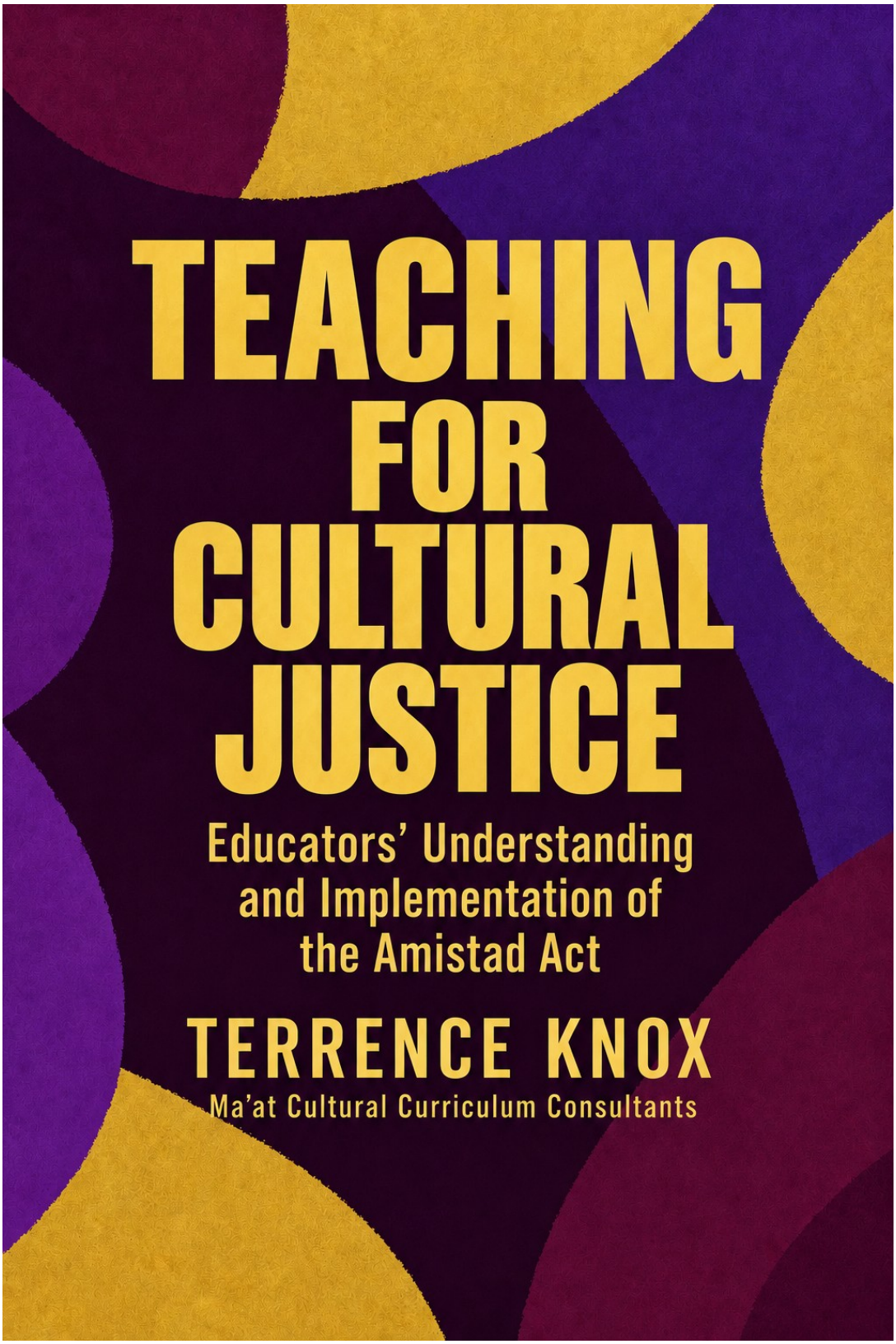

TEACHING FOR CULTURAL JUSTICE
Educators' Understanding and Implementation of the Amistad Act
TERRENCE KNOX
Ma'at Cultural Curriculum Consultants

TEACHING FOR CULTURAL JUSTICE

Educators' Understanding and Implementation of the Amistad Act

By Terrence Knox

ABD, A Benevolent Doctor

FOREWORD

By William Smallwood

For over forty years, I have worked in the city of Paterson, NJ, dedicated to building spaces where young people of African descent could learn discipline, cultural pride, and leadership. Out of this vision came B.U.D.S. (Brothers United Developing Spirituality), a rites of passage program, and Sankofa Leadership Academy, a seven week student leadership summer program.

In those spaces, we have watched young people grow in confidence as they study their histories, assume responsibilities, and learn to lead.

Brother Naazir Conyers and I were older students at Ramapo College when Terrence Knox arrived as a freshman. We took him under our wing during that first year, beginning a lasting brotherhood. Terrence pursued teaching, Conyers Africana scholarship, and I community organizing. Our work continued to meet in the education of African descent youth.

This book is an extension of that shared mission. It situates classroom teaching within the same continuum of liberation that we have practiced in communities. It bridges legislation, pedagogy, and community praxis, insisting that education is never neutral.

I commend Terrence for sustaining the research question that brought him to doctoral study. May this book help educators connect serious historical study with the responsibilities they hold toward young people.

William Smallwood

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

CURRICULUM IS NEVER NEUTRAL

History curricula select voices, events, language, and explanations. A textbook can portray freedom as an inevitable outcome or examine the struggles that produced it. It can present democracy as a finished inheritance or investigate the people excluded from its promises. These choices shape what students learn about citizenship and their own capacity to act.

Dominant accounts of American progress have privileged European settlers, the Founding Fathers, and Western institutions. Within that frame, Africans and their descendants often appear chiefly as laborers or as subjects of reform. Indigenous peoples and other communities enter at the margins. Beginning African descent history with enslavement obscures the civilizations, political thought, languages, and knowledge that preceded captivity. The starting point of a lesson therefore carries an interpretation, even before its teacher asks a question.

Curricular omissions participate in a larger struggle over the recognition of knowledge. Trouillot (1995) locates historical silences in the creation of records, the assembly of archives, and the production of accounts. Schools inherit those silences when they rely on a familiar narrative without investigating its construction. Students need opportunities to examine how a record came into existence and what its survival allows a historian to claim.

A LONG STRUGGLE FOR TRUTHFUL EDUCATION

Du Bois, Woodson, and John Henrik Clarke challenged educational accounts that denied African people intellectual and historical agency. Woodson understood miseducation as more than missing information. A distorted account could teach people to interpret themselves through the assumptions of those who dominated them. Their work placed the authority to interpret experience at the center of educational struggle.

Black educators linked historical knowledge to the struggle for educational freedom. Givens (2021) examines Carter G. Woodson and a tradition of Black teaching that challenged the curriculum imposed on African American students. That history reaches beyond adding a

famous name to a textbook. It requires attention to the teachers, institutions, and organizing through which people contested exclusion.

This history shows that curricular inclusion can transform instruction or merely add a small amount of difference to an unchanged structure. A truthful curriculum asks who produced the knowledge, who benefits from a particular story, and whose testimony was excluded. It teaches African descent history as central to the political, economic, scientific, artistic, and cultural development of the United States.

THE ARCHIVE, THE COUNTERSTORY, AND WHAT STUDENTS CAN KNOW

An official record offers evidence, not a complete account. Laws, census returns, newspapers, photographs, and court decisions reflect particular purposes and conditions of preservation. Someone selected what to record, classify, publish, or retain. A thin archive may therefore reveal unequal access to record keeping rather than a community without historical significance.

Source study should begin with authorship, audience, purpose, and context. Students can compare a textbook paragraph with a primary source and identify the claim each supports. They should also ask what additional evidence would challenge their interpretation. With vocabulary support and a manageable source set, middle school students can practice these habits without treating every document as equally reliable.

Yosso (2005) describes community cultural wealth through forms of knowledge and capacity often overlooked by deficit accounts of students. An elder’s testimony, a family narrative, or experience navigating an institution can generate a research question. The teacher’s responsibility lies in helping students investigate that question while respecting the person who contributed it.

Apply the same evidentiary discipline to personal testimony and institutional records. Ask what each source can establish, how its purpose shapes its account, and where corroboration remains necessary. This approach equips students to evaluate a persuasive story without either dismissing its speaker or accepting every claim.