

BOOK REVIEW WITH A FOCUS

Thomas Norman DeWolf and Jodie Geddes, *The little book of racial healing: Coming to the table for truth telling, liberation, and transformation*. New York: Good Books, 2019, 110 pp., ISBN-13: 978-168099-362-2.

In a world drowning in racial pain and oppression, this book is an ark for those who want to withdraw from racial harm and build a new world of racial healing and justice. When I first began reading this book, I found it very painful. Triggered by poorly facilitated racial healing workshops I attended that were heavily centred around Whiteness, where Black experiences were gaslighted and White guilt was coddled, I struggled to engage and commit to this reading, not sure that I would be safe even while flipping the pages. Pushing past my preconceived fears, I read every word.

This book is not a traditional book about racial healing. It opens with a personal and endearing story about the Celebration of Life for Susan Hutchinson, a direct descendant of Thomas Jefferson, former president and enslaver. Succinct and to the point, the authors talk through Coming to the Table's (CTTT) approach to facilitating racial healing and transformation that was borne out of Susan's experience after she attended a gathering of 'Sallys and Marthas', a family reunion of the freed and enslaved family of Thomas Jefferson. Leaving this reunion deeply inspired, Susan began facilitating healing reunions for other families, bringing them together to heal the wound of slavery and to also create a 'radical approach' (2) for other families and even non-related racially diverse groups to address racial oppression for the purpose of transformation and liberation.

In the most reassuring and laid-back conversation style, the authors explore their approach to 'healing unresolved and persistent racial wounds of the past' (3) that still cause personal, interpersonal and societal harm today. Described as an evolving family recipe, the main ingredients of this approach are trauma awareness and restorative justice.

To simplify such a complex process, it is broken down into four stages, or, to use the authors' description, upheld by four pillars. The last pillar, which is almost always missing from other racial healing processes, is acting as collective champions for change, actively and strategically dismantling systemic racism, and pushing for societal transformation. The first three pillars encourage participants to uncover and share their own personal and social racial histories; to connect with others across races and build relationships; and to be intentional about collective healing using an assortment of healing strategies. In this book, the authors teach the reader how to understand racial healing through a trauma-aware and restorative framework that uses the pillars to increase safety and action. They then provide the reader with relevant tools they can use when working through the four pillars, giving planners and participants a

comprehensive toolbox to achieve the authors' intention of helping people to '[facilitate] healing and transformation' (3).

In chapter two, the authors use the STAR Approach (Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resistance) to teach the reader about trauma awareness, traumatic response, unresolved trauma, and trauma healing in relation to the historic traumas of racial oppression. The STAR Approach teaches that one must recognise and acknowledge one's own personal wounds, while also being aware of and sensitive to the interconnectedness of trauma and how personal and community healing encourage and facilitate collective 'healing, liberation, and transformation' (10). The authors connect cycles of violence and their interpersonal and social complexity to biological trauma responses and the need to actively engage in a healing journey. Understanding trauma, the authors assert, is the first step towards healing unresolved trauma and its impact. The next step is to engage in restorative processes that focus on accountability and healing.

In chapter three, the reader is introduced to the basics of restorative justice philosophy and informed on how restorative justice is a critical component of racial healing and accountability. Restorative justice programmes that have been institutionalised in the United States often overlook systemic accountability, failing to recognise it as a part of what people and communities need to heal when harm occurs. However, DeWolf and Geddes explain that in order to truly transform spaces, communities, and the culture of racism embedded in our nation's policies and practices, the impact of historic and current systemic racial harm must be addressed, and structures that continue to uphold oppressive ideologies must be held accountable.

Chapter four reviews the four pillars: uncover history, make connections, work towards healing and take action. Focusing most specifically on the first pillar, uncover history, this chapter emphasises how trauma awareness and restorative justice specifically support this foundational pillar. The authors explore specific institutional laws, policies and events from an anti-racist lens and open the reader's eyes to the generational wounds that Black people, especially, bear from the cyclical violence of systemic racism. They also call out White fragility, denial and gaslighting, which act as agents of structural and institutional racism.

Further connecting racial healing to restorative justice, chapter five encourages the reader to examine their racial history in connection with how it impacts their relationships. This chapter encourages the reader to have restorative conversations that deepen compassion and empathy while working to uncover and deal with one's own racial biases passed down by family or the greater society. Chapter six embraces the complexities of racial healing work, introducing the reader to the circle process as a tool with which to help participants hold restorative conversations that give participants space to tell their stories, build relationships, and take collective steps towards racial healing and action. The authors systematically walk the reader through the process of planning, sitting in, and holding circles. This chapter highlights the essential elements of a circle: sitting in a circle with a circle keeper, a centrepiece, and a talking piece. It then instructs the reader on how to hold a circle with the most

critical components of circle facilitation: introductions, touchstones and values, cultivating safe space, offering guiding questions that are mindful, and having meaningful opening and closing ceremonies. In a time in which racism, bigotry, prejudice, and entitlement are so prevalent, I think the authors would best serve potential circle planners, keepers, and participants by talking about how White fragility and power imbalances can show up in the circle. The authors look at racial healing and circles through a very idealistic lens. Connecting the circles to the gaslighting and denial discussed in previous chapters regarding the cycle of violence and the triggering of unresolved trauma is imperative. Otherwise, I believe, the authors place inexperienced or unrealistic circle keepers in a position from which to cause further harm by not being prepared for the realities of holding space around a topic so raw and painfully alive with so many.

Recapitulating the ingredients needed for racial healing, restorative justice, trauma awareness and resilience, history, connecting, circles, and action, chapter seven asks the reader, 'What would racial healing look like?' The authors return to the STAR Approach to explain how to build resilience and break the cycles of violence. According to the STAR Approach, healing occurs in three stages. In the first stage, a person finds safety and support. In the second, they understand how they are being harmed and the impact it has on their lives, as well as mourning this harm. The last stage challenges the person to ask hard questions about harm, forgiveness, revenge, and personal evolution while connecting with themselves and with relationships that may have been lost while navigating the pains of oppression. While the next chapter addresses the action to be taken towards dismantling racist systems, this chapter implies that it is possible to find safe space in a world that is racially violent. Before we can ask what healing looks like, as I am mentally going through this process with the authors, in my mind I am asking, 'Where in this country can I find refuge?' The STAR Approach assumes that an African American participant in this process can break the cycle of systemic violence in their lives; in reality, systemic racism is interwoven into the fabric of Black existence. Healing is a constant journey and, while techniques like prayer and faith, ceremony and ritual, mindful meditation, and memorials and monuments are great techniques for self-care, they may not facilitate healing because the harm continues to occur as racist systems resist change. Despite what comes across as an oversimplification of healing, this chapter is important to racial healing and transformation; however, until systemic violence ends, healing will always be a journey, not a destination.

Chapter eight guides the reader into taking action to dismantle systemic racism. The chapter starts with a list of actions White people and 'people of colour' can take to heal the hurts of racial pain that came from 'I Can Fix It', damali ayo's 2007 guide to end racism. In this guide, White people are encouraged to acknowledge their race and the existence of racism, to listen to people of colour, educate themselves, immerse themselves in other cultures and environments, and consider racism their problem to solve. The recommendations for people of colour, I believe, are somewhat disempowering and centred on Whiteness. The first recommendation is contradictory – to be authentic and to not engage in negative White stereotypes. One cannot be authentic while also

concerning themselves with racist projections. The recommendation to be authentic is all people of colour need, not framing their identity around stereotypes created by bigoted colonisers and enslavers. The other recommendations are to talk and listen to White people, get educated about the accomplishments of people of colour, resist segregation and cultivate relationships with White people, and make health a priority. Moreover, White people are told in this chapter to participate in multicultural events, while people of colour are told to resist segregation and cultivate relationships with White people. The irony in this is that White people are the segregationists. Using systemically oppressive tools like eminent domain and redlining, White people have deprived people of colour of geographical and relational freedoms. Black people and other people of colour have, however, been forced to be separatists – to remove themselves from White dominant society when integrating becomes physically, mentally, or emotionally unsafe for them and their families. Separation can be a form of healing and self-care and should be highlighted as such. Liberation is multifaceted and must be defined by people and community.

While people of colour, in chapter eight, are told that they do not have to educate White people, in many ways, that is what this book is about. Sitting in circle with White people is to tell our stories, is to teach them about our experiences, our history, and our trauma. It is not possible to sit in a circle with the intention of discussing race and racism without educating, because what leads and perpetuates racism is the White erasure of it. If there are White people who see racism and its impact, there is still a difference between seeing and understanding. There is a difference between knowledge and empathy. However, with these recommendations for reflections that I have presented, chapter eight is, overall, a very strong chapter. As the chapter continues, the reader is directed to understand systems and to take action against oppressive laws, policies, structures, and barriers.

The last chapter has poetry, personal letters from the author, and a more intimate and heartfelt reflection on liberation and transformation. Overall, this little book of racial healing is an experiential, participatory healing process with people who are committed to racial justice work. Armed with a plethora of diagrams, readings, reflections, and processes, it is a tool for anyone who want to create spaces for reflection and healing. The reader is provided with the opportunity to do racial justice work from a lens of collective healing and action across racial demographics. The book can be essential to helping people engage in restorative work in a way that is not only anti-racist but also more deeply inner-reflective. There is power in the four pillars.

While it may take generations to see lasting change, the book orients us in the right direction. We must uncover our true history, connect with others who are or who are working to become anti-racist, understand the wounds of racial trauma and how these wounds impact us interpersonally, work towards healing, and take action to destroy racist systems and build new systems steeped in liberation.

May we all one day be free.

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