

From Descendants of Slaves to Mass Incarceration

Tabitha Ellis

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In her social science book *From Descendants of Slaves to Mass Incarceration*, Tabitha Ellis shares her experiences with the War on Drugs and its impact on her family.

After watching a beloved relative, Sherman, get put behind bars for a nonviolent drug offense, Ellis began to research the cultural and social factors that led to his incarceration. She concluded that America's criminal justice system is an extension of slavery, intended to keep Black people from prospering in the same way that white people do. This racist scheme, her book contends, is responsible for ripping apart countless families of color—including her own—just so those in power can make ever larger profits.

Drawing on personal opinions, biblical quotations, and limited academic sources, the book contrasts Sherman's happy and intelligent disposition with the obstacles placed in his path that led to his incarceration. It makes a compelling comparison between America in the 1960s, an era of arrests following civil rights sit-ins, to the post-Reagan era, in which filling prisons with the poor people while ignoring the crimes of the rich became a priority. Its tone exuding fury, the book emphasizes the disparities between the experiences of those who run the US education and criminal justice systems—people who are almost all white—and the lives of Black boys who are never given the benefit of the doubt when they need additional help or make mistakes.

The book's citations are too intermittent to support its assertions, though. Further, not enough is done to imbue certain claims with credibility, such as that a history teacher had evil intentions when he placed Sherman in an advanced class that he ended up doing poorly in. And some of the book's arguments are too vague, as with a statement that "most of the students suspended at Sherman's [majority Black school] school were Black," undermining wider contentions about systemic issues. However, beyond the book's personal anecdotes, there are some compelling references to publications by subject matter experts on the topic of systemic racism in schools.

Still, the book's information and language too often repeats. Its frequent Hitler analogies are hyperbolic and lose power when they recur; in the case of an implication that not believing in God makes one like Hitler, some are even disturbing. Punctuation errors are present throughout the text as well. Still, the afterword describing the antiabortion movement's hypocritical focus on unborn children's physical well-being is a poignant end to this quite personal appeal for justice for all Black Americans.

From Descendants of Slaves to Mass Incarceration is an passionate social science text that asserts that Black families deserve better from the US, which treats them as exploitable resources.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (May 11, 2024)

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