Feather Boas, Black Hoodies, and John Deere Hats

Discussions of Diversity in K-12 and Higher Education

Joseph R. Jones (Ed.)

SensePublishers

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ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *FEATHER BOAS, BLACK HOODIES, AND JOHN DEERE HATS*

"*Feather Boas, Black Hoodies, and John Deere Hats* contains the voices of a new generation who help us understand the need to move beyond a "tolerance" of others to the *acceptance and celebration* of human differences. Through a series of rich narratives, Jones provides examples of attitudes, experiences, and institutional acts that continue to propagate the marginalization of people in our communities. Intertwined within these stories are thoughtfully selected ideas to help us understand that *embracing* difference, and not merely *respecting* it, can be the catalyst for real change in all of us."
– Cathy Sweet, EdD, Nazareth College, New York

"Through authentic experiences, *Feather Boas, Black Hoodies, and John Deere Hats* opens the reader's eyes to the ongoing marginalization of those in society, who, for various determinations are deemed to be of little substance. It is the story of the past and the story of the present, but it also contains a story for the future, complete with the hope of a better world, in a better tomorrow, as the book also provides strategies to address, and to hopefully eradicate the propagation of prejudices relevant to one's origin, race, socioeconomic level, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, culture, religion, or condition and subsequently, all that each of those prejudices residually breed. Professors, administrators, teachers, corporate and small business leaders, health care providers, and all others alike in search of improving cultural competence, either individually or within their organization, should read this book as it will expand each reader's knowledge of what it truly means to be multiculturally aware, to integrate authentic diversity practices, and to become culturally proficient either as individuals or within the organizational framework. The book provides readers proactive advice on what can be done to address the ostracization of others while seeking to shape change and to provide service to all. With *Feather Boas, Black Hoodies, and John Deere Hats*, Dr. Jones has once again made a significant contribution to the campaign for human rights by highlighting the necessity of awareness in both the public and the private sector. By giving credibility to the everyday prejudices and cultural biases that are enacted against countless numbers of faceless victims, but whose stories are critical to the human experience, the discussions generated within and by this book are life-changing."
– Susan Thornton, PhD, Dublin City Schools, Georgia

"As a young high school English teacher, I found the stories and research shared in this book to be both intriguing and genuinely helpful. I was prompted to do some research of my own upon completing the book, and I am excited to implement many of the practices shared. In a world where our identity is oftentimes stifled, it is becoming more and more important to worry about our students' identities, difficulties, and stories. Even more importantly, we need to talk about them. I added this book to the shelf I most often go to for reference—I know it will be used again and again."

– Grace Bellmer, Columbia County School District, Georgia

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PREFACE

As an educator, I witness daily the lack of true diversity in educational settings. As a college professor, I have worked on different college campuses in different parts of the country, and they all have one thing in common: a lack of diversity. Attending college is an act that is still somewhat confined to individuals with some level of social and/or economic capital, of whom mostly are White middle-class citizens.

In our current social and political climate, there seems to be a lack of true tolerance and acceptance of difference. Hate language and actions are overwhelmingly visible within our society. Racism, homophobia, and sexism, among others, are still blatantly present across our nation, and these types of acts are also happening in our K-12 schools and on college campuses. Therefore, we must begin examining how we are attempting to create a more diverse and tolerant community.

Numerous books discuss the scholarship of diversity and the ways in which a particular scholar believes diversity should exist within educational settings. There are books that examine the impact of all of the "isms" and how those influence schools and colleges. As a scholar whose work attempts to create safe environments for all students to grow and learn, I have written those articles and books that provide my view of how to create diverse and tolerant places in which to learn. However, in composing this text, I wanted to go beyond the scholastic arguments and viewpoints, and I wanted to give a voice to the people who are daily entrenched in the process of schooling. Often, educational academics forget the trials of the everyday practitioner. We forget the trials of the parents and students who are different from the majority population.

Further, as a White academic with social and economic capital, it is impossible for me to completely equip my students with the necessary tools to construct a fully inclusive school setting. By this, I mean that I can never fully comprehend how my Muslim American colleagues feel on a daily basis. I can never fully comprehend how our current process for creating diverse and inclusive settings impacts an African American family.

In order to fully comprehend and prepare our students to create inclusive classrooms and other academic spaces, we must listen to the voices of the individuals in the trenches. The best way to prepare the white middle class student in my classroom is to allow him or her the opportunity to view the world through the eyes of the individual who is different. Thus, the purpose of this book is to bring those voices into the academic discourse that we use in our classrooms. In this capacity, it is my hope that this book becomes a catalyst that engenders a different conversation about diversity and difference. In doing so, I posit that our students will be better prepared to create inclusive environments.

MADISON RALEY

1. VENTI LOW-FAT SOY, HOLD THE WHIP

I was judged for being a sorority girl before I even joined one. The disapproving looks I received from friends who had chosen against Greek life, the ones who warned me, "Trust me. You don't want to be a sorority girl." I remember the tales that my older friends recounted of girls passed out at parties or making out in the bathroom, who just *had* to be sorority girls. I get it. I know how it must appear. The girl who comes into her 9:00 am class in neon Nike shorts and an oversized t-shirt, her Greek letters proudly displayed on the pocket. She sits down with her Venti Low-Fat Soy Latte from Starbucks and pulls out her MacBook, adorned with her sorority letters and monogram. Her hair is effortlessly curled to give the impression that she didn't try too hard. Her makeup looks like a professional caked it on as she spills the details from the night before to her "sister" in the next seat. It tells people that she cares more about her appearance than she does about pre-algebra or English 101. Maybe they are right. Maybe sorority girls do care about their appearances more than most. I care about the way I look, and I probably care even more of what people think of me. I'm not sure that I did *so* much until I got to college, though. If I learned nothing else from being in a sorority, it's that you get the title. Regardless of your chapter's 4.0 GPA or the academic and philanthropic awards that your chapter has brought home over the years, you still get the title, the one that *Legally Blonde* and *House Bunny* so kindly stamped on the forehead of every sorority girl in America. Sometimes, in the right crowd, the title is certainly favorable. But I learned quickly in my college classes that it usually was not.

My high school graduating class comprised 147 students. It was one of the larger high schools in the county, yet I still knew almost everyone's name and where most of them lived. It was a close-knit family that I had become a part of, and I became unrealistically comfortable in my little niche. My hometown is also home to a large Air Force base, the largest in the state. My friends in school would come and go as their father or mother had received notice of another change. The diversity was prevalent; anyone could see it. But, rather than using it as a reason to shy away from newcomers, we welcomed them with open arms. I had become accustomed to this lifestyle. I refused to use someone's weaknesses or insecurities to isolate them. That was not something I had ever felt, and was certainly not something I wanted others to feel either.

Applying for colleges was a bit of a challenge. As I was growing up, the expectation to succeed was the white elephant in every room that I entered. The option of failure was not one that I was familiar with, and the possibility of disappointing my family

J. R. Jones (Ed.), Feather Boas, Black Hoodies, and John Deere Hats, 1–7.

was off the table. I worked hard throughout high school to achieve good grades and to receive frequent praise but, most importantly, to be able to choose where I attended college. I narrowed it down to three schools, the largest of which was the University of Georgia. I visited, I toured, and I fell in love with the most beautiful historic campus, a buzzing downtown, beautiful gardens, and 100-year-old trees. I was sold. I am not positive when it actually occurred to me, but at some point, it hit me that I would be attending a university that was 238 times larger than my high school graduating class. When it hit me, it hit me hard. This was not my comfort zone. This was not what I was accustomed to by any means. But I had made my decision, and I certainly was not going to be backing out now. I prayed and hoped that they would treat me with the same kindness that I had treated all of the "new kids" at my schools over the years. I desired their approval, the approval of people whom I had not even met.

There were a handful of students from my high school who made the decision to attend UGA as well. Most of my graduating class opted to stay at home for a year or two, attending the local college in town. When it came down to it, there were maybe five from my high school and a total of 10 whom I knew in the entire school. In the blink of an eye, I went from knowing every single student in my graduating class to knowing fewer than 10 people in a school of 35,000. At this realization, I made the decision to join a sorority. It was not because I was bursting at the seams with excitement to monogram all of my clothes or have wine nights watching *The Bachelorette* but because I needed that niche. If that meant being one of *those* girls—if that meant embracing the idea of sleepovers all over again or pretending I liked salad, then so be it. I was determined to do whatever it took to find a place where I could feel comfortable. The approval that I so strongly desired, I was going to get. I was essentially putting myself on a pedestal for 17 sororities to judge, critique, and decide if I was worthy of those three little letters that I craved then more than ever.

Rush was horrific. The 5:00 am mornings, girls with more makeup on than I'd seen on pageant queens, Lilly Pulitzer dresses, uncomfortable wedge shoes—it was a nightmare. Any girl who says that rushing a sorority was a pleasant experience is lying through her pearly white teeth. When rush began, there were over a thousand girls roaming Milledge Avenue in the sweltering heat, dabbing sweat from their lips and reapplying lipstick and powder after every round. I have never been so exhausted before in my life. But I pushed through. I met plenty of the sweetest, prettiest girls who seemed to desire the warm, comforting conversations that we had. Perhaps they were simply acting. I'll never know, but for those few miserable days of rush, the one tiny glimmer of hope that kept me alive was the chance that I'd actually find somewhere I fit in.

I came to discover too quickly that 80% of the girls going through rush were from Atlanta. So what? Big deal. Atlanta is the largest city in the state. There's no way that they could all know each other. Wrong. Every girl from Atlanta seemed to know every other girl from Atlanta. It blew my mind. They had friends in sororities, big sisters in sororities, mothers who been in sororities. I was out of my element.

These girls were getting the bid they wanted one way or another, and I was a part of the measly 20% of the recruitment population who were not from Atlanta. In fact, I knew no one. Of the 1,000+ girls who rushed that week, I knew none of them. I did not know my roommate. I did not know anyone in my classes. Though I was completely out of my element, I somehow managed to make it through "hell week." When bid day arrived, I was pleasantly surprised to discover that I had received a bid from a sorority that I really had loved. It seemed to me to be the most genuine; the sisters were academically strong and supportive of their philanthropy and each another and all around seemed to instill in their members the same values that I had embraced growing up. Despite the ridiculous rumors, the judgmental comments, and the silly stories, I did what so many warned against, and I joined a sorority.

Sadly, this incredible feat that I had so deeply needed did not provide me the instant confidence that I had hoped for. I soon learned that, even within my sorority, many of the girls had attended high school together, knew each other from church, or had gone to day care together. I was starting fresh. They didn't know me, and I had to make an impression. You join a sorority to feel accepted, but the reality is that you have to accept yourself first for others to accept you. I had no clue who I wanted to become, who I wanted to be. I knew my values and my morals, but I continued to play the stories my friends had told me of the sorority girls at UGA. *That* kind of girl was not who I wanted to become. Did I want to pretend as though it was? All that I had hoped for had happened. I had been accepted into the sorority that I'd wanted, surrounded by hundreds of girls whom I now called family, but none of them really knew who I was. I wasn't even sure who I was. So I just tried to be myself. The sorority stereotype is just that: a stereotype. I learned that the hard way. The stories stuck in my head, but day after day, my predisposition was disproven. I had become a part of a family that loved me for being me and truly seemed to care about who I was rather than trying to make me fit their mold. I made friends, went to the events, and transformed before everyone's eyes into a giggly, Starbucks-drinking, monogrammed-wearing sorority girl.

I'll admit it. I gave in to the unspoken dress code. I wore the oversized sorority t-shirts and the Nike shorts. I even caved and wore high white Nike socks with my tennis shoes. I usually brushed my hair and occasionally even curled it. Big mistake. Even without the rest, simply wearing those letters around the University of Georgia campus drew the eyes of nearly everyone whom I passed. It was because of what I was wearing—attire that screamed, "I like to party!" It told people that I cared too much about my appearance and that, because I wore three little letters on my T-shirt, I was dumb.

Since stepping foot onto UGA's campus, I was a part of the majority. I was White, and I was female. The girl-to-guy ratio at UGA was somewhere around 60:40. UGA is diverse. There are students of all races, ethnicities, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds, yet I was still the majority. But for some reason, it didn't feel like it. Back home, I was the majority, in most senses. I was White, middle-class, and Southern-Baptist, which are three of the most prominent labels in most rural Southern

towns below the "Bible Belt." When I was the majority then, I felt the rewards of it. I was not necessarily given special treatment, but I was treated with respect and kindness everywhere I went. Because I was the majority, people knew me—from church, from school, from my family. We seemed to be connected to everyone in some small-world way. At UGA, if I was still a part of the majority, why did it feel as though I was not? It was like, this time, I was a part of such a large majority—of so many—that I was hidden in the shadows of those other White female students who knew nearly every person whom they passed by. I blended in. Sure, people would see my sorority letters and perk up every once in a while, but aside from that, everyone had their own agenda, and I was not a part of it.

I was the only girl in my entire sorority who majored in English—mind you, a sorority of over 200 girls, and somehow I managed to be the only English major. This was yet another decision that seemed to seclude me further and further from the label that I had so desperately desired. My sorority sisters majored in a variety of subjects, from pre-med to broadcast journalism to studio art, but there was not another English major among them. In fact, the English Department, which was nestled in its very own building along with the Classics Department, was deprived of sorority and fraternity members alike in comparison to other college buildings. Rather, the English Department was home to a crowd of individuals who dressed as though they were headed to Woodstock when class let out. The first class that I took in the English building was English 101. I was among other freshman, still learning our way around the massive campus and discovering what group we were a part of. There were several sorority and fraternity members in my classes. At the beginning of the year, sorority girls fought to showcase the sorority that had "chosen" them, the one they had been fortunate enough to snag a bid from, wearing their letters on their t-shirts, shorts, laptops, iPhone cases, wallets, key chains, and even notebooks and pencils. The lower-level English classes were incidentally held on the lower floor of the English building. On the bottom floor, newly admitted fraternity brothers and sorority sisters roamed the hallways. However, the top two floors were reserved for the upper-level courses. Beyond the first floor, girls in sorority shirts with their Diet Cokes and Lilly Pulitzer iPhone cases simply did not exist.

When I began my junior year, I was taking two upper-level English courses. I was beyond ecstatic. English was my passion, is still my passion. Reading and writing are two things that I enjoy more than all else, and when I sat down in the front row of my very first upper-level English course and felt the judgmental pounding stares of my classmates *and* my teacher, my heart broke a little. I'd be lying if I said that I wasn't disappointed. Slowly, I began to notice the negative side effects of being in a sorority. As if I had contracted a disease that my English-major colleagues were scared to catch, I slowly became the girl whom no one wanted to partner with, talk to, or even sit by. I was being quarantined. At a school where over 1,000 girls annually become new members of sororities, where the girl-to-guy ratio is unreasonably unequal, where sororities fight for the highest GPA, I was judged. When they did talk to me, they spoke as if I had never cracked open a book in my life. They never

asked me for opinions on their papers or writings. When I was called on in class, it was to answer dumbed-down questions, as if they pitied my tiny brain for not being able to communicate with theirs. For a long time, I wallowed in their pity. I stopped wearing my Comfort Colors t-shirts and switched them out for "regular" attire. I rarely spoke in class and, for the first time, did not enjoy reading and writing at all. My English classes had become the downfall of my junior year, and I was beginning to question my major.

Though I was discouraged, I had signed up earlier in the year to attend a study abroad program at the University of Oxford. The University of Georgia set up a program that allowed a few English students to travel across the pond to one of the greatest universities in the world and take courses from actual, real-deal Oxford professors. Naturally, I was nervous. I was set to take a course on Romanticism and another on Shakespeare, two subjects that I was not very knowledgeable about. From the previous year, I had received the message loud and clear from my colleagues that I was out of place. And to be brutally honest, I had begun to think that I really was. For the longest time, I was too nervous to speak up in class for fear of saying the wrong thing and giving everyone the proof that they needed to justify their predetermined notions of who I was and what I was capable of. Before the day came to leave for my six-week adventure at Oxford, I listened to Shakespeare biographies on audiotapes, I read as many of his works as I could, and I became as much of an expert on Romanticism as possible in the few weeks that I had. I had no clue what I was getting myself into. I was going on the trip without any friends, and I was barely knowledgeable in the content I would be studying. I was worried.

Before I knew it, I was there, settling into my new home at Trinity College smack in the middle of Oxford, England. My professors were renowned and brilliant. I have, to this day, never spoken to individuals who articulated their thoughts so eloquently. They knew everything, it seemed. Not a topic arose in discussion that they had not studied or researched, and more than anything, they strongly desired to share it all with us. Out in the Oxford community, my classmates and I received a lot of judgmental looks. We were harshly stereotyped for being *those* Americans. The locals, and even other European and Asian tourists, were all under the notion that, because we were Americans, we were idiots. Truly, a great majority of the foreigners whom we met were surprised to find that we were not complete imbeciles. All over again, I found myself being judged by people who did not know me. They had no clue what I was capable of, but because I was an American and wore American clothing, it seemed a common assumption by the vast majority that I was dumb.

This time, I refused to let a stereotype define my skills and success. I wanted to prove to my Oxford professors that Americans, myself included, were not dumb and were instead capable of having meaningful discussions and producing thoughtful, significant pieces of writing. So I spent a great portion of my time at Oxford in the Bodleian Library, which is one of the most magnificent libraries in all of Europe. I spent hours every single day researching new topics, reading the works of Shakespeare, Byron, Keats, and Wordsworth, and then reading more literary

research on their works during the week. We had papers due weekly for both courses that we were taking, and in addition, we were to attend a one-hour discussion session with each professor once a week with two other students. Essentially, we were to come with a paper written, questions drawn from our reading, and we were expected to be knowledgeable on that information—beyond enough to participate in an hour-long discussion with our Oxford professor. As most of you reading this know, this is not how courses at American universities are conducted. Lectures often reach upwards of 50 or more in attendance, and classes with three students are unheard of. Our weekends were spent travelling to Stratford-upon-Avon, Lake District, and London, not only seeing the beauty that influenced these magnificent writers but also coming into contact with actual first editions of their work. Of course, on our own, we wouldn't know where to begin. Our professors joined us, showed us the way, gave us explanations for the millions of questions we must have had, and did what no tour guide could have done. When it was all said and done, we had developed relationships with one another, but more importantly, we had developed meaningful relationships with our professors. I could sit down one-on-one with both of my professors and have extensive, enjoyable, scholastic conversations with them. They saw me as an equal though I was certainly not. I had never had that experience before. Our professors did not dread the fact that they had to babysit us on their supposed "days off," showing us places where they had undoubtedly been dozens of times. Rather, they revelled in the opportunity to educate us, even if it did mean using up their weekends. The beauty in the poetry that I read and the plays that I studied lit a fire that reignited the flame that had been slowly burning out back home. All over again, I felt my passion for writing and reading return stronger than ever all because my professors and classmates had taken the time to help me, to motivate me, and to admire me. They refused to judge me for my appearance even when society told them to. For once, I felt accepted, and I felt confident in my work as a reader and a writer.

I learned more in those six weeks, meeting just once a week with each professor, than I did in entire semesters back home. It reassured me, and it disproved the doubts that I had about myself. In the end, I received an A in both courses at Oxford, and my professors had nothing but positive, encouraging things to say about my work and the work of my colleagues. They were truly impressed by our determination to succeed in diverse conditions and by our dedication to learning so much independently when we were otherwise accustomed to the information being neatly laid in our laps. When I returned to America and began to prepare for my senior year at UGA, I made a decision. I now knew what I aspired to be as teacher, and I was motivated by both my negative experiences thus far and my positive experiences at Oxford to become that teacher. For the first time, I was not judged for being in a sorority, and for those six weeks in Oxford, my peers and professors saw me as a confident, well-educated student.

I see teaching as a kind of metamorphosis. I cannot possibly sit here and tell you all what type of teacher I'll be, what strategies I'll use, or how I'll behave around the

kids. Will I be a mentor for them, or strictly their educator? Will I be stern, or will I be able to find that happy medium where we can be friendly, too? The answer does not come until you actually begin teaching. But if nothing else, I am positive that I'll give my students the confidence that they need to succeed in whatever they desire. I have been the student whom the teachers love, who does all of her homework and goes the extra mile on the projects. I have been the student whom the teacher notices and praises. But I have also been the student whom the teacher judges, ridicules, and ignores. I have felt the glares, the eye-rolls, and burden of a failing participation grade because I was too nervous to speak up. I have had all of those experiences, and when I was at my worst as a student, dropping classes I was fearful of failing, skimming the skirts of a B, I was not confident. It was because of my peers but also my teachers. No teacher should be the reason that a student lacks confidence.

While I do not know what type of teacher I'll be in the years to come, I do know that I will encourage and motivate, but most importantly, I will encourage risk-taking and accept failure as a means of learning from mistakes. Over the years, I've become all too familiar with the pit in my throat that appears every time I am on the brink of failure or disappointment. All kids need confidence, but they also need to know that it is okay to fail. While I missed out on that in college, I can still make a huge difference in the lives of the students who will come through my classroom. I can still give them that confidence that other teachers may fail to realize they need more than anything else. It's that confidence I finally felt when I studied abroad that I wish to pass onto my students and to use in order to help them to understand that they are capable of so much more than they ever dreamed.

ALEX OVERBY

2. CHANGING IDENTITY WHILE STAYING ME

A Story of the Overburys Who Buried

Overby. Overbury. Bury.

We are from England. We used to be Overburys, not Overbys. I say *we*. We is me. Because they are me.

Identity. Family. Heritage.

Bury. Overbury.

The name *Overby* never meant much to me. I once endeavored to inspire all my peers to be begin calling me *Overby*, not *Alex*—because the name *Alex* means even less. It didn't work. I'm still Alex. Well, Alex Overbury. I mean… Overby.

A couple of years ago—I was 21—my dad did a genealogy search. He paid money, I'm sure. I find that offensive. We are the Overburys—I mean Overbys—and We is me, which means that their—the Overburys' (you know what I mean)—presents are my histories and that their futures are my presents, which, if you're following, unquestionably means that I have a right to any and all information regarding We—every Overby.

I guess someone has to craft the algorithms. The website isn't free. I understand—I suppose. You can have our money, *Ancestry.com*.

But I digress. No. Rather, I am burying. Burying the point you're waiting for in pancake fluff—that is, putting so few chocolate chips of substance and fact that they'd never be savored amongst the egregious albeit syrupy amount of pancake. Or like a student who is, in reality, smart but buries his brains beneath a mask of comedy and apathy because he certainly can't let the girl two seats down have any impression that he's anything but cool. No chill? He has *all* of the chill. (That's something that young people say.) You know this boy and girl. She's been rolling her eyes at him, falling in love with him since the first day. He's been making fun of her, falling in love with her since the first day. I hope that they treat each other well. Or maybe it's not like chocolate chips in pancakes, and perhaps it's not genius analyses of theme and motif and character motivation beneath a mask of "I'm too cool for school!" Maybe it's a sinner who rambles about his good deeds a little too much, letting the world know that he's no saint. Yes. That's it.

Was this all fluff? A mask? A ramble of concealment? Are you witnessing a burial?

J. R. Jones (Ed.), Feather Boas, Black Hoodies, and John Deere Hats, 9–10.