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The Little Book of Racial Healing: Coming to the Table for Truth-Telling, Liberation, and Transformation. The Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice: Black Lives, Healing, and U.S. Social Transformation

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The Little Book of Racial Healing: Coming to the Table for Truth-Telling, Liberation, and Transformation. Thomas Norman DeWolf and Jodie Geddes. New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2019. Paperback, \$5.99, 9781680993622.

The Little Book of Race and Restorative Justice: Black Lives, Healing, and U.S. Social Transformation. Fania E. Davis. New York, NY: Skyhorse Publishing, 2019. Paperback, \$5.99, 9781680993431.

Three basic questions for restorative justice are: who has been harmed? What are their needs? and whose obligations are these? (see Zehr, 2015). But how might restorative justice movements respond specifically to *racial* harms, needs, and obligations?

Thomas Norman DeWolf and Jodie Geddes' *Racial Healing* and Fania E. Davis' *Race and Restorative Justice* are the most recent additions to the Little Books Series on Justice and Peacebuilding. Readers familiar with the Little Books Series know each of its monographs features succinct exploration of a specific topic related to justice, conflict transformation, or peacebuilding, written by an expert on that topic.

There is some overlap between the two books. Most importantly, they both address racial injustices in United States, especially chattel slavery and continuing racism against African Americans; however, the texts develop distinctive lines of thought. In *Racial Healing*, DeWolf and Geddes outline strategies for healing racial trauma through restorative justice and circle processes. They argue for the importance of unpacking racial history, making connections, truth-telling, and taking action. For its part, Davis' *Race and Restorative Justice* meditates productively on the necessity of both racial healing and racial justice, generating original insights into the limits and potential of restorative justice. This review addresses each book in turn before describing combined contributions of the two books.

Racial Healing

In *Racial Healing*, Thomas Norman DeWolf and Jodie Geddes' central claim is that U.S. slavery is a wound from which Americans have never recovered. DeWolf and Geddes suggest the notion of racial healing as response to that wound—and as a complement and alternative to other ways of conceptualizing racial justice, liberation, and equality.

The book summarizes the approach of Coming to the Table (CTT), where DeWolf serves as executive director and Geddes is the president of the board of managers. They explore racial

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healing from two “sides” of that table: DeWolf is a White ancestor of slave-traders, Emmy-nominated filmmaker, and author. Geddes is a Jamaican native and community organizing coordinator at Restorative Justice for Oakland Youth (RJOY). She also leads RJOY’s national Truth-Telling, Racial Healing, and Reparations Project.

Informed by strategies for trauma awareness and resilience (STAR), the authors sketch a “continuously evolving set of purposeful theories, ideas, guidelines, and intentions, all dedicated to facilitating racial healing and transformation” (p. 3). DeWolf and Geddes encourage readers to understand this approach as “a recipe with ingredients that change over time as new ideas sprout up for more people to participate. A recipe for a meal we create together and bring to the table nourish and support our beloved family” (p. 3). Indeed, at times, reading this book front-to-back feels like scanning a cookbook. But the sheer density of *Racial Healing’s* ideas make it a useful sourcebook for instructors and practitioners who understand the creative and non-linear process of community healing.

Following the introductory chapter, DeWolf and Geddes present the concepts of trauma and restorative justice, relating each concept to the specific case of U.S. slavery. DeWolf and Geddes write that, “The cumulative effects of America’s past are a compilation of historic traumatic wounds passed down through generations” (p. 16). In DeWolf and Geddes’ view, trauma encompasses individual as well as collective experiences. It includes specific incidents and cumulative histories. The concept of trauma provides a backdrop for understanding the nature of America’s racial wound—especially how traumatic experiences shape the “bodies, brains, and nervous and energy systems” of both aggressors and victims, often in ways that reproduce harm (p. 9). This aspect of their argument echoes Ta-Nehisi Coates’ (2015) insistence that oppression is not merely an economic, political, or ideology project; it works directly upon bodies. At times, DeWolf and Geddes synthesis of trauma and social domination is a little unwieldy. For example, they suggest the concepts of aftermath and legacy to describe the ongoing effects of U.S. slavery. The terms “aftermath” and “legacy” are helpful reminders to persons—especially white people—who might see little connection between their own lives and the slave trade. Still, the term “aftermath” risks understating how racial domination is continuously enacted and resisted. The next chapter seeks to tie the wounds of racism to restorative justice. They write, “The historic, traumatic racial wounds, and those that continue to be inflicted today, were and are horrific and mind-boggling. To heal such deep, systematic, and ongoing wounds requires accountability, justice, and repair. Restorative justice... offers philosophical and practical ways to address the harms of racial injustice and inequity. Indeed, restorative justice work *is* the work of racial healing” (p. 21). This chapter is brimming with potential but needs more specificity. The authors insist that restorative justice “must be [aware] of racism and power imbalances” and interpret events intersectionally (p. 26-27). They might have clarified the mechanisms for cultivating such awareness, perhaps by tying this argument more directly to the four pillars that follow.

DeWolf and Geddes devote the next four chapters to each pillar of CTT’s approach: uncovering history; making connections; working toward healing; and taking action. Each chapter includes helpful background for newcomers to conversations about race, such as brief sections on the

social construction of race and privilege. More experienced readers will find insightful and inspiring twists in DeWolf and Geddes' argument, especially in the vignettes spread throughout the chapters. DeWolf and Geddes deliver on their promise to provide readers a set of ingredients for pursuing racial healing. The effect of their book might have been even stronger if the authors had shared more about how they relate each of the pillars in their own practice.

Race and Restorative Justice

The central archetypes of Davis' *Race and Restorative Justice* are the warrior and the healer. A lengthy introduction retraces the interplay of these two images in Davis' own journey: As a child, Davis' Birmingham neighborhood was terrorized by bombings. After losing two close friends in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, she adopted the "the way of the warrior," joining black nationalist resistance, organizing against political persecution of her family (p. 8), and earning a law degree to battle racial discrimination. After nearly 25 years of practicing law, she enrolled in a PhD program in indigenous studies to reconcile the hyper-masculinity and hyper-aggressiveness of her career as an activist and litigator with an ancient practice of healing. "At last," she writes, "I could be all of me" (p. 14). These and other aspects of Davis' biography build up to a lucid statement of her book's purpose: "to invite restorative justice practitioners to cultivate a heightened racial justice consciousness and racial justice activists to embrace greater healing consciousness." (p. 14). Grounded in research and personal wisdom, *Race and Restorative Justice* is an innovative synthesis of these two approaches to social change. Davis' second chapter situates restorative justice within *ubuntu*, a principle held by southern African tribes and reflected in many other indigenous communities. *Ubuntu* emphasizes the interrelatedness of persons and their mutual responsibility to one another and their place (p. 17-18). Through this principle, Davis illustrates that restorative justice is more than a reactive strategy that can be retro-fitted into existing modern institutions; it is a "pro-active relational strategy to create a culture of connectivity where all members of a community thrive and feel valued" (p. 19). She suggests that the rediscovery of restorative justice in Western jurisprudence is just part of a larger reawakening to the importance of connections between persons, communities, and their environment.

Her chapter on *ubuntu* might strike some readers as perfunctory—most restorative justice practitioners are vaguely aware of its historical roots—but her next chapter drives home the importance of *ubuntu* in a compelling and courageous turn. Davis asks: Given the U.S. restorative justice movement's indebtedness to African and other indigenous notions of justice, why has the movement failed to address racism? What is the potential of restorative justice to bring about racial healing and a society grounded in *ubuntu*? Davis notes that, like many other social movements in the United States, the restorative justice movement has been led by white activists. Historically, these white leaders have not adequately addressed the unjust racial context in which the restorative justice movement has flourished. She gives a stark assessment of that inadequacy: "Given the nation's changing demographics and persistent, if not deepening, racial disparities, a restorative justice approach that ignores these inequities will be perceived as uninformed and uncaring, if not irrelevant and racist" (p. 38). Despite its lack of racial consciousness, Davis sees value in the restorative justice movement's emphasis on healing, trauma, and relationships. In her experience, these elements are absent from or even disdained by racial justice activists. She writes, "Racial justice and restorative justice are often perceived as opposites. In archetypal terms, one invokes the warrior and the other, the healer. If we are to be

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as transformative as possible, however... we must transcend the binary and integrate warrior and healer” (p. 31).

Two tightly packaged chapters on education and mass incarceration illustrate what this integration might look like. Davis explains how the racialized histories of these systems have produced structural, institutional and individual racism, and she demonstrates the potential for restorative justice to transform each of these levels. For example, she argues that restorative justice training in schools must be closely paired with equity training “to develop a more nuanced awareness of structural and institutional racism, learning how they personally reproduce structural inequalities through individual bias, and explore strategies to unlearn it” (p. 55). Her chapter on mass incarceration introduces RJOY’s strategy of “restorganizing,” a concept that deserves more space in this book (or perhaps a sequel). Readers who identify as “warriors” might want a more detailed explanation of how restorative justice leverages institutional power, but Davis’ synthesis is an impressive achievement.

In her penultimate chapter, Davis imagines how a U.S. truth and reconciliation commission process (TRC) on police violence might pursue racial healing and racial justice simultaneously. A brief review of TRCs in South Africa, Canada, and in the United States, Greensboro, and Maine-Wabanaki, leads Davis to suggest the principles of relationality and subsidiarity, with the holistic goal of achieving relational and structural change. The chapter is a sketch, but it suggests the value of her dual approach for local, regional, and national conversations. The final chapter observes glimmers of hope in the current national climate, such as Americans’ recent interest in racial reckoning about slavery, white supremacy, and racial terrorism. Davis revisits to her personal journey in understanding justice, restating her call for both racial justice and racial healing.

Conclusion

Ultimately, these two Little Books do what the whole book series does best: They put compelling and significant ideas into the hands of practitioners, students, and people interested in social transformation, justice, and peace. These books address harms that white people and institutions have inflicted upon black people throughout U.S. history and still inflict today. Each book offers a viable and well-packaged framework for responding to that harm.

More broadly, a key insight of these books is that wounds are particular, and efforts toward healing and justice must tend to specificity of the harm inflicted. The general structure of restorative justice is an incredibly flexible way of exploring the nature of wounds; however, *Racial Healing* and *Race and Restorative Justice* demonstrate that in order to address racial oppression, activists and practitioners need to more actively explore the racial context of their work. As Davis seems to suggest, even the overarching concept of “race” is too big for the particularities of racial harms against specific racial groups, which entail varying intensities, histories, degrees of institutionalization, and geographic dispersions (p. 16). The authors also recognize the need to further explore gendered and class-based systems, to name a few (Davis, 2019, p. 65; DeWolf & Geddes, 2019, pp. 25-26). Thus, by making inroads into the particularity of social harm, they both push the general structure of restorative justice to its limits and reclaim its origins.

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