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## Book Review: Life at the Intersection: Community, Class and Schooling

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## Book Review

*Life at the Intersection: Community, Class and Schooling* by Carl E. James. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood.

Reviewed by Paul Orłowski, University of Saskatchewan

With *Life at the Intersection*, Carl James has written a very useful and important book. The intersection referred to in the book's title is the one at Jane and Finch, located at the nexus of a neighbourhood that the mainstream media continually paint as notoriously violent and filled with society's outcasts. This book takes on the media's monolithic portrayal of an incredibly diverse and complex neighbourhood in one of the world's most multicultural cities: the Jane and Finch area of northwestern Toronto is home to "some 75,000 residents of various ethnic, racial, religious and generational backgrounds" (p. 29). Although most outsiders think of mainly Black people inhabiting the Jane and Finch neighbourhoods in reality, they comprise 20% of the population. White residents make up the largest group at 29%, with South Asians, East Asians, and Latin Americans making up most of the remainder (p. 34).

I grew up in a Scarborough, a Toronto neighbourhood that at times rivals Jane and Finch in terms of the media's ongoing focus and fascination with violence. Although I have spent most of my adult life in western Canada, I frequently visit the neighbourhood I grew up in as my aging mother and my brother still live there. I have watched this neighbourhood evolve from one composed of various European ethnic groups, especially Polish, Italian and Irish Catholics, to one similar in cultural makeup to the Jane and Finch area. Since the mid 1980s, I have been a teacher, first in the high schools of Vancouver's multicultural east end, and for the past decade as a teacher educator in three western Canadian universities. It is through all of these lenses that I read James' fascinating book.

James, a Black immigrant from the Caribbean, is the perfect person to critique media portrayals and honestly describe the people who live in this part of Toronto – he has been engaged in community work in the Jane and Finch neighbourhood for almost 20 years. He has written extensively about his experiences and the young people he has met in the Jane and Finch "corridor," and he refers to several of these studies in this book. This background and experience gives James a kind of "insider-outsider" status with the communities who live there. Because of this, the reader receives an incredibly rich cultural description and deep analysis of students, parents, teachers and teacher candidates who have invested much of their lives in the neighbourhood.

Much of James' experience with the people of Jane and Finch has been through his faculty position at York University and the Westview Partnership between the university and the Toronto District School Board. This partnership is unique in Canada and "seeks to enrich the schooling experience through programs designed to meet the needs, interests and expectations of students, teachers, parents, administrators and teacher candidates" (p. 72). Indeed, one particular program offered through the partnership, the University Path Program, operates on a premise that frames this entire book: "students' failures are due not merely to their individual efforts, social situation, or cultures but also to educational and social contexts and structural barriers that limit their capacity to imagine and pursue certain possibilities after high school" (p. 72). In other words, schools do not operate within a social vacuum. They reflect the values and ideologies of the

dominant society. In the case of this special program, however, a serious attempt has been made to have the schools reflect the needs of the surrounding communities.

*Life at the Intersection* is an exceptionally poignant book for educators, especially because of its analytical approach to cultural studies in relation to schooling. It should be of interest to all progressive-minded people in the fields of educational leadership, teacher education, curriculum studies, sociology of education, education policy, media literacy, as well as school teachers. Since there are far too many important issues and valuable insights to discuss in this book review, I will highlight a few major points from each of the six chapters.

The first chapter focuses on the stigma attached to the Jane and Finch corridor and its residents. James employs critical discourse analysis, particularly emanating from the “market-driven, sensational or divisive” media (p. 25), to illuminate how stereotypes paint the entire area in negative tones. For example, the “blame-the victim” discourse being set against the “rugged individualism” and “meritocracy” discourses (p. 18) makes it even more difficult for the marginalized peoples of the Jane and Finch area to succeed. Throw into the mix the “preponderance for violence” discourse that the media is fixated upon and one can see how potential employers may look the other way when residents from that “troubled” neighbourhood apply for jobs. The following quote highlights James’ position:

What goes on in these communities is not, as many would like to believe, the product of a flawed and limited people who just happen to share racialized and working-class backgrounds. Rather, it is the consequence of inequitable socio-economic structures that mediate individuals’ social circumstances as well as their opportunities and possibilities. (p. 24)

James clearly sees the discrepancy between representation and reality in ideological terms. Rather than the simplistic “blame the victim” discourse heard so frequently in these neoliberal times, his position emanates from critical theory and the hegemonic ways in which certain institutions in society are connected to each other.

A *profile* of the Jane and Finch corridor comprises the second chapter. It includes a critical geography component that clearly demonstrates how mainstream media has racialized the space of the Jane and Finch corridor. According to James, “its [Black] residents are imbued with particular social and cultural meaning in relation to geography, space or context” (pp. 43-44), making it even more difficult for them to succeed academically and economically. This chapter adeptly deconstructs the media reliance on the cultural deficit discourse, sensationalized headlines like “The Year of the Gun” (p. 38), and the pluralist multicultural maxim that if a few can succeed in the Jane and Finch area, then anyone can. I contend that James is right to point to the role of mainstream media in making it more difficult than need be for marginalized peoples to get ahead.

The next three chapters focus on the implications of the issues raised in the first two chapters for educators, as well as offer a rich description of issues related to implementing culturally relevant curriculum. Chapter 3 makes a case that since “schools in working-class communities remain vital in their role as socializing institutions” (p. 52), then “the teacher’s role, among others, must be to help students develop a critical understanding of how their individual circumstances, experiences and problems are related to the system of inequity and injustice in society” (p. 54). The chapter explains why teachers must strive to understand the lives of their students, should encourage them to be “active participants” in their learning, and welcome students and parents “as equal

partners in deciding what is to be learned and its relevance to their aspirations and social, cultural and economic situation” (p. 56). The case made in chapter 3 is for a community school model similar to ones used in other jurisdictions (see Cottrell & Orłowski, in press), but James is calling for more input from the community itself into the *enacted* curriculum, or what actually takes place in the classroom.

The next chapter continues with the themes raised in chapter 3, especially the need for teachers to understand the social, economic and political barriers faced by students from marginalized backgrounds. Relying on his past studies, James uses the actual voices of people who grew up in the Jane and Finch area, and why they feel the desire or the need to “give back” to the community from whence they came. Much of their reasoning emanates from “community cultural wealth” which is the “knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts that members of a community possess and utilize in their bid to survive and resist their marginalization, racialization and/or oppression” (p. 75). In fact, James makes a compelling argument that people raised in areas like Jane and Finch learn certain skills and attributes that actually give them certain *advantages* over people raised in more privileged contexts. One thing that almost all of James’ participants spoke of was an awareness of how a *relevant* education can help them prepare for life outside of school. Among other things, he calls for teachers to teach about the nature of stratification in capitalist society. Indeed, my own research has found that high school social studies teachers rarely address issues of social class (Orłowski, 2011). Moreover, a teaching force that reflects the cultural backgrounds of the students does not necessarily mean that students will accept them as role models or mentors (pp. 86-88). In other words, teachers who understand the unfair socioeconomic structures in our society, regardless of racial background, can help “level the playing field” for their students and mentor them (p. 90).

Chapter 5 focuses on an array of issues faced by young people living in the Jane and Finch corridor. These range from media discourses around the social problems caused by missing fathers, single mothers, and others based in traditional Judeo-Christian values (pp. 98-99). One particularly interesting point raised in this chapter was the public’s discomfort and resistance to the creation of an Africentric Public High School in the Jane and Finch area. According to James, the public discourse “served to polarize rather than educate” (p. 110). He makes the acute observation that when a marginalized community asks for a separate school to help their young people succeed, it is not the same as forced segregation such as in the American South before the Civil Rights Act.

There are many valuable insights for educators from various disciplines to learn from reading *Life at the Intersection*. Its only weakness, from my perspective, is that occasionally James seems to take exception with outsiders, particularly the media, for representing the Jane and Finch corridor as a particularly troubled part of Toronto, and then proceeds to offer the very same portrayal. That aside, James’ depiction is much more nuanced and rich than anything the media has offered, and because of this his book is an important contribution to the intersection of cultural studies and schooling. I will finish this review with a quote that encapsulates the main argument in the book: “A community-referenced approach to education ensures that the lessons, curriculum, pedagogy and resources help students to make sense of their community and their own social situation” (p. 124). For James, this community-referenced approach is the basis of emancipatory education and a matter of social justice. Reading this book has convinced me.

**References**

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- Orłowski, P. (2011), *Teaching about hegemony: Race, class and democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. New York: Springer.