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Abstract

A Review of "Red, White, Black & Blue: A Dual Memoir of Race and Class in Appalachia" by William M. Drennen Jr. & Kojo (William T.) Jones Jr. (Ohio University Press, Athens, 2004)

Keywords: *conflict resolution, culture, mediation*

BRIDGE ACROSS THE RACE-CLASS CHASM

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A Review of "*Red, White, Black & Blue: A Dual Memoir of Race and Class in Appalachia*" by William M. Drennen Jr. & Kojo (William T.) Jones Jr. (Ohio University Press, Athens, 2004)

When we in the conflict resolution arena talk about cultural competency, we often refer to only the most obvious differences in gesture, language, and values. People of this heritage avoid eye contact, while people of that heritage prize eye contact. One group values respectful silence while another believes it right to shout it all out. True, such mannerisms matter in a mediation or facilitated dialogue. But they say so little about the life contexts, the histories and beliefs and communication styles of individuals that these minimalist definitions of culture can easily slide onto already-long lists of stereotypes.

One of the many stark differences between people in the mainstream, that great white, middle-class, heterosexual mass (itself subject to being stereotyped), and people in any one of America's many "minority" communities, is consciousness of the existence of culture. To be of the dominant majority is to comprise the norm. How I think and feel is natural; everyone else is "different". Seeing beyond that warm pool of normalcy is difficult. We swim in a sea of assumptions, and we cannot help but believe that water is everyone's natural element.

What mainstream people don't see, though, goes beyond common conceptions of culture. It extends to the significance of cultural difference in our society. For "culture" is often a euphemism, a non-threatening way of talking not about difference but about domination. "Minority" and "mainstream" are words behind which hide less palatable characteristics of America, things like systemic disadvantage, a laundry list of "isms", continuing dynamics of privilege and discrimination.

For "neutral" interveners in dynamics of painful conflict, that which we don't see constitutes serious bias. Beyond the harm done (and documented) to people in marginalized groups, a blindness to deeper layers of culture extends to core dynamics applicable to virtually every conflict. Let me be explicit about this: I do not believe good conflict resolution can be accomplished in the absence of a deep and nuanced understanding of domination. Even when disputants share a common identity with each other and with the mediator, the absence of detailed and nuanced insight into how power works – what it is, how it is transacted, what the larger contexts are that give it meaning (understandings people on the "cultural margins" tend to have and people in the "mainstream" tend to lack) – tilts the

work in ways that, I believe, would be unacceptable to most good mediators were they to have awareness of it.

So how can mainstream conflict interveners become aware of what they do not see? How especially can they learn that which is not taught which indeed is so pervasive and all-encompassing that learning can only be a product of living? Well, one way I, a white, middle-class long-time mediator, have found is to listen with close attention to honest stories of *particular* lives lived in different social locations.

Red, White, Black & Blue: a Dual Memoir of Race and Class in Appalachia generously offers an opportunity to do just that. Subtitled “a dual memoir of race and class in Appalachia”, the book consists of autobiographical essays by two men, Kojo Jones and Bill Drennan, who grew up in the same neighborhood of Charleston, W. Virginia, in the 1940s and ‘50s. Kojo is black, Bill white. Briefly, they knew and liked each other, meeting mostly on playgrounds and athletic fields in their shared but very differently-occupied neighborhood. In 1955 they attended ninth grade together, pioneers of school desegregation in the first year of Charleston’s compliance with *Brown v. Board of Education*. Typical of interracial acquaintanceships of the era, their ways bifurcated soon thereafter, until they re-met as grown and well-established men in their fifties. So parallel and so different did they discover their lives to have been that they set out to write a shared account.

It takes a good deal of courage in the U.S. today for a black man and a white man to embark on a public conversation about race, at least if that conversation is truthful and this one is. Much of what Kojo and Bill write is reasonably predictable. Both came from families with substantial standing in their own communities. “We usually had enough food,” Kojo wrote, “but my father, mother, and grandmother worked very hard to provide a decent living for us and to keep the rats out of the house and the roof from leaking.”(46) Kojo and his siblings were the first in their family to earn college degrees. That they attained one or another version of professional status is noteworthy, testimony to their fortitude and intelligence.

Bill, however, was born into affluence. The first home he describes is Home Hill, an estate built by his great grandfather where he and his sister spent afternoons and evenings. “We could play in the large yard and build castles in the gazebo that had been turned into a sandbox filled with clean, white, Sun Sand Company sand. At five o’clock we would be called into the house for ‘tea party,’ which was ginger ale and graham crackers, while the servants fixed my grandfather bourbon and soda and my grandmother, Miss Boydie, a cup of coffee.” (11) When he was 8, Bill’s parents moved into a house they’d built across the street, “a long, two-story, red-brick ‘colonial’ house, trimmed in white with black shutters of the windows.” He had a room to himself, one of four bedrooms, and their view from the dining room picture window commanded all of Charleston. From these origins, Bill’s journey through life took a predictable route: all-white private prep school (to which his parents transferred him in tenth grade), ivy league college, Vietnam with officer status, brief detour

to Europe where he experienced a few wild oats, and immediately afterward marriage, professional recognition, and political influence.

Stereotypic as are the outlines of the two authors' stories, the details and their reflections on them constitute a far more compelling narrative. There were moments reading the book when I squinted in pain. But they were less about the obvious differences between the two men than about their different voices. Reading a seemingly straightforward account of some moment in one or another life, I would sense a shard of anger, an unconsciously revealing expression of privilege, an expressive silence about something that must certainly have been happening. The two men's stories do not so much describe a chasm of race and class as exemplify it.

Consider, for example, the contrast between the two men's introductions to race. Bill Drennan makes explicit the prototypic first encounter with race as experienced by white children in affluent homes, "with colored people who worked for my grandmother and my mother." His most glowing prose describes Stella, "my first 'mammy', a big, jovial, jet-black woman" who always emitted in his direction "a cloud of warmth and smiles and Beechnut chewing gum."

Kojo's experience in segregated Charleston was polar opposite. "I didn't really know any white people until I began to go to the Fernbank playground at age ten." Then he recounts a series of cruel encounters, most dramatically his beating at age eleven by four white kids on the playground. Kojo speculated that their wrath was evoked by his success in the game of horseshoes, beating them three times out of four. That they tied him to a fence and whipped him with switches was, however, securely connected to race for him in part because he'd grown up in an assumed social structure of discrimination: no service at the soda fountain, no paper bag at the grocery store.

This contrast between places where people discover race – at home through warm dealings with employees, or in public through hostile confrontations with (usually older) strangers – is one I've found typical in my own work on racial dynamics. Also typically, Bill Drennan tells his tale and moves on to other life experiences, while Kojo Jones organizes his entire narrative around defining racial encounters. To the white man, race is as incidental to the structure of his memoir as he experiences it in his life; to the black man, it is central in both. Because the joint memoir is clearly an exercise in exploring racial dimensions of life, Bill Drennan does punctuate his narrative with incidents touching on the subject. I do not mean to cast doubt or otherwise discredit his good intentions in proposing the project in the beginning, nor the changes he's undergone in the process of implementing it. But that is exactly the point: even with his intention and attention attuned to race, his stories are incidental to the main themes of his life, while to Kojo Jones they are clearly central.

Bravely, the two authors subject their work to the analytic pen of a third writer, a communications scholar named Dolores Johnson. Her erudite commentary draws out some deeper levels of meaning in the book, although it elides others. Her tool is discourse analysis, an academic approach rich in yield and interest but limited in scope. When the eye is drawn

to communication between individuals, there is a tendency to miss the surrounding context. And in the case of racial inequities in America, context is key. Kojo Jones' and Bill Drennan's accounts beg for linkages with those systems of domination that underlie relations of class and race in our society. It is certainly interesting to note contrasts in the lengths of each man's contribution and to connect wordiness with privilege, as Dolores Johnson does. But I regretted the missed opportunity to go deeper, to echo the memoir authors' honesty and earnestness by delineating the structural racism that so clearly, to my eye, explained the differences the commentator detailed. Numbers of times, the analysis came close to naming that most central reality and then disappointed by hurrying back to peripheral phenomena.

That tension is reflected in the analyst's undertone of disappointment in the two authors' failure to grow closer to each other by the end of the project. Drennan comments on their failure to socialize, and Jones' final piece of writing is a call for reparations. While Johnson bemoans the "parallel language tracts" in which they write about race and class, she concedes, with more relevance, that "the importance of their collaborative life writing is what it has to teach our diverse society about the significant influences and effects of historical and cultural imprinting on our communication processes." (165)

For conflict resolvers, that learning is crucial, but it is also not enough. We cannot bridge a chasm if we do not know where the edges of the cliffs lie. More, we need to be able to describe those edges, below the surface, in graphic detail. What is the soft soil of language, what the bedrock of systemic racism? Where must the contours of earth be altered before a bridge is sturdy enough to support genuine connection? If we cannot answer those questions – not only where race is explicitly at issue but also in the more general cases where power is at issue – then we are not mediating. We are structuring conflict into our work, and we are contributing to an outcome that is the opposite of reconciliation, contradicting our intention and configuring our unwanted collusion with injustice.

One evidence of bedrock I noticed lay in the very different ways Jones and Drennen engaged in public affairs. That they both did is a tribute to something moral they share; both men's lives have been marked by a sense of responsibility to their community. But their public roles, as well as the routes by which they came to them, contrast in ways that speak painfully of fundamental racial realities in today's America.

Soon after Bill Drennan returned to Charleston, he reconnected with a friend who subsequently was elected governor of the state and appointed Drennen Commissioner of Culture and History. Kojo Jones, on the other hand, took part in a series of efforts to redress racial injustice. For seventeen years, for instance, he worked for the United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice. Like Bill, Kojo became a public figure, but in a sharply contrasting relationship to power. Bill became an official, Kojo a critic. From inside government, Bill tried to support good causes (although I found his account a bit vague on the results.) Kojo, on the other hand, campaigned from outside government for substantial social change. Like Bill, his means were respectful, legal, positioned well within the boundaries of participatory civic engagement. No threats or weapons for him; instead he worked through NGOs with religious and community roots. (He doesn't write about it in the

book, but many years ago he worked with San Francisco Community Boards. He continues today to maintain close connections with people mediating for the community good.) It is not surprising that each man ended up positioned occupationally in ways that reflect their racial locations – Bill from the center, Kojo from the margins.

Reflecting on the neatness of that contrast, I found myself speculating on yet another psycho-geologic stratum at which race seemed to me crucial in shaping their life stories. Bill Drennen's "wild oats interlude" suggest a man at odds with himself and his position in society. Having left military service in Vietnam, he was reluctant to return to Charleston and the life awaiting him. He dabbled in illegal dealings and illicit sex. (One of his most distressing stories – distressing to me, that is, not apparently to him – is a warm and fuzzy description of a black prostitute in France who washed her "private" regions sensually in his presence, and, he thought, for his pleasure.) When he did finally go home, he married and started his career in a flash, with no seeming discomfort or difficulty. Kojo Jones, on the other hand, transferred directly from the military (where he encountered searing racism) into a life of protest. No experimentation with outcast, he instead insisted on the dignity of his chosen role as an agent of change, perhaps because all the bitter racial encounters he chronicles up until that time so threatened to cast him out.

In searing contrast, I could not help wondering if Bill's experimentation with the underworld were not his one chance to get out, to protest the establishment position for which he was destined. I was stunned by how smoothly he moved from drop out to responsible citizen, with no indication of torment or even regret. He writes about Europe as a normal boyish escapade. But I read it as something else, that short-lived escape permitted to upper class youths entering adulthood, a ritual designed perhaps to leach the last protest out of them so they are reconciled to taking their appointed place in the power elite.

Kojo, of course, was allowed no such thing. For him to have stepped into the underworld was to court severe punishment. His stories demonstrate how much in jeopardy he was to the criminal justice system, simply by virtue of being a black man. To have given cause was to step onto a rocky path of unforgiving peril.

That Kojo gained by choosing a life of resistance is evident. But what of Bill's losses from forgoing it? What sense of spirit was undone by the absence of protest in his life? What, you might ask, does a man so privileged *have* to protest? I believe that privilege, too, has its injuries, that inequality runs against the human bond and in so doing hurts us all. I could feel more than read a desire for justice running like a thin thread throughout Bill Drennen's narrative. But it is justice betrayed. Soon after desegregation, white friends invited a black classmate, Albert, to a party at Bill's home. Hearing that this well-liked young man might come, Bill felt conflicted. On the one hand, he liked Albert and rebelliously resented limits on his freedom to socialize. On the other hand, he anxiously anticipated his parents' reaction. He handled his quandary by doing nothing.

In the end, Albert did come, and Bill's parents did intervene. Reprimanding their son, they drove Albert home, while Bill silently acquiesced and was left with the memories – and the lessons:

That is one of the most painful memories in my memory bank. Where was my strength? Where was my courage? How is it all right to play football and basketball together, and not all right to drink a Coke together, or dance or sing or socialize? I really don't think I seriously questioned it. That was the way things were, and that was that. (38)

Bill draws no connection between this incident and his parents' decision to send him to boarding school the next year. But the lesson was clearly not lost on him. His story is defining: it is the way white people are taught to accept injustice. Racism, whether named as such or not, whether in the form of social segregation or the myriad more subtle forms it takes today, lays down the foundation for power relations in our society. To acquiesce to injury to a fellow human being is to accept a system of inequity and cruelty that rubs against what I believe is an innate sense of justice in us all. We are born with the phrase, "It's not fair!" lurking on the edge of our lips. We learn to suppress it. And incidents like Bill's are one means by which that happens.

To his credit and our benefit, Bill's conscience survived; it inhabits his contribution to *Red, White, Black & Blue*, and his commitment to racial change. Kojo, too, transcended his injuries and his anger, not abandoning just criticism but at the same time accepting Bill as an ally and partnering in this project. Their product offers us, the readers, especially those of us working to resolve conflict and contribute to a more just world, a rare window into the heart of the matter.