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# Critical Race Theory and Education: Mapping a Legacy of Activism and Scholarship

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Critical Race Theory and Education

## Mapping a Legacy of Activism and Scholarship

*Kafi D. Kumasi*



Schools are involved in framing ideas about race and in struggles around racial equity. They serve as a sorting mechanism, providing different students with access to different kinds of experiences, opportunities, and knowledge which then shapes their future opportunities. This relationship is particularly true for disenfranchised and poor students who are likely to have access to important tools, information, and skills only in school. Far from functioning as “great equalizers” schools too often perpetuate existing inequalities.

—Amanda Lewis, *Race in the Schoolyard*

In order to give voice to the difficulties many parents living in urban centers across America today have faced in finding quality schooling options for their children, I begin this chapter with a brief anecdote about my own struggle as a black mother of two. I share my story because the state of urban education in the United States is in a crisis that deserves more attention and resources. In so doing, I am also invoking *counterstorytelling*, a central feature of critical



race theory (CRT) scholarship, which is the branch of critical social theory that will be explored in this chapter.

My story begins at the completion of my doctoral coursework, when I decided to move back home. I was born and raised in a large, predominantly black urban city located in the midwestern United States. As a result of this move back home, I was also moving my two school-age children away from the mostly white college town where I attended graduate school. The schooling choices available for my children in my hometown were less than desirable. Rampant school violence, crumbling facades, outdated and irrelevant curricula, and apathetic teachers are just a few of the issues plaguing the school district.

From a CRT perspective, the lack of opportunities for quality schooling back home are not a coincidence but, rather, can be attributed to the confluence of several social and economic forces that have played out over decades, even centuries. One obvious reason for urban decay is the decreased tax base that was brought on by white flight in the 1960s, when white city residents fled in large numbers to suburban areas, particularly after the race riots of 1967. In addition, the city has recently suffered from corruption among high-ranking city and school officials, and this has exacerbated existing racial tensions among city and suburban residents, who blame each other for the city's problems.

Yet while these circumstances have given my hometown a bad rap, so to speak, I still felt some comfort in knowing that I could draw from my own knowledge and experience as a former urban schoolteacher to help fill in areas where the public school system might be lacking if I were to send my children to our neighborhood school. Unfortunately, my concerns were not confined only to the academic side of the educational equation; they also had to do with issues of school safety and the lack of extracurricular opportunities.

When I reflect on my decision to attain residency in the nearby (mostly white) suburban school district, I can see clearly the ways in which *race*, or more specifically *whiteness*, structures my own life choices. This choice was not an easy one to make because I knew that there would be important trade-offs for choosing to send my children to a predominantly white suburban school. I realized that it would be left up to me to offset the lack of culturally centered teaching, specifically the omission of teachings about black history, by teaching my children at home and exposing them to black culture and history through other outlets, such as museums and libraries, as well as strong role models in the home and community.

Still, I see more clearly than I ever have before how race and power intersect in ways that not only shape my life choices but also shape the larger society's struggle over valued cultural and material resources such as schools. In this sense, schools have become precious commodities that are being competed for and protected by individuals who have the most social, economic, and cultural capital (Delpit and Dowdy 2002). CRT can help us all see the racial dimensions of these educational struggles.



The primary goal of this chapter is to map the historical precursors of CRT, specifically to highlight select individuals whose antiracist, anticolonial ideas and actions preceded the body of thought that was coined “CRT” by legal scholars in the 1960s during the civil rights era. This chapter situates the origins of CRT inside a broad historical discourse that has evolved over several centuries in response to the social condition of racially oppressed people. The lineage of CRT that is offered in this chapter is limited by my subjective knowledge in this area. However, an attempt has been made to include historical figures (for example, Frantz Fanon and W. E. B. Du Bois) whose names have been appropriated by well-known CRT scholars such as Derrick Bell in discussions about the historical influences of this theoretical tradition. Moreover, this chapter is not meant to be exhaustive; rather, it aims to provide a brief introduction to some seminal moments, events, and personalities within the CRT tradition, in hopes of encouraging readers to explore these events and personalities in greater depth on their own.

The chapter is organized into five sections. The first section provides contextual remarks to help situate current discussions of race and education in the twenty-first century. The second section highlights the intellectual precursors to CRT, beginning with anticolonial thinkers and protesters from around the world. The third section traces the development of CRT with its origins as a counterlegal discourse that took root in the United States during the civil rights era; it offers a brief discussion of the multicultural intellectual genealogy of CRT. The fourth section contains definitions of key CRT concepts that have been highlighted throughout the chapter in italics. The fifth and final section provides a brief introduction to CRT in education, followed by a close examination of two articles that exemplify how educational scholars are using CRT to address contemporary issues, particularly as they relate to research and teaching.

### CONTEXTUALIZING RACE AND EDUCATION

It is fashionable nowadays to downplay and even dismiss race as a factor shaping the quality of life in the United States and instead to favor class-based and gender-based approaches to understanding social oppression.

—Garrett Duncan, *Critical Race Theory and Method*

Over the last twenty years or so, one can discern a disturbing trend in mainstream educational discourses regarding how school inequities are explained. The tendency is to attribute the disparities that exist between inner-city and suburban school resources and between achievement among white and non-white youth to issues of class, while dismissing or minimizing the influence of racism. There is a sense that racism has been eradicated in the post-civil rights



era and that racially subordinated peoples rely too much on “racial victimology” (McWhorter 2000) to explain their own social conditions. Author and cultural critic Shelby Steele has also written extensively about the notion of racial victimology in his book *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (2006). The central argument he makes is that black Americans traded in their sense of responsibility at the same moment (in the 1960s) that white Americans accepted their role in subjugating blacks through the lingering effects of slavery and racial segregation. He contends that blacks turned their victim status into a kind of currency that has no purchasing power. In his view, blacks must stop relying on set-asides and entitlements such as affirmative action and adopt a “culture of excellence.”

The problem with the race-neutral views of educational inequity that currently flood mainstream educational discourses is that they are often ahistorical. For example, supporters of race-neutral educational policies often cite the fact that the Constitution prohibits using race in deciding matters of citizenship and equal rights, thus making it unlawful for contemporary educational policymakers to do the same (see Coleman, Palmer and Winnick 2008). Yet James D. Anderson (2007) exposes the faulty logic that these arguments rest upon by chronicling the legal precedents that were established long before race-conscious educational policies such as affirmative action became law in the 1960s. Through an in-depth analysis of the congressional debates that were held during the Reconstruction Congress (1865–1875) concerning matters of citizenship and equal rights, Anderson found that the question of racial classifications was in fact a highly debated issue that was ultimately left unresolved. Using excerpts from the actual congressional debates, Anderson explains that the moderate-conservative majority of the Reconstruction Congress was very much race-conscious. Furthermore, the Reconstruction Congress took race into account in virtually *all* of its debates concerning citizenship and equal rights. In responding to Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts’s recent statement that “history should be heard” when it comes to using race to assign children to schools, Anderson concludes:

If history must be heard, as Chief Roberts contends, then we should take time and effort to understand the historical and sociological context in which school desegregation and affirmative action cases arise, and not prejudge them by the mythology of a color-blind Constitution. (2007, 256)

Those who suggest that racism plays little or no role in explaining current educational inequalities often rely upon the myth of “Ameritocracy” (Akorn 2008) or upon color-blind assumptions that promote an idea that America is a fundamentally just society that rewards all individuals who simply work hard. Evidence for this meritocratic belief system is often attributed to the growing black middle class in America. What is missing from this discourse, according to



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Antwi Akom (2008), is an acknowledgment that access to the American dream is restricted on the basis of racial identity and other forms of social difference. Similarly, Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault (1997) reveal how liberal white color-blind assumptions play out in classroom settings and often mask covert racist ideologies concerning people of color. Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) describes circumstances where stereotypical labels and categories get “fixed” upon certain groups of students. For example, when black and brown youth living in the inner city and attending inner-city schools are labeled “at risk,” the implicit comparison being made is to an unspoken yet normative category of whiteness. In these instances, white identity and white cultural and linguistic norms are positioned as superior to those practiced by nonwhites. Hence, students whose language and cultural practices deviate from those of the dominant white culture are perceived to be abnormal or inferior. Ladson-Billings explains that a new language and construction of race have emerged in mainstream discourses that are particularly offensive toward nonwhite people but are cleverly disguised beneath conceptual categories that become placeholders for normative references to certain racial groups:

Conceptual categories like “school achievement”, “middle classness”, “maleness”, “beauty”, and “intelligence” and “science” become normative categories of whiteness while categories like “gangs”, “welfare recipients”, “basketball players”, and the “underclass” become marginalized and de-legitimized categories for “blackness.” (1998, 9)

As it relates to the issue of school achievement, educational scholars have found CRT to be a powerful explanatory tool to help tease apart the intersections of race, class, and other modes of domination. For many educational scholars, the power of CRT lies in its ability to avoid using cultural-deficit paradigms to explain the persistent achievement gap between white and nonwhite students and in its demand for “a deeper analysis of the historical and contemporary conditions that have created socioeconomic disparities” (Dixson and Rousseau 2006, 122). Yet before one can understand the scope of contemporary educational inequities, he or she must first understand the social and historical context in which these conditions were created. The next section seeks to contextualize this history by providing a brief overview of the historical precursors that led to the more popular civil rights adaptation of CRT that informs educational scholarship today.

### **HISTORICAL PRECURSORS TO CRITICAL RACE THEORY**

As mentioned previously, the origins of CRT are not easily traced to the ideas of one or two individuals, unlike other branches of critical social theory (for





example, Antonio Gramsci and the concept of hegemony). Instead, CRT is more broadly conceived as a historical movement that is “derivative of the history and intellectual traditions of people of color” (Matsuda 1996, 5). William F. Tate describes CRT as “an iterative project of scholarship and social justice” (1997, 235). CRT can thus be seen as both a historical movement and a philosophical orientation that recognizes the centrality and permanence of racism in the United States. At the same time, CRT is a pragmatic philosophical response to the oppression that racial minority groups have experienced throughout history since the onset of European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade (Harris 1983).

The intellectual origins of CRT can be traced back to the historic battles against white supremacy that were recorded in the mid-1700s. During this period nonwhite people in places such as Africa, Asia, South America, and the Caribbean began to “shake the foundations of white Western world hegemony” through their anticolonial efforts (Thurman 1996). The list of historical figures mentioned in Table 7.1 is by no means exhaustive, but the names are presented in chronological order to help the reader get a general sense of the kind of activism that preceded the civil rights era. These figures help illustrate the mental shift that began to occur among colonized and newly freed men and women of color in the 1700s and 1800s, when white supremacist ideologies began to be seriously critiqued.

Two early examples of the pragmatic origins of CRT are recorded in the life works of Tupac Amaru (1742–1781) and Toussaint-L’ouverture (1743–1803). Each of these men fought (in one case successfully) to end colonialism and slavery in their respective countries. In 1780, Amaru led an indigenous uprising in South America against the Spanish occupation of Peru that has been recorded as one of the largest, earliest, and most significant anticolonial movements in the history of Latin America (Cornblit 1995). To the east in the West Indies, Toussaint-L’ouverture, a former black slave, rose in importance as a military commander by helping drive out both the Spaniards and the French invaders who oppressed the colony of St. Domingue (Haiti) (Santrey 1994).

Such incidents of rebellion can be linked to a larger effort to eradicate global European colonialism. In that sense, global European colonialism is one of the key episodes that launched the anticolonial movement. The achievement of Haitian national independence in 1804 and the abolishment of slavery in the West Indies in 1832–1833 are two critical events from this era.

Antislavery efforts were also mounted in America—a social context with its own unique history of race relations. For example, Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), a former slave turned abolitionist teacher, fought for women’s rights and worked as a traveling preacher despite having experienced the harsh effects of slavery when her children were sold into slavery. John Brown (1800–1859) was an American abolitionist who advocated and practiced armed insurrection as a means to end all slavery. He led the Pottawatomie Massacre





**Table 7.1 Historical and Intellectual Precursors to Critical Race Theory**

<i>Historical Figure</i>	<i>Life Span</i>	<i>Origin, Place</i>	<i>Key Qualities</i>
Tupac Amaru	(1742–1781)	Peru, South America	Led an indigenous uprising in South America against the Spanish occupation.
Toussaint-L’ouverture	(1743–1803)	Haiti, West Indies	A former black slave who helped drive out European colonizers and sparked the independence of Haiti.
Sojourner Truth	(1797–1883)	New York, U.S.A.	A former slave turned abolitionist teacher who fought for women’s rights.
John Brown	(1800–1859)	New York, U.S.A.	White American abolitionist who advocated armed insurrection as a means to end all slavery.
Frederic Douglass	(1818–1895)	Maryland, U.S.A.	Influential black abolitionist of the nineteenth century.
W. E. B. Du Bois	(1868–1963)	Massachusetts, U.S.A.	First black to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard University. He theorized about the plight of blacks in the United States.
Mahatma Gandhi	(1869–1946)	India	A major political and spiritual leader of India who sought to achieve Swaraj, or independence.
Carter G. Woodson	(1875–1950)	Virginia, U.S.A.	The father of Black History Month who wrote <i>The Miseducation of the Negro</i> (1933).

in 1856 in “Bleeding Kansas” and made his name in the unsuccessful raid at Harpers Ferry in 1859.

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) was perhaps one of the most influential black abolitionists in the nineteenth century. Douglass used education as his major weapon to fight against racial oppression. In his now famous autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1849), Douglass stressed



literacy attainment as an avenue to escape from the degradation of slavery and a vehicle to attain the accoutrements of success in mainstream U.S. society. In this sense, Douglass made visible how highly valued literacy attainment was and continues to be within the African American community (Harris 1992). In Douglass's time it was unlawful to teach blacks to read and write in certain states in the Old South. These laws were fueled by perception among whites, particularly white plantation owners, that if blacks learned to read they would stir up abolitionist sentiment and ruin their southern way of life. Douglass's legacy of articulating the importance of education as a means to fight racial inequalities helped set the stage for his immediate successors, including W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) and Carter G. Woodson (1875–1950).

Both Du Bois and Woodson theorized about the plight of blacks in the United States, particularly as it relates to issues of education and social mobility. Less than a century after Douglass penned his autobiography, Woodson began to write extensively about the intersections of race, power, and education in the United States. In *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933), Woodson critiqued the ways in which American public schools failed to equip African American students with the kind of education needed to empower them socially, politically, or economically. One of his primary critiques was that the traditional school curriculum was biased toward teaching about European history and culture while failing to provide black students with a sense of the culture and history of black people.

An important component of Woodson's work was his ability not only to identify the problem but to come up with a solution. For example, although Woodson critiqued the American school system, he also offered a comprehensive alternative to the problem by establishing the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, which is still a thriving organization that goes by the acronym ASALH. This effort led to the installation of Black History Week, which later evolved to Black History Month, which is still celebrated today. Douglass and Carter are but two examples of the intellectual roots that paved the way for contemporary CRT scholarship.

CRT owes an intellectual debt to each of these scholars, but particularly to the sociological work produced by W. E. B. Du Bois. In remarks about Du Bois's landmark study, *The Philadelphia Negro*, the *Times Literary Supplement* published the following anonymous statement:

What made Du Bois' study remarkable in its day was its rejection of prevailing assumptions of inherent racial differences, thus bearing on issues much wider than those indicated by its title. It is also notable as a thoroughly modern piece of social research. The problems faced by Philadelphia's blacks, he argued, had nothing to do with their supposed racial proclivities, but derived from the way they had been treated in the past and their relegation



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in the present to the most menial and lowest-paying jobs. (see <http://www.amazon.com/Philadelphia-Negro-Social-Study/dp/0812215737>)

In this study, Du Bois applied the standard tools of sociology to a topic that had been understudied by mainstream sociologists—black life. For this he has been credited with helping lay the intellectual foundations of critical social theories that address race and power (Twine and Gallagher 2007). Perhaps his most famous theoretical contribution was the theory of *double consciousness*. Double consciousness was a framework Du Bois developed to help explain the social and psychological tensions that African Americans experience as a result of having to negotiate their racial identity in a context where dominant white values, cultural and linguistic practices, and standards of beauty are privileged. In his classic work *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois famously described the condition:

A peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (1953, 3)

Du Bois's theory of double consciousness has left a powerful legacy for scholars seeking to explain and improve the educational experiences of black students. One notable example of Du Bois's influence in educational scholarship can be seen in the work of black studies scholar Molefi Asante. Asante's Afrocentric idea in education was influenced by Du Bois's Afrocentric educational perspective and historical worldview. In his major work, *The Afrocentric Idea* (1998), Asante explains that Afrocentricity means "placing African ideals at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behavior" (6). Although scholars like Asante note that Du Bois himself was not an Afrocentrist, but rather a Eurocentrist, they nonetheless credit him with being a major pre-Afrocentric figure in the philosophical and intellectual development of black people.

Asa G. Hilliard is perhaps one of the most renowned theorists of Afrocentric education. Hilliard (2002) credited Du Bois with being a major influence on his ideas about African-centered education. Hilliard argued that black children experience Du Bois's double consciousness as a result of being educated in a U.S. schooling context that fails to adequately infuse black cultural frames of reference into the curriculum.

Another important educational work that carries Du Bois's legacy is Mwalimu Shujaa's edited book *Too Much Schooling, Too Little Education: A Paradox of Black Life in White Societies* (1994). Throughout the book, the





contributing authors cite Du Bois and by extension further solidify his place as a forerunner of African-centered scholarship. In the chapter entitled “Historic Readers for African American Children (1868–1944): Uncovering and Reclaiming a Tradition of Opposition,” Violet J. Harris draws directly on the work of Du Bois in her analysis of the historical curricular materials designed for black children, including Du Bois’s own *The Brownies’ Book* (1980).

Another key thinker and activist who fought against (and theorized about) racism and colonialism was Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1946). Gandhi was a major political and spiritual leader of India who sought to achieve *Swaraj*, or the independence of India from foreign domination, through nonviolent civil disobedience. Gandhi went on to become the inspiration for civil rights movements around the world, as evidenced by his influence on the American civil rights icon Martin Luther King Jr.

The West Indian playwright and politician Aimé Césaire wrote about the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized in his 1955 book *Discours sur le colonialisme*, another literary example of anticolonial thought. This text is an example of an early social theory treatise written from the perspective of a colonial subject. Similarly, in 1952 Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (2007) gave a firsthand account of the effects of European colonization on the political consciousness of the colonized. These acts of bravery on the colonial “battlefield” exposed as a fallacy white supremacy, a concept that needed to be fervently challenged. This idea began to take root and to be spread in a number of media, particularly through print texts. Former colonial subjects began to write accounts of indigenous life before colonial rule. Their writings helped offset the destructive effects of white supremacist ideology by showing that native people had a high quality of life prior to European colonization. Novels such as René Maran’s *Batuaola* (1922) and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1959) are examples of these kinds of literary contributions to the foundations of CRT. In many ways, these stories served as counternarratives to the dominant Eurocentric ideology about nonwhite people’s lived realities and capabilities.

The next section explores the more well-known body of CRT scholarship, which is associated with a branch of legal studies that emerged during the civil rights movement in the United States.

### **CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN THE ACADEMY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW**

CRT scholars acknowledge the permanence of racism while, at the same time, arguing that this recognition should not lead to despair and surrender but to greater resolve in the struggle. . . . The assertion that racism is a permanent and pervasive part of the American landscape is not a defeatist





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position. It is an acknowledgement of the “trouble of the world,” but is coupled with a vision of hope for the future.

—Adrienne D. Dixson and Celia K. Rousseau,  
*Critical Race Theory in Education*

Among contemporary scholars, CRT is commonly known as a body of legal scholarship that was initiated by a group of lawyers during the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Readers who are interested in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the origins of CRT might consult Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic’s *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2001).

In short, CRT began when a small group of legal scholars from across the country, including Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Charles Lawrence, Lani Guinier, Mari Matsuda, Patricia Williams, and Kimberly Crenshaw, began to recognize and challenge the fact that the hard-won gains of the civil rights movement were being stalled and quickly eroded due to a pervasive liberal ideology in the law. This liberal ideology was content with slow and protracted legal reforms so long as they were on white America’s terms or converged with their interests (Parker and Lynn 2002).

The earliest writings on CRT can be traced to the work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman (Delgado and Stefancic 2005). Both men challenged the prevailing traditional philosophical position of liberal civil rights, which maintained a color-blind approach to social justice. Bell and Freeman, among other scholars, began to coalesce around an ever-growing sentiment that critical legal studies (CLS) left little room to address the issue of racial inequality.

CLS was a movement within the law led by mostly white Marxist and postmodern legal scholars who were attempting to uncover the ideological underpinnings of American jurisprudence. CRT scholars argued, however, that CLS failed to recognize the ways in which the hegemonic system of white supremacy and racism actually shaped the very construction of the legal foundation upon which U.S. society is built. In her description of the events that precipitated CRT’s development, Angela Harris recounts:

There was, of course, law that had a lot to do with the lives of some communities of color: poverty law, welfare law, criminal law, and immigration law. But there was, seemingly, no language in which to embark on a race-based, systematic critique of legal reasoning and legal institutions themselves. As first-year, then second-year, then third-year law students, we had no inkling of the struggles going on at Harvard Law School over the work and teachings of Derrick Bell, or of the few scholars—one coauthor of this book among them—who had begun to apply the tools of critical theory to the law. We finished our legal educations never having found a place where the sophisticated discourse of racial critique in which we lived our daily lives could enter the legal canon. (As cited in Delgado and Stefancic 2001, xviii)





Harris helps illustrate how CRT helped unmask the so-called objective, color-blind interpretations of law and legal doctrine and revealed the ways in which the law functioned as a mechanism to solidify control over the social and structural arrangements of U.S. society by whites.

Derrick Bell is said to be the most influential source of thought critical of traditional civil rights discourse (Delgado and Stefancic 2005). His critique represented a challenge to the dominant liberal and conservative position on civil rights, race, and the law. Bell employed three major arguments in his analyses of race and American law: Constitutional contradiction, the *interest convergence* principle, and the price of racial remedies. Bell's critique has been summarized as stating that whites will promote racial advances for blacks only when those advances also promote white self-interest.

Bell used storytelling or narrative style in his early manuscripts as a way of showing that the stories people of color tell come from a frame of reference different from that of the dominant culture. CRT scholars in general maintain that people of color speak from an experience framed by racism and that in order to appreciate their perspective, we must allow them to "name their own reality" or give voice to their unique racialized experiences. Delgado offers three reasons for the naming of one's reality in legal discourse:

- (1) much of reality is socially constructed; (2) stories provide members of outgroups a vehicle for psychic self-preservation; and (3) the exchange of stories from teller to listener can help overcome ethnocentrism and the dysconscious conviction of wiring the world in one way. (As cited in Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995, 51)

Similar to Bell's efforts, the work of CRT pioneer Kimberly Crenshaw provided an invaluable critique of traditional civil rights discourse. Her most noted contribution was the identification of two distinct properties of antidiscrimination law: expansiveness and restrictiveness. The former recognizes equality as an outcome and relies on the courts to eliminate the effects of racism. The latter views equality as a process and is focused on preventing any future affronts. Crenshaw contends that while both expansive and restrictive properties coexist in antidiscrimination law, the restrictive property fails to address the lingering effects of the country's racist past and merely perpetuates the existing social order. When Tate, whose background is in educational psychology, applied Crenshaw's expansive and restrictive view to evaluate particular educational policies in the 1990s, he found that the restrictive interpretation of antidiscrimination laws worked against African American students' interest. This is just one example of the ways in which CRT has helped build a community among scholars from various disciplinary backgrounds who are dedicated to exposing and transforming racial injustice anywhere it is manifested. CRT has thus provided a new language and a new paradigm in which to address





the issues and challenges facing “outsider” groups who experience racism in their daily lives.

### CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND VOICES FROM THE MARGINS

Instead of being treated as marginal, women, people of color, citizens of postcolonial societies, gays and lesbians, and various other “subalterns” ... are now made central by postmodern critical theory, which not only speaks in their name but theorizes their oppression in common terms. Postmodern social theory nonetheless makes the explanation and articulation of difference a central aim. This differs from multiculturalism in the sense that it not only “allows” various subalterns to narrate their lives and experiences but builds a critical theory on the basis of evidence gathered from these narratives.

—Charles Lemert, *Social Theory*

Because CRT was initially geared toward critiquing the slow pace of racial reform promised by the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, the tendency was to focus on issues related to African American citizens at the expense of other marginalized groups, including women, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian Americans. This emphasis on black and white racial relations helped forge a new community of critical scholarship that examined oppression as it was experienced by other marginalized groups outside the African American community. A more detailed discussion of the multicultural roots of CRT is provided in Tara J. Yosso’s article “Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth” (2005).

Only recently have the contributions of women and scholars of color been given space in Western canons of critical social theory (see, for example, Lemert 2004). Traditionally, white males were credited as the “fathers” of critical social thought. Ironically, the well-known African American sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois was studying at the University of Berlin during the same time period in which the Frankfurt School of philosophy and sociology was being established in Germany. Du Bois went on to produce an impressive body of sociological work on African American conditions that is largely influenced by Marxist thought. Yet it has only been rather more recently that Du Bois’s work has been deliberately acknowledged as part of the “critical social theory” tradition.

The impetus for Du Bois’s sociological work in the black community was that he believed that social science could help alleviate the “problem of the color line” (Du Bois 1953, 3). He later went on to publish a series of significant essays in a wide range of periodicals between 1897 and 1903, where he hoped to use his research acumen to tackle the problems of racism. In 1898 he wrote:



At such a time true lovers of humanity can only hold higher the pure ideals of science, and continue to insist that if we would solve a problem we must study it, and that there is but one coward on earth, and that is the coward that dare not to know. (27)

### KEY CONCEPTS

*Double consciousness:* The push/pull social psychological syndrome that African Americans experience in trying to both accommodate and resist mainstream white society's cultural and linguistic norms. The term was coined by the twentieth-century black sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois (1953). The Du Boisian scholar, Robert Gooding-Williams (2009), describes double consciousness as a two-dimensional pattern of estrangement that arises when blacks experience the power of second sight from the perspective of antiblack prejudice. In his book, *In the Shadow of Du Bois*, Gooding-Williams points out that this definition of double consciousness arose from Du Bois's writings on Alexander Crummell, a black abolitionist. Du Bois depicts Crummell as a tragic figure who did not fully sympathize with the plight of former slaves, which caused him to internalize the same deficit perspectives toward blacks that were often hidden by the white majority. Double consciousness is a key term in CRT scholarship because it captures the contradictory qualities of racial minority experience, which are woven into the social fabric of U.S. society.

*Hegemony:* The dominance or power of one cultural group over another. This dominance is not necessarily maintained by force; it is also supported through the consent of the subordinate group, in that the members of the subordinate group begin to accept, adopt, and internalize the values and norms of the dominant group. A more in-depth discussion of the concept of hegemony can be found in chapter 2, on the work of Antonio Gramsci.

*Interest convergence:* The thesis, proposed by Derrick Bell, that the white majority group tolerates advances for racial justice only when it suits their interests to do so. The notion of interest convergence can be understood well when it is explained against the backdrop of the civil rights era. For instance, the idea that the "gains" blacks made as a result of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* reflected racial tolerance is untrue; rather, the Supreme Court supported *Brown* because it served the U.S. cold war agenda of supporting human rights.

*Intersectionality:* The fact that race does not function independently of other modes of domination, such as classism or sexism. In fact, although racism is a central feature of any CRT analysis, CRT scholars are critical of any sociological analyses that focus solely on race without recognizing that racial oppression exists in multiple layers based on gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality. CRT scholars recognize the intersectionality of race and racism with other forms of subordination

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and recognize that people belong to more than one demographic or cultural group and are consequently affected by disenfranchisement or inequality in more than one way. To this point, Douglass S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton note, “Not only does discrimination lead to segregation, but segregation, by restricting economic opportunities for blacks, produces interracial economic disparities that incite further discrimination and more segregation” (as cited in Dixson and Rousseau 2006, 123).

Patricia Hill Collins also writes extensively about intersectionality by theorizing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression (see Lemert 2004). Collins places African American women at the center of her analysis to help open up the possibilities for a both/and conceptual stance, one in which all groups possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically created system. For Collins, the significance of seeing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression is that “such an approach fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusively about other oppressions, such as age, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity” (in Lemert 2004, 536).

*Race:* To be sure, a term that continues to confound and vex people in contemporary social life. Some of the complexities around race derive from the fact that race is the “ultimate trope of difference that has been used figuratively in the modern world to describe irreducible differences between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems” (Gates 1986, 533). Throughout history, there have been social and political disputes over how racial lines have been drawn and who gets to be classified as a certain race in the eyes of the law. This battle has primarily consisted of nonwhites seeking to be classified as Caucasian in order to attain U.S. citizenship and the associated privileges that come with being white in our society.

CRT scholars recognize that the characteristics ascribed to a particular race can and will change to fit a dominant group’s interest. In this way, *racist behavior is not an aberration in everyday life; it is often normal practice in deeply racialized social systems*. For example, African American people were most commonly called “happy-go-lucky and childlike” in the slavery era to rationalize slavery but now are most commonly called “threatening and criminal” to rationalize increased police intervention. As individuals seek to move beyond the nefarious legacy of racism in the post–civil rights era and in an increasingly globalized, multicultural societal context, race will continue to command increased attention.

Despite being in agreement that *race is a social construct, not a biological one*, many scholars still often use race to explain variances in social outcomes (for example, achievement levels, income levels, incarceration rates), giving little attention to the racialization process itself (Lewis 2004, 6.). Social scientists continue to carry out research that employs racial categories as if they were fixed or scientifically proven. Some scholars have suggested that there needs to be a shift in social science methodology away from examining the effects of the color line to exploring the constitution of the color line itself.

At the same time, race should not be seen as merely a sociological abstraction or a figment of one's imagination. Racial categories are very real and shape how people identify themselves, how they behave, and what kinds of opportunities are afforded them in life. The theoretical origins of the concept of race have been widely discussed in the field of sociology. In particular, much of the intellectual groundwork in this area has been laid by scholars such as Michael Omi and Howard Winant (see, for example, Omi and Winant 1994), among others. In the following quotation, Winant provides an important overview of the historical development of racial theory in sociology that serves as a useful primer to understanding the current racial predicament in modern society:

At its most basic level, race can be defined as a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies. Although the concept of race appeals to biologically based human characteristics (phenotypes), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process. There is no biological basis for distinguishing human groups along the lines of race, and the sociohistorical categories employed to differentiate among these groups reveal themselves, upon serious examination, to be imprecise if not completely arbitrary. (Winant 2000, 172)

*Racial identity:* The degree to which a person feels connected to or shares commonalities with an ethnic or racial group. For African Americans, racial identity is noted to be shaped by historically oppressive and racist experiences in relation to white supremacy. However, both positive and negative experiences might influence racial identity among African Americans.

*Voice:* From a CRT perspective, the ability of a group, such as African Americans or women, to articulate their experiences in ways that are unique to it. It is CRT's conception and employment of voice that helps make it a powerful tool for addressing racial inequality. Through *storytelling* and *counternarratives*, disenfranchised people(s) are provided the intellectual space to "name their own realities" in areas, such as academia, where they have been previously marginalized. Thus, counterstories are narratives told by members of out groups that help counteract the grand narratives of the dominant group and challenge the status quo. A CRT framework recognizes the *centrality of experiential knowledge* of people of color and views this knowledge as legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination. Among blacks, storytelling is part of a larger tradition where real-life events have been fictionalized as a way to mask real-life trials and tribulations. The genres through which these stories have been told include Negro spirituals, folktales, and rhetorical devices such as signifying and testifying (Smitherman 1977).



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Because CRT scholars acknowledge that people of color have different stories and different ways of telling their stories than do enfranchised people(s), they have received criticism from both liberals and conservatives. Such critics have argued that stories are analytically unsound and promote a kind of racial essentialism that inhibits true social reform. Yet CRT scholars maintain that they are not making up stories; they are constructing narratives out of the historical, sociocultural, and political realities of their lives and those of people of color. In this way, narratives provide a context for understanding the way inequity manifests in policy, practice, and people's everyday experiences.

CRT scholars also respond to criticisms about the validity of counter-narratives within CRT discourses by *challenging dominant claims of objectivity, neutrality, colorblindness, and merit*. For example, Bell argues that "objective truth, like merit, does not exist, at least in social science and politics. In these realms, truth is a social construct created to suit the purposes of the dominant group" (in Delgado and Stefancic 2005, 92). CRT scholars have also defended attacks on CRT's use of storytelling by maintaining that it is not merely a rhetorical device employed by CRT scholars; rather, it is also an effective tool for countering the acontextual approach within traditional legal analysis that is commonly seen in dominant discourses. In the field of law, the most notable examples of storytelling are exemplified in the writings of Bell and Williams. Educational scholars are also using narrative styles and counterstorytelling as both analytical and methodological frameworks (Duncan 2005). Seasoned CRT scholars, however, have cautioned against using storytelling merely for aesthetic purposes and have urged emerging CRT scholars to help advance other areas of CRT that are less developed. These attacks leveled against CRT's credibility help illuminate the pervasiveness of whiteness and its influence on contemporary scholarly discourses. Discussions about what constitutes "good" scholarship is subtly yet firmly linked to whiteness or Eurocentric epistemologies, which according to Joe L. Kincheloe et al. privilege "mind over body, intellectual over experiential ways of knowing, mental abstractions over passion, bodily sensations and tactile understandings" (1999, 162).

*Whiteness*: A phenomenon defined by Ruth Frankenburg in three ways:

First, whiteness is a location of structural advantage, or race privilege. Second, it is a "standpoint," a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, at society. Third, "whiteness" refers to a set of cultural practices, that are usually unmarked and unnamed. (1997, 1)

Because of hegemony, whiteness is both resisted and reproduced by nonwhite people in a way that leads them to enact double consciousness.

According to Ian Haney-López, the concept of whiteness was reified through the U.S. legal system, particularly by the Supreme Court, which loosely defined whites as "those not constructed as non-white. That is, Whites exist





as a category of people subject to a double negative: They are those who are not non-White” (Haney-López 2000, 93). Not only were whites differentiated by being the antithesis of nonwhites, but they were constructed as the superior antithesis. In this way, the racial hierarchy of white supremacy was formed out of the need to justify the African slave trade by positioning blacks as subhuman, a concept that was later legalized through the courts and in the U.S. Constitution when blacks were counted as three-fifths of a person.

### **CRITICAL RACE THEORY APPLICATIONS IN EDUCATION: A CLOSE EXAMINATION**

In the field of education, CRT has become a widely used analytical tool for addressing school inequities. CRT was introduced in the field of education through a seminal article published by Ladson-Billings and Tate entitled “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education” (1995). In this article, the authors draw upon the thesis that whiteness holds material and symbolic property value in the United States and can be used as a framework for examining racism in education.

One of the major thrusts behind the CRT movement in education was a desire to move discussions of race beyond the realm of the experiential to the realm of the conceptual. Early CRT scholars in education such as Ladson-Billings argued that race and racism had yet to be given their full explanatory power in educational scholarship. Therefore, one of the most promising aspects of CRT has been its ability to use theory as a way to systematically uncover the fact that race *still* is a determining factor in societal inequity and consequently in school inequities (Dixson and Rousseau 2006).

Approximately ten years after Ladson-Billings and Tate’s seminal article appeared in *Teachers College Record*, a second generation of educational scholars galvanized to show the growth and complexity of CRT and how its key constructs can be applied to address educational issues. The resulting book, *Critical Race Theory in Education: All God’s Children Got a Song* (2006), edited by Adrienne Dixson and Celia Rousseau, served a number of purposes, but mostly it provided a forum through which scholars from across different areas of education could showcase their collective progress in using CRT frameworks to address a wide range of educational concerns. One of the common features of the pieces selected for this volume is a commitment to building upon the legal roots of CRT as the foundation from which to discuss current educational work.

The work that has been done to examine applications of CRT constructs in educational scholarship is quite extensive. Therefore, this final section focuses only on two articles published in this field: one related to research and one focused on teaching. These articles were chosen in order to highlight work





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that addresses methodological issues in using CRT constructs to conduct educational research as well as pedagogical strategies for using CRT in real classroom settings.

*Duncan's "Critical Race Theory and Method"*

Garrett Duncan's "Critical Race Theory and Method: Rendering Race in Urban Ethnographic Research" (2002) provides a cogent analysis of the ways in which racist stereotypes about urban youth often get reproduced by well-meaning educational scholars (in this case by graduate researchers) whose work centers on inner-city students. Duncan draws on his experience as an instructor of a qualitative methods course called Literacy in the Schools to help readers understand how notions of care and empathy get invoked in ways that often reinforce white supremacist ideologies. These racist stereotypes toward urban youth are reified, according to Duncan, primarily because of the emphasis that some educational researchers place on what he describes as the "putative pathologies" of city-dwelling children, as opposed to their literate strengths and abilities. Duncan contends that CRT can be used to render race visible in the educational research process by employing reflexivity to help expose and disrupt false empathy and to replace it with more liberatory approaches to conducting qualitative inquiry in urban education.



*Application of CRT Constructs.* In typical CRT fashion, Duncan skillfully weaves personal *narrative* with sophisticated analysis of the ways in which racist practices get subtly reinforced by educational researchers. He provides a detailed and reflective account of his process teaching (and later redesigning) a qualitative methods course in order to employ pedagogical strategies that, in his words, "explicated the concrete, relational, and systematic character of racial oppression in ways that made it tangible and subject to intervention" (102). In this case, the analysis centers on the ideological stances that a group of graduate researchers (all of whom were white) took toward their work with a group of inner-city youth of color. As mentioned previously, Duncan contends that his students exhibited a kind of false empathy toward the urban youth they encountered in an after-school literacy program, an attitude that helped reinforce a hierarchical relationship that positioned the urban youth as victims. After analyzing the field notes his students took during their work with the inner-city youth, Duncan surmised that there were two competing ideologies informing how he and his students understood their work. His insight on this issue reflects his ability to detect and articulate the ways in which CRT plays out in the realm of educational research. He describes the differences as follows:

On the one hand, I saw the research problem mainly in terms of the role of a broader racist culture in undermining the human potential of the children in



the research setting. The student researchers, on the other hand, understood their work as helping a group of unfortunate, underprivileged children take advantage of the offerings of a fundamentally just society. (91)

In making this point, Duncan touches on one of the fundamental propositions of CRT, which is that racism is endemic to American life (Dixson and Rousseau 2006, 33). Although he comes to this conclusion primarily through self-reflection, he bolsters this claim by providing an analysis of secondary data gathered from students' writings about race in the redesigned course. *Reflexivity*, according to Duncan, is "an inward focus in qualitative inquiry that recognizes that boundaries between the observer and the observed are blurred in the research process" (96). In keeping with his own call for reflexivity, Duncan later redesigns his original qualitative methods course Education 250: Literacy in the Schools, and renames it Education 400: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture in Urban Education, I. Based on his reflections, he concludes that the new course should foreground his students' knowledge about concepts like race and racism rather than privileging what the scholarly literature says about the subject. In doing so, Duncan simultaneously employs two central CRT tenets in this work: voice and praxis.

Duncan associates the false empathy that his students in the first class exhibited with an ideology of liberalism. He describes liberalism as an abstraction and detachment that enables individuals to avoid seeing the fundamental relationships between economically devastated cities and the affluence of suburban enclaves. He argues that this kind of liberalism shapes the way race is talked about (or not talked about) in the design of research studies with urban youth. In making this analysis, Duncan employs a CRT tenet, which is a *critique of liberalism*. Delgado describes this kind of liberalism as "when a white believes he or she is identifying with a person of color, but in fact is doing so only in a superficial way" (as cited in Dixson and Rousseau 2006, 42).

*CRT as a Vehicle*. Ultimately, Duncan sees CRT as a vehicle for helping educational researchers think about their own assumptions about race and reflect on how they see themselves in relation to the larger society and to their research. He contends that such reflections are not merely a futile academic exercise but can be translated into concrete actions in the field. To back up this claim, he provides concrete examples of how conceptions of race were interrogated by a group of graduate researchers in the second, more student-centered methods course he taught. In redesigning the course to insert race more explicitly into the content, Duncan thwarts criticisms that CRT does not have enough empirically based research to back up the claims that are made. Overall, this article lays a strong foundation for understanding how CRT can be applied in the design of qualitative research, particularly as it relates to the ever-increasing body of scholarship on issues and trends in urban education.



*Stovall's "Where the Rubber Hits the Road": Overview*

In "Where the Rubber Hits the Road: CRT Goes to High School," David Stovall narrates his effort to infuse CRT into an urban high school classroom. By offering this detailed account of how CRT can be used to frame classroom learning, Stovall helps debunk the popular conception that CRT scholarship lacks transferability to real educational settings. In the first section, "From Theory to Praxis in a Secondary Classroom," Stovall candidly walks the reader through the conceptual/planning stages of the course, where his stated goal is "to teach a class that examined the intersections of race and power through analysis of images in the media" (2006, 235). In the section on "CRT in the Classroom," Stovall shares highlights of how students responded to the various writing prompts and assignments that were given in class. Throughout the text, Stovall weaves a discussion of the various CRT constructs that informed his pedagogical choices and strategies. He concludes that the course provided a space where the voices and the racialized experiences of students of color were validated. He reaffirms what every critical educator knows, that the work of social justice education is "messy" and low on public recognition but is nonetheless imperative for real social change.

*Application of CRT constructs.* At the heart of Stovall's article is the employment of *praxis*. As mentioned previously, CRT scholars in education have been criticized for being high on theory and low on practice, yet Stovall offers concrete strategies that reflect how CRT gets transferred into real teaching practices. In the article, Stovall argues for a systematic approach to racism in education based on his observation that antiracist work is too often reduced to a "meaningless slogan bereft of all critical content" (244).

Another CRT construct Stovall employs is *voice*. He does so by privileging the experiential knowledge of his students and allowing them to use their real-world racialized experiences as the starting point for discussions about race. While this technique seems logical, Stovall points out that oftentimes educators inadvertently privilege the dense theoretical readings on race in an attempt to help students understand the complexities and nuances of the concept. Instead, Stovall states that although he uses these theoretical texts in his syllabus, they serve as a reference rather than a focal point. By allowing the students to enter the discussion at a point where they are most comfortable expressing their knowledge, Stovall is not only summoning a principle of CRT but also, perhaps more notably, exhibiting his keen understanding of how students learn.

The inclusion of *interdisciplinary perspectives* is a central feature of CRT scholarship. Stovall utilizes this concept in his class by helping students see how media conglomerates are organized and how they work to perpetuate capitalist greed and racist stereotypes. By navigating the complexities of race and class with his students, Stovall taps into another premise of CRT, which is *intersectionality*, or the belief that individuals often have overlapping interests





and traits based not only on their racial identity but also their class position, gender, and so forth (Delgado and Stefancic 2005).

*Counterstorytelling* was implemented through the course via the class viewing of the *Eyes on the Prize* PBS documentary series. The segment Stovall showed to the class focused on the life of slain Black Panther Fred Hampton. Whereas mainstream media rarely highlight the black community's ability to organize, the story of the Black Panthers provides evidence to the contrary.

*CRT in Action*. Stovall's article is a keen example of CRT in action in schools. The topical units of discussion for the class were designed not only to help render race and racism visible in the media, but also to help students make connections to academic concepts they would encounter in college. In this way, Stovall seems to be conscientious about how to balance the need to fit CRT within the high-stakes testing and accountability environment that dominates contemporary educational practice, with the imperative of social justice.

In conclusion, I began this chapter by describing my challenges in navigating the race, power, and education nexus for my children. Although this story gives voice to similar struggles that many people of color face, it is important to fight educational inequalities with as many weapons as possible, including counter stories and direct legal action. CRT is one powerful weapon that can help us understand and fight the lingering effects of racism, both in school systems and in everyday life. I hope this modest attempt to map the intellectual and activist roots of CRT and to synthesize this vast body of thought has in some way contributed to the goals of social justice education. In doing so, perhaps others will be moved beyond critique toward social action.

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