

## Colour Matters: Essays on the Experiences, Education and Pursuits of Black Youth

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## *Book Review/Recension d'ouvrage*

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### **Colour Matters: Essays on the Experiences, Education and Pursuits of Black Youth**

by Carl E. James

University of Toronto Press, 2021, 354 pages

ISBN 978-1-4875-2631 (paper)

#### **Reviewed by:**

Diane Montgomery

Carl James is a university professor and equity advocate at York University (Toronto, Ontario). In his book, *Colour Matters*, he presents intergenerational experiences of Black youth and their families who migrated to Canada after the change to Canadian immigration laws in 1967. Two decades of Ontario-based research are presented to illustrate the systemic racism experienced by the research participants. He captures the reader's attention through contrasting narratives of Black youth who fought the cultural stereotypes and those who tried to flee the racism within their communities.

I am left to wonder, however, if other perspectives beyond the revealed fight or flight themes are missing? Are the experiences in this book representative of all Black youth and their families who immigrated to Canada? For example, I am a second-generation black female with a third-generation black son, and although my parents moved to the suburbs in Ontario after emigrating from Jamaica in the 1960s, I never perceived my family as victims of racism.

James suggests that neoliberalism and multiculturalism are 'colour-blind' views about racism as they promote the existence of cultural freedom and social, economic, and educational opportunities while pronouncing that everyone is responsible for the choices they make. James suggests that critical race theory is better aligned to the real issues

of racism because it puts race at the center of the phenomenon while recognizing that aspects of lived experiences remain determined by others.

The 10 chapters of the book portray racism thematically in relation to stereotypes, social mobility, and equity in education. The first two chapters provide a historical context of the Black youths' migration to Canada. He contrasts the 1980s when Black families valued education as their way to get ahead in Canadian society, to 2000 when the introduction of the Safe School Act (Bill 81, 2000) engendered low achievement rates, high dropout rates and increased rates of suspensions and expulsions (Friesen, 2006). James suggests systemic racism cannot be overlooked as a possible source of this disintegration.

Through narratives in chapters 3, 4 and 5, James illustrates experiences of three Black males who overcame the systemic barriers of racism consciously through social mobility and unconsciously through a colour-blind lens. For one youth, this meant distancing himself from his Black peers in order to avoid the multiple negative racial stereotypes highlighted in chapter 6, 7, and 8 including: athletics over academics; corrective agents as substitutes for fatherless youth; and trouble-makers who seek negative encounters with the police. Working-class parents of Black youth are viewed as disinterested in their children's education when they distance themselves from the classrooms out of respect for the teacher. As a result, the teachers identify a larger portion of Black students as requiring special education support (15%) than whites (8%) or any other racial group (8%) (TDSB, 2011). In an effort to address some of this inequity, the Africentric Alternative school at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) was formed despite lack of funding by the Ministry because of the implications of segregation.

Chapter 9 is about social mobility – the 'upward' move to the suburbs away from the Black community where parents encouraged their children to assimilate by guiding their children's behaviour. One parent tells her child, "In your conduct you have to watch yourself, and you have to be the best. You always have to strive to prove to them that you are better" (p. 260). However, James explains that social mobility doesn't have to result in conforming and/or distancing from their Black heritage. Another parent says, "Because of the colour of your skin, you should be aware there are pitfalls... but don't let (being Black be) the primary concern... The moment they make it the central concern, it distracts from the focus to succeed" (p. 262).

The study in the final chapter provides an overview about equity in education highlighting the inequities in resources, academic and applied programs, gifted and diagnostic assessments. The educational needs of black students are summed up by a Black pre-service teacher's response to future teachers in a teacher education program. He says, "I was lucky. I had a Black teacher who really cared. Teachers – Black or White – need to know what kids' lives are about. It can't be just about the curriculum... At the end of the day, they need to actually get their hands dirty and be there for their students every day" (p.312).

The focus of this book is on systemic racism directed towards Black immigrants. Despite James' criticism of neoliberalism, the proposed solutions of a separate alternative school and corrective agents suggest one must work harder to escape racism, rather than putting the responsibility on the system to remove systemic roadblocks to success. In my view, one of the limitations of this book is not looking at inclusion as a critical framework. James indicates that Black youth need to see themselves represented in the curriculum, which I believe could be a positive move towards inclusion. But I would also argue that a global curriculum representing a selective yet broad depiction of races and cultures reinforces the valuation of "other" which could impact all students. Racism is hard to fight but ignorance may be easier to accept through increased awareness of the critical issues faced by all immigrants. This book provides a suitable foundation to understand the educational, social and economic obstacles faced by Black youth and their families in Canadian society. However, further research on Black families who overcame some of the stereotypes may present a more balanced perspective of racism and help people to understand that colour matters instead of turning a blind eye to the problem.

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