

Education Review

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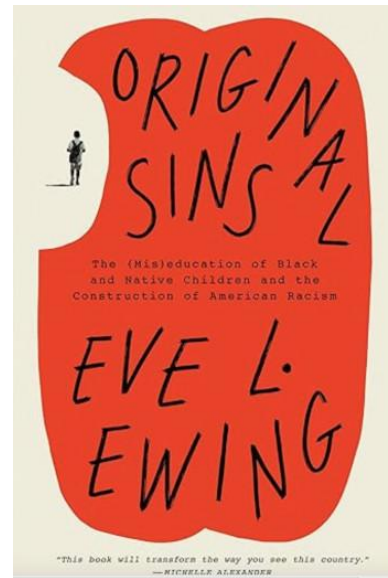
Ewing, E. L. (2025). *Original sins: The (mis) education of Black and Native children and the construction of American racism*. One World Publishing.

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Dr. Eve L. Ewing is an associate professor in the Department of Race, Diaspora, and Indigeneity at the University of Chicago and a proud Chicago native. As a scholar, her research examines the intersection of race, history, and education in America. Ewing first garnered national attention in 2018 with her debut nonfiction book, *Ghosts in the Schoolyard: Racism and School Closings in Chicago's South Side*, which critically examines how systemic racism contributed to the mass public school closures that took place in the city in 2013. While this work helped her to emerge as a leading voice in education, it is worth noting that Ewing's intellectual contributions and influence extend well beyond the boundaries of academia. In addition to her roles as a scholar and educator, Ewing is also a poet, playwright, and author of comic books, graphic novels, and short stories. Her expansive body of work includes the award-winning poetry collections of *Electric Arches* and *1919*, the young adult fiction book *Maya and the Robot*, and contributions to the *Marvel* comic book series, *Ironheart* and *Black Panther*. Her essays and cultural commentary have also appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *The New York Times*.



Eve L. Ewing

Ewing is also a cultural organizer who sees art, storytelling, and collective imagination as vital tools for envisioning and building more just and liberated futures. As a result, she intends to cultivate spaces where people can come together to learn, reflect, dream, and make changes. This intentionality shows up in many ways, but most recently through her newly minted role as a co-owner of Build Coffee and Books in Chicago, an independent bookstore, coffee shop, and community hub on the South Side.

These goals also shape the intellectual force behind her newest book, *Original Sins: The (Mis) Education of Black and Native Children and the Construction of American Racism*. In this work, Ewing guides readers through the history of the American education system, revealing how it was designed to perpetuate racial inequality and how this inequitable design persists today. In doing so, *Original Sins* offers a sweeping, historically grounded examination of how the American education system has long served as a deliberate instrument of racial subjugation, particularly for Black and Native children.

Although public education has primarily been framed as the great equalizer, offering a path to opportunity, social mobility, and democratic citizenship, Ewing's work reveals a far more troubling legacy. Drawing on archival research, policy analysis, and critical race frameworks, *Original Sins* situates education within the broader structures of settler colonialism and white supremacy. Readers are assisted in uncovering the racialized origins of American public schooling and the ways in which they continue to inform and shape America's public education system today.

Original Sins also arrives at a pivotal moment as policy debates over public schooling intensify amid increasing political polarization and shifting government priorities. This highly charged environment has resulted in widespread efforts to ban books, restrict curricula, and censor topics related to race, gender, and inequality. While many education advocates and actors have pushed back to challenge these policies, Ewing reminds readers that public schooling was never intended to serve all students and is functioning precisely as it was designed. In doing so, Ewing urges readers to reckon with the enduring legacy of settler colonialism and white supremacy within our education systems and structures and to fundamentally reconsider what is needed to achieve a truly just and equitable vision of schooling.

Spanning four parts and thirteen chapters, along with an introduction and conclusion that ground the reader, *Original Sins* is thoughtfully organized to build a cumulative critique of the U.S. education system. Ewing's central argument is that U.S. public schooling has and continues to play a foundational role in upholding racial hierarchies. This is done so by normalizing whiteness as the dominant cultural and intellectual standard and thereby reinforcing systems of white supremacy through everyday practices and structures. Ewing also contends that education in the U.S. has always served as a state tool for controlling and marginalizing Black and Indigenous people.

In Part I, Ewing asks readers to consider whose interests schools have historically served and whose futures they have constrained. This section raises foundational questions about the intended purpose of schooling in a settler nation and lays the groundwork for understanding schools as sites of state power and social control. It opens with a historical examination of schooling during the founding of the United States, detailing how lauded individuals, like Thomas Jefferson, used their access and power to perpetuate white supremacist ideals in the construction of the nation's schools. Through a chronological timeline and thematic focus, Ewing traces the evolution of these foundations to show how they continue to uphold schooling today.

In Parts II through IV, Ewing lays out three central pillars that, she argues, have shaped how racism is organized and sustained within U.S. public education. These pillars, which Ewing also refers to as “technologies of harm” (p. 11), include: 1) the manufactured belief in the intellectual inferiority of Black and Indigenous students, 2) the normalization of discipline and punishment through carceral practices that disproportionately target students of color, and 3) the systemic economic subjugation that ties schooling to exploitative labor systems that thrive off of inequity, reproducing generational poverty and stratification. Upon these pillars, Ewing constructs an exposition of the various ways in which schools are complicit in maintaining racial violence and challenges readers to question the idea of benevolent or neutral foundations of America’s public schools.

Following these chapters, the book concludes with a call for a radical reevaluation of what America’s schools should be to serve all students. By grounding the conclusion in the themes of imagination, liberation, and braiding, Ewing underscores that meaningful educational transformation must begin with the communities most harmed by the system and be driven by their experiences, cultural knowledge, and desire for something better. In this way, *Original Sins* makes a fundamental and enduring contribution to the fields of education, race studies, history, and critical theory.

In addition to Ewing’s compelling and timely arguments, *Original Sins* also engages with and builds upon the work of other critical scholars. While Ewing’s scholarship has long been rooted in an interdisciplinary methodology that intertwines storytelling, sociological inquiry, archival research, and community-based ways of knowing, *Original Sins* has allowed her to expand upon and develop this critically engaged approach. Drawing on Black and Indigenous epistemologies (Tuck & Yang, 2012), Black feminism (Hill, 2000), Critical Race Theory (Miles, 2019; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), Black Critical Theory (Dumas, 2016; Dumas & Ross, 2016), abolitionist and decolonial thought (Givens, 2021; Givens & Ison, 2023; Love, 2023; Stovall, 2018) and Afrofuturism (Coles, 2023; Coles, et al., 2021), Ewing dives deeper into the historical and structural forces that shape public education, citing the works of social justice advocates and historians to bring a more critical lens to the history of the United States.

Throughout the book, the author engages the work of key scholars who interrogate the permanence of racism and the continuing harm of state-sanctioned schooling. Her analysis is also a conversation with scholars such as Bryan Brayboy (2005), Derrick Bell (2004), and Michael Dumas (2014), whose works emphasize the permanence of racism, the psychological and physical antiblack violence in education, and the strong link between schooling and state-sanctioned harm. Ewing also insists that we cannot transform what we refuse to name and, in doing so, directly engages with Tuck and Yang’s (2012) critique in “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor”, highlighting how contemporary education discourse has stripped decolonization of its material and political demands. In this way, Ewing also reminds readers that settler colonialism informs the schooling experience of every American child.

Ewing’s *Original Sins* fits right in with other recently published books critical of education in the U.S., such as *Punished for Dreaming* by Bettina Love (2023), in which

Love describes the harms that education reform has done to Black children in America. Like Love, Ewing uses historical analysis and counternarratives to reframe the American education system as a harmful system for Black and Indigenous children. In this same vein, Ewing, like Love, turns to an abolitionist vision that is guided by a Black feminist ethic of care. Both authors remind readers to consider that there was a time before the harms of schooling and education. Therefore, there can be a time beyond the harms experienced by Black and Indigenous children.

Original Sins is also deeply engaging and well-researched. The book includes a detailed Bibliography and an extensive Notes section that highlight the depth of Ewing's scholarship, providing readers with a strong foundation for further study and reflection. Although *Original Sins* may be challenging for some due to its density and challenging ideological views, Ewing's precision never fails to hold the reader's attention or becomes too inaccessible for audiences outside of education. The scholarly yet conversational tone of her writing shows Ewing's experience as an educator and long-time scholar of race and education. She makes the book accessible and relatable by using personal anecdotes from her K-12 teaching experience, making this book one that those involved in education should read.

Ewing explains that one reason for writing this text was to enable educators to have "robust conversations about the systems in which we find ourselves, and strive to change them" (p. 12). Additionally, she mentions that this work is intended for students, caregivers, and those committed to collective work toward liberation. This book is designed for individuals who wish to engage in meaningful conversations. In some sense, it is also a call to action for educators and organizers. Therefore, *Original Sins* is a crucial read for scholars, educators, and policymakers.

While some readers might feel that *Original Sins* could offer more concrete pathways for what "refusal" or abolition means in practice, Ewing makes it very clear that this book is not intended to be a how-to guide for fixing the U.S. public education system. Rather, she has written a historical walkthrough of how education in the U.S. is founded on antiblack and anti-Indigenous racism and bigotry. By refraining from prescriptive rhetoric, Ewing also urges readers to think more critically about the racial inequities of our world and the ongoing effect of settler colonialism embedded in our institutions and structures. In doing so, she encourages readers to move beyond passive complicity and toward actively engaging in collective reflection, a necessary first step toward meaningful action and collective healing.

Ewing's hope is that this book might serve as a tool for more just and liberatory futures for all students, particularly Black and Native students. Her assertions particularly move us, scholars committed to justice and collective liberation, to the idea that meaningful change begins with a collective critical consciousness and deeper reflection on the narratives we have been taught throughout American history, especially regarding the origins of those narratives and whose voices or perspectives were being represented. However, this requires first reckoning with how Black and Native peoples have been historicized, which has often been misrepresented through the lens of dominant power structures.

As Ewing illustrates throughout *Original Sins*, schools are not just neutral sites of learning, but institutions deeply entangled with the nation's foundational myths. This

framing resonates deeply with our own scholarly pursuits. Because we all engage with the education system in some way, we each have a stake in interrogating the legacy of these violences and imagining new possibilities. Given that, Ewing's work calls on each of us to take responsibility for disrupting those patterns and imagining alternatives. It reminds us that meaningful educational transformation cannot come from policy alone, but must be rooted in truth-telling, community-led visioning, and a collective willingness to honor both critical history and radical imagination. As a result, *Original Sins* leaves us with an optimistic message about the importance of solidarity in actualizing the vision of American schools as places of something other than institutional violence.

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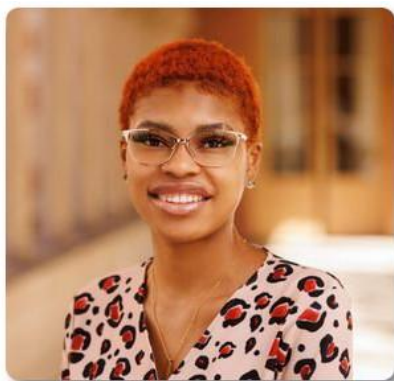
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