

# Introduction

LORI D. PATTON, ISHWANZYA D. RIVERS,  
RAQUEL FARMER-HINTON, AND JOI D. LEWIS

Jonathon Kozol's *Savage Inequalities: Children in America's Schools* is among the most well-known and highly regarded works in urban education studies. Published in 1991, *Savage Inequalities* was the result of Kozol's research on the persistent inequities in urban schools. His book brought these issues to the forefront and ushered in the need for greater attention to the challenges, politics, and conditions that prohibit students, administrators, and communities from realizing the promise of educational democracy. So powerful was *Savage Inequalities* that not only did it cast a spotlight on schooling inequities and disparities, this *New York Times* bestseller became the default framing for how broad audiences, educators, policymakers, and school leaders would understand urban schooling.

While we value Kozol's scholarship, we also contend that his work created a dominant narrative about urban schooling that did not fully incorporate the voices of individuals from those communities and in some ways offered an incomplete depiction. In our 2013 article published in *Teachers College Record*, "Dear Mr. Kozol: Four African American Women Scholars and the Re-authoring of *Savage Inequalities*" we share our experiences of growing up and being educated in East St. Louis, Illinois. We followed with a 2021 article in *Urban Education* titled, "That Wasn't My Reality: Counter-Narratives of Educational Success as East St. Louis' Educators 'Reimagine' *Savage Inequalities*." Through the aforementioned articles, we shared the disconnect that exists between our lived experiences and

Kozol's characterization of East St. Louis. We stated, "We found it difficult to merge his outsider views with our insider experiences. . . . Individually, we knew that our backgrounds included many unnamed human and structural resources, valuable beyond a dominant and patriarchal framework" (p. 3). Although a critique of Kozol's single storytelling was our starting point, stopping there was insufficient. Rather, we were collectively interested in the often-unnamed sources of support that ensured our success and the success of so many of our peers and family members. We wanted to center those who were responsible not only for our survival but also our capacity to thrive along our educational pathways and life trajectories. As a result, we applied Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, situated in critical race theory, to reflect on our experiences with growing up in East Saint Louis. By using Yosso's scholarship, we had language to restory our experiences in a way that resisted the dominant narrative that *Savage Inequalities* has become.

Our restorying process led us to produce this edited volume as a space for scholars to engage in the same iterative process of counter-storytelling and highlighting those within their communities who embodied love, care, compassion, pride, and an arsenal of community cultural wealth that is rarely centered in educational discourse, particularly with regard to notions of success. This volume includes contributions from a range of individuals including scholars, educators, and practitioners, each of whom engage in re-storying their experiences in urban educational environments. The counter-narratives they share represent diverse perspectives, ways of knowing, and the creation of knowledge by students, teachers, and administrators who not only grapple with some of the themes highlighted in *Savage Inequalities* but also offer a counter-narrative that presents the lived experiences of being educated and educating in schools and communities that have been systemically isolated and disenfranchised.

The counter-narratives in this volume illuminate the nuances of unjust, dominating, or hegemonic depictions of teaching and learning in urban areas. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argue that counter-stories can serve as sources of survival and sources of political and cultural resistance for socially marginalized individuals and groups; second, counter-stories challenge master narratives of race and other intersectional markers of identity that promote stereotypical and deficit-oriented representations of people of color (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In the latter sense, counter-stories can be understood as a form of talking back, by which marginalized groups can speak truth to power and, in so doing,

begin the task of moving from silence and marginalization to speech and liberation (hooks, 1989). Collectively, the compilation of diverse narratives in this book center the voices of minoritized populations in urban educational and community contexts. The contributors present critical and engaging narratives of schooling in urban educational and community contexts including some of the areas highlighted in *Savage Inequalities* (e.g., Camden, East St. Louis, Detroit, and New York).

The contributors provoke readers to think critically about the value of narrative as a strategy to disrupt dominant discourses and challenge conventional knowledges regarding education in urban contexts. They also grapple with and complicate Kozol's interpretation of urban educational environments by juxtaposing it with their own experiences. In doing so, they disrupt and resist wholesale applications of hopelessness and despair, so frequently placed upon teachers, students, families, and communities in urban settings. These narratives can be a resource for future educators to gain a deeper understanding of the inequities present in urban educational contexts and the strategies that teachers, families, students, and communities employ in the face of these challenges. Moreover, the narratives can re-educate those who misunderstand urban students and families as subjects who need to be saved or strategically avoid urban teaching placements.

Overall, this book serves a threefold purpose. First, it is a venue through which the lived experiences and realities of those in urban educational contexts are foregrounded and framed through community cultural wealth. Second, the book serves as a valuable educational resource for educators and students to engage in critical dialogue about *Savage Inequalities* and the power relations and hegemony that shape larger discourses on urban education (e.g., who tells the stories, how they get told, and ultimately who listens). Lastly, this book exists as a counter-narrative to current political and media discourses that fuel clear misunderstandings and master narratives of urban schools and their stakeholders. Instead of accepting narratives that characterize urban school communities as trapped and wallowing in despair, this book explores the diversity in the urban experience where students, staff, parents, and community members continue to work hard despite the purposeful divestment in urban communities of color in cities across this nation.

The book is divided into six sections. The foreword by William Trent provides rich context for this book, particularly how Trent encouraged us to pursue this work and to share our counternarrative, which he insisted was

both valuable and necessary. Each section is centered around a theme we identified as editors that captured the essence of the narratives contained therein. In Part 1, “Resilience, Wholeness, and Thriving in Urban Schools,” Chayla Haynes, Jada Renee Koushik, and Omari Jackson’s narratives remind readers of how self and sensemaking is situated in urban communities and urban education. In Part 2, “The Urban Community as Educator,” Mirelsie Velazquez, Steve D. Mobley, and Amber C. Bryant share narratives that illustrate how urban communities often provide an education for life lessons that expand beyond school. In Part 3, “Centering Students in Teaching and Learning,” Keith Benson and students from Camden City Schools, Jane Bean-Folkes, Susan Brown and Chanelle Rose, and Ahmad Washington provide a collection of narratives that center students voices, as well as the community organizations that serve these students and invest in them. In Part 4, “Reflections on Educator and Institutional Influences,” Diane Fuselier-Thompson, Ezella McPherson and Carly Braxton, Theresa J. Canada, Heather Moore Roberson, Lonnie Morris Jr. and Maceo Cooper-Jenkins discuss stories of how institutional leaders and educators shaped their schooling experiences. In Part 5, “Re-Narrativizing ‘Home,’” Brittany Williams and Lyntoria Newton, Toby Jenkins, Jodi Jordan, Deborah Patton and Lori Patton describe conceptions of home and reminisce about the role of place in urban schools and communities. In Part 6, “Sunday Dinners with Love,” Raquel Farmer-Hinton, Dallas Jewell Watson, Joi Lewis, and Ishwanzya Rivers reflect on Sunday dinners and shared meals as an educative space in urban environments. The book concludes with an afterword by Tara Yosso, who provides readers with further thoughts on community cultural wealth and the values and resources minoritized communities possess and rely upon to navigate within and beyond urban schooling contexts.

In order to promote readers’ sensemaking of and connection to the narratives, we invited guest responses from leading scholars in urban education. Dorinda Carter Andrews (Part 1), Marvin Lynn (Part 2), Noelle Arnold (Part 3), Rich Milner IV (Part 4), Theodora Berry (Part 5), and David Stovall (Part 6) review, respond to, and complicate the narratives within their respective sections while also reflecting on their own experiences and perspectives on urban schooling. Further, they each offer a set of thought-provoking questions and readings for additional discussion.

We hope readers will engage with this book in a way that not only recognizes the importance of naming existing savage inequalities that plague many urban schools and communities but goes further to illu-

minate the community cultural wealth that exists and is by far the most valuable perspective for understanding educational success. The narratives contained in this volume consider the ecological complexities inherent in urban school systems and surrounding communities, connecting them to the participants' stories, and extending the discourse on teaching and learning in urban school districts to revise what it means to work and live in these communities.

## References

- Delgado, R. (1989). Storytelling for oppositionists and others: A plea for narrative. *Michigan Law Review*, 87, 2411–2441.
- Farmer-Hinton, R., Lewis, J. D., Patton, L. D., & Rivers, I. D. (2013). Dear Mr. Kozol . . . Four African American women scholars and the re-authoring of *Savage Inequalities*. *Teachers College Record*, 115(5), 1–38.
- hooks, b. (1989). *Talking back: Thinking feminist, thinking black*. South End Press.
- Rivers, I. D., Patton, L. D., Farmer-Hinton, R. L., & Lewis, J. D. (2021). That wasn't my reality: Counter-narratives of educational success as East St. Louis' educators "reimagine" *Savage Inequalities*. *Urban Education*, 0042085920987283.
- Solórzano, D., & Yosso, T. (2002). Critical race methodology: Counter-storytelling as an analytical framework for education research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 8(1), 23–44.
- Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91.
- Yosso, T. J. (2006). *Critical race counterstories along the Chicana/Chicano educational pipeline*. Routledge.