Black Participatory Research (BPR) is unapologetically by and for Black scholar-activists. As such, it is a critical addition to the literature on participatory action research (PAR), and essential reading for all collaborative, community-engaged, and antiracist education scholars. For Black readers, this book provides long-awaited recognition and exploration of the unique challenges and opportunities associated with conducting participatory research alongside coresearchers with whom you share a fundamental aspect of identity and experience: Blackness. For White researchers, reading this book presents a unique opportunity to experience, for a mere 189 pages, what it is like to read something that is not written with you in mind. And for everyone else, this book provides a taste of what it might look and feel like to decenter Whiteness in education research—an arguably essential practice in the struggle for justice.

This volume definitively topples long-unspoken assumptions in the field of collaborative, community-engaged research. Namely, the book pushes back against the idea that “multiracial research teams are best suited to advance research that disrupts White supremacy” (p. 7). Through numerous examples, the authors demonstrate that research for racial justice does not require any White people to be in the room. At the same time, the authors problematize a second assumption that Black researchers and Black communities are automatically a perfect fit (p. 181). Although taking seriously the potential power of Black solidarity, the books makes clear that shared racial identity is not a sufficient criteria for assessing whether a researcher and a community will be a “good match” (p. 181). Third, and perhaps most significantly, the editors of this volume challenge the fundamental insider/outsider assumptions at the heart of PAR literature. Participatory research approaches (in contrast to traditional
approaches to social science research) insist that marginalized communities have valuable knowledge and skills to contribute to the work of investigating and solving the problems that directly affect their lives. Therefore, a substantial body of work explores questions of how professional, “outside” researchers conduct research with rather than on members of marginalized communities. These community “insiders” are often assumed to be Black and Brown, while the “outsiders” are overwhelmingly assumed to be White. This book’s authors reject that assumption.

In so doing, the book effectively eschews the anxieties of White researchers, carving out much-needed space to explore the unique questions, dangers, and promises of professional Black researchers working with and for Black communities. Unburdened from the task of unpacking the traditional White outsider/Black insider dynamic, the book’s authors were free to explore questions such as follows: What are some of the opportunities and pitfalls associated with the role of the bridge between “White-dominated institutions and marginalized Black communities” (p. 1)? How might Black professional researchers work our outsider within (Collins, 1986) status to leverage institutional resources for the liberation of all Black people? How do we pull the plug, when it is clear our Black bodies are being used to facilitate the extraction of stories about Black suffering to be used in White people’s PowerPoint presentations? How do other axes of power, privilege, and oppression intersect with racism and operate within Black–Black research partnerships? What are some of the ways that our own racial identity development as Black professional researchers might manifest in our relationships with community-based research partners? What practices could we engage in to facilitate our own liberation and process and heal from the racialized harm that we experience while researching?

All of these are essential questions that have had little to no consideration in the participatory research literature, until now.

In the book’s introduction, the editors outline the breadth and depth of racial injustice in urban education. From there, they present a definition of BPR, a form of PAR in which traditionally trained Black researchers co-construct knowledge in partnership with Black communities toward the goal of addressing these inequities. Beyond the shared racial identity of the project’s research team, this approach to participatory research is grounded in the epistemological commitments of Critical Race Theory. More specifically, in this form of participatory research, race is understood to be a social construct (rather than a biological or otherwise essential human characteristic), and racism is understood to be a system of power and oppression that is foundational to American society. Like other forms of PAR, reflexivity is an essential component of the research process. And in the words of Drs.
Decoteau J. Irby and Elizabeth R. Drame, “this book is an artifact” of that process (p. 187). Throughout the book, the authors share with the reader reflections on their own assumptions and values (self-reflexivity), as well as critical interrogations of their relationships with other members of the research team (interpersonal reflexivity). Altogether, their stories urge a collective reflexivity (p. 4), prompting readers to think critically about the ways power and identity play out in education research more broadly.

The rest of the book is organized into three parts, each exploring these complexities of power and identity as they played out in different BPR projects—one in New Orleans, one in Philadelphia, and one in Dakar, Senegal. Each of these three case studies is organized into three chapters, beginning with an introductory chapter that provides the reader with background information on the sociological, historical, and policy context in which the BPR project was situated. This chapter also provides an overview of the project’s methods, including a description of the research team, data collection methods, and timeline. The two chapters that follow each background chapter present reflections written by Black project researchers, both professional and community based. In the words of the editors, these chapters reveal the projects’ “hidden transcripts” (p. 179).

The first case, “Dark Waters: Navigating the Ripple Effects of Education Reform on Black Children in New Orleans,” describes a large-scale PAR project that took place in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The project was initiated by a diverse coalition of nonprofit organizations that came together to advance the shared goal of public education reform. The group partnered with Dr. Drame to utilize participatory research as their community engagement strategy. The “purpose of this program was not only to seek out key stakeholders’ opinions about quality public education, but also to stimulate the engagement of these stakeholders in dialogue and policy action” (p. 29). Over the course of several years, the research team conducted interviews, focus groups, and surveys with hundreds of community members. As the professional Black researcher associated with the project, Dr. Drame contributes a chapter that explores the ways that her social location—as an “expert,” a Black woman, and an outsider—shaped the research process. She reflects on the ways that her status as a traditionally trained academic lent her credibility with White partners, while her racial identity helped her to build trusting relationships with Black partners. In addition to Drame’s reflections, Deirdre Johnson-Burel—a native New Orleanian, a Black woman, and the group’s executive director—contributes a chapter. Her account provides another perspective on the role of the PAR project in catalyzing change in her community.

The second case, “All-Out War: Fighting Against the White Appropriation of Jailed Wisdom” describes a short-lived university-community
collaborative research project that took place in the Philadelphia–New Jersey–Delaware region. The project engaged formerly incarcerated school noncompleters in an investigation of the root causes of Philadelphia’s “dropout crisis” (p. 77). This project was dreamed up by two White researchers—the first with a connection to a major university and the second with a connection to a for-profit prison company. These two White researchers recruited Dr. Irby to lead the study, and he, in turn, recruited Dr. Lynnette Mawhinney (a Black colleague and chapter author) to join the research team. The project consisted of 15 in-depth life history interviews and a series of iterative focus groups. Unfortunately, it did not make it past the initial pilot study. Dr. Mawhinney’s chapter discusses the events that led up to the project’s termination and explores the concept of active nonparticipation as a resistance strategy (p. 183). In this case, the Black professional researchers employed several different tactics to sabotage the study to “diminish the exploitative treatment of the participants and [them]selves” (p. 107). One of those participants, Mr. Gerald Bolling, authors the third chapter. His reflections analyze the macro- and micro-power dynamics of the project. In Mr. Bolling’s words, “we can never underestimate the importance of who’s in charge” (p. 98).

The third and final case is titled “Eradicating the Waste: Challenging Western Education Dominance in Postcolonial West Africa.” This project’s research team consisted of 10 international middle schoolers and their teachers. Together, they engaged in a multiphase PAR project promoting sustainable development and environmentalism in Dakar, Senegal. One highlight of this case is a chapter co-written by three of the project’s youth researchers. They discuss tensions between the members of the research team, their fellow students, and their teachers, concluding that, in the end, “[the research team] couldn’t help change peoples’ lifestyles because they never wanted to take responsibility for their actions” (p. 156). In the chapter that follows, Dr. Dominique Duval-Diop reflects on the ways her own biases affected the research process. Through this self-reflexive critique, she highlights the reality that Black professional researchers are capable of perpetuating oppressive systems and she urges the reader not to neglect the hard, but essential work of “look[ing] inward” (p. 178).

Throughout these candid reflections, gaps emerged between the lofty ethical and theoretical commitments of critical race theory and PAR and the actual implementation of the projects they described. For example, in all three cases, community-researchers express ambivalence over the projects’ modest outcomes. In the words of Mrs. Johnson-Burel, “I can point to a few solid policy wins . . . however, there is still significant ground to cover” (p. 51). This is not to say that the projects were unsuccessful, but only that what emerges from
these accounts is the reality that PAR is no silver bullet for educational inequity. As another example, in only one case was the project initiated by community members. The other two projects were heavily steered by the interests of the professional researchers, who recruited participants with a clear picture of the topic, research questions, and methods already in mind. And based on the chapters written by the community researchers they recruited, it is unclear whether these areas of interest would have emerged organically had community-based coresearchers been engaged in the research process from the very beginning. Gerald Bolling’s chapter, for example, seldom references school noncompletion. Instead, his analysis focuses on the challenges of reentry and the broader work of criminal justice reform.

These gaps provided valuable insight into the very real challenges of alternative, emancipatory approaches to education research. Altogether, what emerged is a realistic portrait of what it looks like when Black researchers employ the tools of participatory research toward struggles for social justice and Black liberation. These accounts lay bare the jagged imperfections of praxis, and are perhaps more useful to emerging researchers than the glossy, round-edged theory that is often found in textbooks. The examples of BPR presented in this book are honest, sobering, and beautiful.

Irby and Drame open the book with a statement about their shared commitment to self-determination as Black-identified researchers. This book is an expression of that commitment. Before embarking on their respective projects, they “had no examples of the critical reflexivity required to heal [them]selves from researching while Black (as researchers and Black folks)” (p. 5). There was nothing in the literature that addressed “the race-specific issues [they] experienced” (p. 5). Faced with this gap, they put together a volume that provided the very examples they needed. As a Black doctoral student, embarking on a PAR dissertation project, I am grateful for this contribution. Before this book, I too was facing the paucity of examples of Black–BPR to learn from and wrestle with. I could not see my concerns, questions, struggles reflected in the PAR literature and I questioned whether my research really belonged under the umbrella of collaborative, community-engaged education research. Not anymore.

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