

International Journal of Human Rights Education

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Decolonial Human Rights and Peace
Education: Recognizing and Re-envisioning
Radical Praxes*

Article 12

2020

Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

Gertrude Jenkins
University of San Francisco, tjjenkins@dons.usfca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre>



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jenkins, Gertrude. (2020) . "Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor," *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 4(1) . Retrieved from <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol4/iss1/12>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Journal of Human Rights Education by an authorized editor of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

Book Review

Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership by

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 368 pages.

\$30 (Hardcover). \$22.99 (E-book).

ISBN: 978-1-4696-5366-2

Review by T. Gertrude Jenkins*

University of San Francisco

Three quarters through *Race for Profit*, I called my mother. She'd worked in the housing division of Newark Legal Services in New Jersey from the late 1970s to the early 2000s. My childhood days had been spent in that legal aid office, absent-mindedly eavesdropping on discussions about landlord-tenant law and housing disputes. I remembered the mass tearing down of housing projects throughout Newark and East Orange and how they'd almost immediately been replaced with rows of new townhouse structures. I'd also remembered how those tearing downs and building ups affected members of my family; many of us became migrants in our own city, being moved from one downtrodden structure to the next,

* T. Gertrude Jenkins is a 14-year educator, specializing in grades 9-12 English Language Arts. Over the course of her career, she's taught in Orlando, FL; Atlanta, GA; and Redwood City, CA. Jenkins is currently pursuing a doctorate at the University of San Francisco as part of the International & Multicultural Education program in the School of Education. Her research focuses on anti-Blackness in K-12 school systems, both in the U.S and abroad. As a co-founder of Making Us Matter, an education activism non-profit, Jenkins works to provide an education space that is safe from white normativity and deficit-centered pedagogy. Her work is motivated by her desire to provide alternative options for schooling that are free of the many systemic messages of anti-Blackness that are constantly transmitted in our current school systems. tjenkins@dons.usfca.edu

like rodents after a chemical bombing. However, those memories gained new meaning after understanding the policies that had brought them to life. I needed the perspective of someone like my mother, whose career had been dictated by the trickle-down of federal decision-making and who could humanize it for me.

But this is what she said:

“Yeah, I remember when they tore down those projects and replaced them with all those HUD homes.¹ I’m surprised they left up the ones around the corner from Watson Ave. All you see over there is drug dealers and fiends; they need to knock that one down too.”

My mother’s response was not anomalous. It’s the collectively shared response of so many African Americans from poor and working-class neighborhoods throughout the country. It’s reflective of an internalized narrative that has placed Black bodies at the blame-worthy end of this nation’s pointed finger. In *Race for Profit*, Dr. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor disrupts this narrative, exposing the housing crisis of the late 1960s to mid-1970s for what it was – a war against Black lives. A finalist for the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for History, this book takes a detailed look at federal housing measures directed towards urban (Black) communities during the Johnson and Nixon administrations and the lengths taken to maintain segregated neighborhoods post-redlining. Taylor unpacks how the public and private sectors worked together to orchestrate predatory measures against low-income Black communities and how these practices affected other institutions within those communities. Taylor brilliantly relates how these acts cultivated and sustained a dominant narrative against Black people that is still very much alive today. She breaks down political intricacies that the average African American may not have been aware of, but has definitely felt by virtue of being Black. Each chapter builds on the premise

¹ HUD refers to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development, a federal agency that oversees the provision of public housing.

of how, at its core, federal housing measures were created to maintain racial segregation and a white supremacist structure.

The Price of Black Citizenship

In Chapter One, “Unfair Housing,” Taylor makes it clear that at its inception, Black homeownership was a doomed endeavor. The influx of Black families arriving to Northern states during the Great Migration and World War II incited worry in white citizens who did not want to live amongst Black people, never mind see them as equals. Housing opportunities increased but remained segregated for Black citizens, despite their eligibility and stellar payment record. Since the federal government enacted no legislation against racially discriminatory practices by banks and real estate agents, acts of discrimination were given license to flourish under “gentlemen’s agreements” between real estate agents and bankers whose primary concern was vested in keeping neighborhoods separated (p. 48). Blacks were charged higher interest rates on mortgages compared to white citizens for far more inferior housing, creating what became known as a “Black Tax” and resulting in deteriorating neighborhoods that became justifiably invisible.

This discussion is furthered in Chapter Two as Taylor unpacks “The Business of the Urban Housing Crisis.” This chapter displays how the federal government blatantly used the poor living conditions in Black neighborhoods to entice private sector market ventures. Improving “ghettos” was advertised to the private sector as an opportunity to expand business. As a result, the “Black Market” was soon capitalized on. Intriguingly, Taylor clearly explains the political motivation behind corporate lobbying and private sector involvement in political decision-making, at least from a federal housing standpoint. To put it simply, the American government was unable (or unwilling) to provide the funding necessary to improve housing measures for Black citizens. In exchange for financial investment in low-income housing developments, banks, insurance companies, and the like were allowed to cultivate and maintain discriminatory practices with little to no federal oversight (p. 76). As such,

Black people were held in a dichotomous choice between accepting access to homeownership and being relegated to segregated neighborhoods or having no homes at all.

However, as highlighted in her chapter, “Forced Integration,” Taylor makes it clear that attempts at desegregated housing did not make circumstances any better for Black homeowners. Rather, it stoked dormant hatred and new resentments against Black people. White, working-class communities were held under threat of government cutbacks for necessary resources if they didn’t oblige to the Open Communities Program. However, community resources soon drained due to overcrowding; the government did not strengthen the infrastructure in these districts to accommodate for the increased number of residents. Here the reader grasps a harsh reality: the vast majority of Black Americans were damned, one way or the other. If they remained in inner cities, they’d be subject to not only segregation and dilapidated housing structures, but also the abuse of predatory government partners. However, if they chose to move into newly desegregated neighborhoods, Black families would suffer varying acts of resentment from their white neighbors, teachers, and other community figures. Taylor leaves no room to argue against the counter-narrative; contrary to popular belief, Black people didn’t stay in poor neighborhoods because they had a genetic predisposition to dereliction; it was just safer than living amongst white people.

Will the Real Slum Lords Please Stand Up?

Chapter Four lays out three factors that made affordable housing for low-income Black families so difficult: (1) the demand for more housing in urban areas instead of suburban communities, (2) suburban residents’ resistance against welcoming low-income (Black) residents, and (3) lobbying from the housing industry to invest in already existing structures rather than building new ones. Again, Taylor challenges the internalized notion that Black neighborhoods remain in shoddy conditions due to lack of care among residents. To the contrary, Federal Housing Administration (FHA)/HUD housing in existing structures was substandard and hazardous.

Predatory dealers were actually buying cheap, condemned buildings and using them for profit, without oversight from the FHA. Even new homes continuously fell apart due to the pace of production in building new homes and rushed home inspection procedures (p. 144). Taylor makes it clear that Black neighborhoods never had a fighting chance.

The federal government's abuse of Black communities was downright criminal, so much that complicit parties from speculators to senators were eventually brought to trial (and some even brought to justice). However, the damage had already been done; Chapter Five, "Unsophisticated Buyers" outlines how Black mothers in particular were blamed for the destruction of their dilapidated homes as an issue of poor housekeeping. When tons of FHA homes went into foreclosure, the blame went right to families in "urban" neighborhoods. The accepted truth was that Black women simply didn't have the capacity to live in suburban dwellings. But Taylor exposes how in actuality, Black women were predatorily sought out to buy homes with the promise of offering repairs and certain amenities only to discover that their homes were unlivable (p. 179). Real estate agents would mark up the price of the homes well above market value and then refuse repairs, leaving homeowners with no other choice but to foreclose on the house.

A "Welfare Queen" is A Queen, Nonetheless

Taylor brilliantly shines a humanizing light on the treatment of Black women throughout the FHA/HUD homeownership process. For readers who have deeply known and loved Black women who survived these homegrown human rights abuses, Taylor's portrayal is a welcome redemption. She reveals the untold stories of Black mothers who organized and took legal stance against their oppressors, and in some cases, won. Those who know the toil of Black grandmothers, mothers, and aunties, understand that this false narrative is mere deflection from the culpability of the federal government.

However, the most poignant part of the history Taylor lays out is in the final chapter. She reveals Nixon's declaration in 1973 of the end to the

urban housing problem as the beginning of the “urban” problem – and “urban” always means Black. Removing the nation’s responsibility to appear to care about Black lives opened up the floodgates for division within the Black community at large. The moratorium on low-income homeownership programs, compounded with massive job loss for government workers, left Black families in desperate straits. Suddenly, families who were barely making it to begin with, were left unhoused and without work (p. 214). But the collective amnesia of the United States misses that major point. And this is where the Pulitzer Prize finalist goes in! The invention of the Underclass shifted the blame and shame away from the racist practices in the Federal Housing Administration and placed them on the Black community. The need for government programming was deemed obsolete as the dystopic imagery of poor, Black life was foisted into a dominant narrative.

Without directly saying it, Taylor provides an “aha moment” for everyone who already knows historically what followed. This is what makes *Race for Profit* brilliant. The bulk of the book focuses heavily on the Nixon administration; I found myself leaning into the chronology, anticipating what would be revealed in the decades that followed. But it never goes there. I’d like to think that Taylor is slyly nudging the reader to realize that the remaining writing is already on the wall. This isn’t just a book about “how” the urban development crisis became what it did, it’s also a book about “why” urban housing is what it is today. Americans, regardless of ethnicity, bought into the narrative of the “welfare poor.” When the “working poor” believe that it’s the “welfare poor” that are causing the lot to suffer, everyone stays broke. When “welfare queens” are believed to be real, every Black woman in America loses her crown. Their children become justifiably unteachable to their teachers. If we’re willing to look a tiny bit further ahead, we can also understand this as the catalyst for mass incarceration; when helping Black people is declared hopeless, jailing and tucking them away for lifetimes becomes an accepted course of action. The majority says boo, and the minority rages against a machine that is all too massive.

So, Now What?

This is why I can't fault my mother for her comments, despite having worked so close to this system and enduring her own homeownership woes. I can't blame her any more than I can blame myself for reaching age 36 before I knew any of this. As Black people from low-income neighborhoods, we grow up feeling these things but are never quite sure of the mechanisms in place that cause us to feel them. I'd venture to say that this was at least in part Taylor's purpose as related to Black audiences; it's really easy to get caught up in the "Black people vs. N----- debate." I'd be lying if I said that I haven't unduly clenched up and become hyper-vigilant in Black neighborhoods that weren't my own. The fear we have of one another is by design; Taylor has simply made visible the blueprint.

Race for Profit illuminates the bleak shadow already cast over issues of Black housing and programs that superficially aim to level the playing field for poor and working-class people. While perhaps not intentional, this (re)telling of history inspires segregation of a different kind. If at the root of public legislation lies the pursuit to separate and provide inferior resources to Black and other vulnerable BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) communities, then it stands to question why we need to participate at all. At this point, there appears to be more value in home/community-grown efforts to vacate oppressive systems that are resistant to dismantling. In the remixed words of Harriet Tubman, "We out." If not, what's the alternative? We are still very much feeling the effects of the Nixon administration. How long will we feel the effects of Trump's? I believe this is the point Dr. Taylor is getting at, but she masterfully leaves us to draw our own conclusion.