

2021

Book Review: We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom

Robert Alexander
University of San Francisco, rmalexander@dons.usfca.edu

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



Part of the [Education Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Alexander, Robert. (2021) . "Book Review: We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom," *International Journal of Human Rights Education*, 5(1) . Retrieved from <https://repository.usfca.edu/ijhre/vol5/iss1/15>

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

We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom

by Bettina L. Love

Beacon Press, 2019, 200 pages

\$19 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-0807069158

Review by Robert Alexander*

University of San Francisco

Bettina L. Love's *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* masterfully explains how people of color (POC) in the United States have been invalidated, humiliated, punished, and criminalized in every corner of society. While no single topic can be identified as the key consequence of systemic racism, regarding educational freedom, Love makes clear that dark bodies are not and have never been treated equally.

POC want to matter, but how can we matter when dominant society imposes insurmountable institutional and structural barriers? So, what do we want? Knowing what we know? What is this thing we are after?

* **Robert Alexander** is a counselor, educator, and author. He is a 3rd year doctoral candidate in International and Multicultural Education and enjoys helping young students actualize their full potential whether it is going to college or picking a major. The Hood To Higher Education Organization exposes youth of color to different college options and careers while building on their own cultural awareness through critical literacies. Learn more about Robert Alexander's books and organization at hood2highereducation.com.
rmalexander@dons.usfca.edu

Although no one person is equipped (nor has the right) to speak for millions, particularly about race and racism, there is one thing I know with everything I am: we who are dark want to matter and live, not just to survive but to thrive.

Love begins the second chapter of *We Want to Do More Than Survive* by describing the discrepancy between the educational outcomes of rich and poor people. Love was a high-school teacher in Florida and many of her students came from families who were just trying to make ends meet. Often these students were from Haiti, Mexico, Colombia, Cuba, and Guatemala, and spoke English as a second language. The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) gave Love's school an "F" grade based on Florida's Standards Assessment, and many of Love's students failed the FCAT several times because it was administered in English. These children are held back by a system that doesn't account for their needs or value their backgrounds.

According to a report by the Equal Justice Initiative (2017), between 1877 and 1950 more than 4,400 Black men, women, and children were lynched in the United States. In her analysis of White¹ rage, Love contends that you cannot discuss White supremacy without also considering this critical component. In *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*, historian Carol Anderson (2016) argues,

The trigger of White rage, inevitably, is Black advancement. It is not the mere presence of Black people that is the problem; rather it is Blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspirations, and with demands for full and equal citizenship. (p. 25)

¹ Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups for articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see [here](#)): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.

Of course, education is key to advancement. In presenting what she calls the “educational survival complex,” Love describes how students are taught what it takes to survive but not how to thrive (p. 27). What Dr. Love experienced was a sense of hopelessness. She felt despair knowing that while she was doing her best, the institutional barriers to academic freedom would always counter her best efforts as a teacher. What can be done for frustrated dark students who realize that the system is organized to hold them back rather than to help them excel?

Love details her experience of how schools have become a training ground for racist practices and emulate what happens in the outside world. She describes the feeling before the *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision in 1954, when Black schools were proud institutions that “provided Black communities with cohesion and leadership” (p. 28). Though Black schools’ facilities and books were inferior to their White counterparts, the education they provided was not. In oral history interviews, Black teachers reflecting on Black schools before the *Brown* decision affirmed the success of these schools: “Black schools were places where order prevailed, where teachers commanded respect, and where parents supported teachers” (p. 28). Educating Black children was viewed as the collective responsibility of the community. The *Brown* decision removed Black children from that environment and put them in a position where institutional interests were not in their own interests. Legal scholar Derrick Bell and W. E. B. Du Bois both felt that Black students would have been better off educated by their own.

In her discussion of what she calls “spirit murder,” Love describes numerous incidents demonstrating the racist treatment of Black and Brown students (p. 38). Everything from Latinx students being told to go back to Mexico, to school bullying, to principals’ and superintendents’ anti-Semitic behavior, to lynchings. As a Black man, I too experienced systemic racism in my own schooling, for example, when a math teacher neglected to offer me the same tutoring he made available to White students. Mr. Bettencourt was surprised when I showed up to the weekly tutoring session. He then went out of his way to not assist me and ignored my questions. Love suggests that students’ spirit murder is something we must identify and

rectify. We need to meet Black students where they are, and not take for granted that these experiences do and will occur. We owe it to our students to address each spirit murder, each and every time.

In Love's own experience as a student in Rochester, New York, it wasn't until she attended school number 19 that she had a Black teacher, Mrs. Johnson, and her first Black male after-school program leader, Thabiti. The program was called Fighting Ignorance and Spending Truth (FIST); in this program, Love learned about the work and ideas of Angela Davis, the Black Panthers, Black Liberation, Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela, and leaders of her own community. She didn't understand then why she felt so moved by these ideas, but knew that what she learned was validating and empowering, that it mattered. As Love learned about resistance and the refusal to accept the status quo, FIST gave her the tools to survive school unbroken.

Growing up in the Nineteenth Ward of Rochester gave Love opportunities to explore. She would frequent the Boys and Girls Club, the recreation center called the Southwest Area Neighborhood Association (SWAN), and the Flint Street Rec Center. Community was a big part of Love's life, and what programs they offered or where they went for field trips informed where Love would spend time. Love built a tight connection with the camp counselors until finally she became one herself.

Love emphasizes an idea from organizer Ella Baker's work: participatory democracy and abolitionist teaching go hand-in-hand (p. 89). This includes the Women's Movement's rejection of top-down, patriarchal leadership. Love argues that Baker's action-oriented model is how we go from surviving to thriving.

Taking the lead from Baker, abolitionist teaching is built on several foundations:

- Appreciating the cultural wealth of students' communities and creating classrooms in parallel with those communities aimed at facilitating interactions,
- People mattering to each other,

- Fighting together in the pursuit of creating a homeplace that represents the hopes and dreams of the people in the community, and
- Resisting oppression while building a new future.

Abolitionist teachers are visionaries who fight for their students' freedom, for justice, for the end of gun violence, for the end of the prison industrial complex, and even for students they've never met. This is how important it is to these advocates.

"Freedom dreaming" is a term that Dr. Love uses to describe imagining a new world free of oppression (p. 89). Freedom dreaming is how we take the unattainable and make it attainable. Freedom dreaming is how we go from victim to creator. Freedom dreaming is how we break the school-to-prison pipeline, and dismantle the idea that dark bodies need White people to save them. Freedom dreaming is what is required for abolitionist teaching.

Love contends that we need co-conspirators, not allies. Co-conspirators go above and beyond the call for action. For example, activists Bree Newsome and James Tyson met as strangers at an event that would link them together forever. Newsome, a young Black woman, and Tyson, a young White man: these two decided to put their lives on the line to remove a confederate flag in South Carolina.

I remember taking a diversity course in graduate school, and at the end of the semester, we all agreed to stay in contact as allies. I was the only Black male in the class, and my peers put pressure on me to be the voice for *all* Black people. Love calls this the "teacher education gap" (p. 126). Teacher education programs communicate what is wrong about dark communities and stereotype them, and as a result, such programs often fail to address the systemic racism, trauma, and poverty that have been historically perpetuated by patriarchal Whiteness.

Future teachers learn that dark children experience trauma. Dark children are "at-risk." They are "underprivileged." They fall into the achievement gap. And dark communities are underserved, with residents living in poverty. Love points to the one-sidedness of this perspective. "But how did this reality happen, and is that all? Where is the beauty, the

resistance, the joy, the art, the healing, redemption, and the humanity and ingenuity of people making something out of nothing? Just as important, where is the critique of the system that perpetuates injustice and dark suffering in and outside the walls of schools?” (p. 128).

Love compares her theories to the North Star. Polaris, the North Star, is one of the brightest stars in the sky—and the one runaway slaves would use to guide them towards their freedom. Love suggests that theory is her North Star and suggests that theory can similarly help people contextualize oppression, injustice, cultural relevance, and the intersections with education. Love describes how the stress of being a lesbian, an educator, and a mother started to weigh on her. She couldn't figure out why she was having intense anxiety even while living the American Dream. She had a new home, two healthy babies, and a loving partner—yet she was still experiencing panic attacks. To make sense of all this, Love offers, “To be a Black mother is to be America's punching bag, as you morph into a shield and take every blow for your family, especially your Black children, that will be thrown by America's White rage” (p. 150).

Love states, simply, “We feel no pain because we feel everything” (p. 150). She explains how Black infants are twice as likely to die as White infants. The injustices add up. Love describes how tennis star Serena Williams had a large hematoma that went ignored until she gave birth and had multiple surgeries. Even Michael Brown was compared to Hulk Hogan when the White officer that shot him was on the witness stand. Story after story exposes racists myths about Black people possessing superhuman strength and pain thresholds. However, Love was smart enough to know that she is not invincible, and so she sought help, instead, through therapy.

Love's recommendation is straightforward: Black people must heal. Not only do we need to heal for ourselves, but we need to heal for the generations before us, and to set examples for generations after. In this, Love distinguishes between being “alright” and being “well ” (149). I connected with these expressions immediately, because when someone asks me how I'm doing I usually say, “I'm alright.” It often happens at work when I'm just barely making it through the day and I'm just “alright.” I'm not doing “well.” “Well” means that you are thriving. “Alright” means that

you're just surviving. People of color need to go from "alright" to "well," but we need everyone's help.

We must reject Whiteness and everything it represents. White people must acknowledge oppression, privilege, and systemic racism. If it means checking White emotions in the name of abolitionist teaching, we must do what we have to do. Abolitionist teaching rejects the self-centeredness of Whiteness and everything that comes with it. Abolitionist teaching means putting it all on the line. It means using Whiteness to lift and not to demonize, criminalize, and objectify Indigenous peoples and people of color. Only then will we do more than just survive.

References

Anderson, C. (2016). *White rage: The unspoken truth of our racial divide*. Bloomsbury USA.

Equal Justice Initiative. (2017). *Lynching in America: Confronting the legacy of racist terror*. Equal Justice Initiative.
<https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>