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## **LADSON-BILLINGS, GLORIA. BEYOND THE BIG HOUSE: AFRICAN AMERICAN EDUCATORS ON TEACHER EDUCATION. NEW YORK: TEACHERS COLLEGE.**

**Christina Collins**

Gloria Ladson-Billings' new book, a blend of biography, memoir, and academic research, is compelling in its analysis of the experiences of black academics in white institutions and the complicated personal and professional considerations that have shaped her interviewees' decisions to pursue teacher education as a career. The author effectively uses the metaphor of slaves' experiences with the plantation "big house" of the antebellum era to explain why and how her subjects perceive themselves as "in" but not "of" the mostly white institutions in which they work (p. 2). The seven scholars she spoke with (Joyce King, Carl Grant, Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, Geneva Gay, William Tate, Cherry A. McGee Banks, and, briefly, Lisa Delpit) consistently expressed a sense of ambivalence about their role as both academics and advocates for reform and racial justice within their universities as institutions. Each said that race had played an important role in shaping their experiences in the academy, with most noting that they were expected by white colleagues and administrators to be "experts on diversity" even while trying to avoid the charge that their research interests were "too black" to have general scholarly relevance (pp. 6-7). Others expressed some concern over the impact of affirmative action policies on the perceptions of colleagues and students about their qualifications, though this topic is, unfortunately, only briefly touched upon in the book.

Such experiences are common to black academics in a wide variety of fields; however, this work argues that they are especially pertinent to those who work in departments of teacher education. In tracing each interviewee's route to the academy, Ladson-Billings' profiles emphasize the crucial role that African American scholars' own educational experiences played in leading them to their current positions. For many, the role of teachers (both black and white) who believed in their academic potential and served as advocates and mentors had been central to their success, and remained the source of a deep personal commitment to serving as mentors for their own students - especially minority students in mostly white institutions. However, these experiences also often served as a motivation for these researchers' decisions to focus much of their classroom teaching efforts on non-minorities who were training to enter urban schools. As Geneva Gay explained regarding her decision to pursue an academic career in mostly white universities, "these are the people who are going to teach our children," and she wanted them to do so as well as possible (p. 92).

A major weakness of this book, however, is its lack of a rigorous and thorough analysis of how the participants see their own research as linked to this shared goal of educating African American children effectively (though this is briefly addressed in each profile), what they think is the best way of training teachers to do so, and how these opinions compare to those of the other interviewees. It would have been fascinating for Ladson-Billings to take advantage of her familiarity with the work of these scholars and her own expertise in this field to more deeply probe her subjects' judgments on these issues. Her brief description of Lisa Delpit's work offers a tantalizing hint of what could have been, as the author notes the furor in the field created by Delpit's charge that most teacher education programs' focus on "so-called progressive pedagogy" was ineffective in preparing candidates to teach black children (p. 131). Do the other scholars profiled in this book agree with this influential critique? Or do they see their own work as falling into the genre that Delpit rejects?

In addition, as the author herself acknowledges, this is not a "conventional" academic text (p. 134); the bulk of this slender volume consists of seven short profiles of prominent African American teacher educators whom the author knows both personally and professionally, and each chapter includes a brief comparison of the selected scholar's life and career to that of a black historical figure. In light of the small number of African American teacher educators currently employed (African Americans make up only about 5% of teacher education professors nationwide), and the lack of previous research on their experiences, Ladson-Billings' decision to use in-depth interviews to develop detailed "portraits" (pp. 13-14) of a small sample of the most prominent people in the field is understandable, and is certainly a valid research strategy. However, some readers may feel that the book's heavy emphasis on methodology represents an unnecessary distraction from its central themes.

Despite these qualifications, *Beyond the Big House* is a valuable new resource for those who study the role of race in both teacher education programs and in universities as institutions. For those who study higher education in particular, this book provides an excellent overview of some of the common challenges that African American graduate students and professors face in moving forward in their careers, and offers useful accounts of some of the ways these extremely successful scholars have overcome these obstacles. These accounts of the shared experiences of both Ladson-Billings and her participants as black scholars in teacher education programs thus can and should be used as a starting point for serious discussions among administrators, professors, and students at all American universities about how to make their institutions more racially equitable

places to work and to learn.

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