
SAVED BY THE BELL:
DERRICK BELL'S RACIAL REALISM AS PEDAGOGY

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One of the most formidable of the paradoxes encountered in the education of the Negro minority in America is that their unique minority status itself has engendered philosophies which, in substance, blandly deny the fact of this status. It is true that the patterns of Negro life in America vary widely, from an almost caste-like situation and isolation from the dominant currents of American life to a situation in which there is considerable sharing of the American culture. Nowhere, however, is there complete absence of the social implications of this minority racial status, and nowhere is there the perfection of cultural integration upon which the current educational philosophy is founded.

□ Charles Johnson, "The Need for Realism in Negro Education"¹

INTRODUCTION

The recent pop culture iconography of the Critical Race Theory (CRT) label has attracted more devoted (white) fans than a 90s boy band. In philosophy, this trend is evidenced by the growing number of white feminists extending their work in gender analogically to questions of race and identity, as well as the unchecked use of the CRT label to describe any work dealing with postcolonial authors like W.E.B. DuBois, and Frantz Fanon, or the role postcolonial themes like power, discourse, and the unconscious play in the social constructionist era.² While this misnomer may seem practically insignificant, the artifice formerly known as CRT in philosophy—more adequately called critical theories of race—has been axiomatically driven by the political ideals of integration and a revisionist commentary that seeks to expand traditional philosophical ideas like reason, history, and humanity, previously closed off by racial borders to people of color.

In the field of education, however, CRT has had quite a different impact. For over a decade, largely due to Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate's 1995 article, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education," education theorists have been dealing with the work of Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado and Cheryl Harris, and other Critical Race Theorists' arguments concerning the impact of white normativity on institutions of learning, the use of education as an instrument of white supremacy, and the role race plays in determining the very social and political structures of American life. CRT has a noticeable presence in the work of education scholarship on race, but the initial distinction that Ladson-Billings and Tate drew in their 1995 article between CRT—as a dissenting chorus of colored voices—and multiculturalism—has collapsed.

Current scholarship, in focusing almost exclusively on whiteness as an obstacle to “school equity” and “educational opportunity,” has shifted the focus away from the stories, experiences, and “situational knowledge” of racial and cultural peoples to the elimination of whiteness as the best means to fulfill the unstated mandate of multiculturalism and the empty promises of integration. According to Ladson-Billings and Tate,

multiculturalism came to be viewed as a political philosophy of “many cultures” existing together in an atmosphere of respect and tolerance. Thus outside of the class room multiculturalism represented the attempt to bring both students and faculty from a variety of cultures into the school (or academy) environment. Today, the term is used interchangeably with the ever expanding “diversity,” a term used to explain all types of “difference”—racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, ability, gender and sexual orientation.³

The consequence of this ubiquity is that it has made even radical positions like CRT subservient to the larger integrationist ideal of American democracy, whereby the dominance of this integrationist politic empowers the ideas of multiculturalism and diversity to act as “undergirding drives” in contemporary education, reifying an unquestioned humanist orientation that aims to inculcate the ideal of equality in students, while ignoring the significance of race and racism in the lives of people of color. Needless to say, contemporary educational theories have become the primary war zones of this ideological debate, as the need whites have to reconcile the contradiction between their material and historical existence and the suffering that existence entails for the millions of people defined by racial exclusion have made institutions of learning the flagships of integrationist socialization in the United States.

Traditionally in philosophy, the only limitation of philosophical concepts is the extent to which the conceptualizer imagines; however, when the task placed before whites entails a philosophical encounter with the realities of Blacks, philosophy is suddenly limited—incarcerated by the white imagination’s inability to confront its corporeal reflection. For centuries, European thinkers, and their contemporary white followers, have run rampant in the halls of academia prematurely championing the success of liberalism to speak to the experience of those historical groups of people excluded from modernity, while simultaneously celebrating the universal embrace by the supple bosom of whites’ anthropologically specific ideas of reason and humanity. In the United States, this philosophical impetus has solidified the political regime of integration as not only the most desirable, but most realizable condition of Black (co)existence in America. Following this course of events, the education of African-descended people has been collapsed into a single ideological goal, namely how to mold Blacks into more functional and productive members of American society under the idea of equality established

by *Brown v. Board of Education*. Unfortunately however, such a commitment elevates the ethical appeals made by *Brown*, which focused on higher ideals of reason and humanity found in liberal political thought and the eventual transcendence of racial identity, to moral code. Under this new morality, the education of Blacks becomes a decidedly normative endeavor in which schools compel African-descended people to base their identity around how Blacks should act and what Blacks ought to be as Americans. This ideology, instead of attending to what Blacks should learn or the knowledge Blacks need to have in order to thrive as *Blacks in America*, forces Blacks to abide by the social motives that aim to create *good Negro citizens*.

This essay, then, represents an attempt to shift racial discourse away from the ideological imperative that makes the “politics of integration” the animating *telos* of race discourse in the United States. As scholars of African descent concerned with the preservation and thriving of our “race,” we can no longer ignore the failure of integration, multiculturalism, and liberal thought to arrest the dehumanization of African-descended people. The sempiternal cycles of Black victimization, incarceration, and the unchecked murder of African-descended people at the hands of the U.S government and the complacency of the white populace towards these racial injustices have invigorated the need of Black scholars to discuss the realist aspects of American race relations—or more specifically the permanence of anti-Black racism in the United States.

It is here that the aforementioned epigraph by Johnson, which demands that Blacks acknowledge the position of their racial status in America and accept the effects this racial subordination has on the philosophies that undergird our education toward the world, demonstrates its *tour de force*. The reality of racism demands that the education of Blacks be tailored to their particular racial status in America—regardless of how educators feel about the saliency of racism in American society. Blacks can no longer content themselves with the empty notions of racial equality or the ill-maintained hope in the moral suasion of whites as our justifications to acquiesce white racism. Our hopes in the gradual elimination of racism can no longer serve as the base from which Blacks are taught to interact with the world. Simply stated, we can no longer afford to educate ourselves and live our lives on the proleptic delusion of an integrated and nonracist white America, when we know that our reality is fundamentally determined by white racism.

While it is not uncommon to find the works of various scholars highlighting the contributions of CRT to the field of education, to date however, no author has attempted to explore the contributions of a racial realist perspectives to current conversations concerning race in the philosophy of education.⁴ In what follows, I aim to show that an acceptance of Bell’s racial realism, or the belief that “Black people will never gain full equality in this country, even those Herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary ‘peaks of progress,’ short-lived victories that slide into

irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance,⁵ is a relevant, philosophically sound basis for a critical race philosophy of education.

ADMITTING THE ILLUSION OF *BROWN*: THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPORT OF LOOKING AT *BROWN* AS AN ANTICOMMUNIST DECISION

Despite the popularity of post-*Brown* rhetoric which champions the triumph of integration, “America is at best a desegregated society,”⁶ where desegregation is largely not true in most cities in the United States, especially in schools. Recent studies in sociology and psychology have given an eerie confirmation to Bell’s racial realism, as even the human sciences are being forced to acknowledge the seemingly permanent nature of American racism. In Joe Feagin and Leslie Picca’s most recent work for example, narratives were utilized to reveal that the white social graces of tolerance, diversity, and plurality that have led many scholars to erroneously conclude that racism is on the verge of elimination is in fact an illusion. Many scholars point to the emergence of a new or modern racism—a racism perpetuated by the myth of cultural deficiency and framed by political contests over policies like affirmative action—that can simply be cured by more cultural interaction and crossracial dialogues, as it leaves the “old” notions of biological inferiority, fixed racial stereotypes, and the use of the word “nigger” to the wayside. However, says Feagin, “much of the overt expression of blatantly racist thought, emotions, interpretations, and inclinations has gone backstage—that is into private settings where whites find themselves among other whites, especially friends and relatives.”⁷

This research, which draws a distinction between the public nonracist social graces of whites—the front stage, and the private racial performances “behind closed doors”—or the backstage, is the most convincing evidence to date that racism in American has not changed or decreased from its pre-*Brown* levels. Despite the belief initiated by *Brown* that the education of Blacks and whites in the same schools decrease racism and have practically eliminated race as an important social category, current findings support the irrefutable failure of integration. Or as Eduardo Bonilla Silva so eloquently states,

regardless of whites sincere fictions—that if Blacks and other minorities would just stop thinking about the past and work hard and complain less (particularly about racial discrimination) then Americans of all hues could all get along—racial considerations shade almost everything in America.⁸

Even where education theorists are correct in highlighting the racial dynamics of American education, there is still the tendency to ignore the conditions that made the desegregation of schools the long arm of America’s integrationist project. Current discussions of race in the philosophy of education have been dominated by various antiracist strategies and humanist phenomenologies aiming to challenge dominate social hegemonies that

perpetuate racism, sexism, and homophobia in America. While all worthwhile efforts, there is a suspicious absence of scholarship that interrogates the belief that education should be the designated driver of racial transformations. Though this view is commonly held by educational theorists, their consent is rooted in an uncritical reflection on the historical and political forces that made education the mechanism of racial amelioration in the United States.

The monumental case of *Brown* (1954) marked the shift from the Vinson Court to the egalitarian social ethics of the Warren Court era. Though the Vinson Court was compassionate toward the desegregation of state institutions of higher learning, it was not until the Warren Court that the ideas of racial equality, desegregation, and the automatic progress of liberal-democratic thought were merged into a new American patriotism unified against the charges of tyranny waged by communist states during the Cold War. Under the Warren Court, compulsory education took on a decidedly assimilationist role. In Chief Justice Warren's opinion in *Brown*, he states that

Education is the very foundation of good citizenship...it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment.⁹

From this premise the Warren court continued its framing of education as the means to eradicate racism. The decision of the court to frame education as the necessary forum through which students engaged and debated the views of other diverse students, gave integrated schools an equalizing, socializing, nationalizing—assimilationist and secular—mission.¹⁰ Within years, however, legal scholars recognized the problems of the unattainable and unwanted assimilation of Blacks into the American social fabric, and like Alexander Bickel recognized that “*Brown v. the Board of Education*, with emphasis on the education part of the title, may be headed for—irrelevance.”¹¹

This should come as no surprise given the political interests motivating desegregation in the 1950s. *Brown*, rather than being an indication of America's evolution in social conscience, was an anticommunist decision superficially “aimed at eliminating the constitutional justification of state-sponsored racial segregation,” in recognition of the “nation's need to strengthen its argument that democratic government was superior to its communist alternative.”¹² According to Mary Dudziak, both Justice William Douglass and Chief Justice Warren were well aware of the international implications of the *Brown* decision.¹³ The unanimous decision in *Brown* was a political concession geared toward preserving U.S. credibility and soft power during the Cold War.

Because the focus on education created a symbolic victory for American race relations without any significant change in the structures or attitudes that direct policy, current thinking on race in the philosophy of education continues to endorse the dilapidated idea that better democratic citizens are necessarily less racist citizens. Given both the sociological and jurisprudential evidence, it

seems readily apparent that diversity in education was never meant to change the cultural and legal mechanisms that sustain racial domination in the United States, but only eliminate the racial identities that maintained the separation of the races in name. Whereas the desegregation of lunchrooms, beaches, and other public facilities simply granted access as the right to equality (where racial mixing was not mandated by the rights protected), the strategy of school desegregation differed greatly. According to the courts, “the actual presence of white children is said to be essential to the right in both its philosophical and pragmatic dimensions.”¹⁴ Thus, equality was understood as only those measures and ideas that allowed Blacks’ association with whites in white establishments. “Equality by proclamation,” says Bell, “not only failed to truly reflect the complexity of racial subordination, it also vested the government and the courts with the ultimate moral authority to define African American freedom.”¹⁵ Unfortunately, this burgeoning truth of the matter remains ignored in philosophical treatments of education, as theorists emphasize global strategies of dialogue and racial compassion as means to realizing equality.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A RACIAL REALIST PERSPECTIVE IN THE EDUCATION OF “RACIAL” PEOPLES

Given this knowledge, what are philosophers of education to do? In what sense does the actual knowledge of race and the reality of racism, despite the delicate sensibilities that have arisen in the integrationist era that aim for racial harmony, become a necessary knowledge about the world and a necessary component of Black’s education in it? In America, white-Black race relations are systemic, and reproduced culturally, institutionally, and socially from generation to generation.¹⁶ This systemic racism confers a permanent minority status to Blacks that is ignored in contemporary treatments of race.

However, this is a very recent trend, as Black thinkers were embracing realist perspectives in education as early as the 1930s. Johnson for example argued,

The conscious aim of Negro life is to improve this status, thus escaping the physical as well as the more intangible cultural handicaps of this status. This is conceivably one of the functions of education. But escape is not possible merely through the denial of the status, nor the denial of the past, nor through the simple adoption of the symbols of freedom.¹⁷

Throughout history, Black thinkers have acknowledged the particular problems created by their unique racial status, and understood that a general humanist education fixed on abstract norms that did not attend to the particular experience of their oppression and the specific problems that oppression entails was useless.

In most current curricula, an emphasis is placed on the ability of Blacks and whites to get beyond the problem of race that hindered past generations.

While some educators acknowledge that race is still a looming concern, its significance is routinely downplayed in an effort to convey the popular maxim that “there is only one race—the human race.” But this humanist position routinely fails to explain the persistence of Black victimization at the hands of whites. If we are all human, why is race written into the legal and social policies of American society? For Bell, Blacks should not disown their racial status but embrace its totality. He says, “acceptance of the racial realist concept would enable [Blacks] to understand and respond to recurring aspects of our subordinate status. It would free them to think and plan within a context of reality rather than idealism.”¹⁸ By Bell’s thinking, accepting the consequences of a Black racial identity is a much better instrument by which Blacks can diagnose the ills of American racism, than the common home remedy of denial.

Today however, many Black thinkers cannot resolve themselves against the post-Civil Rights imperative that maintains that it is unethical to emphasize the role that race plays in determining the reality of Blacks. According to Bell,

black people are trapped in a racial time warp. We are buffeted by the painful blows of continuing bias, [but maintain] that the disadvantages we suffer must be caused by our deficiencies because, we are told without even a trace of irony, racism is a thing of the past.¹⁹

Despite the philosophical insights and explanative power of Bell’s position, Black philosophers primarily rely on the existence of an imagined racial equality in the post-Civil Rights era utopia as the foundation from which race should be theorized. The efforts made by Black scholars to avoid charges of essentialism, nationalism, and ideological myth making cannot be overemphasized in this regard, as it is in the avoidance of these charges that Black thinkers are rewarded for their production of “knowledge,” regardless of the ability this “knowledge” has to describe actual racial relations in the world.

Today, the story of the Civil Rights struggle is commonly told in a linear fashion, as if progress in race relations followed a teleological evolution—from an ignorant time when racial status was taken to signify real and meaningful differences between people to the present enlightened time, when race is properly understood in mainstream culture not to make a difference except as vestiges of unfortunate historical oppression or in terms of vague and largely privatized “ethnic heritage.”²⁰

Making the jettisoning of race the pinnacle of American race socialization is consistent with a normative universalism that equates truth and progress with the elimination of racial distinctions. While this animating *telos* has been uncritically accepted by the masses of Black folk in America as a condition of our eventual recognition as citizens, the result has been an intergenerational existential crisis in which Blacks are torn between their hopes for to end racism and the need to emphasize racial identity to describe racism’s persistence.

Unlike most theories, Bell's racial realism challenges the philosophy of education to encounter the possibility of theorizing about race from the much-denied position that accepts its permanence. Since racism has not ended, there is no need to think as if it has. Some thinkers would claim this is unnecessarily pessimistic, but the extent to which anti-Black racism affects and determines the lives of African-descended people suggests it is a healthy dose of reality.

THE PROBLEM OF EQUALITY—
TOWARD A CONCEPTUAL DISENGAGEMENT

Equality, in creating both the measure of humanity and the desire of Blacks to be included into that humanity, can only be unveiled through African-descended people's surrender of their historical and culture orientation—their peoplehood. “In our anxiety to identify [with whites], we are attracted to the obvious and the superficial, the least worthy characteristics of the dominant group.”²¹ In this moment of mystification, African-descended people replace the reality of racial distinction with a paradoxical contemplation, in which we seek to remedy our confrontation with the racial reality of the United States by negating the validity of our reality that speaks from and articulates our experience of American racism. As such, identifying with the oppressor is an ontological act. It replaces the existence of a people with the caricatures of that people embraced by the imagination of whites. The danger in the idea of equality is that it seduces the Black imagination into believing in the possibility of extinguishing its own existence. As Anthony Paul Farley tells us, “there is no outside of the color-line,”

Everybody at some level believes in it. It's a deeply seductive image. The image that we all want as oppressed people is an image of our master finally loving us and recognizing our humanity. It is this image that keeps prostitutes with their pimps, colonized with their colonizers and battered women with their batterers. Everyone dreams of one day being safe.²²

Equality only serves as an imaginative allure—a fantasy, and this is the reality that must be conceptually disengaged. The demand for equality is a request to be recognized as rational, as individual, as ahistorical, and of course as un-Blackened by whites. The longing for equality forces Blacks to mistake humanity as an analytic truth, in which we mistakenly assume that our birth as human necessarily gives us our “humanity.” But this is an errant basis to begin theorizations of Black resistance; genuine Black resistance is not based in the analytics of humanity; it is not a purely intellectual activity. Regardless of Black appeals to genetic similarity or to the theme that “God created all men equal,” race will continue to reference our nonhumanity. Instead of trying to meet the criterion whites have placed on humanity, genuine Black resistance must be rooted in the right to develop and assert a new cultural world.

A CONCLUSION BY WAY OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Today, my resentment at the doctrine of race superiority, as preached and practiced by the white world for the last 250 years has been pointed to with sharp criticism and contrasted with the charity of Gandhi and of the colored minister [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.] who lead the recent boycott in Alabama. I am quite frank: I do not pretend to “love white people.” I think that as a race they are the most selfish of any on earth. I think that the history of the world for the last thousand years proves this beyond doubt.

□ W.E.B. DuBois, “Whites in Africa After Negro Autonomy,”²³

As a philosophical perspective, racial realism points to the need of a continuing struggle and a deep-seated dissatisfaction with both the illusory progress given under the liberalist integration fantasy, and the realities of anti-Black racism, Black poverty, and Blacks’ vulnerability to white interests. Bell’s mantra that “resistance must be grounded in struggle; thus, the realization, as our slave forebears, that the struggle for freedom is, at the bottom, a manifestation of our humanity that survives and grows stronger through resistance to oppression, even if that oppression is never overcome”²⁴ is a crucial motif in our continuing encounters with American racism.

For some, a racial realist account of education is rooted in an unbearable honesty, but admitting the role that whites *have had* and *do have* in sustaining anti-Black racism should not be made apologetically. Despite its historical saliency in the writings of Black scholars, unkind words against white supremacy and criticism of whites for their inability to understand or remedy their racial framings are taken as ideological ramblings considered irrelevant to true philosophical problems. This tendency varies very little from philosophy to the philosophy of education, as Black authors are embraced to the extent that they can help whites understand themselves but are largely dismissed when their critiques implicate white racial identities not only to racism but the global colonial context and the imperial history of white culture. In both cases, reality—the reality that people of color deal with daily—is ultimately inaccessible to whites, and as such has been called into question as an actual form of knowledge. Today, Black scholars, teachers, and philosophers confront a decision over whether or not to view racism for what it is—how it actually exists in the world, or view racism through the lens of their hopes for a better tomorrow. Unlike most choices, this decision is not personal. At its root, it is political and revolves around the intimate role an educator has in the ways that Blacks will view and challenge the world now and in future generations.

NOTES

1. Charles S. Johnson, “The Need for Realism in Negro Education,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 5 (1936): 375–82, 375.

2. The most recent example of this is Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006). Sullivan's work claims to investigate whiteness as an unconscious habit, but fails to quote or even reference the work of Charles Lawrence, who wrote an article in CRT concerning the unconscious dimensions of white racism almost two decades before Sullivan; see Charles R. Lawrence III, "The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Racism," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement*, eds. Kimberle Crenshaw, et al. (New York: New Press, 1995), 235–56. Sullivan's work is perhaps the most pernicious example of whites' attempts to hijack the field of CRT and continue the all-too-common practice of erasing the intellectual contributions people of color have made in the field of race studies by writing themselves (and their whiteness) into it.

It is also relevant to discuss the tendency of whites to read into Bell's scholarship nonexistent continuities with traditional white figures. In this regard whites attempting to understand the works of Bell align him with what they take to be radical figures in the Western tradition, like Michel Foucault, Karl Marx, and Jacques Derrida, instead of confront the racism inherent in assuming that it is only through white thinkers that Black thoughts can be understood or philosophical. To my claim that his work should be understood as a continuation of Black thought, exclusive of white influence, Bell replied,

You have it exactly right. I consider myself the academic counterpart of Errol Garner, the late jazz pianist from my hometown, Pittsburgh, who never learned to read music fearing, as I understand it, that it would ruin his style. I think there must be value in Marxist and other writings, but I did not really read them in college and have had little time since. I am writing this in Pittsburgh where I have been celebrating my 50th law school reunion from Pitt Law School. I do care more about the thought and writings and actions of Du Bois, Robeson, Douglass, et al. I think during my talk at UCLA, I read from the 1935 essay by Ralph Bunche about the futility of using law to overcome racism. It made more sense than so much of the theoretical writings on law, past and present, that I can barely understand and have great difficulty connecting with my experience. And you are right. At almost 77, I do not care to write in ways that whites can vindicate. (personal interview, October 2, 2007)

3. Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate IV, "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education," *Teachers College Record* 97, (1995): 47–68: 61.

4. Even Tate abandons Bell's racial realism for a racially harmonious ethic; see William F. Tate, "Ethics, Engineering and the Challenge of Racial Reform in Education," *Race, Ethnicity and Education* 8 (2005): 121–7.

5. Derrick Bell, "Racial Realism," *Connecticut Law Review* 24 (1992): 363–79, 373–4.
 6. Jeffrey Wallace, "John Bingham and the Meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment Ideology V. Reality: The Myth of Equal Opportunity in a Color-Blind Society," *Akron Law Review* 36 (2003): 693.
 7. Leslie H. Picca and Joe R. Feagin, *Two Faced Racism: Whites in the Backstage and Frontstage* (New York: Routledge, 2007), x.
 8. Eduardo Bonilla Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 1.
 9. *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
 10. Alexander Bickel, *The Supreme Court and the Idea of Progress* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 121.
 11. *Ibid.*, 151.
 12. Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 59.
 13. See Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 104–6.
 14. Derrick Bell, "Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interest in School Desegregation Litigation," in *Critical Race Theory*, eds. Crenshaw, et al., 7.
 15. Bell, *Silent Covenants*, 186.
 16. See Joe R. Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
 17. Johnson, "Need for Realism in Negro Education," 376.
 18. Bell, "Racial Realism," 308.
 19. Bell, *Silent Covenants*, 186–7.
 20. Gary Peller, "Race-Consciousness," in *Critical Race Theory*, eds. Crenshaw, et al., 128.
 21. Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants*, 200.
 22. Anthony Paul Farley, "Thirteen Stories," *Touro Law Review* 15 (1999), 621.
 23. W.E.B. DuBois, "Whites in Africa After Negro Autonomy," in the *Oxford W.E.B. DuBois Reader*, ed. Eric Sundquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 669.
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24. Bell, “Racial Realism,” 378.
