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Book Review: Teaching for Black Lives

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Book Review

Teaching for Black Lives

Editors Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian, Wayne Au
Rethinking Schools Publication, 2018. 382 pages.

\$29.95 (paperback)

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In this transformative age of social justice, the nature and structure of knowledge has become very different from what it has been in past centuries. *Teaching for Black Lives* brings together a collection of writings that aim to assist educators who are committed to social justice and looking to make viable changes in curriculum that humanizes the experiences of Black students and Black lives. Now more than ever, the structure of teaching needs to change to incorporate lessons that connect to the lives and experience of Black students in U.S. society. Due to the radical and racial remarks of the 45th President of the United States, the nation is going through a paradigm shift that is calling for the abandonment of old ideals and the forming of holistic ideals that serve the needs of a pluralistic society. The editors of *Teaching for Black Lives*, Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian and

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Wayne Au, structurally designed the book to illustrate to educators how they should make their classrooms and schools sites of resistance to White¹ Supremacy and anti-Blackness. Fundamentally, this book serves to make classrooms and schools a place of hope and beauty as educators explore Blackness.

Teaching for Black Lives is structured in an anthology format to present the worldview of the Black experience in America. The Black experience in America has historically been silenced in order to push the revisionist narrative of White supremacy. Moreover, this book answers the question: What are the Black experiences in America? In each generation educators have glanced over the experiences of Blacks in America and regulated their dissemination of knowledge into the highlight reel of popular Black figures like Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Rosa Parks. The book is divided into five sections that encompass an introductory overview to the Black experience in America.

Section 1: Making Black Lives Matter in Our Schools

Historically, Black students have been underserved, underrepresented, and unsupported to overcome socioeconomic and psychosocial challenges as they pursue education. This section makes the assertion that the educational system should be building a school-to-justice pipeline rather than a school-to-prison pipeline. Social justice movements like Black Lives Matter are rising

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.

up and making a stance that the system is dysfunctional and needs correcting. One of the biggest impacts to society is how students are educated about social movements in the classroom or a structural knowledge of society. One of the key purposes of knowledge is to provide an understanding of history, but also a knowledge of one's own history provides a sense of self and the state of affairs in society. Fundamentally, knowledge is a tool to be used to understand and equip oneself with the means to be prepared for an ever-changing society.

In the current structures of education, Black Americans are culturally and historically isolated because of a system that is meant to control institutional knowledge that prepares one for society. Therefore, African American students require extra scaffolding for success in college and careers, including academic and student support programs, and tools needed to be successful. To address such an issue, this section closes with addressing the vision for Black Lives. As mentioned earlier, the nature of the problem is that Black children attend under-resourced classrooms where they are pushed out of an education that was not structurally created for them (Watson, Hagopian, & Au, 2018). The editors and authors call for a restorative justice approach to transform the curriculum that fits the needs of Black students who are being purposely neglected because educators do not have the skillset to support them to overcome their socioeconomic challenges that are brought into classrooms. These socioeconomic and psychosocial challenges are largely associated with the past enslavement of Black people in America.

Section 2: Enslavement, Civil Rights, And Black Liberation

Centuries of enslavement did more than turn Black Americans into second-class citizens. The act of erasing the historical memory of Black people's ancestral land was a psychological and dehumanizing approach to spread the narrative and dominance of White supremacy. This act disabled Black people's innate need to function as a collective unit rather than individuals. With no way to establish collective unity, Black people were prevented from being able to properly process, understand, and respond to

social, political and cultural situations in the best interests of their own culture. This section illustrates that early on in American history, the color line was quickly established to divide not only Whites from Blacks, but also the elites or bourgeoisie from the common people. The United States was structurally created to produce a racial hierarchy that would never challenge the status quo. From the dismantling of slavery to modern day society, White supremacy has instituted law after law in order to keep Black Americans from rising to any form of meaningful political or socioeconomic power.

This section introduces the topic of “medical apartheid,” which refers to how White doctors and physicians have played mad scientist on Black bodies from enslavement to modern day society. Such as Henrietta Lacks, a Black woman whose cells were used to create vaccines and medicines we still use today. The tragedy of her story is that those cells were taken without her permission and no financial compensation has been bestowed to her family, even though pharmaceutical companies have made billions of dollars of her genetic material. While understanding the tragedy of Black people is important for everyone, it is especially important in order for Black people to reestablish collective unity to fight against this barbarous and unjust treatment. With the rise of Black liberation from the claws of White supremacy, greater efforts for solidarity are needed.

Section 3: Gentrification, Displacement and Anti-Blackness

While Black Americans sought to establish their own culture and communities, White supremacy saw this as a threat to their influence on American society. This section begins with portraying the devastating reality that White supremacists burnt down whole communities and cities where Black people lived because of hatred and fear, such as the Tulsa race massacre and many more. Due to the laws of Jim Crow and segregation, Black Americans established their own towns and communities to live separate from White society. Watson, Hagopian, and Au highlight key moments that transformed legal Jim Crow segregation to modern day gentrification. As society moved away from Jim Crow, communities fell into the category of gentrification and displacement.

An important key moment in history is the process of associating the word “urban” with Black communities. Through the descriptive use of language, society is now using words to categorize a particular race of people in order to place them into stereotypical categories. On the topic of displacement, the authors discuss the situation in New Orleans during and after Hurricane Katrina and the adverse negative impact this tragedy had on Black people. This observation becomes important in how we educate Black students on the nature of Black communities, why they are structured in a certain way, and what degree of federal support can be expected. Although laws have been passed to provide Black people with a small fraction of this American dream, White supremacy purports that Black Americans are criminals and dangerous to their way of life. Therefore, White supremacy does what it can to slowly dismantle Black society.

Section 4: Discipline, the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Mass Incarceration

With the downfall of chattel slavery, White supremacy had to find another way to control the minds of Black people. The first topic of this section, entitled “Jailing Our Minds,” by Abbie Cohen, provided a strong title to paint a picture of what has happened to Black society, especially Black men. Beyond a doubt, Black men and boys have been traditionally treated like criminals. The editors brought in the work of Michelle Alexander to illustrate the fundamentals of how this school-to-prison pipeline is apparent in what she calls the era of a new Jim Crow.

This section of the book talks about areas that are not openly mentioned in a K-12 class, or more importantly, a college course, unless the focus is on social justice. Racial and social injustices should be against the law of the land, and this section highlights how Black students are being disproportionately disciplined in the classroom, as are Black people in society. The editors conclude this section with the topic of making strides toward restorative justice. Black people know that issues are occurring, but as a society, we should be trying to make change rather than ignoring the problem.

Section 5: Teaching Blackness, Loving Blackness, and Exploring Identity

Given the fact that the historical memory of African cultures was erased through the trans-Atlantic slave trade and replaced with a White supremacy narrative, Black Americans have been placed in a position where oftentimes they reject their own image and try to become more Eurocentric. Black Americans have been victimized by White supremacy; moreover, they tend to identify themselves primarily with European cultural ideology, language, and ideas of family rather than an Afrocentric way of thinking. The introduction to the section with words from James Baldwin illuminates this entire section of the book and became my favorite area, that merits a second read. While this section covered various areas related to Blackness and the Black experience, I have to wonder if adding in scholars such as Dr. Molefi Asante or Dr. Wade Nobles would have changed the aesthetic of this section. These two scholars are pioneers in the field of Africana Studies and yet they were left out of the collection of articles. Even though they are not included, this section provided a great insight into the clarification and teaching of Blackness.

In teaching Blackness, an educator cannot quantify Blackness. Blackness is not a single ideal or an array of five to six key points. To teach Blackness is to teach the point that Black people are multifaceted beings that encompass all forms of gender identities, socio-economic status, and spiritual faiths. This section implores educators of Black youth to teach them these points of clarification. Overall, this is a great section to conclude the book and provides an area to reflect on further.

Conclusion

After reading this book, I found that it was one of the best texts to incorporate into the classroom of either secondary education or higher education, specifically for educators seeking to get a teaching credential in social science. The text was easy to read, and not structured in the way of a

traditional textbook with academic jargon. My recommendation for this book is to create a separate workbook that aligns with each section. This workbook would function as a guide to assist educators who have never taught about Black lives and can assist them with how to present certain areas and what types of assignments should follow.