

**OVERCOMING BEING IN A NADIR: THE HARSH REALITIES
OF A SOCIETY CREATED FOR WHITES**

Critical Race Theory, Racial Achievement Gap, Gentrification, and the Welfare Queen Myth

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Introduction

*They say we N-I-double-G-E-R, we are
Much more, still we choose to ignore
The obvious, man this history don't acknowledge us
We were scholars long before colleges
They say we N-I-double-G-E-R, we are
Much more, but still we choose to ignore
The obvious, we are the slave and the master
What you lookin' for? You the question and the
answer*

*We trust no black leaders, use the stove to heat us
Powdered eggs and government cheeses
The calendars with Martin, JFK and Jesus*

*Gotta be fresh to go to school with fly sneakers
Schools with outdated books, we are the forgotten
Summers, coolin' off by the fire hydrant
Yeah I'm from the ghetto
Where old black women talk about their sugar level -
it's not unusual
To see photos of dead homie's funerals
Aluminum foil on TV antennas
Little TV sit on top the big TV, eating TV dinners
Girls dye their hair with Kool-Aid
They gave us lemons, we made lemonade
But this nigger's payed, ancestry of slaves
Descendant of kings, it's necessary I - bling
Put rims on everything, where Timbs on every scene*

*N.I.G.G.E.R. (The Slave And The Master)
Song sung by rapper, NAS*

Rapper, NAS' epigraph above speaks truth in particular about racism with regards to being black in the 21st century: Notwithstanding that Critical Race Theory (CRT) is currently in its second decade of existence, it is not and has never been something extraordinary—insofar as racism is something that has always been with us. Rather, CRT is a bona fide and avant-garde movement that leads to praxis—explicitly and courageously speaking to the injustices that prohibit people of color from exercising freedoms that whites have come to enjoy—that emancipates oppressed persons from a life of destituteness. CRT has been examined and dissected in many books, reports, studies, and articles. This is not one of them. Rather, this article examines how majoritarian society stations people of color in a nadir; thus, requiring a forward-thinking and fundamental change of society's beliefs, attitudes, and conceptions. This article draws from a fountain of postmodern-critical work and attempts to be non-tautological insofar as it makes a clarion call for reform and work to be done to emancipate and to enlighten certain populations, in particular minorities. It will also posit suggestions to improve the lives of black and brown faces.

Relevancy

It is hard to refute the position that society appears to be created for people with a lighter complexion; mainly non-Hispanic whites. CRT is relevant and an important topic of discussion and debate for many reasons, a few being: the racial achievement gap continues to flourish, the revitalization of urban centers re-segregates already segregated schools, and the mythology of the current U.S. Welfare State leads to ignorance.

CRT has scaled many peaks and its origin remains unique. Its genesis is steeped in two movements—critical legal studies¹ and radical feminism—and began in the mid-1970s. CRT, or the radical legal movement that sought to transform the relationship among race, racism, and power, was created as a response to critical legal studies (CLS)—the legal movement that challenged liberalism, denying that law was neutral, that every case had a single correct answer, and that rights were of vital importance. People of color associated with the CLS movement were

marginalized. This marginalization, frustration, and dissatisfaction with CLS led to CRT being born, issues of race forming its epicenter.

The Five Tenets of CRT

There are five major components or tenets of CRT: (1) the notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational; (2) the idea of an interest convergence; (3) the social construction of race; (4) the idea of storytelling and counter-storytelling; and (5) the notion that whites have actually been recipients of civil rights legislation.

Firstly, racism is ordinary: the overall ethos of majority culture promotes and promulgates a notion of “color-blindness” and “meritocracy.” These two notions are mutually intertwined and serve to marginalize certain enclaves of people—predominately people of color. The two notions are Trojan Horses; so-called *Color-blindness* and *meritocratic* rhetoric serve two primary functions: first, they allow whites to feel consciously irresponsible for the hardships people of color face and encounter daily and, secondly, they also maintain whites’ power and strongholds within society.

First, *color-blindness* legitimizes racism’s need for an “other” in order to flourish and maintain its influence within the fabric of society. Racism and white supremacy are not aberrant, insofar as the oppressors—the status quo—exploit the “others” (the oppressed) in order to maintain their elitist control, as well as to claim that they are neutral. Close examination repudiates this false sense of neutrality.

Second, *meritocracy* allows the empowered—the status quo—to feel “good” and have a clear conscience: many would ask why the powerful would not have a clear conscience since they maintain a majority of the wealth and power in society. The powerful maintain power and only relinquish portions of it when they have nothing to lose; furthermore, they receive platitudes and compliments when they do choose to dole out portions of their power.

Secondly, Bell’s (1980) theory of *interest convergence* is a critical component within the cogs of CRT. Common sense beliefs are formulated by the majority “status quo.” The beliefs created by the majority—the haves—oppress minority groups—the have-nots and have-too-littles. Stated more precisely, *interest convergence* is the notion that whites will allow and support racial justice/progress to the extent that there is something positive in it for them, or a “convergence” between the interests of whites and non-whites. CRT focuses on informing the public how certain stories act and serve to silence and distort certain enclaves of people and cultures (typically people of color), while simultaneously building-up and legitimizing others’, typically the majority—status quo (which retains or gains even more power through these transactions).

Thirdly, race has been constructed socially, much to the detriment of people of color. Much scholarship has been documented on this assertion (e.g., Armelagos, Carlson, & Van Gerven, 1982; Akintunde, 1998; Cameron & Wycoff, 1998; Chang, 1985; Delgado, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Haney López, 2006a, 2006b, 1994; Parker et al, 1998; Takaki, 1993; Valdes, Culp, & Harris, 2002; Marks, 1995)ⁱⁱ.

The “social construction thesis” or declaration that “race is a social construct” has been one of CRT’s hallmark mantras and core issues. One does not have to peer too far back in U.S. history to ascertain that race has been socially constructed¹. Instances of socially constructing race may include: (a) the infamous *Dred Scott v. Sandford* case whereby the U.S. Supreme Court declared that “Negroes,” whether free or enslaved, were not citizens; or (b) the infamous “one drop rule,” a relic from the Jim Crow era where one drop of black blood made an individual “black.”; or lastly (c) how in 1935 minorities were denied Social Security and excluded from unions. In 1935, Congress passed two laws that protected American workers and excluded

¹ See, e.g., RACE-The Power of an Illusion (access at: http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm)

nonwhites. The Social Security Act exempted agricultural workers and domestic servants (predominantly African American, Mexican, and Asian) from receiving old-age insurance, while the Wagner Act, guaranteeing workers' rights, did not prohibit unions from racial discrimination. Nonwhites were locked out of higher-paying jobs and union benefits such as medical care, job security, and pensions. As low-income workers, minorities had the greatest need for these provisions, yet they were systematically denied what most Americans took for granted.

Fourthly, the idea: CRT calls this concept “storytelling” and “counter-storytelling.” This dichotomy—storytelling and counter-storytelling—is predicated upon the belief that schools are neutral spaces that treat everyone justly; however, close examination refutes this: simply evaluating graduation rates accomplishes this. School curricula continue to be structured around mainstream white, middle-class values. These white, middle-class values are codified in a hidden curriculum. There continues to be a widening of the racial achievement gap (the separation of students of color’s achievement and the achievement of Anglo-Americans). Whose needs do these values and curricula serve? It is not students of color?

Hackman and Rauscher (2004) draw attention to the fact that under the guise of *mainstream* curriculum certain enclaves of students become marginalized through curriculum and praxis that are insensitive and inequitable. Hackman and Rauscher (2004) state the following:

[...] often under-funded [...] mandates across the nation leave many educators wondering how best to serve their students, particularly those students who do not fit into the *mainstream* [author’s emphasis] profile or curriculum. In today’s schools, the needs of students with disabilities and members of other marginalized groups often go unmet, and as such, more inclusive educational approaches need to be adopted to ensure that all students have access to a solid education. (p. 114)

CRT’s counter-storytelling is a necessary tool given the curricula inequity in the U.S. educational system. Without CRT’s counter-storytelling, the true stories would never be publicly proclaimed, and perhaps the world would come to believe and perceive that all was fine.

Fifthly, whites have actually been recipients of civil rights legislation. It is worth citing Taylor (2009) at length:

Fifty years post *Brown*, *de jure* separation has been replaced by *de facto* segregation, as White flight from public schools has created a two-tiered system in many cities and student assignments have shifted from mandatory busing to neighborhood preferences. Most children of color currently attend schools with relatively few Whites; very few White children attend schools where they are the minority. Clarenton, South Carolina, one of the case schools used by civil rights lawyers Thurgood Marshall and Charles Houston, remains as segregated as it was before 1954. The educational progress of African Americans that has occurred has thus been allowed only if it is perceived by the majority as cost-free, or nearly so. Preferably, these changes have come incrementally, and without social disruptions such as marches, boycotts, and riots. Importantly, for most Whites, advances must come without affirmative action. (p. 6-7)

There is an unsettling irony in this idea: although whites have undeniably been the recipients of civil rights legislation, it has also been verified that affirmative action, too, best serves whites (e.g., Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Delgado, 2009). Delgado (2009) exhorts and explicitly requests that “[...] we should demystify, interrogate, and destabilize affirmative action.

The program was designed by others to promote their purposes, not ours” (p. 111). Lawrence (2002) states this similarly: “The dismantling of affirmative action is segregation. Its purpose and meaning are the same as the Jim Crow laws” (p. xv).

In a similar vein, the historical *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954) was inadvertently an eventual victory for whites—or the status quo. What *Brown* ultimately did was the opposite of what it sought to do: it restricted equality for African Americans, not expanding it. Tate, Ladson-Billings, and Grant, as cited in Dixson and Rousseau (2006), state the following:

Brown failed to substantively improve the education of African American students because it represented a restrictive rather than expansive view of equality. What was needed was a vision of education that challenged the fundamental structure of schools that reproduced the same inequitable social hierarchies that existed in society. That the *Brown* decision failed to disrupt these structures is evidenced in the enduring inequities in the educational system. (p. 45)

It is clear that whites have actually been recipients of civil rights legislation.

Racial Achievement Gap

Mainstream society, in particular education is continuously affected, by and large by the multiplicity of special interests, which many times run juxtaposed and counter to one another. With so many interests it is no wonder why there are so many contradictions in society. The ever-widening racial achievement gap stands front and center in the 21st century. One of very few benefits of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) is that it requires documentation of achievement. With the advent of high stakes testing, a product of NCLB, it appears that the acronym: NCLB truly means No Caucasian Left Behind. Minorities have been left behind—placed in a nadir—and continue to underperform non-Hispanic whites. The *New York Times* has reported that “[t]he achievement gap between white and minority students has not narrowed in recent years, despite the focus of the No Child Left Behind law on improving the scores of blacks and Hispanics, according to results of a federal test considered to be the nation’s best measure of long-term trends in math and reading proficiency” (April 28, 2009). Why is this so? In order to comprehend why, the author argues that it is most effective to examine education holistically through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens.

CRT must invigorate the waters policymakers navigate and stakeholders operate in order to better demonstrate that a forward-thinking and fundamental change of society’s beliefs, attitudes, and conceptions is warranted for the betterment of the brethren. Market theory presumes too much and is an inadequate model and approach to reform schools nationwide, in particular for the brown and black faces. CRT must be a defender of oppressed peoples and comfort those in need. Education is the pathway coined by many (originally Horace Mann) to be “the great equalizer” in life. If this is true, policymakers and constituents should be alerted and alarmed since currently there exists a discrepancy in the scholastic achievement amongst whites and other racial enclaves of people; clearly reform work needs to be done. This reform and restructure work must be as equally forward-thinking, and dynamic as its adversaries (e.g., all the *isms*, xenophobia, bigotry, etc.).

The racial achievement gap will not narrow by simply having teachers arriving early and staying late at schools. Nor will it improve if academics, policymakers, and reformers continue to do what got us to our current location. Anyon (1997) states this beautifully, “Finally, and crucially, we must ask, How can we use the answers to these and other questions as a guide to

corrective future action? History is ignored by most who study educational reform [...]” (p. 38). The next paragraph speaks to this importance of history as well as the importance of correcting ahistoricism.

Gentrification

Urban revitalization is a cleaner, more sanitary word for gentrification; which is a messier word for demolishing certain impoverished and/or low-income neighborhoods and replacing these edifices with high-cost, luxurious buildings more appealing to whites; which thereby displaces many people and families of color. Gentrification is a harsh reality for black and brown people and leads to the creation of vanilla cities; it is something that must be addressed immediately. Gentrification, both by commission and omission is insidious. Committing gentrification is a form of violence insofar as that it attacks the impoverished that are financially under-resourced and unable to combat the gentrification process. Omitting a discussion is equally problematic and dangerous, as it is the black and brown inhabitants of these residential areas are invisible. CRT enables the victimized to voice their concerns and resentment.

Gentrification contributes to enormous income disparities and cleavages in the social fabric of urban and metropolitan cities and locales. Where students live can either impede or augment the education they will receive. In *Unfinished Business: Closing the Racial Achievement Gap in Our Schools*, Noguera and Wing among others argue that students’ zip codes in large part determine the pathways our students follow. For example, research in this book points out that the mean G.P.A. for 9th graders steadily increased as the median household increased. This was also mapped out in a map that illustrates that the achievement gap between students from affluent families in Berkeley and poorer families in the flatlands grew wider over time and as median incomes increased (see Wing, 2006).

CRT has in its arsenal a powerful, potent, and penchant strategy to discuss the topic of gentrification: chronicles. Chronicles are best described and defined as the following: creating and using fictional people to debate issues of race and discrimination in society. Chronicles are also sometimes used interchangeably with the words “storytelling” and “counter storytelling.” This paper uses the word chronicle since the word speaks to history and a record or narrative description of past events. It is this ahistoricity that CRT attempts to eradicate.

Welfare Queen Myth

The sentiment that families who receive welfare are malingering and lazy is a myth. In fact, according to Handler and Hasenfeld, if we “[s]ummariz[e] the profile of welfare families...many are working, have worked, or will try to work when they leave welfare” (p. 63). This indicates that the general public’s paradigm of welfare recipients is grounded upon erroneous convictions. Many of these false assumptions have historical origins. Labeling welfare recipients lazy began in the mid-1960s. Handler and Hasenfeld state that “[b]etween 1965 and 1967, when antipoverty programs began to be criticized, news depictions of poverty became racialized” (p. 175). This biased media coverage negatively impacted the general public’s opinion of African American’s and their work-ethic. Therefore, believing that *all* welfare recipients are lazy and exploiting the welfare system is a belief predicated on prejudice and racism.

Among a myriad of myths regarding welfare and its recipients, perhaps the most toxic is that the problems welfare recipients experience are self-inflicted. Many knowingly and unknowingly speculate immorality causes the poor to stay on welfare. Sadly, many people judge welfare recipients based on an erroneous belief that they would rather purchase alcohol than food. This previous myth can be summarized in the expression “beer instead of bread.” While

some may fit this model, not all people on welfare purchase alcohol with the monies they receive from cash-assistance programs.

Deplorably, blaming the victim is a maxim education has quickly subscribed to and championed. Teachers cite that if only the parents of these poor students would care the children would learn and achieve. Or worse yet, it is the children's fault—they are lazy and do not care about school. How further from the truth can these statements be? It is unimaginable that parents of color and particularly those on the welfare rolls do not care about their current struggles and state of affairs.

CRT must quickly distinguish these unknowingly or knowingly false assumptions. It has been recorded that Mohandas K. Gandhi once said that "Poverty is the worst form of violence." CRT would agree that being impoverished is a form of violence and would advocate for dismantling false, injurious, and self-serving propaganda—welfare mythology, such as the welfare queen. Like welfare mythology, schools' sine qua non is to silence certain enclaves of people while valuing and victimizing others.

Final Remarks

CRT finds itself at a critical point in time when many are looking for solutions and suggestions. Unfortunately, the black and brown faces that so desperately need advocates and allies are being forgotten and sidelined. Critics must not lose hope and must continue to fight with their writings, ground-level work, and outspokenness by recanting falsehoods, stereotypical perceptions and conceptions, and xenophobic affronts.

Asian-Crits must release its highly cerebral insights and arguments in order to create safe spaces for Asians; otherwise, Asians will remain rickshaw pullers for whites. Queer-Crits must articulate positions that run counter to the status quo; otherwise, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* will continue to gloss over queer issues and perpetuate faulty, assumptive, and highly hegemonic rhetoric: generalizations about sexual identity, namely that gay men are inherently more fashionable and stylish than heterosexuals. Tribal-Crits must continue to imbue the mainstream with their needs and critiques; otherwise, the black/white binary will receive the majority of time when speaking about topics of oppression and privilege. Clearly overcoming being in a nadir is much work. CRT has the ability to destabilize white supremacy so that it will not have a leg to stand on. Who is ready to work?

About the Author

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Endnotes

ⁱTaylor, in *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education*, notes that “[s]ome mark the official start of CLS in 1977 as a conference at the University of Wisconsin, Madison” (2009, p. 2).

ⁱⁱAny attempt to name them all would fall short.