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Editor's Introductory Essay: Race, Rights, and Reparations

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Race, Rights, and Reparations

“Two hundred fifty years of slavery. Ninety years of Jim Crow. Sixty years of separate but equal. Thirty-five years of racist housing policy. Until we reckon with our compounding moral debts, America will never be whole.” –T. Coates, 2014

As the 101st anniversary of the birth of Nelson Mandela on July 18, 2019 approached, I found myself working with editorial staff and contributing writers to finalize Volume 6 of *The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs*. We had announced the theme for this combined 2018-2019 issue more than a year earlier, and it remained the same: “President Nelson ‘Madiba’ Mandela, The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the New Millennium: Social Movements 2.0.” Within weeks of our target publication date, however, current events inspired me to revise the title and content for my proposed introductory essay. Thus the final title became “Race, Rights, and Reparations.”

That third “R” had, again, become a hot topic and the subject of much public discussion and debate in the season of events commemorating the “400 Years of African American History” that unfolded in the wake of what some identify as the beginning of African servitude in British North America, and Juneteenth, which commemorates the symbolic “freeing” of enslaved African Americans more than 150 years ago.¹

Oxford Dictionaries defines reparations, a “mass noun” as the action of making amends for a wrong one has done by providing payment or other assistance to those who have been wronged.² Among 21st-century social and economic justice activists in the African American community, the idea of securing reparations for slavery has long been anything but an *unspoken* hot topic.

Interest in 19th century discussions peaked in the era of the Civil War and Reconstruction, when, in 1865, Union Army general William Tecumseh Sherman suggested that African Americans in what would soon be referred to as the “former Slave South” should be granted 40-acre plots of land and the use of government mules as part of the Union’s effort to prepare these formerly enslaved people for a life of freedom. But the promise of “40 acres and a mule” was not fulfilled to any great degree.³

More recently, “The Case for Reparations,” a thought-provoking June 2014 *Atlantic Magazine* article by Ta-Nehisi Coates, called attention to the ongoing need for reparations. Coates believed at the time of the article’s publication that members of Congress should lead the national review on reparations, and he stated:

Something more than moral pressure calls America to reparations.
We cannot escape our history. All of our solutions to the great

¹ “400 Years of African American History Commission,” National Park Service, accessed July 22, 2019,

² “Reparation,” Lexico: Powered by Oxford, accessed July 22, 2019, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/reparation>.

³ Darlene Clark Hine, et al., *The African American Odyssey* (New York: Pearson, 2018).

problems of health care, education, housing, and economic inequality are troubled by what must go unspoken.⁴

While the Modern Civil Rights Movement with such dynamic leaders as attorneys Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall helped secure a significant victory in the form of the unanimous 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*—which declared segregated schools unconstitutional and paved the way for subsequent work by Dr. King, as the evidence in the Coates’ articles suggests—disproportionately large numbers of African Americans remain trapped in a socially and economically subordinate state, and their children attend the segregated, inferior schools that predominate in poor neighborhoods. Coates also said:

And just as Black families of all incomes remain handicapped by a lack of wealth, so too do they remain handicapped by their restricted choice of neighborhood. Black people with upper-middle-class incomes do not generally live in upper-middle-class neighborhoods . . . [R]esearch shows that Black families making \$100,000 typically live in the kinds of neighborhoods inhabited by White families making \$30,000.

One expert quoted in the article suggests, “Blacks and Whites inhabit such different neighborhoods that it is not possible to compare the economic outcomes of Black and White children.” On June 19, 2019, Coates and others reiterated their calls for reparations—this time before some members of Congress who are now giving serious consideration to establishing a commission that will study and develop reparations proposals.⁵

Interestingly enough, African American activists have not been alone in calling for reparations for past injustices, including injustices related to education. Citizens in the majority-Black country of South Africa have, especially since the 1994 election of President Nelson Mandela, increasingly sought reparations for the centuries of degradation suffered at the hands of White minority officials and, after World War II, the legacy of more than four decades of legal oppression under the Nationalists’ Apartheid government.

In his award-winning 1994 autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*, Mandela described the hope that Black South Africans of his generation associated with the availability of education and the reality of the damages done to Black communities when students were denied equal access to quality education under Apartheid:

Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mineworker can become the head of the

⁴ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic*, accessed July 22, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>.

⁵ “H.R.40 - Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act” accessed September 18, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/40>.

mine, that a child of farmworkers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another [. . .]

Yet, even before the Nationalists came to power, the disparities in funding tell a story of racist education. The government spent about six times as much per White student as per African student. Education was not compulsory for Africans and was free only in the primary grades. Less than half of all African children of school age attended any school at all, and only a tiny number of Africans were graduated from high school.

Even this amount of education proved distasteful to the Nationalists. The Afrikaner has always been unenthusiastic about education for Africans. To him it was simply a waste, for the African was inherently ignorant and lazy and no amount of education could remedy that. The Afrikaner was traditionally hostile to Africans learning English, for English was a foreign tongue to the Afrikaner and the language of emancipation to us.

In 1953, the Nationalist-dominated Parliament passed the Bantu Education Act, which sought to put Apartheid's stamp on African education.⁶

Coates, Houston, Marshall, King, Mandela, and their social justice and human rights colleagues had many 20-century allies in the academy among educators like Ida B. Wells Barnett, Septima Clark, and Ella Baker, who took a special interest in nurturing students and preparing them for full citizenship.⁷ Today, teachers at all levels can still be counted among those who see the need for educational reforms that might be included in a larger program of reparations in multiracial and multicultural societies with a history of legal segregation and discrimination. Solutions to the problems facing public schools, however, are not likely to come easily.

The authors of *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society* (Gollinck & Chinn, 2013), for example, remind readers that multicultural education is neither unknown nor easily explained when it comes to the social history of education in the Americas in general and schooling in the United States in particular. In laying the foundations for pre-service teachers' understanding of this topic, however, these writers take great care to introduce the material with which 21st-century educators must familiarize themselves, if they are to be effective classroom teachers in educational settings where students of color will soon "represent nearly half of the elementary and secondary populations—even as the majority of teachers will continue to be White and female"⁸

⁶ Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Philadelphia: Little, Brown, 1994), 166-167.

⁷ Hine, *The African American Odyssey*.

⁸ Donna M. Gollinck and Philip C. Chinn, *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society* (Boston: Pearson 2017), 1.

The authors go on to suggest, “Multicultural education is a concept that acknowledges the important role of diversity in the lives of many students and their families and builds on it to promote equality and social justice in education.”⁹ The aforementioned racial differences alone, however, do not account for the many different cultural “norms” that students bring to the classroom. Culture, we are told, “defines who we are. It influences our knowledge, beliefs, and values”—matters that cannot accurately be assessed based solely on racial identity or skin color.¹⁰ It is through an examination of the authors’ discussions of the challenges associated with achieving the promise of a truly pluralistic society that one gains an understanding of why the process has been so daunting for school leaders and policymakers alike.

While this book does not include an exhaustive review of all relevant literature on the transformative role of education, the authors offer an analysis that includes ideas from the scholarly works of leading 20th-century thinkers in both sociology and the history of education—including William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, one of the most prolific African American scholars of all time, and a leading 20th-century Pan-Africanist. The authors do a good job of trying to present a balanced overview of both the history and current state of affairs in multicultural education.

In “Race and Ethnicity,” chapter two in *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society*, the authors state that race is a social construct and take care to remind readers that there is little in the way of biological science behind categorizing human beings according to race.¹¹ However, because the United States of America and South Africa are racialized societies and notions of race are deeply embedded in the social, cultural, political, and economic history of both countries, teachers and others who read the text can gain valuable insights on the role of race in the history of schooling by studying the impact of race on education.

As was the case in South Africa, from the earliest history of the United States of America, leaders used federal law to deny Blacks’ fundamental rights. Often, laws were also used to restrict the power of Native Americans and to limit immigration from African nations and other parts of the world with large populations of people of color. There were, for example, no significant changes in these types of immigration practices until the era of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965. Race might very well be a social construct but the awareness of race and related policy implications cannot easily be ignored.¹²

As Gollnick and Chinn suggest, despite the successes of the Modern Civil Rights Movement and ongoing efforts to desegregate schools and secure civil rights for all citizens regardless of race, many contemporary movement activists are forced to admit that lawmakers are often reluctant to use race-based policies to right educational wrongs. Information from the Southern Poverty Law Center and publications by Michelle Alexander, Coates, and other African American writers suggest that the nation is not free of racial discrimination by any means. As a result, the highest incomes, greatest amounts of wealth, and disproportionately high amounts of power and influence are concentrated in the hands of Whites in the United States. On the other hand, higher rates of poverty and homelessness tend to be found among people of color, those with lower educational attainment, and in households that are headed by women. We are also

⁹ Gollnick and Chinn, *Multicultural Education*, 24.

¹⁰ Gollnick and Chinn, *Multicultural Education*, 3.

¹¹ See chapter 2 of Gollnick and Chinn, *Multicultural Education*.

¹² *Ibid.*

told that the children of the poor are more likely to be further victimized in underfunded schools that do not necessarily have the best-qualified teachers. Those with an interest in this topic would be well served by a reading of every chapter in *Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society*.

For all of the above reasons, I remained convinced throughout the editorial process for this issue that I had a responsibility to include discussions of education and current debates on race, rights, and reparations in my introduction. Our incredibly diverse group of contributors to this interdisciplinary collection include a #BlackLivesMatter activist, a librarian, university faculty members, a journalist-author, a graduate student, a writer-entrepreneur, and a community college administrator.

There are lessons here, certainly, for Americans and South Africans, who have long been aware of their shared learning-related concerns and the cultural and racial ties that bind them together in their struggles for educational equality and full citizenship in their respective countries. I trust that other citizens in our global community will also benefit from reading this material.

In conclusion, I want to say that I received a second Fulbright Award for the summer of 2019, and I continue to be extremely grateful for the opportunity to return to South Africa with Fulbright support. Serving as a Fulbright Specialist on the Qwa Qwa campus of the University of the Free State (UFS), where I co-taught an Oral History Module for approximately 100 students and conducted oral history research on the evolving role of religion and spirituality in post-Apartheid South Africa, provided a much-needed and extremely healthy dose of inspiration as we worked to complete this issue. I like to think of this last visit as a reunion of sorts, because I was a member of Cleveland State University's delegation to the July 2012 Global Leadership Summit at UFS. I will always cherish the memories associated with spending my second Nelson Mandela Day on the continent of Africa in 2019.