



education review // reseñas educativas

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

editors: **gustavo e. fischman /
melissa cast-brede / gene v glass**

Supported by the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

March 23, 2016

ISSN 1094-5296

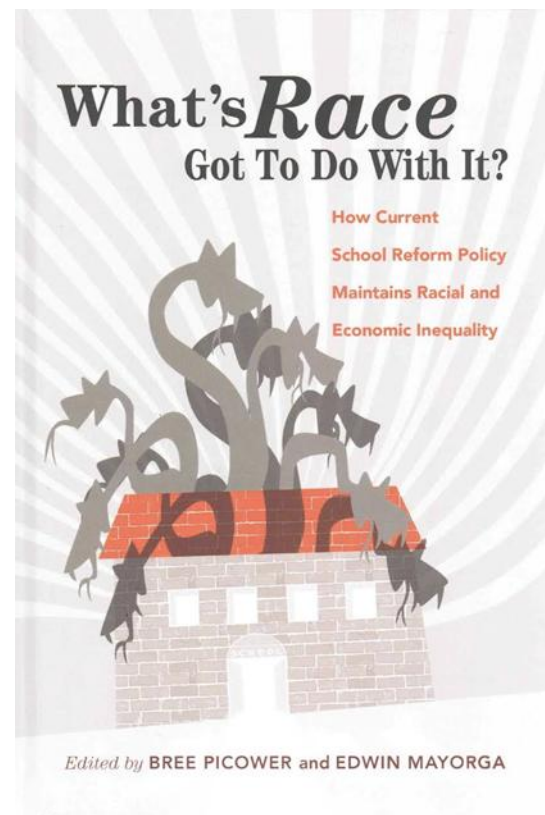
Picower, B. & Mayorga, E. (Eds.). (2015). *What's race got to do with it? How current school reform policy maintains racial and economic inequality*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Pp. vii+ 208

ISBN: 978-1-4331-2883-7

**Reviewed by Scott D. Farver
Michigan State University
United States**

Outside of courses that focus specifically on matters of race and equity in education, I often feel isolated in my doctoral studies when I discuss these issues. In an era that is often described as ‘postracial,’ there are many who discount race as a determining factor in educational and economic policy, pointing to the election of President Barack Obama as an example of how we as a nation have “moved past race” (Alemán, Salazar, Rorrer, & Parker, 2011, p. 479). Reading Bree Picower and Edwin Mayorga’s new edited volume *What’s race got to do with it? How current school reform policy maintains racial and economic inequality* (2015), I felt like I was “home,” surrounded by others who not only do *not* buy into this myth, but actively resist and fight against it. Picower and Mayorga gathered eight scholar-activists from around the country for this book to answer the question posed in the title—what does race have to do with things



Farver, S. (2016, March 23). Review of *What’s race got to do with it? How current school reform policy maintains racial and economic inequality* by Picower, B., & Mayorga, E. (Eds.). *Education Review*, 23. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/er.v23.1918>

like racial and economic inequality? In a nutshell, everything.

This book is the result of over a decade of work Picower and Mayorga accomplished as leaders of a grassroots activist group called the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE). Building on monthly meetings (also titled *What's race got to do with it?*) that allowed educators to engage in readings and discussions about racism's role in school closings around the city, this book continues that work in "bringing together leading scholar activists' voices on how race and neoliberalism work in sync to maintain inequality across the country" (p. 2).

As a result of these discussions, NYCoRE members visualized the mixture of neoliberalism and race as a "Hydra," in reference to the many-headed monster of Greek mythology. That Hydra was difficult to defeat, as every time one head was removed, two heads would grow in its place. NYCoRE connected the Greek Hydra to the market-based reforms they were experiencing in New York and viewed reforms such as mayoral control of schools and high-stakes testing as heads to a modern-day Hydra of educational reform. The group found that when their focus was centered on just one head (or reform), they lost sight of the central body (or Hydra) driving such reform. They also found that, as Hercules did when he needed his nephew to defeat the Hydra, NYCoRE needed allies to address the central body driving the many-heads of reform that they viewed as species of neoliberalism and to address the issue at its core. As NYCoRE members continued their work, they realized the ideals of neoliberalism driving such market-based reforms were intricately tied to race.

Though only one author explicitly uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a grounding framework in this collection, (David Stovall), this collection seems to center on a key tenet of CRT, that racism is an "ordinary, not

aberrational" part of our society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 7), which makes it appear "normal and natural to people in this culture" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). Since race and racism are acknowledged by CRT to interact through and within other forms of subordination, this book highlights how neoliberal policies in particular interact with racism to continue educational inequities. This book, then, continues the efforts of the NYCoRE in order to gain wider support from others to help defeat this modern-day beast.

Picower and Mayorga have linked the chapters in this text around two central grounding theories and ideas, both of which I explore in turn in this review: neoliberalism and White supremacy. While grounding their work in a variety of frameworks, the authors in this book all link their ideas to these two theories by exploring individual reforms taking place in education throughout the country. The authors show how forces of neoliberalism and racism collude within those reforms, while also giving examples of how some are currently resisting such reforms, which I also describe. The authors build upon the Hydra metaphor to show a connectedness that would not be possible reading these chapters in isolation.

Neoliberalism

The editors set the stage for the rest of the text and ground their work in Kumashiro's (2008) definition of neoliberalism—a capitalist ideology that sees markets and competition as the best way to bring about social change. In such a system, public services become private, which, because of the belief in the power of market forces, should ensure the "best" and most "efficient" products for the consumers—while at the same time cutting public services, wages, and standing staunchly in the face of unions. Such neoliberal policies use ideas such as meritocracy and accountability to further their agenda of privatizing public goods and services, leading

to further inequities in education, which this book exposes and fights against.

Picower and Mayorga (2015) explain how such neoliberal ideals “use market-based rhetoric to take power from the majority of people and concentrate it in the hands of few while masking the process that allowed this to happen” (p. 5). As such, individual choice is a key component of neoliberalism—which praises those who succeed in such a system, and punishes those who do not. Pauline Lipman (2015) challenges this fallacy in her examination of school closings in Chicago, where 50 neighborhood schools serving primarily African American and Latino/a low income students were shuttered, turned over to private operators, or converted to charter schools. For Lipman, the school closings in Chicago are the epitome of neoliberal failings that assault students, families, and communities of Color and are an extension of racist state abandonment of urban areas. Lipman describes how these decisions to move towards a neoliberal privatization model of public education are justified as colorblind and that the school selected for closure just *happen* to disproportionately affect African Americans—an excuse she challenges throughout her chapter.

Aggarwal (2015) also examines how neoliberal reforms such as school choice do not just have racialized *outcomes*, but rather are organized *through* race and directly tied to ideas of individual rights in a capitalist state (p. 105). While *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 required school desegregation, *Brown v. Board of Education II* in 1955 was supposed to answer ‘how’ and ‘when’ that desegregation was supposed to happen. Aggarwal (2015) documents how school choice was an answer to this question of ‘how’ and ‘when,’ which resulted in the onus being placed on families instead of institutions. Aggarwal argues how the re-segregation of schools we see today is a result of such neoliberal reforms based on choice, which then blame families, students

and communities for not making the ‘proper’ choices.

Neoliberalism and race are central to David Stovall’s (2015) chapter on mayoral control of schools as well. Using CRT, Stovall argues how neoliberalism linked with Whiteness is central to examples of mayors taking control over public schools in large cities across the country. Using Leonardo’s (2009) definition of Whiteness as an ideology that permeates Western thought and action, which leads to domination, Stovall’s chapter describes how this control stems from a belief from White power structures that community members cannot be trusted to make decisions about education. This mayoral control over education limits the ways in which residents can improve their education. It then paves the way for neoliberal policies such as charter schools, union busting, and merit-based teacher pay to sweep into schools with little or no resistance from a rubber-stamping board intent on keeping such a mayor happy. For Stovall (2015), schools under mayoral control “become the conduit for an illusion of progress for all, with the reality of progress for some” (p. 54).

Jones (2015) focuses his discussion on neoliberal reforms around issues of privatization of schools and the displacement of Black teachers by White ones. Jones examines how the neoliberal “business model” for education drives many new reforms—one where “innovation” lies with management, as workers themselves in this model could never be trusted to innovate, especially in a collective (i.e. unionized) sense (p. 85). Though public sector unions historically have helped lift African Americans out of poverty, in a business model of education where profit is the bottom line, unions become problematic, which results in workers being exploited and dehumanized. For Jones, this is directly linked to both themes of the book—neoliberal reforms and racism—as he writes, “there is no

way to challenge racism without challenging economic exploitation and vice versa” (p. 93).

Whiteness and White Supremacy

Nevertheless, Picower and Mayorga (2015) want to be clear that the problems with current educational reforms do not lie solely with neoliberal policies, but are deeply entrenched in issues of race—specifically Whiteness. The editors find it critical to name this system and the process of domination as *White supremacy*—defined by them as “the way in which our society was founded and remains organized so that White people are at the top of the hierarchy of power” (p. 6). The White supremacy they discuss is not the hood-wearing-KKK-members-type of supremacy, but a systematic one that positions Whiteness as being powerful and dominating all reaches of society. This idea of White domination over people of Color is directly tied to ideas of the Whiteness being seen as a property. This is based on Harris’ (1993) idea that there are certain “privileges and benefits that accompany the status of being White [that] have become a valuable asset that whites sought to protect” (p. 6). With this in mind, there is a strong theme throughout the text that shows ties between neoliberal policies and the systematic protection of these privileges and benefits of Whiteness.

Wayne Au (2015) grounds his discussion on high-stakes testing around issues of Whiteness and White supremacy. Au describes how every current major reform is centered on ideas of student performance, which is measured by high-stakes standardized tests. Au describes how these modern standardized tests are rooted in the racist IQ testing and Eugenics movement of the early 20th century. The idea of standardization in testing assumes objectivity in the tests, which implies that those individuals with the most merit who work the hardest do the best. When non-Whites perform poorly on tests, neoliberal logic would suggest such scores are

the result of individual failings, not of institutional ones. Au challenges this and asserts that modern high-stakes standardized testing offers “a pathway to success for affluence and Whiteness at the cost of the failure of low-income students of Color” (p. 33). Au argues these tests are not neutral but are central to supporting success of affluent White students.

White Supremacy is central to Terrenda White’s (2015) argument about reasons for rapid expansion of certain kinds of charter schools (“No Excuses” charters) in urban areas, especially those that focus on behavior management and “rigid adherence to dominant cultural norms and expectations” (p. 125). White describes how neoliberal views of choice in schooling minimizes any focus on needed structural reforms to schooling while attributing trends such as discrimination in schools to choices made by families in a fair and open market. Despite the best intentions of actors within such schools, White finds that educator practices in these schools were in response to desires and interests of senior agents of the charter organization, who tend to be White. Using frameworks of abstract liberalism and cultural racism, White describes how Whiteness is constructed as an invisible norm, against which students of Color in these schools are routinely judged. This often results in a view of cultural deviance from teachers in such schools as well as a failure to value the community in which these schools operate.

Barbara Madeloni (2015) sees edTPA, a new teacher candidate assessment tool, as an instrument of White supremacy that requires obedience and acquiescence. For Madeloni, the core of Whiteness is “to deny voices of outrage and defiance, to call for politeness and moderation, to deny voices that name power, especially the power of Whiteness” (p. 177), and edTPA reproduces this. According to Madeloni, edTPA and its reliance on standardization based on Whiteness is limiting for teacher educators who wish to engage in

social justice. It is clear that for Madeloni, edTPA reproduces the Whiteness already prevalent within our education system through many instances of standardization, which “requires there is a norm” (p. 168). For Madeloni, this is unacceptable, as this “norm” reproduces Whiteness. The use of tools such as edTPA is counter to any view of education that is non-static and non-linear, and denies voice, imagination, and embodied knowledge from student teachers.

In her chapter on philanthrocapitalism, Amy Brown (2015) writes about collusion of big corporate money with “good White saviors” (p. 155) in schools across the country. Brown examines how philanthropists in education are able to perpetuate hegemonic norms by controlling how their large donations must be sent. In her study, Brown finds a clear relation between such philanthropic capitalism, White supremacy, and economic inequality that depends on a certain racialized narrative (that students of Color are in need of saving) that, like other neoliberal reforms discussed throughout the text, seem to be neutral. Brown points out that even though donors can be framed as benevolent as they give to large non-profits aimed at helping students of Color, they also enjoy perks such as political influence and even tax deductions for their donations.

With a background of studying issues of race and Whiteness through a CRT lens, I was expecting to read about White supremacy and how it continues to create inequality in the United States in relation to neoliberalism. The “normalcy” of Whiteness in the United States makes discussions that center on systemic White supremacy as defined by CRT scholars, difficult for some without this background. White readers of this text who may not have this background might have difficulty getting past ideas of structural racism and White supremacy as defined here because of a historical connection of White supremacy to overt racist actions. A typical reaction might

be, “But I’m not a White supremacist!” Those without a background in CRT may shut down or resist these ideas, as their understanding of racism may be personal, not systemic, accountability. I do not see this as a critique of any of the authors in this volume by any means—rather a nod to how needed such discourse is, especially for future teachers.

Resistance

Though the state of education in the United States might seem dire from the discussion above, I was most impressed with how each author gives examples of how students, families, and teachers are resisting these individual reform efforts in their own communities. Instead of being burdened by these neoliberal reforms wrapped in colorblind ideology, these communities are actively resisting such reforms and resistance is woven throughout the book. Jones, for example, discusses how unions in Chicago linked with families and made it impossible for the mayor to pit parents against teachers, which allowed for a successful strike to improve schools there. Lipman describes how organized resistance to school closings across the United States has demonstrated that parents are both a resource and a source of vision in education. David Stovall (2015) describes successful attempts to implement positive change in Chicago and Jackson, Mississippi with the advice that “the only thing that has a chance against the Hydra is the ability of residents to organize, plan, and implement strategies that support inclusive, democratic structures for decision making” (p. 55). Wayne Au presents a number of groups who are tired of high-stakes standardized testing and describes how the tremendously the resistance has grown. Among the many groups described by Au is the Badass Teachers Association, which has over 38,000 supporters, as well as other national groups nationwide that oppose such tests.

Another unique asset this book provides is its inclusion of four articles of resistance in its appendix. Picower and Mayorga include in this collection a speech at a rally against school closures in Chicago by nine-year-old Asean Johnson, where he demands of the mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emanuel that, “EDUCATION IS OUR RIGHT, THAT IS WHY WE HAVE TO FIGHT!” (p. 185). There is also a 10-point platform of demands by a group of young activists in New York City called the A.C.T.I.O.N. project who see it as their mission to fight for a quality education, of which they feel they are being deprived. Also included is the mission and platform for a coalition of grassroots organizations called the Network of Teacher Activist Groups (TAG) and a statement from Stand Up Opt Out to the Chancellor of New York City schools as to why they decided not to administer standardized tests in 2014. These additions are crucial for readers to see, as they provide concrete examples of how others have resisted these neoliberal reforms in their own communities.

Because this book ties present neoliberal reforms directly to race and racism, I would highly recommend this book to be read by all teacher educators in doctoral seminars. There are perhaps many future teacher educators who are not as familiar with these ideas who would benefit from a thorough understanding of how race and class combine to maintain inequalities in education. I also believe this text present unique opportunities for readers to see real-world examples of how such policies are being

resisted by communities throughout the country. While I believe this text might be too theoretical for undergraduate pre-service teachers early in their studies (i.e. first and second year students in teacher preparation programs), I would also recommend using this text with students immediately before or even during their student teaching placement. This book would help give those student teachers language and strategies to name and confront the policies they are seeing enacted in their student teaching placements.

This collection of author-activists present not only a thorough examination of the problems associated with neoliberal policy initiatives found in education today, but clearly show how they are grounded in certain ideas about race and Whiteness that cannot be untangled. Reading this text, I have a clearer understanding of the racist underpinnings of the seemingly race-neutral neoliberal education initiatives being forced upon many communities in our country. However, the takeaway from this volume should not be despair at the size and scope of the many-headed Hydra of educational reform facing us today, but rather hope that through the collective resistance these authors highlight and engage in, the Hydra can be defeated.

References

- Alemán, E., Salazar, T., Rorrer, A., & Parker, L. (2011). Introduction to postracialism in U.S. public school and higher education settings: The politics of education in the age of Obama. *Peabody Journal of Education, 86*(5), 479-487.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York: New York University Press.

Harris, C. I. (1993). Whiteness as property. *Harvard Law Review*, 106(8), 1710-1712.

Kumashiro, K. K. (2008). *The seduction of common sense: How the right has framed the debate on America's schools*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 7-24.

Leonardo, Z. (2009). *Race, whiteness, and education*. New York: Routledge.

About the Reviewer

Scott D. Farver

Michigan State University

Scott D. Farver is a doctoral student in Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Education in the College of Education at Michigan State University. Scott was a high school German teacher before joining the US Peace Corps with his wife, Erin. While serving as a volunteer in the Philippines (2006-08), he co-taught English and helped organize teacher trainings with his local counterparts. Scott also taught fourth and fifth grade near the Navajo Nation. His current research focuses on issues of race and critical multiculturalism for pre-service teachers.




education review // reseñas educativas

a multi-lingual journal of book reviews

editors: **gustavo e. fischman /**
melissa cast-brede / gene v glass

Supported by the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

 *Education Review/ Reseñas Educativas/ Resenhas Educativas* is supported by the edXchange initiative's Scholarly Communications Group at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and ***Education Review***, it is distributed for non-commercial purposes only, and no alteration or transformation is made in the work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>. All other uses must be approved by the author(s) or ***Education Review***. ***Education Review*** is published by the Scholarly Communications Group of the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University.

Connect with *Education Review* on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Education-Review/178358222192644>) and on Twitter @EducReview