Critical Civic Literacy: A Reader

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A wise and enlightened constituency will refuse to invest a reckless and profligate man with office. If we do not prepare children to become good citizens then our republic must go down to destruction.

—Horace Mann

In the early part of the 21st century, one that seems to cast dark clouds over enlightened citizenship, Mann’s words appear to have been lost or forgotten. Civic education, a cornerstone of 19th-century common schools, has been shunted to the back burner in public education today as often mindless high-stakes testing sets the larger agenda in our classrooms, board rooms, and media outlets. That striking devolution of interest in civics itself is one of the main reasons for this book’s inception. The contributors to the volume do not speak in the same ways about citizenship education as did Mann, who was profoundly in favor of melioristic social harmony and consensus. But they all seek to lift civic literacy to its rightful place in nurturing and sustaining human rights in government and society. They realize that we now need critical civic literacy perhaps more than ever before.

American society is not structured to enhance the dignity of many, but unfortunately, is structured to foster a dehumanizing quest for status, power, and wealth. We live in a fundamentally racist, materialistic society which, through a process of rewards and punishments, cultivates the quest for status, power, and wealth in such a way so as to use people and institutions effectively to protect vested interests.

—Clarence J. Karier

Karier, a leading historian of American education in the latter part of the 20th century, is a powerful critic of Mann’s notion of social harmony and consensus. He perceives a plethora of con-
tested areas of discourse and practice in American life, most notably our marked social stratification, excessive materialism, and so-called “meritocratic” system of governance. In one manner or another, each of our contributors tackles some important aspects of those dilemmas. Like Karier, they see obstacles and possibilities that many others do not see—or simply wish to ignore. They view injustice and want to correct it. They find inequities and seek to join forces with those who act to overcome them. Some may call many of our contributors “radical,” forgetting that “radical” means getting to the roots of real problems. The latter is the definition that each of our contributors would acknowledge; and, because of that acceptance, they seek to construct stronger forms of critical civic literacy.

You cannot have a secure self-location in a period where every movement is half-assed and not deep into the corruption of this society of which we are sensitive….I believe that our ambiguity has to do with the uneasiness of self-location and insecurity—which make(s) us strive to be politically happy when we know in our souls that [t]his is not the answer to anything we are really interested in on the political sphere.

—C. Wright Mills

Mills was no ordinary sociologist. Of course, he used his “sociological imagination” to view events and trends. Yet he also employed self-observation and critical self-engagement in his academic endeavors. In almost existential fashion, he put his self-reflection into action, prodding the public and its power brokers to solve the problems of society. Indeed, he is among that rare breed we refer to as “public intellectuals.” In large part, this volume was created in the hope that our contributors would choose to take a similar path in their writing and reflection. They have not disappointed. They also realize that there is something terribly wrong in our social structures; and they are striving to locate and eradicate those debilitating sociopolitical deficiencies. They, too, know that we are in drastic need of critical civic literacy.

To refuse to participate in the shaping of our future is to give it up. Each of us must find our work and do it.

—Audre Lorde

Lorde’s message brings up one of my own misgivings about being a college professor in the oftentimes dim landscape of 21st-century America. I have, from time to time, been both amused and disheartened by those colleagues who, in the name of “liberation,” obfuscate and mystify the larger public (that is, the relatively few who actually read their work). The convoluted nature of their language is accepted, and presumably perused, by perhaps several dozen of their scholarly comrades (some of whom privately admit to not understanding a word of such academic jargon). Too many educators, in both public schools and the academy, have also been too content to play the role of armchair philosopher—one who swings robust imaginary clubs at the Establishment while barely lifting him or herself out of the Lazy Boy. This book is meant for them only in the faint hope of an awakening. Above all, it is written for those interested citizens, educators, students, policymakers, and all others who seek to put civic literacy into social and political action. Yes, we need to reflect deeply about contested issues and come to deliberative conclusions—and then
we need to get off our arses. Critical civic literacy is sorely needed if we are ever really going to practice democracy in our institutions, especially in school hallways and classrooms.

We will constantly be drawn from our reflection into activism, making theory real….Indeed, this struggle toward a deeper understanding of classroom and structure of inequality is a moral struggle that compels all educators and those who work for the betterment of the lives of others to engage it fully. In order to avoid the socially reproductive tendencies of injustice, we must recognize the tremendous stakes and the pressing nature of the work. We can wait no longer.

—Adam Renner

In December 2010, Adam Renner passed away at age 40. He had been a tenured faculty member at Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky, for a number of years. In August 2010, he had left that position to become a teacher at the June Jordan School for Equity in San Francisco. Adam died before he could complete his original essay for this book. He embodied the ideal of the scholar/activist. Thus, in a certain and real sense, this volume is dedicated to Adam and people like him: Those who do not just sit on the sidelines and pontificate, those who practice what they preach in the realm of civic education. In this troubled, wildly fragmented world, we need far fewer silly sound bites, fewer goofy media images, fewer political candidates who are caricatures of unreason, and more substantial voices articulating and acting upon humane possibilities. In a word, we need more Adam Renners in our world if we are to survive and thrive today and tomorrow—especially in a public life still worth living.