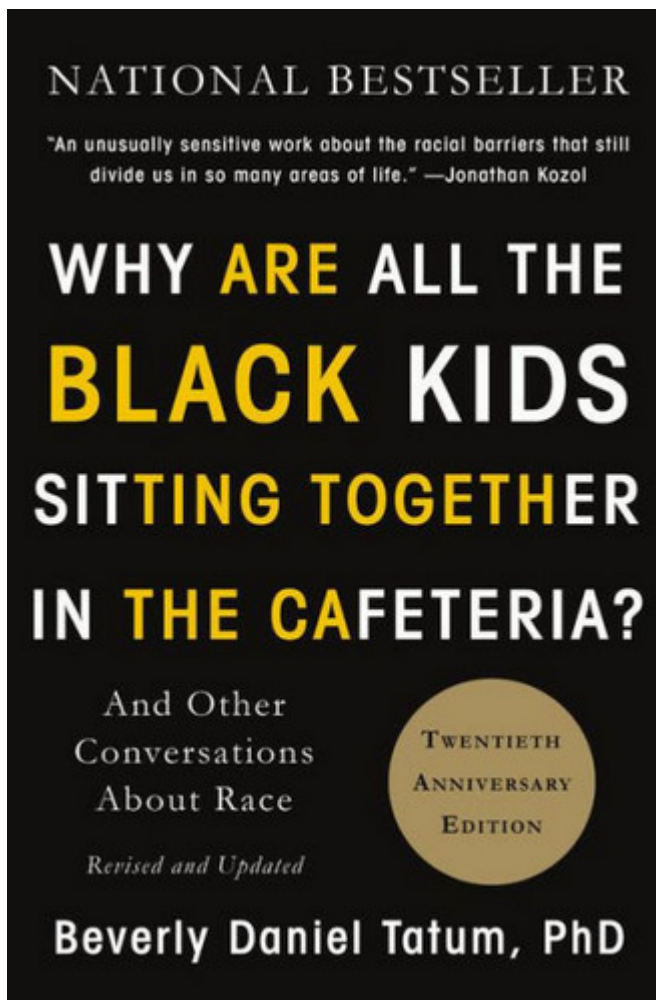


VAST POTENTIAL

Updated Edition is Highly Recommended

Posted: Sunday, October 21, 2018

“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race, Revised and Updated” by Beverly Daniel Tatum. New York: Basic Books (an imprint of Perseus Books), 2017, 464 pages, \$18.99.



“I spent Election Night 2008 with hundreds of students gathered at Spelman College, along with faculty, staff, administrators, alumnae and city leaders, to await the results of our historic presidential election,” Beverly Daniel Tatum explains near the beginning of the “revised and updated” version of “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race,” her classic best-seller originally published in 1997. “It was a remarkable evening in which we collectively reflected on the achievements of the past, the success of the present, and the hopes of the future.”

“However, just after the 2008 presidential election,” she continues, “I was asked to write an essay for an online publication called Inside Higher Education, specifically in response to a series of ugly campus incidents that took place just before and after the election – incidents such as the hanging of an effigy of Barack Obama at the University of Kentucky, the appearance of a noose on a tree at Baylor University, the dumping of a dead bear plastered with Obama posters at Western Carolina University, and the post-election Facebook post by a University of Texas student that called for ‘all hunters to gather up, we have a n----- in the white house.’ These four

examples seemed perplexing among a generation of students that voted so enthusiastically, 2 to 1, for Barack Obama.”

So begins a journey Tatum began two decades ago into the historically volatile race relations that have characterized the United States for much of its relatively short existence. I was first introduced to “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” soon after its initial publication; it was a required textbook in a graduate course I taught on social and cultural diversity in the early 2000s. The original release was powerful and ideally suited for the era it was designed to critique. I am happy to report that the updated edition is poised to make a similar impact on the modern American cultural landscape as we prepare to begin the third decade of the new millennium.

Structurally, “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” is comprised of a prologue, introduction and 10 chapters arranged in five major sections: “A Definition of Terms,” “Understanding Blackness in a White Context,” “Understanding Whiteness in a White Context,” “Beyond Black and White” and “Breaking the Silence.” The manuscript is extensively researched, with 44 pages of source notes and a 28-page bibliography at the conclusion of the main text.

Tatum’s resume includes teaching black studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara before joining the psychology faculty at Westfield State College. She then served as a professor of psychology at Mount Holyoke College, where she was eventually appointed chair of the psychology department, dean of the college, vice president for student affairs and acting president of the college. Ultimately, she was appointed president of Spelman College, where she currently serves as president emerita. Tatum has a B.A. in psychology from Wesleyan University and an M.A. and Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Michigan. She also has an M.A. in religious studies from Hartford Seminary. She received the Award for Outstanding Lifetime Contribution to Psychology, the highest honor presented by the American Psychological Association, in 2014. Her previous books include “Can We Talk about Race?: And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation” and “Assimilation Blues: Black Families in White Communities: Who Succeeds and Why.”

Tatum has a gift for articulating her views in a way that is exceptionally easy for readers to instantly decipher regardless of their particular background or experience. Academics and scholars have long recognized her work as being on the leading edge of studies focused on the preservation of cultural integrity, while promoting the still-evolving concepts of social justice and progressive equality. At the same time, her eloquence speaks to the average person in a way that few of her contemporaries seem capable of effectively emulating. For example, reflect on the following passage from “Defining Racism,” the inaugural chapter:

“I sometimes visualize the ongoing cycle of racism as a moving walkway at the airport. Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystanders along to the same destination as those who are actively walking. Some of the bystanders may feel the motion of the conveyor belt, see the active racists ahead of them, and choose to turn around, unwilling to go to the same destination as the White supremacists. But unless they are walking actively in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt – unless they are actively antiracist – they will find themselves carried along with the others.”

An overarching theme throughout the narrative is the unmistakable yet undeniable conjecture that most of those responsible for perpetuating racist beliefs from one generation to the next are not overt racists; rather, discrimination, intolerance and bigotry are primarily the result of those who simply go along with – and therefore implicitly support – the prevailing sentiment within their personal circle of influence.

Again, I thought Tatum’s original book was a game changer when it was first introduced 20 years ago. I believe the intervening years have confirmed my initial assessment as being accurate, although, as Robert Frost might surmise, we still have miles to go before we sleep. The revised and updated version of “Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” has the potential to reach an even wider audience, especially given the current political climate. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.