

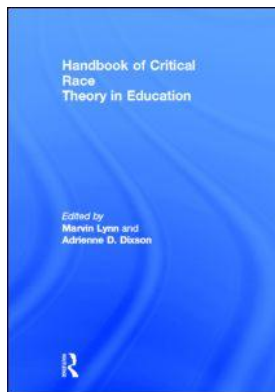
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CRITICAL RACE THEORY—WHAT IT IS NOT!

Gloria Ladson-Billings

THE BEGINNING OF CRT IN EDUCATION

In the summer of 1993, William F. Tate and I submitted a proposal for the 1994 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). AERA was soliciting new forms of presentation so we selected a different format—the advanced paper session. This format called for prospective attendees to write authors in advance for their papers so that these sessions would be in-depth discussions of papers all the session attendees had previously read. Unfortunately, no one wrote for a copy of our paper, and Tate and I believed no one would show up to our session. It turned out that we were wrong. The session, bearing the title of the paper, “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education” (TCRTE), was standing room only, and we had to discuss its substance with a group who were unfamiliar with the paper.

During the question and answer section of the presentation it was clear that some of the attendees were hostile to this new theoretical perspective. Surprisingly, the hostility came from some scholars who were typically allies—scholars whose work focused on multiculturalism and diversity. Apparently, our focus on race as a primary tenet of inequality violated the sacred rule of maintaining the race, class, and gender triumvirate. The “friendly fire” we received as a result of making race the axis of understanding inequity and injustice in the US spurred us to write what became the first article on CRT in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

While I have described the “public” introduction of CRT in education, it is important to include the less public foundational moves that made that first publication possible. Sometime in early 1992 William Tate shared a *Harvard Law Review* article by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988), “Race, Reform and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Antidiscrimination Law.” That article transformed how I thought about civil rights and race. Rather than accept the slow and incremental progress of traditional civil rights legislative and judicial processes or the notion that race was “just another variable,” Crenshaw’s article challenged my thinking and pushed me intellectually in new and important ways. To be sure, I had previously read Derrick Bell’s *And We Are*

Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice (1989), but I did not connect Bell's use of literary imagination with what was becoming an important movement in legal studies.

Reading the Crenshaw article forced Tate and me into the law library, where we found an entire group of scholars working in this tradition. Of course it was a wonderful irony that we were working at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the place where the movement started. Both Professors Patricia Williams and Linda Greene were on our law school faculty, which gave us a bit of an advantage despite our outsider status as non-legal scholars. Williams's book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (1991) was another entry way into this new legal genre. Professor Greene pointed us to a variety of other scholars—Richard Delgado, Mari Matsuda, Charles Lawrence III, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Cheryl Harris, to name a few. The first thing we learned as we began this quest was just how much we did not know. Our challenge was not merely the density of legal writing but our ignorance about the precedents upon which many of the arguments rested. Thus, our work was not merely reading these scholars; it was reading them in relation to the legal cases they were citing.

After extensive reading Tate and I wrote a draft of a paper that tried to both explain CRT and describe its relevance and application to education. Tate and I had worked together on an earlier paper, "The Brown Decision Revisited: Mathematizing Social Problems" (Tate et al., 1993), where we tried to examine the way the *Brown* decision proposed a mathematical solution to a problem that was much more complex than mere numbers. In the midst of writing this paper Tate and I realized our perspectives about race were converging and moving away from that of other "diversity" scholars.¹ Because we knew we were undertaking what would be a radical departure from traditional work on inequity we thought it best to "test out" our work in our own department. Fortunately, we worked at a place where colleagues were eager to hear each other's ideas, and we distributed the paper widely throughout the department to colleagues and graduate students alike. We then convened a colloquium on a Friday afternoon.² We presented our main argument and then opened it up for questions. Those questions came fast and furious. What was surprising was that they were not hostile. People were genuinely trying to understand what our analysis meant for the future of educational disparities. Were we saying that the inequities were intractable? Yes, we were. Were we saying that the civil rights movement was a failed project? To some extent it was. Were we saying that racism would endure? Indeed we were.

Given the pessimism of our argument our colleagues pushed us to provide more evidence and to at least present people with a way to reconcile the belief in progress towards greater equality and the racial realism that we were promoting. No one said we had a flawed argument. Instead, people were worried that our argument might be so jolting that others would reject it out of hand. Over the next few weeks colleagues gave us scribbled notes on their copies of the manuscript to consider so that we might offer a tighter thesis—whether they agreed with us or not. I found that support some of the most helpful I have ever received in the academy. Even though people did not wholeheartedly agree, they were at least willing to provide good questions that forced us to bolster our position.

So, by the time we arrived at the AERA session, we felt as though we had already been through a rigorous vetting. The questions raised at that session were no tougher than what we had already endured. What was different about the AERA session was the hostility that we felt from supposed friends and allies. I suggested to Tate at the end of the ses-

sion that we get the paper out for publication as soon as possible—before the detractors began to publish pieces against ours. We wanted a journal outlet that had a wide readership and good standing in the field. We decided on *Teachers College Record* and were pleased that the editor saw it as a promising article. With some minor edits the editor accepted the article for publication. To date that article has had over 1,000 citations and has been reprinted in several other volumes. Within a few years of publication of TC RTE a number of other CRT in education articles and book chapters began to appear. Tate (1997) published a comprehensive overview of the field and its major proponents that became an important baseline document for understanding the terrain of CRT in education. The following year I (Ladson-Billings, 1998) published an article that attempted to dissuade education researchers from delving into CRT without adequate grounding in the field. During this time Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado made visits to the University of Wisconsin-Madison and we had opportunities to sit and talk with them about our project. Bell also urged caution. Crenshaw encouraged us to keep reading in the field and keep spreading the word. Delgado was especially excited to hear about the work and was interested in possible collaborations. He was fearful that CRT might not go any farther in law and saw education as a logical extension of the work. In fact, Delgado developed an interest in publishing a CRT volume that would be accessible to high school students.

At about this same time Solorzano (1997) began publishing on CRT and building the project at UCLA. Since Kimberlé Crenshaw had two positions—one at Columbia Law School in the fall and another at UCLA Law School in the spring—the CRT project naturally spread from the early summer workshops at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to both coasts. Also, Solorzano had access to Neil Gotanda and Gary Peller at UCLA. Later Parker et al. (1999) began engaging the methodologies that CRT recruited to illuminate and illustrate its case. Afterwards, Lynn (1999), Taylor (1999), Solorzano and Yosso (2001), and Delgado Bernal (2002) were among the scholars who contributed to this literature.

The previously cited works laid the foundation for critical race theory in education. The field was in its infancy and like any new movement it was attracting many young scholars who were looking for new ways to think about their work and new methodologies for race scholarship. However, we must be clear that just because a scholar looks at race in her work it does not make her a critical race theorist. In “Through a Glass Darkly: The Persistence of Race in Education Research and Scholarship” (Ladson-Billings, 2012), I argued that all of the social sciences were infused with conceptions of race and racist notions, and since education draws heavily from the social sciences those views of race find their way into education scholarship and research. For example, most scholars of gifted and talented education do not focus on the fact that much of the field is built on the eugenicist perspectives of Lewis Terman (1925–59). Clearly, these scholars do not consider themselves race scholars, let alone critical race scholars.

Many scholars study disproportionality in special education designations, expulsion, and suspension but they would not call themselves critical race scholars. Scholars such as Skiba and Rausch (2006) carefully document issues of unequal disciplinary procedures and school exclusion. Although they document differential treatment based on race, these scholars would not call themselves critical race theorists. They use quantitative data to demonstrate the adverse impact of school rules and policies on African American and Latina/o students. The point is that writing about race and racial issues does not

necessarily make one a critical race theorist. Those who are CRT scholars subscribe to a number of tenets that Delgado and Stefancic (2001) identify as hallmarks of CRT:

- belief that racism is normal or ordinary, not aberrant, in US society;
- interest convergence or material determinism;
- race as a social construction;
- intersectionality and anti-essentialism;
- voice or counter-narrative.

RACISM AS NORMAL

What do critical race theorists believe? ... First, that racism is ordinary, not aberrational—“normal science,” the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country.

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, pp. 6–7)

The first tenet of CRT is the notion that racism is not some random, isolated act of individuals behaving badly. Rather, to a CRT scholar racism is the normal order of things in US society. This is the thing that distinguishes CRT scholars from others who investigate race. Some focus on specific instances of racism or might admit to institutional racism. However, few outside of CRT would declare that racism is normal. Most argue that racism resides in individual (and sometimes corporate) beliefs and behaviors regarding the inferiority of people of another race. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), CRT scholars believe that racism “is the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color in this country” (p. 7).

In 1944 Swedish Nobel prize-winning social scientist Gunnar Myrdal concluded that racism was simply the failure of liberal democratic practices to align with liberal democratic theory. This concept was what Hochschild (1984) termed an “anomaly thesis,” i.e., “race discrimination is a terrible and inexplicable anomaly stuck in the middle of our liberal democratic ethos” (p. 3). For more than two generations civil rights advocates and social scientists subscribed to this notion. Hochschild further opines that racism’s ongoing presence long beyond slavery, Reconstruction, two world wars, and the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case (1954) “is not simply an excrescence on a fundamentally healthy liberal democratic body but is a part of what shapes and energizes the body” (p. 5). Further, Hochschild argues, “liberal democracy and racism in the United States are historically, even inherently, reinforcing; American society as we know it exists only because of its foundation in racially based slavery, and it thrives only because racial discrimination continues” (p. 5). Instead of Myrdal’s “anomaly thesis” Hochschild says that this is a “symbiosis thesis.” In a nutshell, this difference between anomaly and symbiosis forms the basis of the difference between most race theory and critical race theory.

INTEREST CONVERGENCE

Most racial remedies, however, when measured by their actual potential, will prove of more symbolic than substantive value to blacks.

(Bell, 1992, p. 646)

The late Professor Derrick A. Bell is considered the “Father of Critical Race Theory,” perhaps because of his prolific writing on the topic, his instrumental role in educating many cohorts of law scholars who fostered the movement, and the principles by which he lived his life and his career.³ One of Bell’s theoretical propositions that accompany CRT is interest convergence. According to Bell (1980), White people will seek racial justice only to the extent that there is something in it for them. In other words, interest convergence is about alignment, not altruism. We cannot expect those who control the society to make altruistic or benevolent moves toward racial justice. Instead, civil rights activists must look for ways to align the interests of the dominant group with those of racially oppressed and marginalized groups.

A policy example of interest convergence came about when President John F. Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925 in March 1961 that included a provision that government contractors “take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin.” The intent of the order was to affirm the government’s commitment to equal opportunity. Four years later, President Lyndon Johnson issued Executive Order 11246 prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, religion, and national origin by those organizations receiving federal contracts and subcontracts. However, in 1967 Johnson amended the order to include sex. That one move changed affirmative action from a racial justice policy to an interest convergence whose major beneficiaries are White women (and by extension other Whites—men, women, and children).

A second example of interest convergence occurred when former Arizona Governor Evan Meacham cancelled the state’s Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday. According to Meacham, the state could not afford another paid holiday and Dr. King was undeserving of a holiday. This move caused the cancellation of 45 conventions, with an estimated loss of \$25 million. The most high-profile cancellation was the National Basketball Association’s All Star Game. The reversal of the MLK Holiday decision was not a result of a change of heart on the part of Governor Meacham but rather a need to align the state’s economic interests with the hope and symbolism the holiday represented for African Americans (Gross, 1993).

RACE AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Race has been a constitutive element, an organizational principle, a “praxis” and structure that has constructed and reconstructed world society since the emergence of modernity, the enormous historical shift represented by the rise of Europe, the founding of modern nation-states and empires, the “conquista,” the onset of African slavery, and the subjugation of much of Asia.

(Winant, 2001, p. 19)

Biologists, geneticists, anthropologists, and sociologists all agree that race is not a scientific reality. Despite what we perceive as phenotypic differences, the scrutiny of a microscope or the sequencing of genes reveals no perceptible differences between what we call races. As members of the same species, human beings are biologically quite similar. Just as a tabby cat and a calico cat are the same species with the ability to reproduce within their species so it is with humans. However, humans have constructed social categories and organization that rely heavily on arbitrary genetic differences like skin color, hair

texture, eye shape, and lip size. They have used these differences as a mechanism for creating hierarchy and an ideology of White supremacy.

Smedley (1993) points out that there is a deep paradox between the scientific notion of “no-race” and the “social parameters of race by which we conduct our lives and structure our institutions” (p. 19). Thus, while critical race theorists accept the scientific understanding of no-race or no genetic difference, we also accept the power of a social reality that allows for significant disparities in the life chances of people based on the categorical understanding of race.

One of the most interesting instances of race as a social construction is that of President Barack Obama. During the 2008 presidential campaign, candidate Obama was regularly confronted by the notion that he was not “Black enough.” Born of a “White” mother and a “Black” Kenyan father, many considered the circumstances of Barack Obama’s upbringing so far outside of the experiences of most African Americans that he could not possibly be “really” Black. Some questioned his legitimacy to be president, presumably based on Article II Section I of the United States Constitution that states the office can only be held by a natural born citizen of at least 35 years of age who has lived in the country at least 14 years prior to election. There was no question about Barack Obama’s age or length of residence but he was constantly dogged by the allegation that he was not born in the US. Interestingly, his opponent, Senator John McCain, was born in the Panama Canal Zone, yet no one ever questioned his legitimacy to be president. While we insist that race no longer matters in our society, President Obama’s entire presidency has been suffused in race—even when he has worked hard to steer clear of race and race related issues in policy making and governing.

INTERSECTIONALITY AND ANTI-ESSENTIALISM

As CRT developed, scholars began to see “race” itself as the product of other social forces—for example as the product of heteropatriarchy in a post-industrial, post-colonial, capitalist society—or as in the United States, in a Euro-American heteropatriarchy.

(Valdes et al., 2002, p. 2)

According to Delgado & Stefancic, “Intersectionality means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combinations play out in various settings” (2001, p. 51). Because our society is organized along binaries, intersectionality is a difficult concept to research. We see things as black or white, east or west, rich or poor, right or left. When we move into the complexities of real life we recognize that we each represent multiple identities—race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, and many more. We perform our identities in myriad ways and can never be certain to which of those identities others react. However, since race has been such a flashpoint in this society we almost always believe that our challenges stem solely from racial injustice. Imagine the following scenario:

A Black woman walks into a luxury car dealer. She has just come from a strenuous workout and is sweating in an old pair of sweat pants and a ratty T-shirt. She is not wearing makeup and her hair is pulled back in a ponytail. She does not look like a “typical” luxury car buyer.

During her time in the showroom she notices that the salespeople introduce themselves to everyone but her. She has stood by a high-end model for at least 10 minutes but no salesperson has asked the customary “Can I answer any questions about this car for you?” Instead she is starting to feel invisible. Car salespeople are talking to everyone else in the showroom, including those who have arrived after she did. What seems to be the problem?

Because of the way race structures our everyday life experiences it is reasonable for most people to believe that the reason the woman is not receiving any attention is her race. However, one might also argue that her less than professional appearance might make class the reason the salespeople are ignoring her. Perhaps the obvious class markers—dress, hair, and overall appearance—make her an unlikely candidate for a sale. Thus, class not race may be operating here. Or, since our society continues to maintain sexual asymmetry, perhaps the woman’s gender has closed her off from receiving serious consideration as a luxury car buyer. However, CRT scholars are urged to look at the way all three identity/status categories may be operating simultaneously.

That same showroom might have been more welcoming had the woman arrived in high-end clothing and a nicely coiffed hairdo. It might have been more welcoming if the person in those same workout clothes were a man. We do not know which individual or combination of identity categories is at work here. Rather than attempting to simplify and strip down to a single explanation, CRT scholarship is willing to engage in the “messiness” of real life.

Because of increasing globalization we should expect to see even more complexities. We see people we categorize as Black who speak what we perceive as European languages (e.g. French, Spanish, Portuguese, etc.). Or we try to neatly categorize who is Muslim or Jewish or Christian only to learn that people cross many traditional boundaries and align themselves in different groups and categories. CRT scholars recognize that the neatness was always artificial and arbitrary. If someone is gay or lesbian, is his or her racial identity thrown into question? Is race or sex privileged? Are these identities ever in conflict? These questions are a part of the work of CRT scholarship.

Do all oppressed people have the same thing in common?

(Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 56)

The other side of intersectionality is essentialism. Critical race theory scholarship decries essentialism. Essentialism is a belief that all people perceived to be in a single group think, act, and believe the same things in the same ways. Such thinking leads to considerable misunderstanding and stereotyping. On the one hand there is the need for people to participate in group solidarity for social, cultural, and political purposes (Guinier & Torres, 2003). Thus, to identify as African American or a woman or an immigrant can be useful as a way to organize and garner political clout and social benefits. However, on the other hand, people do not relinquish their individual rights, perspectives, and lifestyles because they share group identities.

Recently, a well-known historically Black college/university declared that male students entering its business school would not be permitted to wear their hair in dreadlocks (Davis, 2012). This declaration sparked a lively debate among African Americans on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. Some agreed with the business

school dean. Others vehemently opposed the decision. Still others offered mixed opinions that suggested the school was trying to protect its students from the harsh realities of a mainstream, corporate workplace and what it takes to “get ahead.” There was not a “Black” position on this issue.

During the days after the O.J. Simpson trial verdict, when the former football star, sports commentator, and actor was acquitted of murdering his ex-wife and her male friend, tensions were high in many communities. The talk show hosts on both television and radio were discussing O.J. non-stop. The day the verdict was announced I was teaching a class of pre-service teachers. Our room did not have a television monitor so I took a portable radio to class, plugged in my earphone, and when the verdict was announced repeated it verbatim to the class. No sooner had I shared the verdict than a young White student sitting in the front row of the class began to cry. What about this murder—given the thousands of murders that occur in the US every year—made it personal to my student?

At the same moment one of our graduates (who happens to be White) was collecting data for her dissertation at a historically Black college/university. When the verdict was announced the students gathered around the student union big screen television jumped up in a triumphant shout when the announcement came. What was it about this verdict—given the thousands of court trials in the US—that had the Black students assembled in solidarity to receive it?

After a few days when it seemed that all people could talk about was the O.J. Simpson verdict, a White colleague stopped me in the corridor and asked, “So, Gloria, what *do* Black people think about the O.J. Simpson verdict?” For once I had what I think was the correct response. I smiled slowly and replied, “I don’t know. What do *White* people think about it?” At that moment my colleague realized just how ridiculous the question was. There was no uniform “White” response to the verdict, and there certainly was no uniform “Black” response. The amount of within-group differences for any racial or ethnic group are greater than the between-group differences. CRT scholars guard against essentializing the perspectives and experiences of racial groups.

VOICE OR COUNTER-NARRATIVE

In the mid-sixties, Archie Shepp took his “fundamentally critical” tenor saxophone and stepped outside of the commercially laden mainstream’s musical community of assumption and voiced his dissent beyond the ways it would be tolerated within the constraints of conventional jazz. Twenty-five years or so later, some legal scholars of color ... are voicing ... dissent from many of the law’s underlying assumptions.

(Calmore, 1995)

Storytelling is one of the oldest human art forms. Ancient cultures maintained their histories and cultural sense of self through the stories they told and retold. Stories or narratives have been shared in every culture as a means of entertainment, education, and cultural preservation and to instill moral values. The very discipline we call history is about the cultural narrative that cultures, nations, and societies tell, particularly about themselves. The African proverb says, “Until lions have their historians, tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter.” It captures the ethnocentric and hegemonic way stories can and do operate. Stories reflect a perspective or point of view and underscore what the

teller, audience, society, and/or those in power believe to be important, significant, and many times valorizing and ethnocentric.

For example, many German school students went through school learning nothing about the Third Reich and Adolph Hitler's "final solution" to rid Germany (and indeed Europe) of Jews and others he deemed undesirable. The story Germans hoped to tell about themselves focused more on their post-war achievements in arts, culture, innovation, and economic prosperity. Similarly, some West African nations tell an official story in their school textbooks that omits any acknowledgement of the transatlantic slave trade and its devastating impact on the development of the continent. The issue of embellishing or valorizing one's history and/or culture is common. However, the acceptance of that presentation as "truth" and "universal" can be deeply problematic (Ladson-Billings, 2000). When one group describes its worldview or story as "real history," "truth," or "objective science" and others' worldviews as myth, legend, and lore we validate one narrative while simultaneously invalidating the other.

In American jurisprudence opposing lawyers allegedly have the same evidence from which to construct a narrative—a story to tell a judge and/or jury. Both sides claim to be telling the "truth." Despite what story is presented to the public, the "counter-story" is a contrasting story that describes the story from a different vantage point. The ability to tell that story is important not just as a defense strategy but also as a way to unmoor people from received truths so that they might consider alternatives.

At the end of apartheid in South Africa it became important to construct "Truth and Reconciliation" panels for those who had been harmed by a brutal system of separation and oppression (Theissen, 1999). The painful experience had to be articulated by victims and acknowledged by perpetrators. The storytelling of the victims represented a series of counter-stories to the narrative the country had told itself and others for years. Telling the stories was both therapeutic and cathartic. It became one of the ways the new nation could reconstitute itself and move ahead. Unfortunately, the US tends to devalue the role of storytelling in social science. A story represents an instance and does not include enough "empirical" data points or a large enough sample to conform to Western science notions of "truth."

Critical race theorists use storytelling as a way to illustrate and underscore broad legal principles regarding race and racial/social justice. The point of storytelling is not to vent or rant or be an exhibitionist regarding one's own racial struggle. Unfortunately, far too many would-be critical race theorists in education use the narrative or counter-story in just that way. There is little or no principled argument to be made. The writer is mad because of an affront and the pen becomes a retaliatory weapon. The story does not advance larger concerns or help us understand how law or policy is operating.

Derrick Bell's "The Chronicle of the DeVine Gift" (1999) is an example of how a counter-story can be written that has personal reference but broader social justice meaning. In this chronicle Bell's alter ego, Geneva Crenshaw, is frustrated about the amount of work she has as the only African American law professor in a prestigious law school. This is exactly the situation in which Bell found himself at Harvard. But rather than rant about being overburdened he constructs a story or chronicle about what life might be like if a mysterious donor continued to steer high-quality candidates of color to the law school. Bell's chronicle suggests that a high-profile predominately White law school would reach a "tipping point" if "too many" candidates of color were hired.

Bell's story starts with his experience but quickly branches off into a speculative tale

that points out the disingenuous way predominately White institutions that claim to be seeking to “diversify” their faculty and staff actually have no real intention of achieving true diversity, even when candidates of color are meritorious.

In another chronicle Bell (1989) describes what he calls “The Black crime cure,” where a group of young Black men discover a magic pill that changes them from petty street criminals to outstanding citizens. They no longer do drugs, rob and steal, cut school, or participate in gang activity. They become model citizens as long as they keep taking the pills. Unfortunately law enforcement has less work to do—the gang task force is no longer needed, the drug enforcement task force has no purpose, and the nightly patrols in Black communities yield no suspects. At first, the larger community is delighted, but soon people begin to realize how lucrative crime is for the rest of the society. Now they must lay off police officers and prison guards. The security firms sell fewer security devices and need to cut back their work forces. The alternative schools and juvenile detention centers are without youth. The town’s entire economy was based on the by-products of crime. To return things to their previous state, the police follow the Black youth to a cave outside of town and discover the source of the magic pills. After the youth leave, the police raid the cave, confiscate all the remaining pills, and blow up the site.

Again, Bell is not telling a story about himself. Instead he is exposing the ways that Black crime serves the interests of Whites. First, Black crime is rarely perpetuated on Whites, i.e., the victims of most Black crime are Black. Second, Black crime creates work opportunities for Whites—police officers, probation officers, prison construction firms, prison guards, lawyers, judges, and court workers all benefit from high rates of crime. The point of the chronicle is to get readers to consider Black crime from a very different perspective beyond the notion of pathological Black people to the economic benefits the “so-called pathology” provides for the White middle class.

In an attempt to develop chronicles and counter-stories that were more expansive and linked to broader educational policy issues I tried to write a chronicle that explained the way current education reform efforts were designed to subvert real reform in urban communities (Ladson-Billings, 2007). In this chronicle, which I titled “The Case of the Sacrificed Black Children—Part 2,” I used Bell’s (1989) earlier story about school desegregation (“The Case of the Sacrificed Black Children”) to discuss how modern attempts at urban renewal made schools their centerpiece. Here draconian testing regimes and severe promotion and retention policies that everyone knew were designed to fail were a proxy for displacing urban families in order to provide corporate interests greater access to prime land and tax deductions in the form of TIFs (tax incremental financing). I tell this story not as a personal story but rather as a broader motif for explaining what citizens in urban areas across the nation were experiencing in the neighborhoods and schools, especially Black and Brown citizens.

Similarly, in a chapter in the book William Tate and I edited (Ladson-Billings, 2006) I wrote a story that predicted how the rebuilding in post-Katrina New Orleans would occur. When I shared the story in one audience one person said I was a “prophet.” I was quick to correct him. There was nothing prophetic about what I was saying. I was merely articulating what was predictable, since it had happened so many times before. The chronicle did come to pass. Redevelopment in New Orleans emphasized middle and upper income residents, and poor people have been left to fend for themselves. The primary point here is that the chronicle or counter-story is about racial justice principles, not personal affront.

CODA

This chapter attempts to address central tenets of CRT that education scholars who want to work in this area must adhere to if they want to be true to the concepts developed by CRT innovators. I set out to write this chapter not merely to chastise scholars who have grabbed hold of CRT as a “sexy,” “trendy,” “new” thing that absolves them of the responsibility to do quality work. The point is not to have a rant or to claim that racial “navel gazing” is any more substantive than Eurocentric, positivist, functionalist navel gazing is. CRT scholars cannot rail against the failure of positivist research to be objective or neutral when our own scholarship is so specific to our personal concerns that it fails to help us grasp important principles of racial justice. To illustrate my concern, I end this chapter with what might be called a CRT “anti-chronicle.”

A Game of Spades ... or, “Are You Really Going to Play that Card?”

Khalia Winston sat in her office and placed her feet comfortably on her desk. She could hardly believe it. She had landed a tenure track position at a research-intensive university. She would teach one course each of the first two semesters, and receive two months of summer support, a graduate assistant, and a \$25,000 research grant as a part of her start-up package. Her salary was about \$5,500 higher than the other two new hires in her department. Her research focused on race and its impact on teacher education.

In her first few months Khalia learned her way around the university. She taught her graduate course and received good feedback from the graduate students who were looking for faculty members whose primary focus was on race. Her faculty mentor told her that, although she’d done excellent work on her dissertation, at this university she would have to develop a new data set with which to pursue her line of inquiry. When the internal research funds competition came around Khalia did not get her proposal completed in time and could not receive campus research funds. Undaunted, Khalia continued working on her proposal and submitted it for an external grant. Unfortunately, it was not selected for funding.

As the years passed Khalia continued to have success with her graduate courses. She was popular among graduate students, particularly graduate students of color. Her undergraduate courses were a different story. The undergrads thought she was too strident and left them guilt-ridden about their privilege and lack of exposure to other cultures. Every semester her teaching evaluations were bifurcated: high graduate course evals and low undergrad evals. Swinging back and forth between these two poles, Khalia became stressed out and struggled to focus on her writing.

Because she was one of two Black faculty members in her school, Khalia was regularly called on to serve as a speaker or facilitator for professional development throughout the community. Although she enjoyed this attention she felt the need to get away from campus and started going to conferences in big cities that dealt specifically with race, diversity, and Black issues. A few times she had a paper to present, but rarely did she turn the papers into manuscripts for publication. When the time for her third-year review rolled around Khalia had published only one book review and a short opinion piece for an obscure newspaper. Her review chair informed her that things were not looking good and he could not guarantee a vote for renewal.

At this point Khalia grew quite angry and started working on a “manuscript” about her experience as a “Black” scholar in a “White” institution. Throughout the manuscript Khalia castigated her undergraduate students, colleagues who didn’t “help” her, the “unreasonable” demands on her time, and the failure of her chair to provide her with accurate information about what she needed to do to earn tenure. She submitted her manuscript without sharing it with any senior scholars for feedback. When she received a “reject” letter from the editors that included detailed reviews of the limitations of her work she declared that all of academe was “racist” and it was “impossible” for Black scholars to get their work published.

In a tearful conversation with the only senior Black colleague in her department Khalia grew angrier as he asked her some pointed questions—“How many original manuscripts did you write and get out the door?” “What did you do about the poor teaching evaluations?” “What did you do to protect your time for writing and research?” “How many of your conference papers are in good enough shape to be turned into manuscripts?”

Khalia’s eye’s burned with anger and the corners of her mouth turned into a snarl. “Oh, you too, huh?” she snapped.

“Me too, what?” her senior colleague asked.

“You’re just as whitewashed as the rest of them. You ain’t nothin’ but a sell-out!” she barked as she rose to leave.

“Now you just wait a minute, young lady,” her colleague’s baritone voice reverberated throughout the office. Khalia stopped in her tracks. “One of the reasons you got this job is that I put my credibility on the line. It’s not that you didn’t have solid credentials, but they had a White candidate with an equally stellar resume. When she gave her job talk she knocked it out of the park. Your talk was mediocre at best, but I reminded my colleagues that few people give good ‘job talks.’ I convinced them to look carefully at your whole body of work and the ‘promise’ it offered. I lobbied to get you a higher salary because indeed you had ‘rare bird status’—an African American woman graduate of a prestigious graduate program. But from the moment you arrived you dismissed any advice I gave you. You insisted that you knew what you were doing. When I cautioned you about going to too many conferences you insisted that you needed to get away from all of this “Whiteness.” When I said you should at least turn your conference papers into publishable manuscripts you said you’d do it but you did not. When I advised you to try to work with your undergraduates and meet them where they were you dismissed me. Now I understand you’re writing what amounts to a rant—and, yes, I know a lot of editors who share things with me—and you want to suggest that I’m the sell-out? No, honey, you don’t get to use that card with me!”

This brief “chronicle” is a composite of instances I have heard throughout the country. The work of the critical race scholar must be as rigorous as that of any other scholarship (or perhaps more so). We have an obligation to point out the endemic racism that is extant in our schools, colleges, and other public spaces. We must deconstruct laws, ordinances, and policies that work to re-inscribe racism and deny people their full rights. And we must be careful to guard this movement that is entering its “academic adolescence.” We must be willing to say what critical race theory is not.

NOTES

- 1 I am using the term “diversity scholars” to describe a number of scholars whose research takes a more inclusive approach (i.e. class, gender, race, ability, linguistic, etc. differences). This is not a critique of such scholarship, but I do distinguish it from the more race-focused approach Tate and I began undertaking in this work.
- 2 I must confess we called it on a Friday afternoon presuming few people would come. To our surprise the room was packed.
- 3 See Bell (2003).

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