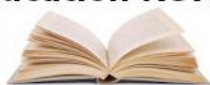


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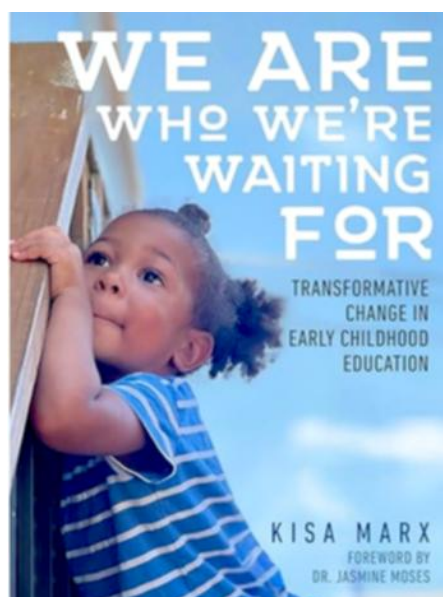
Marx, K. (2026). *We are who we're waiting for: Transformative change in early childhood education.* (Foreword by J. Moses). Red Leaf Press.

200 pp.

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Kisa Marx's *We Are Who We're Waiting For* is a revolutionary text that defies easy categorization. Part memoir, part pedagogical manifesto, part unapologetic love letter to Black children, this work weaves together personal narrative, critical theory, and practical wisdom into what can only be described as an instrumental autobiographical text for educators. Marx has created something rare in educational literature: a book that not only espouses transformative practices but models them in its very structure and voice.



A Genre-Defying Masterwork. From its opening pages, Marx establishes a distinctive methodology—interweaving traditional academic discourse with memoir, positionality statements, and thoughtfully curated music playlists. This is not a stylistic flourish but an intentional pedagogy. The book's form mirrors its central metaphor of weaving, demonstrating how theory, lived experience, and cultural production can be braided together to create new understanding. The playlists that accompany selected chapters—spanning diverse genres from Avant to Aerosmith, from Jhené Aiko to Florence + The Machine—signal Marx's commitment to honoring the full complexity of Black cultural life and refusing narrow definitions of what "counts" as intellectual work.

The writing itself achieves what bell hooks modeled in *Teaching to Transgress*: a seamless integration of the personal and the political, the scholarly and the accessible. Marx's prose moves with the rhythm of testimony, building toward moments of revelation that feel both intimate and universal. Her voice is direct, unapologetic, and deeply grounded in care—a difficult balance to strike, yet she maintains it throughout.

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Centering Black Children without Exploitation. What distinguishes this book most powerfully is its ethical stance. Marx announces early and unequivocally: "This book is not another study." In a field where Black children remain, as she notes, "the most studied in history, yet the least taught," this refusal is both radical and necessary. Rather than subjecting Black children to yet another analytical gaze, Marx positions herself as what she calls a "keeper of dreams"—an archivist of aspirations, a griot, a firekeeper tending to the flames of possibility.

The book's central organizing metaphors—dreaming and fire—work in concert to disrupt deficit narratives. Dreaming, Marx argues, is not escapism but "a survival skill, a blueprint for what could be, and a source of hope in the face of hopelessness" (p. 3). This reframing transforms what might be dismissed as fantasy into a necessary act of resistance and visioning. Similarly, her fire metaphor—drawn from her mother's description of her children and expanded through engagement with Indigenous land stewardship practices—refuses to pathologize Black children's intensity, anger, or resistance. Instead, Marx asks: How do we tend these flames so they burn with purpose rather than rage?

Deep Engagement with Black Intellectual Traditions. Throughout the text, Marx demonstrates a sophisticated engagement with Black Studies scholarship, including, yet moving beyond, the canonical figures of Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, Du Bois, Nikki Giovanni, and Audre Lorde to center voices like Saidiya Hartman, Chimamanda Adichie, and Junot Diaz. Her citations and epigraphs are not perfunctory but deeply embedded and signifying choices that locate the work within ongoing conversations about Black education, abolition, and liberation. The influence of contemporary scholars like Gloria Ladson-Billings, Bettina Love, Gholdy Muhammad, and David Stovall appears not as trendy name-dropping but as reflecting authentic intellectual lineage.

The phrase "Care is the work"—which deserves prominence as central to Marx's argument—echoes throughout the text. It's a deceptively simple formulation that carries profound implications for how we understand the labor of early childhood education. Marx refuses to separate the work of caregiving from the work of liberation, insisting that authentic care—care that promotes belonging and connection—must be rooted in love.

Strategic Use of Story and Multivocality. Marx employs storytelling with surgical precision. Brief case studies—like the novice, anti-bias-minded caregiver or Kendari's story in Chapter 4—function as more than illustrations. They are sites of analysis, moments where theory meets lived reality and neither emerges unchanged. The inclusion of voices beyond Marx's own, particularly Clark's story in Chapter 7 and Emma Worms in Chapter 12, creates a multivocal text that practices the collaborative, community-centered approach it advocates.

The personal revelations Marx offers from her childhood experiences and stories of her own son require tremendous courage. These are not confessional moments for their own sake but strategic vulnerabilities that model the kind of authentic presence she asks of educators. When she writes about being "the awkward, scrawny girl who couldn't keep her head out of the clouds," she is honoring her younger self as well as recognizing the dreamers in her care.

Metaphor as Method. Marx's use of metaphor operates at a level of sophistication that elevates the entire text. The infrastructure metaphors in Chapter 5—on-ramps, rest stops—make visible the invisible systems that either support or hinder educational access. The Dragon or Bear metaphor in Chapter 9 echoes Isaiah Berlin's classic hedgehog and fox distinction while remaining distinctly grounded in Marx's own epistemology. "Living Abolition" (Chapter 7) transforms what could be abstract theory into embodied praxis.

Perhaps most powerful is the "Pedagogy of the Erased" in Chapter 11—a knowing engagement with Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that simultaneously honors and challenges canonical educational theory. By centering figures like Lucy Craft Laney and questioning the normative centering of Maria Montessori, Marx enacts the kind of "unhiding" she calls for, making visible the Black educational traditions that have been systematically obscured.

A Call to Revolutionary Action. By Chapter 13, Marx's argument crystallizes into an undeniable truth: child development and early childhood education are not peripheral concerns but fundamental infrastructure of society itself. The book's wide-ranging engagement with topics from neurodivergence and autism (integrated naturally rather than tokenized) to code-switching, from carcerality to joy, demonstrates the capaciousness of Marx's vision.

The conclusion's epigraph from Junot Díaz and its pointed brevity feel exactly right: a mic drop moment that trusts readers to carry the work forward. The titular assertion—"We are who we're waiting for"—moves from Alice Walker's original context into Marx's specific call for early childhood educators to recognize their power and responsibility.

This volume is essential reading for those involved in early childhood education and, more broadly, for anyone committed to the liberation of Black children. Marx has written a book that is scholarly and accessible, personal and political, specific and universal. It challenges readers to examine their own practices, beliefs, and complicity in systems that harm children while offering a vision of what becomes possible when we truly center children's humanity.

The book's greatest achievement may be this: it doesn't just theorize about what liberated learning spaces might look like; it creates one. In these pages, readers are invited to pause, reflect, dream, and imagine alongside Marx. We are asked to see children not as problems to solve but as full, complex individuals with boundless potential. We are reminded that "Story is my inheritance" and challenged to consider what stories we are inheriting, hiding, and creating. "*What about the watoto?*" Marx asks us from the opening pages. By the end of this remarkable book, we understand that this question is not rhetorical but foundational—a call to reorient our entire educational project around the well-being, dreams, and liberation of children. We are indeed who we have been waiting for. Marx shows us how to become worthy of that calling.

This is the work of a firekeeper—tending flames with care, protecting them from harm, and trusting them to burn in their own directions. Marx has given us both the language and the permission to do this sacred work. The question now is: Will we answer the call?

About the Reviewer

Gregory V. Larnell is an associate professor at the University of Illinois Chicago. His scholarship centers on mathematics education, urban education, K-12 education, and higher education. His research examines the roles of identities and inequities in mathematics learning experiences, with attention to schools and universities, curricula and standards, and more recently, the roles of families, parents, and caregivers in supporting school mathematics. Dr. Larnell's scholarship is published in a broad range of academic journals and books, including the *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education*, *Multicultural Perspectives*, and the *Notices of the American Mathematical Society*. His work has received national recognition, including an early career publication award from the AERA (SIG-RME), a citation from the Benjamin Banneker Association for excellence in teaching, and a Public Voices fellowship with the Op-Ed Project.



About the Author

Kisa Marx is a child advocate and anti-oppression educator with over two decades in the field of early childhood development. In late 2023, she founded The Play Lab Foundation, her nonprofit organization committed to providing humanity-centered, self-affirming, high-quality care for every child. Kisa continues her advocacy with *Rethinking Weapon Play: How to Encourage Imagination, Kindness, and Consent in Your Classroom*, which she co-wrote with Samuel Broaden, and through information dissemination as an anti-bias curriculum developer, workshop facilitator, and national advisor for Defending the Early Years.



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