



Book Review

The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea

Joni Schwartz

***The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea.* Christopher J. Lebron (Author) New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780190601348 Hardbound. 187 pages.**

Christopher J. Lebron places the social protest movement, #BlackLivesMatter, squarely in the context of civil rights movements throughout American history. Lebron makes the argument that #BlackLivesMatter is a continuation of an ongoing struggle and movement in America propelled by earlier scholars, artists, and activists such as: Ida B. Wells, Frederick Douglass, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Alain LeRoy Locke, and Martin Luther King. Special attention is given to the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s because each regarded its mission as clarifying and exemplifying the value and equity of Blacks in America. They are seen as precursors to the #BlackLivesMatter movement. This book makes the case that the question of whether “Black Lives Matter” is neither a new assertion nor a new protest movement but rather is embedded in the long and oppressive history of the United States.

This book is concise and relatively short at 187 pages. It is a welcome contribution to social science literature and could be an important read for adult educators and their students as well. In the book’s introduction entitled “Naming the Dead,” Lebron eloquently states that we must name the dead, call them out for the sake of the living. Therefore, he identifies by name black bodies murdered recently in America by unjustified violence – Philandro Castile, Michael Brown, Travon Martin, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner – just to name a few of the hundreds of names of individuals. Following the strong introduction, Chapter 1 begins with the black American social and political thought of Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells. It provides “some of the intellectual and philosophical moorings we need to fully appreciate the depth of “black lives matter” (p., xv). Chapter 2 continues this argument showing how black artistic performance has and does take a stand in social movements and progress by highlighting Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes’ work during the Harlem Renaissance. Chapter 3 focuses on issues of gender and sexuality as they relate to black equality in America through the work of Audre Lorde, the self-identified - black, lesbian, social justice advocate poet; and Anna Julia Cooper, who is credited with being the first black feminist theorist. Then in the fourth chapter entitled, “Where Is the Love? The Hope for America’s Redemption” Lebron examines James Baldwin and Martin Luther King Jr. who were powerful advocates for the role of love in confronting racism in America. The final chapter and afterword bring the struggle for racial equality and #BlackLivesMatter to the present, to

the contemporary struggle in America, by engaging with and challenging the perspectives of prominent contemporary black American academics, scholars and writers such as Randall Kennedy and his endorsement of black respectability politics, and John McWhorter's perspective on the debilitating paradigm or mindset of many blacks in America. In his afterword called "Nobody's Protest Essay", Lebron states

When I write at my best, I am not writing to you – I am writing to me for you. I'm sorry, but I'm too busy with the struggle to be much concerned with whether you agree with me. I sometimes don't even agree with myself in an unqualified sense. But I am trying to save myself. The struggle of life in this country is a lot to bear." (p. 163). He makes it personal.

Once again and worth repeating, the great contribution of this book is that it links the past to the present by connecting the contemporary #BlackLivesMatter movement to previous social protests through highlighting the continuity of thought between past-day and present scholars, activists, artists and writers. This is an accessible book which introduces the reader to familiar and not so familiar black thinkers and activists while not only "naming" the dead but also remembering them by bringing them to voice.



Joni Schwartz is professor in the Department of Humanities at the City University of New York - LaGuardia Community College and also teaches in the Graduate Program at John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Her research interests include Critical Race Theory, communication activism, mass incarceration and adult education. Her recent co-edited book *Race, Education, and Reintegrating Formerly Incarcerated Citizens: Counterstories & Counterspaces* was just made available in paperback.