

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

By Bettina L. Love, 2019. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 200 pages, ISBN 9780807069158, Softcover, \$16.00.

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Notable author, researcher, and educator, Bettina L. Love offers an unapologetic critique of the United States' educational system in the text *We Want to do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*. In her work, Love's text situates the idea of Black mattering as a valuable conceptual framework and offers a clear vision for the future of educational justice—one rooted in the spirit of abolitionist teaching. Specifically, what distinguishes Love's book from others is how she eloquently combines her lived experiences as a teacher and professor with empirical research and historical events while also paying homage to Black abolitionists who paved the way for all of us. While Love highlights many examples from the K-12 context, her text is a call to action for all educators—teachers, administrators, researchers, and faculty in higher education and beyond—who claim to love Black children.

*We Want to Do More Than Survive* features seven short, accessible, and thought-provoking chapters. In chapter 1, "We Who Are Dark," Love sets the tone for her book centering Black mattering as an integral concept. Straight away, Love mentions that "dark people have never truly mattered in this country except for property and labor" (p. 7). Using quotes from W.E.B Dubois, Angela Davis, Toni Morrison, and many others, Love calls on us to (re)member the past and evoke their same urgency and passion related to Black life and Black mattering. While mentioning that Black folx "matter to our communities, families, and ourselves" (p. 7), Love asserts that America was built on racist ideals which uplift whiteness as superior and darkness as inferior. In framing the book from this lens, Love helps situate how Black humanity has always been questioned—even in the secondary school context. Throughout each chapter, Love reminds the reader of what Black mattering could and should look like in education. She declares that "we who are dark want to matter and live, not just to survive but to thrive" (p. 10). She ends the chapter problematizing the current U.S. educational system and pleads for educators to move past reform to fight for systemic change in classrooms by teaching students about racial violence, oppression, and centering Black joy as transformative liberation.

In chapter 2, "Educational Survival," Love opens with a personal narrative as a new teacher to Black and Brown children in South Florida, naming "my students and I were merely trying to survive" (p. 19). In her recollection, Love highlights how her students had to navigate unfavorable environments at school (e.g., lack of resources, teacher turn-over, and high-stakes standardized testing). She names this phenomenon the educational survival complex, "in which students are left learning to merely survive, learning how schools mimic the world they live in, thus making schools a training site for a life of exhaustion" (p. 27). Pairing her

experiences with empirical evidence, Love provides multiple examples of how Black and Brown children—those who are dark—fight to survive and navigate injustice in the U.S. educational context, specifically due to white rage (e.g., Indian Removal Act, school segregation, and No Child Left Behind legislation). Throughout this chapter, Love suggests that the current U.S. educational system is built on anti-black policies and practices rooted in racism, transphobia, classism, rigid ideas of gender, and Islamophobia. She ends the chapter calling for teachers to understand that the U.S. strategically built education on notions of white supremacy, anti-blackness, and sexism which intentionally teaches Black children to survive instead of thrive. Under this current educational survival complex, children are too consumed with simply existing and staying alive to learn.

In chapter 3, Love revisits the concept of mattering, centering her personal experience as a Black child growing up in Rochester, New York. Using bell hooks' language of "homeplace," Love recalls finding spaces where Black folk truly matter[ed], where souls are nurtured, comforted, and fed (p. 63). She names feeling seen, heard, and understood by her mother (Patty), her first Black woman teacher (Mrs. Johnson), and a youth empowerment program called FIST—sharing these people and places were sites of resistance that taught her to value her Blackness. From these interactions, Love learned that teaching dark children is not an intellectual exercise or one to be taken lightly. Instead, teaching Black children is a deeply personal, emotional, spiritual, and communal process that requires teachers to holistically invest their time and talent. Likening the work of teachers to abolitionist leaders of our day, Love encouraged educators to move like Civil Rights activist Ella Baker and other organizers who used grassroots efforts, intergenerational strategies, and love for young people to move us closer toward freedom.

Throughout chapter 4, "Grit, Zest, and Racism (The Hunger Games)," Love called out character education programs (e.g., The Character Lab) and the educators who take part in them. She asserts that these trendy programs (e.g., Grit Labs) sound good in theory but are entrenched in ideas that dark and poor children lack morality and need to "work harder"—which is deep-rooted in anti-blackness. Love goes on to name these programs and curriculums as distractions to civics education, which provides necessary historical context and helps equip children with the knowledge they need to fight injustices. She shares that educators must recognize that injustice requires students to become *agitators* who use their knowledge to fight in ways that are not always easy or comfortable. Speaking truth to power, Love ends by encouraging teachers to research and learn about justice, equity, and systems that impact their students so that their work is informed by truth and not trends.

In "Abolitionist Teaching, Freedom Dreaming, and Black Joy," the book's fifth chapter, Love, goes on to describe abolitionist teaching "as a way of life" (p. 89). Again, mentioning the work of activist Ella Baker, Love states that abolitionist teaching can take many forms. She shares that educators can create a "safe space or homeplace in their classrooms, fight standardized testing, restore justice in their curriculum, or seek justice in their own communities" (p. 89). Regardless of the act, Love names to be an abolitionist teacher means restoring humanity in educational

spaces. She also suggests that abolitionist teachers must be willing to put their reputation, home, and livelihoods on the line for other people's children. Love ends chapter 5, acknowledging that being an abolitionist takes real work, and she reminds us that "any pedagogy that does not challenge injustice is useless because survival is not the goal" (p. 123). The goal is to matter.

Encouraging educators to move beyond gimmicks and best practices in education, chapter 6 asks teachers, professors, teacher preparation program faculty, and researchers to find their North Star—a helpful guide that lights the way to freedom. Mentioning bell hooks' (1994) work, Love asks readers to allow theories to become their North Star, a location for healing that can help frame the work of educating dark children. Giving readers helpful context, Love asks educators to embrace theories such as Critical Race Theory (e.g., Ledesma & Calderón, 2015), Community Cultural Wealth (e.g., Yosso, 2005), decolonization (e.g., Patel, 2017), Black feminism (e.g., Hill-Collins, 2002), Quare studies (e.g., Patrick Johnson, 2001), Critical White Studies (e.g., Matias, 2016). Furthermore, Love calls for the understanding of neoliberalism (e.g., Martinez & Garcia, 1997), economics, and the history of social movements, which helps provide full context around the experiences of dark people outside the limited scope of white supremacy. Love ends the chapter by urging teachers to move away from quick fixes and tricks to turn toward theories to guide our work.

Chapter 7 concludes the text with, "We Gon' be Alright, but That Ain't Alright." In this chapter, as with others, Love provides countless examples of how whiteness and white supremacy have tried to destroy Black minds and bodies. She highlights her traumatic experience with panic attacks and mentions how white doctors believe Black bodies can tolerate more pain. Love then declares the need for wellness, healing, and restoration when working towards freedom, particularly for Black folx. In this chapter, Love names that she had to "center [her]self and practice being well daily (p.158)" sharing that "In no way does being well somehow stop injustice, but it does allow you to be your best self while fighting injustice" (p. 158). Aside from naming her experiences, Love declares that all educators must be well. She detailed that schools can only be "sites of healing" when folx can embrace theory, interrogate systems, engage in free therapy, and work in loving and compassionate workspaces (p. 160). Love ends the chapter stating that schools cannot be alright with the status quo but must make concerted efforts to ensure wellness and healing are ultimate priorities.

Throughout each chapter of this book, Love gives suggestions for educators—K-12 and higher education faculty—to center Black lives and Black mattering in our work. While Love contributes many practical implications for readers, I've provided three examples, specifically for higher education faculty.

First, faculty can and should create "homeplaces" for students in their classes and offices—creating spaces where students feel seen, heard, and affirmed as scholars. While there are multiple ways to create safe spaces for students, one suggestion would be to identify a wide variety of course materials to engage students, including journal articles, blog posts, podcasts, panel discussions, webinars, and

videos that reflect multiple forms of scholarship from authors from historically and racially marginalized backgrounds. Inviting minoritized folx across various identities in course materials might encourage students from all backgrounds to feel safe and visible in class discussions and assignments. Additionally, providing homeplaces means creating safe spaces for Black students and faculty to write, mentor, uplift, and teach one another. Altogether creating a homeplace on campus means embodying a caring posture that focuses on faculty and students' physical, mental, and emotional health—ensuring that everyone has access to health care, mental health resources, affordable housing, and food.

Second, faculty should consider finding their North Star—using theories to guide their values and how they approach their work. For higher education teaching, using theories means thinking critically about what brings you to your work. Whose scholarly traditions are you taking up? Who are you reading and citing in your work? What philosophies inform your assignments, practices, and values as an educator? Engaging in reflection around these questions and committing to learning new theories can help faculty find their North Star. Faculty interested in learning more about Black mattering should consider engaging in scholarship related to Black Feminist, Black Radical, or other Black knowledge traditions.

Third, faculty in higher education should commit to advocacy both on campus and in their personal lives. Centering Black mattering on-campus could include calling out problematic colleagues or troubling standardized testing in admissions. Off-campus efforts include challenging oppressive systems in one's community (e.g., interrupting homophobic family members and voting for policies that provide equitable outcomes for Black families and communities). Love mentions engaging in abolitionist praxis rooted in Black mattering may seem difficult at first; she reminds us that the work is too important not to try.

Overall, Love's book is a well-argued, well-cited, well-written war cry for educators and academics everywhere. Throughout the text, she seamlessly critiques the U.S. educational system and the educational survival complex, centers Blackness and Black Mattering as a practical analysis framework, and provides strategies based on theory to guide our work for the future. Using her personal narratives, combined with historical references and culturally relevant examples, Love offers a space of reflection and delivers a helpful playbook for all those who claim to be educators, including those in higher education. Furthermore, Love's work centers on intersectional social justice and highlights radical movements of the past as helpful tactics for our future.

Applying concepts from *We Want to Do More Than Survive* to teaching and pedagogy praxis, particularly in higher education, means focusing specifically on abolitionist teaching, Black mattering, and wellness in our work as professors, preparation program faculty, and researchers. Invoking an abolitionist praxis in higher education teaching requires advocacy and action in our campuses, classrooms, and beyond. From a critical race lens, abolitionist teaching includes applying methods like protesting, boycotting, and calling out other administrators, faculty, and colleagues who are racist, homophobic, transphobic, or Islamophobic.

Having an abolitionist ethic also means being knowledgeable, talking about, and addressing homophobia in our classrooms, research labs, offices, and communities in materials ways. Regardless of one's position or title, embodying an abolitionist ethic from the Black radical traditions can provide a sense of urgency, show students they matter, and model what fighting against oppression can look like.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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