social studies education, including: Ceola Ross Baber, Jane Bernard-Powers, Jeffrey W. Cornett, Margaret Smith Crocco, Abraham DeLeon, Ronald W. Evans, Stephen C. Fleury, Four Arrows (aka Don T. Jacobs), Todd Hawley, Neil O. Houser, Gregg Jorgensen, Joseph Kahne, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Christopher R. Leahey, Merry Merryfield, Jack L. Nelson, Nel Noddings, Paul Orlowski, Valerie Ooka Pang, Marc Prunyn, Doug Selwyn, Özlem Sensoy, Walter Werner, Joel Westheimer, and Michael Whelan.

It has been a privilege to collaborate with many great scholars on a variety of projects including, Derek Ford, David Gabbard, David W. Hursh, Kathleen Kesson, Johnny Lupinacci, Curry Stephenson Malott, Gail McCutcheon, Stephen Petrina, Ken Saltman, Patrick Shannon, Larry Stedman, Ken Teitelbaum, John F. Welsh, and Mark Wolfmeyer.

All the people in, and around, the Rouge Forum have continued to be a huge inspiration to me as a scholar, teacher, and activist, most especially Brad Porfilio, Faith Agostinone Wilson, Gina Steins, Bryan Reinholdt, Joe Wegwert, Amber Goslee, Dennis Carlson (1946–2015), Peter McLaren, and Adam Renner (1970–2010).

Colin and Rachel continue to make me a proud father. And, as always, the person who provides my life with love, happiness, and excitement is Sandra Mathison.

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