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Hilton Kelly. *Race, Remembering, and Jim Crow's Teachers.* London: Routledge, 2009. 154 pp. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-80478-3.

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Memory as Mediated Text in Jim Crow's School

Race, Remembering, and Jim Crow's Teachers by Hilton Kelly is an entry in the Routledge series Studies in African American History and Culture, edited by Graham Hodges. Kelly interviewed forty-four former classroom teachers in all-black schools. The participant pool included fourteen males and thirty females, aged fifty-nine to eighty-five. Almost all of the participants later taught in integrated schools after court-ordered desegregation. An analytic-inductive process was used to categorize the data collected from the interviews. As common themes and patterns emerged, they were coded and analyzed. In addition to oral interviews, archival data from five Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in North Carolina was utilized.

The book is divided into three sections: 1) "Remembering Teachers and Teaching"; 2) "Hidden Transcripts Revealed"; and 3) "Remembering Jim Crow's Teachers." The appendix contains a statement on methodology, interview questions, and a table of demographics and characteristics of participants. In the foreword, educational sociologist George W. Noblit makes a case for oral history "as a corrective to the accounts sponsored by those in dominant positions in power" (p. xiiv). Noblit defends Kelly's reliance on oral history and suggests that ethnohistories–particularly those that counter the official (or dominant) version–can advance social theory in some new and important ways. Moreover, according to Noblit, Kelly utilizes key theoretical constructs in a way that "pushes the discourse into new domains" (p. xv).

In part 1, the author establishes the body of knowledge for this study. Namely, he cites works by David S. Cecelski, Michele Foster, Linda Perkins, Vanessa Siddle Walker, Adam Fairclough, Noblit, and Van O. Dempsey as well as others who have written historical or sociological works dealing with black schooling in the South during segregation. Some are regional works, but the common denominator is their emphasis on reconstructing, "the good and valued all-black school" (p. 9). The works cited are a canon for researchers such as Kelly who affirm the inherent goodness of the all-black school. The study addresses two broad questions: 1) "What was the quality and character of teachers and teaching in legally segregated schools for blacks?" and 2) "In spite of state-sponsored racism and discrimination, how did teachers prepare black students for skilled jobs, civil rights, and social power" (p. 4)? The author seeks to provide an alternative to the following standard interpretations: 1) that black schools were "inherently inferior"; and 2) that they were remarkably good despite the social strictures (p. 4). By examining the memories of teachers who taught in black schools before and after integration, Kelly strives to evoke a middle ground between these opposing views.

Kelly explains that memory is not only recall but rather a "mediated remembering and reconstructing of the past" (p. 5). Mediation is necessary to avoid the historical fallacy of presentism, whereby the past is dominated and evaluated by present-day attitudes and beliefs. The texts themselves are the memories of the black teachers in Kelly's study. Groups perceive and interpret events according to a sociocultural context. While a certain event may be powerful and meaningful to one group (e.g., African Americans), it may hold an entirely different meaning to another (e.g., whites). Kelly's question, then, becomes this: How is the past represented by groups or individuals who experience it differently? Some text, like the language used by Supreme Court justices in the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) cast the black schools as inherently inferior and averred that blacks would benefit from placement in desegregated schools. When it comes to black schools, then, the "goods" have historically been downplayed or rendered silent. But by searching out and listening to unheard voices and accounts–by resurrecting

the silence–the "official text" can be not only balanced, but corrected. Kelly also utilizes excerpts from Richard Wright's "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch" to analyze the conditions imposed by racial segregation.[1]

Kelly employs the term "geopolitical practice" to justify concentrating on black teachers in three rural communities–Edgecombe, Wilson, and Nash–located on the coastal plain of North Carolina. Taken from the book *Race, Place, and the Law, 1836-1948*, geopolitical practice is "social and political actions oriented toward reshaping the spatial conditions of social life" (p. 17).[2] Kelly's thesis is that black teachers used schooling as a geopolitical space for preparing "black youth for skilled jobs, civil rights, and social power" (p. 18). Although geopolitical practice is an intriguing idea that seems relevant to this study, readers may find that it is not as thoroughly explored (or explained) as it might have been.

Citing archival sources, Kelly refutes the common criticism that black teachers were unlicensed or underprepared. Although that was true during Reconstruction, during the 1940s, there was actually a surplus of black teachers who had gone on to complete graduate degrees. By 1947-48, a higher number of black rural teachers held teacher certification than white rural teachers.

However, many of the participants in this study did not choose teaching as a first choice but only after other venues were closed to them due to racial segregation. All of the teachers had attended all-black schools, but some had earned graduate degrees from traditionally white institutions. Although Kelly wants to focus on the "goods" of black schools, the teachers also remember inferior resources such as second-hand textbooks, outdoor toilets, and broken-down buses (if any). All of them spoke of having to purchase their own school supplies: in fact, some were actually required to do so by their principal through a "teacher tax" (p. 52).

In part 2, the author introduces the element of "respectability." Black teachers thought that moral responsibility, industry, and education would distance them from racial stereotypes and uplift the race out of their formerly enslaved status. This attitude not only led to an embrace of the self-help philosophy but also created a class differentiation amongst blacks. Although Kelly does not refer to schooling as socialization, he does suggest that respectability was taught by black teachers. In addition, the pedagogy of black teachers included culturally relevant teaching in their classrooms. Some characteristics of that pedagogy emerge from the oral interviews: for example, the use of grouping students, teaching children according to their ability, visiting the parents, and encouraging the students to be prepared for the workforce.

Within the black community, teachers were perceived as having "made it"–in other words, they had become members of a growing black middle class. Furthermore, Kelly suggests that the black teachers "promoted the acquisition of educational capital in the form of generating materials and supplies, situated curriculum and instruction, mobilizing human resources, and forging a double consciousness with students" (p. 7). Based on the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, Kelly defines "educational capital" as the "qualifications (academic credentials or certifications) that can be used for social mobility regardless of social origin or family background" (p. 67). Educational capital, then, gave African Americans the "hope that formal academic standards or qualifications would be the 'great equalizer' despite its limitations in an oppressive society" (p. 70). Within this milieu, educational capital could be utilized to obtain jobs and achieve social power. Kelly does not go into detail about what skills the students might have obtained, however. Instead, he leaves it up to future researchers to "explore the specific skills, knowledge, and credentials that black students obtained and map out outcomes before and after integration" (p. 67). He admits that, while black teachers had the task of uplifting the race beyond the acquisition of cultural capital (dominant speech, dress, and behavior), poor and working-class black parents could not give their students the tools with which to bridge the gap between themselves and the dominant white society.

In part 3, Kelly concludes with an evaluation of the beliefs and actions of black teachers as interpreted from the oral interviews. He returns to Richard Wright's autobiography to illustrate the limits of educational capital. In Wright's account, the protagonist acquires skills that would enable him to be employed in the office of a white-owned optical company. However, the application of his skills was thwarted by racial prejudice and, hence, his skills could not be used. Kelly suggests that the actions and beliefs of teachers in all-black schools were counter-hegemonic and that schools were places of resistance. Teachers viewed their work as a geopolitical act that could ultimately change the racial order. The reader is not given examples of a geopolitical pedagogy, however. And despite the risk of presentism, Kelly suggests that a reexamination of teachers' oral histories might inform today's teacher on how to deal with schools that are segregated by social class.

Kelly has written a provocative book that privileges

memory, when mediated, as a text and a means of reconstructing the condition of teaching in an all-black school prior to integration. As Kelly notes, the literature about black schools falls into two opposing categories: black schools were either remarkably good or inherently inferior. The voices in Kelly's book suggest that there was a middle ground, however. There seems to be no debate that black schools were inferior when it came to resources and supplies. The teachers, however, were dedicated, well prepared, and creative. They seem to have enjoyed community support, even if they had to initiate contact with parents and caregivers themselves. In addition, the teachers functioned as role models who not only represented the middle class but also possessed the tools of resistance to Jim Crow society. One wonders, however, if the teachers' descriptions of their experiences are not indicative of the shared ordeal as described by Dan C. Lortie, whereby the difficulties of a situation are muted by the camaraderie that develops under stressful circumstances.[3]

Despite the fact that teaching was not always their first choice of profession, the teachers worked in schools without adequate resources in an oppressive society. One teacher summed it up: "We are survivors! The black race is [full of] survivors" (p. 75). It is possible that the painful memories have been overridden by the "good" memories of collegiality, bonding, and a shared purpose of going up against "the system." The shared ordeal forges an identity, but it is uncertain what role it played in the lives of these teachers or how it was mediated in this study. As Kelly notes, he has raised (deliberately or perhaps unintentionally) questions that future researchers will need to investigate before holistic answers to the two broad questions posed at the beginning emerge.

Notes

[1]. Richard Wright, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow: An Autobiographical Sketch," *Race, Class, and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, ed. P. S. Rothenberg, 5th ed. (New York: Worth Publishers, 2001), 21-30.

[2]. David Delany, *Race, Place, and the Law, 1838-1948* (Austin: University of Texas Press 1998).

[3]. Dan C. Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).

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