

## Ending Silence, Children's Visions and Racial Justice: A Review of *Racism Explained to My Daughter*

Lauren J. Silver

We have come to a critical juncture, as the fiftieth anniversary of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision inspires our reflection and assessment of the changes in race relations in the United States. While access has improved for some individuals, we should acknowledge the continuing racial disparities in our country (e.g., ongoing racial segregation and inequality in public schools and residential spaces). The challenge we now face is figuring out how to change our personal lives and society to truly meet the expectations and ideals of *Brown*.

Tahar Ben Jelloun's book *Racism Explained to My Daughter* is particularly relevant as we search for ways to create a more racially just society. Jelloun insists that the most vital way to fight racism is to educate our children about its implications and evils so that they can, through enlightened understanding, transform society and create a more equitable future. While Jelloun situates his discussion within France, this book is relevant to children and adults in multiple contexts.

Jelloun writes in response to his ten-year-old daughter's questions. He states his goal as explaining difficult concepts concerning racism in language that is "clear, simple, and objective" and thus, easily accessible to children. The book also includes responses from celebrated American scholars, William Ayers, Lisa Delpit, David Mura and Patricia Williams. The multi-ethnic, multi-racial respondents' discussions reveal distinct American perspectives, and thus indicate the ways in which racial concepts play out differently in alternative contexts. As a whole, this manuscript contradicts Jelloun's original intent to talk about race and racism in simple language, as it demonstrates the complexity of racism and the insidious, diverse and overlapping ways it is implemented in our lives. Racism is never a simple or objective concept to explain. Nevertheless, Jelloun points us in the right direction as he makes evident the importance of educating our children and including them in these very difficult and painful discussions.

Tahar Ben Jelloun writes in a question/answer format that covers an important and diverse range of concepts related to racism, including "*different, foreigner, prejudice, impulse, discrimination, ghetto, melanin, sociocultural differences, blood types, genetics, scapegoat, extermination, genocide, ethnic groups, slavery, apartheid, colonialism*" (Mura, pg. 94-5). In sum, Jelloun argues that tolerance should never become passivity and that the only way we can begin to respect and celebrate each other's differences is by fighting racism through communication and actions. Jelloun initiates this process as he provides language to educate and include children in this struggle.

Several of the respondents address the theme of “silence,” which Jelloun’s contribution seeks to rectify. Williams and Mura comment on how Jelloun’s discussion is particularly useful due to the lack of books for children on racism, and they support his attempt to broach this difficult topic with young minds. All of the respondents address the ways in which silence, in its multiple forms, continues to perpetuate racism. Mura and Agers expose the subtle and pervasive ways it affects our lives, while they are discouraged by the dearth of explicit conversations about racism in public and private spaces. For example, after incidents of violence at his children’s school due to racial slurs, Agers relays how his request to speak to the students about racism was denied. Furthermore, he describes a school where he taught in which the educators strove to create a liberating environment through deliberate language-use, among other conscious efforts. In spite of the inclusive school environment, they continually struggled against an encompassing silence, as they talked to the children about the inequalities of daily life confronted outside of the school.

By acknowledging the injustices that we support as we pretend to be colorblind, Mura describes silence in a different manner. Our silence about the discrimination experienced by people of color serves to devalue their realities while sustaining a culture where racism is perpetuated because it is not identified or countered. Mura argues that this form of silence occurs not only on an individual level but also through institutional inequities that perniciously don’t get named as racist. Mura states, “I must enable my daughter to see that racism is a system of power as well as of beliefs and actions” (p. 102). Mura contends that Jelloun’s discussion falls short of these considerations. However, he also recognizes that these concepts are hard enough for adults to understand and even more difficult for children to grasp.

The book concludes with Delpit’s letter to her daughter. Delpit struggles with a poignant tension faced by any parent raising a child of color. She writes to her daughter, It is hard to know how both to engender the possibility of color not mattering—where people will truly be judged not by the color of their skin, but the content of their character—and to give you understandings that will create a protective armor for the real world of racial bias that exists around you. (p. 187) Delpit points to the tension of articulating racism and making it visible to her child, while also providing her daughter the space of childhood where she can be innocent of the evils and confinement of racism. Striking this balance should be the goal of all parents and educators as we prepare our children to rebuild this world in a just fashion. *Racism Explained to My Daughter* provides a conversation to begin this process.