

Teaching Difficult Histories in Difficult Times: Stories of Practice. Lauren McArthur Harris, Maia Sheppard, and Sara A. Levy. New York: Teachers College Press, 2022. x + 214 pp. \$38 Paperback ISBN: 9780807766446, or \$117 Hardcover ISBN: 9780807766453, or \$31 Ebook ISBN: 9780807780770.

The edited volume *Teaching Difficult Histories in Difficult Times: Stories of Practice* by Lauren McArthur Harris, Maia Sheppard, and Sara A. Levy is an extraordinary contribution to our understanding of teacher practice on the most challenging historical content to teach. In each of the fifteen chapters, K-12 teachers and education researchers discuss the challenges, opportunities, victories, and failures they faced as they covered difficult topics in numerous contexts, often with a lack of institutional support and facing intense pressure for content coverage.

Perhaps the most important theoretical innovation comes from the editors in the introduction, as they answered the question: what makes something a difficult history? Though a great deal of historical content can be challenging, Harris, Sheppard, and Levy define “difficult history” as events in the past wherein people suffered because of unjust actions, policies, or systems that resulted in dehumanizing experiences (4). Connecting dehumanization to specific unjust actions or systems seems like a useful way to define and understand the concept of difficult history. One issue throughout the volume, however, is that several authors used alternate definitions of difficult history as the basis of their work. The first chapter on the educational program for the 9/11 Memorial & Museum, for instance, defines difficult history as events that are “traumatic, troublesome, sensitive, or violent” (16). This is a much broader definition of difficult history with no mention of systems or dehumanization as used by the editors. So, although the introduction provides a clear conceptual framework for difficult history, the entire volume is more nebulous on the best way to define the term.

The chapters are arranged in four sections that center content, student identities, local and contemporary contexts, and teacher decision-making. The volume is weighted mostly towards the teaching of U.S. history but does contain some interesting chapters on world history and examples drawn from other national contexts. Though many chapters discuss successful teaching strategies, others analyze moments of failure. A chapter on teaching historical injustices in a Canadian context by James Miles and Rosie Thind focuses on the inherently problematic nature of comparing difficult histories, which lead students to weigh the relative scale of suffering they learned about. The authors conclude that comparisons are often unhelpful, instead suggesting that discussions should center on the causes and roots of injustice and their connection to contemporary issues.

Though each chapter tells its own story, several themes emerge when taken as a whole. One prominent concern was that, when they cover difficult histories, dominant or traditional narratives too often focus solely on suffering and dehumanization. Several chapter authors instead call for more attention to the agency of the abused or to stories of survival and resistance. A chapter on teaching Indigenous people’s history by Taylor Collins and Christopher Martell, for instance, argues that focusing only on suffering and destruction “send[s] messages to non-Native students that Indigenous people no longer remain” (113). That chapter and others argue that centering con-

tent on resistance helps to challenge dominant narratives that erase or minimize the agency of marginalized people groups.

Another thread throughout the volume are discussions of the inherent subjectivity of teaching difficult history. This content creates powerful emotions in students that must be acknowledged and understood. This is most fully discussed in a chapter on teaching the Middle Passage by Jennifer Hauver, Victoria Lisle, and Ga-Min Lee. The authors had to reckon with the feelings of guilt and, sometimes, shame that students experienced as they challenged traditional narratives and learned more about this difficult topic. They concluded that they were “not interested in shaming students” but rather embracing “the messy emotions these texts often generate” (201).

Chapters in the volume also acknowledge the positionality of teachers and the significance of local contexts in teaching difficult history. As “gatekeepers of the curriculum,” teachers’ worldviews and backgrounds influence the way they teach. Scott T. Glew’s chapter on teaching perpetual war as difficult history is intriguing in this regard, as the author used his own background as a veteran to initiate discussions about militarism. Chapter 9 recounts the powerful truth and reconciliation efforts of a teacher in Alachua County, Florida. The authors emphasize that “the centrality of place, identity, and context in difficult histories in how and why difficult history is taught cannot be overstated” (119). Given these perspectives, it is best to view each chapter not as a model to be strictly imitated, but rather as an example from which teachers can draw ideas that they will need to tailor to the specific place and context they find themselves in.

This volume is valuable for K-12 teachers preparing to teach tough topics in any area of the social studies. It offers a wealth of advice, theoretical perspectives, and practical tips on how to approach some of the most heartrending content in the curriculum. Veteran and novice teachers alike could all likely gain new and valuable perspectives from the chapters in the book.

But as I read, I couldn’t help but think that some of the chapters already seem dated. Though the book came out in 2022, much of the writing was completed during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since that time, state legislations across the United States have, in the name of defending students from Critical Race Theory or Divisive Concepts, placed significant limits on how teachers can discuss challenging topics in the classroom. One wonders, therefore, if a sequel to this volume is already needed, offering research- and experience-based perspectives on how teachers can continue discussing difficult subjects in an era where they are increasingly policed by the state when they do so.

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