

## Seeing Every Student as a 10: Using Critical Race Theory To Engage White Teachers' Colorblindness

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I have attempted to carry on the critique and analysis of colorblindness in education in my work as a teacher educator. In working with in- and pre-service teachers, I have found that beliefs in colorblindness are rarely straightforward. At times, when the teachers I know claim to be colorblind, they enact practice that seems to betray this belief. When they claim not to be colorblind—i.e., that they see color and race—and acknowledge that racial background does make a difference in somebody's life and educational chances, colorblindness can still affect their teaching practice. For the most part, the teachers I have worked with want to address the racial disparity they see in schools and feel it is the responsibility of teachers to do so.

Ben Blaisdell (BB): If you believe that students of minority racial groups have a tougher time in society because of historical issues, racism, etc., do you think it's the teacher's responsibility to respond to that type of treatment?

Teacher (T): I think that's it the responsibility of everyone to respond to it. Yes, teachers ought to have a special sensitivity just because they interact with children.

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As they attempt to work against racism, these teachers hold onto an ideal of equality. That is to say, they want to do all they can for all of their students regardless of racial background. As one teacher puts it, “I see every student as a 10.”

As a white researcher working with primarily white teachers, I have found Critical Race Theory (CRT) to be valuable in addressing the colorblindness that still exists in teachers’ thinking and teaching practice while also tapping into the way teachers value students. A theory that comes out of the field of law, CRT, in essence, is a way of analyzing the dynamics of race in U.S. society.<sup>1</sup> The main analyses of CRT derive from a presupposition that racism is inherent in U.S. society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000), and that the existence of racism is inseparable from the history of property rights in this country (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Later in this article, I will describe the core tenets further and explain how CRT can be used to analyze the construction of race and racism. What is important here is that CRT is very direct in its assertion of the inherent nature of racism. Because this premise is a starting point for any analysis, CRT moves conversations about racism past arguments about *whether* racism exists or not and into analyses of *how* it exists. Its directness has helped me be direct and open with teachers (and for them be the same with me) in challenging colorblind views, in discussing what racism is (including discussions of individual vs. institutional racism, complicity, etc.), and as a way to tap into and draw on the spirit of that desire to treat every student as a 10.

In this article, I discuss how CRT has helped me address colorblindness in my work with primarily white teachers. I draw examples from an on-going qualitative research study with high school teachers—four white, one Thai American, and all from middle-class backgrounds—about issues of colorblindness and race. All the teacher quotations are from these teachers. While this article is not a report on a qualitative study, per se, the study has had an influence on my work as a teacher educator with a social justice agenda. In the study, I employ a performance approach to research. In such an approach, the purpose of the research act is not for the researcher to extract knowledge from the participants; rather, the researcher and participants take the role of co-performers (Conquergood, 1991) in meaning making. The implication for such an approach is that the research with teachers is an act where we come to understand the world in new ways, an act that has relevance to the teachers themselves. As the teachers and I perform this act that together, they have a major and active role in determining the change that occurs. So, the focus is as much on my development as it is on that of the teachers. Therefore, in this article I also comment on my experiences working with white pre-

service teachers (in college courses I teach) and reflect back on my time as a white high school teacher of primarily non-white students.

In the interviews, I specifically used a dialogical performance (Conquergood, 1985) approach. The aim of dialogical performance is to “bring self and other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another” (p. 9). Through the use of ethnographic interviews in this manner, the teachers (other) and I (self) arrive at new understandings of colorblindness, whiteness, and race together. Because the teachers and I are co-performers of the dialogue, I am not detached from the meaning making that takes place. CRT and its directness fit well with this approach. According to Denzin (2003) and Conquergood (1985, 1998), a performance approach challenges the maintaining of analytic distance from the participants, as this type of distance cannot lead to new ways coming to understand the world. Rather, “[p]erformance approaches to knowing insist on immediacy and involvement” (Denzin, 2003, p. 8). Likewise, CRT critiques liberal, incremental approaches to change (Ladson-Billings, 1998) and seeks more radical and immediate material changes. While CRT has come out of law, it does not focus on changes in law only. It is equally important to affect ideology as well (Delgado, 1995). Scholars in education have used the main tenets of CRT to promote changes educational policy, curriculum, and pedagogy (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Parker 1998, 2003; Solórzano, 1998).

Therefore, I continue this line of inquiry and use my experience with CRT, with teachers, and in my development as a scholar/educator to examine how scholars can work to change colorblind ideology and practices and at the same time draw on teachers’ spirit of equality in order to get teachers to acknowledge race in their practice. The focus of this article then is on what teacher educators and researchers can gain from the use of CRT (rather than on a particular study). I will also discuss the caution a white researcher needs to exercise when using CRT.

### Colorblindness:

#### What White Teachers Mean . . . and What They Do

Not all white teachers mean the same thing when they use the word colorblind, whether to describe themselves or other teachers. There is a general sense that being colorblind means not seeing a person’s race. However, most teachers I have worked with talk about seeing their students’ races, but still treating each student as they would treat any other student. That is to say, they believe they treat white and non-white students equally in the interest of being fair. These notions of fairness and equality pop up in various fashions. For some teachers, being fair means

not giving extra attention to any student whether they are struggling or not. For others it does mean giving extra attention to any student who may be having difficulty but doing so regardless of the student's race. Still, some teachers do pay extra attention to their non-white students in the belief that these students face obstacles that their white students do not.

Few of these teachers describe themselves as colorblind. Perhaps they really do realize that race is an issue in schools or perhaps they just know that the word colorblind is becoming taboo. Either way (and as I stated previously) most teachers I have worked with want to do something to address the racial disparity they see. So, I have tried to understand what they mean when they use the word colorblindness and how their practice might be colorblind regardless of whether they use the word or not.

A small minority of the teachers I have worked with claim to do nothing for struggling students, but even they usually do admit to noticing students' races and believe that race affects students' lives in some way. They view equality and fairness with treating their students exactly the same way regardless of racial background and the adherence to this view prevents these teachers from acting on the racial difference they see. Other teachers claim to help any student with special circumstances (whether because the student is a racial minority or for any other reason). They also see race (i.e., they see the race of their students) but do not see the racial quality (i.e., the whiteness) of their own teaching. Most teachers I have worked with fall into this category. Finally, there are teachers who do go out of their way to help non-white students because of those students' racial backgrounds. They see the race of their students and act on racial difference, but even they often fail to see the whiteness of their own teaching. While they are not absolutely colorblind, they are sometimes blinded to aspects of race. So, even though teachers often want to reject the label of colorblindness, they may not be completely color conscious.

There are many reasons why teachers have trouble seeing the whiteness of their practice. Part of it is that whites often do not see whiteness as part of their identity, even when they acknowledge that white is a race.

T: I'm sure that [white is a race], but I don't think about it. I just interact with people, and my close friends are so diverse in their diversity, and I value culture and ethnicity, so I'm Italian.

Many whites see their ethnic background, like Italian, or their religion as part of their identity, but few see whiteness in the same way. They also fail to see the whiteness of ethnicities like Italian American. Another reason teachers have trouble seeing the whiteness of their practice may have to do with the connection to whiteness and privilege. Many white

teachers I have worked with acknowledge their privilege as white generally speaking, but they have more difficulty coming to grips with their privilege as teachers.

T: [Responding to an article about CRT...]<sup>2</sup> I had a little trouble with the idea that white teachers are the ones in power. I think that the people who chose to go into teaching aren't the most powerful in society anyway. People who go into teaching aren't that privileged. It's not that they're *not* privileged; they are specifically choosing a profession in which they aren't going to be. So that throws a wrench. The argument is that people get power, they keep it, and they want more. But teachers don't have it. They are looked down on in society.

There is some truth in the above statement. Teachers do not make as much money or have the same status as middle class professionals with the same amount of education. However, teachers of course do have power in regards to their students' lives. What may prevent teachers from acknowledging this power is that whites have grown up with "unchallenged beliefs regarding American meritocracy" and a "lack of experience interrogating their own assumptions" (Ng, 2003, p. 105).

T: I don't think that power is a conscious thing, but I think that going into your comfort zone is. And I think that teachers, in the end, teach the way they were taught so they will go back to that old raise your hands, sit in rows [approach], because that's what they know best. Teacher education doesn't teach about how to teach in different ways. I think that teachers are going to have to give up their comfort in the way that they do things.

In teaching in their comfort zones, teachers may not recognize or acknowledge how their expectations and beliefs about teaching are based in whiteness.

Even when teachers acknowledge that non-white students may face challenges that white students do not, white teachers still operate, to some extent, from the idea that the academic playing field is level. The teachers who go out of their way for non-white students challenge this idea in some forms of action but may also unconsciously adhere to it in other ways at the same time. For example, after saying that she believes African American students should be given special attention to help them overcome the racism they face one teacher says, "I teach every student differently, but it's never based on race." Teachers are rarely either completely discriminatory or completely fair in their practice. They are usually partially both. They are colorblind and color conscious at the same time. As the following excerpt shows, a teacher can see racial dynamics in some places but may not see it in others or in their own practices. I asked this teacher about how she might respond to claims that

minority students who have benefited from practices such as affirmative action haven't earned their success. She responds:

T: Well, I'd try not to laugh. I would disagree. I would say that everyone starts at a different place and that you have to do to get where you are now...Some people who have gotten to a certain place have had to work much harder to get there. And if they had started off higher they would be much further. And I don't think that you can compare that.

This is the same teacher that says she never treats students differently based on race.

T: I think that is right that we should people like individuals. I think that every person is different and every person, regardless of color, is the same.

In addition, white teachers who have the desire for all of their students to succeed and who acknowledge race in their work may still, unknowingly, discriminate against their racial minority students. Just as teachers unknowingly speak to male and female students differently, white teachers in speech may commit microaggressions (Solórzano, 1998) against non-white students.

T: I think that there are things that we are doing, not intentionally. I am a 10<sup>th</sup> grade honors teacher and other teachers try to help these kids, but by being pretty rigid about what a high performing students looks like and acts like and produces is causing that kind of thing.

So, colorblindness still affects their practice. In attempts to treat all students equally, teachers may fail to acknowledge the whiteness of their curriculum, pedagogy, and discourse. Thus, colorblindness prevents teachers from seeing their complicity in the marginalization of students of color.

### CRT and the Analysis of Colorblindness

CRT is valuable in highlighting, critiquing, and ultimately helping to correct for the above complicity. As Lazos Vargas (2003) points out, there are various traditions and trajectories of CRT, and she employs the term critical race studies to encompass CRT and the related fields that have risen from it, fields that also center race with a highly critical stance. On one level, different interpretations of CRT can appear to be contradictory. For example, a racial fatalist view challenges the assertion that racial equality will ever occur in the U.S. This view exists side by side with a "liberal optimism" (p. 4) that is more hopeful for racial remedy. Lazos Vargas argues that this combination of fatalism and optimism is an important aspect of critical race studies. Optimism motivates scholars to work towards racial equality while fatalism provides a check against

changes made too easily. In my work, I adhere to the optimistic assertion that CRT “can be interpreted as holding that American society can become more racially just and that Whites *can* overcome racism” (p. 4, emphasis in original) and Matsuda’s (1991) belief that CRT maintains a commitment to eliminating racism. This vision of CRT seeks to understand the nature of racism so that it does not maintain the same effect on people’s lives. CRT does this by analyzing how racism is created and maintained via a system of norms rooted in whiteness. “Once we understand how our categories, tools, and doctrines influence us, we may escape their sway and work more effectively for liberation” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. 213). For whites, this understanding must include an awareness of how those categories, tools, and doctrines make us complicit in racism. The ways we set guidelines, organize knowledge, and create policy are rooted in and perpetuate white privilege, and CRT can help us expose the creation of that privilege, a privilege that makes us complicit in racism.

To uncover privilege and understand complicity, I use Lazos Vargas’ (2003) articulation of the main tenets of CRT. According to Lazos Vargas, three important elements of CRT are: a challenge to what are considered societal norms, a storytelling approach, and the idea of interest convergence. Challenging societal norms is important as it leads to an uncovering of the whiteness of those norms. In the next section, I will explicate how CRT can be used to name whiteness and white practices. A storytelling approach is important in that it makes possible alternative articulations of history, articulations that also attempt to highlight and uncover whiteness and that challenge colorblind views of, for example, teacher practice and student behavior. Interest convergence is important as it offers an analysis of attempts at racial remedy that accounts for context and opens up revisionist interpretations of history that challenge white norms. In addition to these three aspects, an additional important aspect of CRT is its analysis of property rights (Ladson Billings & Tate, 1995). The analysis of both curriculum and whiteness as property (Harris, 1995) helps to uncover the creation of white privilege and the marginalization of non-white students. Examining whiteness as property leads to analyses of how spaces, such as classrooms, are racialized in ways that further benefit whites and hurt non-whites. In the subsequent sections, I articulate the above elements of CRT as the following analytic tools: naming whiteness, revisionism, interest convergence, property, and racial spaces.

### *Naming Whiteness*

As I stated earlier, CRT maintains a critique of colorblindness. As racism is “normal, not aberrant in American society” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, p. xvi), claims of colorblindness and colorblind ideologies and



language make invisible the presence of racism and how race is practiced in institutions like schools. For example, practices like tracking can be used to maintain systems of meritocracy that appear to be equitable but that actually privilege whiteness. Educators can claim to place students in certain tracks because of their academic abilities while ignoring how measures of those abilities are related to race.

T: ...after a year of teaching a basic class where students were—it was behavior—I spent at least 50% of the time dealing with behavior problems. I mean students with IEP [individual assessment plans] and talking back... I think that if we could integrate some students...from standard to honors it might work but if it was an equal mix, I don't know.

In the above excerpt, the teacher is talking with me about her thoughts on detracking. She has a problem with tracking but also has a problem with letting go of it completely. In this type of case, I try to talk with teachers about why there might be more behavior problems in lower track classes and why there are more non-white students in those classes. Naming whiteness<sup>3</sup> is important in these discussions. I try to work with the teachers to look at the whiteness of their teaching practices (including but not limited to discipline techniques and choice of content) and how those practices may favor their white students. If the curriculum that teachers use reflects cultural backgrounds of their white students and the teaching techniques they employ follow white modes of interaction, teachers may unknowingly favor white students. If teachers' perceptions of the abilities of their students and the value of their students' experiences are based on white norms, teachers may be inadvertently forming negative judgment of their students of color. The purpose of naming such practices for their whiteness is to show how teachers contribute to the privilege for students raced as white and put limitations on those raced as other than white. Naming whiteness helps teachers see the whiteness of their practice and its effects. For example, one teacher acknowledges that there are institutional problems that cause unfair tracking but cannot see how the whiteness of her practice contributes to the process. Here is how she responds to the CRT article.

T: I get a very strong tone [from the article]. As a white person reading this article I almost feel like I am personally being accused. And I think the flaws are in the system. I think that system is flawed and I think that there are people who are consciously and unconsciously contributing to the problem. But I think that we need to look at the system.

She believes institutional flaws (i.e., “the system”) and conscious, overt racism exist, but hesitates to label unintentional acts as racist. Naming disciplinary or pedagogical acts for their whiteness—that is, for how they



are based in socially constructed white norms—can help teachers like this one better see how they do contribute to racial inequality (i.e., how they perpetuate “the system”) and, thus, how they can subsequently alter their practice. Perhaps they will be able to change how they choose curriculum, alter how they interact with students, and even come to new understandings of their students of color. While I have not been able to completely convince the teacher in the above example that we as white teachers contribute to racism against our students, I have been able to get her to consider the idea that whites actively maintain their privilege.

T: [Schooling] is flawed in a way that gives advantage to whites. CRT would say that whites have constructed it that way, not that everyone wants to keep minorities down, but that they want to keep that privilege.

BB: But you think that whites don't have that intention [of keeping minorities down], so they aren't racist?

T: But I can see how...I could be swayed in some way to agree with what you said. I think that there are some gray areas here.

Getting closer to the understanding of complicity may eventually help this teacher address her own privileging of whiteness. The goal in naming whiteness is for the teachers to come to new understandings, so they can attempt practices that do not privilege white students over others.

### *Revisionism*

Related to the naming of whiteness is Delgado and Stefancic's (2001) conceptualization of revisionism, or revisionist history. An aim of CRT is to tell alternative histories (of institutions or events) in order to show the racial dynamic of dominant versions of history. For example, Bell (1995) has explained how the Brown decision was not necessarily the good-hearted attempt at equity that some may claim it to be. He has shown how desegregation was really in the interests of whites and that it was not until these interests arose that people were willing to desegregate schools. CRT scholars attempt to critique standard versions of history that hide white privilege. Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) have also used a version of revisionism via counterstory. They counter traditional resistance theories that highlight how students end up hurting themselves by resisting the oppressive structure that act on their lives to tell stories that stress how Latino students have been able to enact transformational resistance and succeed in spite of those structures. In these stories, they reframe student action as positive acts in which students assert their agency.

I believe researchers can work with white teachers to re-historicize many of the assumptions they have about teaching and students. For example, one teacher discussed her school's attempt to detrack by opening

honors classes to any student who wants to take them. This policy shift did not change the number of students in the honors classes. The teacher wondered about this lack of change and why the students wouldn't want to take the honors classes. Researchers can work with teachers to take a revisionist look at both the school's attempt to detrack and the minority students' reaction. Teachers would be able to examine how the school puts up other barriers that prevent minority students from enrolling in honors courses, in effect perpetuating a version of segregation. Teachers can again look at their choice of curriculum and modes of interaction, and they can interrogate their perceptions of students' abilities and experiences in order to critique and ultimately alter their practice. Teachers could begin to work against the ways in which their practice is complicit in maintaining segregation, so that they can then envision ways to take down barriers, for example, to the more rigorous curriculum of honors courses. In addition, with a new revisionist look at students' decisions not to take honors courses, teachers might not see such decisions as a failure on the students' part but as intentional acts made with good reason. By coming to a view of students of color as people with agency, teachers may be able to understand students' decisions and employ students' reasoning in reform attempts such as detracking. Again, as does naming whiteness, revisionism can transform educational practice that can affect students' lives positively.

#### *Interest Convergence*

Bell (1995) rearticulates the Brown decision, re-historicizing the decision to show how it fit the interest of whites. This is his idea of interest convergence. Interest convergence in this sense means that whites will only allow decisions, such as changes in law, that benefit people of color if they are in the interests of whites, especially middle and upper class whites. In the analysis of schools' attempts to detrack, Oakes, Wells, Jones, and Datnow (1997) note how white parents whose children were in higher tracks only allowed detracking to occur if it neither infringed on their children's right to access to higher tracks nor impeded their access to curriculum that was different from (i.e., better than) that of other students. Examining the interest convergence involved in schools' decisions to detrack can allow researchers to see the way in which those decisions can still be used to maintain privilege.

This type of examination is also important to do with teachers. First, it can allow teachers to critically question who benefits from school practices and decision—that is to say they may be able to think more critically and make less assumptions about practices that are intended to benefit students of color. In this way, teachers can also begin to rearticulate these practices in ways that do help traditionally marginalized

students. They can attempt to use instances of interest convergence to bring about changes they think are necessary. For example, a teacher mentions her English department's conversations about diversifying the reading in their 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade courses.

T: The 10<sup>th</sup> grade teachers, who are all white, got rid of all the white authors except for one and we were really happy about that. In 9<sup>th</sup> grade, there was a lot of resistance to taking off the white authors. There are five required books. *Raisin in the Sun*, that is the only black author. Some considered *To Kill a Mocking Bird* as diverse. They wanted to replace *Animal Farm* with *Black Boy* and people freaked out. One guy went so far to say that, 70% of the literature would go to representing 15-20% of our population. I can't believe that he had the nerve to say that.

This teacher understands her colleague's view that white authors can speak to all students but for some reason black authors only speak to black students as problematic. During the same semester this conversation was happening in her department, her school district was undertaking a substantial initiative to close the black-white achievement gap in the district. A grasp of interest convergence could enable this teacher to analyze why and how the department was now attempting to revamp their curriculum and make it more multicultural. She could use an understanding of the interest convergence involved in the district's initiative to address the achievement gap in order to analyze the thinking behind and potential effectiveness of that initiative. In addition, when teachers and administrators think like her colleague above and fail to see the whiteness of their viewpoints and this thinking then exposes itself, barriers to efforts at equality also expose themselves. An analysis of interest convergence, along with the heightening of awareness regarding the barriers to equality, can enable teachers to have come to a more profound and comprehensive awareness of how race effects school contexts and the decisions made in those contexts. In the end, perhaps teachers like this one, who desires to see real change in racial equality, can use their awareness to work with the people in the district and community (for example, those people who were pushing the initiative to address the achievement gap) and with like-minded teachers to make changes in their schools (for example, a greater diversity in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade English curriculum).

### *Property*

Another way to uncover the whiteness of teachers' work is to analyze curriculum as property. This type of analysis is important in work with teachers. First of all, access is an issue. White students have access to more rigorous curricula than do non-white students.

T: In a school setting, power comes thru resources. One of the better arguments made [in the CRT literature] is that schools are not offering AP courses. I usually think of resources as computers. But white students are getting better classes, which will get them into college, and get them better jobs. And get power.

Reading one article in CRT and talking with her about it enabled this teacher to see curriculum as property. This simple type of analysis can be used to further equal rights arguments and to talk to teachers about how to change access. It can show that not all students have equal rights. However, by itself, this type of analysis does not explicate how access to rigorous curricula is tied into the ownership of whiteness itself. Harris (1995) explains how whiteness is property. It is something people have that allows them to use and enjoy certain privileges and to exclude other people. The system of slavery in the U.S. caused a situation where people needed to classify who counted as a citizen (or a person even). Certain rights, such as the right to vote, were only afforded to full citizens. To be a full citizen, it was deemed that a person must own property. Since slaves could not own property—in fact they were considered property—they could not be full citizens. Even when slavery was abolished, blacks were denied the right to own property and thus access to full citizenship. It was thus also important for whites to be able to determine who was and was not white, so they could decide who could and could not own property. Both the right to use and enjoy and the right to exclude exist in this situation. This construction of whiteness as property created a legacy of whiteness in which those who are considered white, or who “own” whiteness, are able to create rules, regulations, and laws that guarantee their privilege.

This legacy continues today. Rules and regulations, such as those used in schools, also help ensure the maintenance of white privilege. Whiteness as property now exists in white teachers’ notions of what a good student is.

T: I think that there are social connotations with those students that don’t even have to do with the curriculum objectives. We prefer students who sit, and raise their hands, and don’t talk, and we have this bias towards them even if we don’t realize it. And I know from my reading that that’s limited.

Teachers unknowingly assign whiteness to their students and this denies the equal access to curriculum for the students they do not assign whiteness to. By not naming these notions as white but rather couching them in terms of acceptable behavior or appropriate speech, whites create regulations that in effect guarantee their own unequal access to more rigorous curriculum and make deviants who do not have equal access.

BB: If we agree with the idea that minorities have structural restrictions, is it okay for there to be different standards?

T: It's tricky. There are certain things that we need to change about our views, like the way that people dress. It's very easy to look at a kid and decide he's going to be trouble. On the other hand, I try to tell my students that there are certain things you need if you want to do things in life. Like speech. There are certain ways that you talk when you are out of school and ways to speak when you are in a job interview and ways you need to write in a job essay. And it's okay to say that one way to speak is not more valuable than the other.

What is interesting in the above excerpt is that the teacher understands that teachers, including herself, view students according to standards of whiteness. On the other hand, she also races her minority students' non-standard speech. According to her, that non-standard speech is inappropriate for certain situations, and that may be true in a sense. However, what she does not point out is whiteness of the standards that determine appropriate speech. She acknowledges that all ways of speaking can be valuable but by not seeing the racial dynamic of the norming process, she fails to examine how speech by minority students is denied the standard of whiteness.

When teachers ascribe to these notions of appropriate speech (or any behavior), they may unknowingly hold lower expectations of students, discipline them unfairly, or interact with them in ways that negatively affects their access to curriculum. In effect, not assigning the property of whiteness to certain students prevents those students access to the property of the curriculum. Not understanding the curriculum itself as white only exacerbates this problem. Non-white students may have a disadvantage in accessing curriculum that does not represent their culture and unfairly represents the culture of their white classmates. Therefore, by working with teachers to question the history and whiteness of their views of what it means to be a good student and of their curriculum, researchers and teacher educators can affect their students' access to curriculum. By talking with the teachers like the one above about how standards such as those for appropriate speech are raced and how this race-ing affects access to property, teachers can learn to analyze their notions of good student, meaningful curriculum, and effective pedagogy in order to form notions that do not privilege whites over non-whites and therefore work towards more equitable practice.

### *Racial Spaces*

The dynamic of whiteness as property helps create what Iglesias (2002) calls racial spaces. The concept of racial spaces refers to the way in which whites have used and denied the mobility of resources in order to ensure their own privilege. In effect, places become raced in ways that

either ensures or denies people of color access to privilege and rights. For instance, certain neighborhoods may receive better police protection or civic resources because they are considered to deserve it. By examining how classrooms are racial spaces, I hope to illustrate how educators can frame their students as deserving or undeserving depending on how those classrooms are raced. For example, Duncan (2004) has discussed how certain schools are discussed of in what he calls racial time. Poor, urban schools are discussed as “primitive,” as if they do not exist in the same time period as “developed” or “modern” society. By describing a space such as a school as operating from a previous, less-developed time—in essence, “timing” the space—that space becomes racialized because it does not live up to a white, developed nation’s version of progress. This timing places blame on the schools for not keeping up or serving their students well and relieves other aspects of society for creating those conditions in schools, just as under-developed nations can be blamed for what is considered their own lack of progress.

Analyzing classrooms in this fashion can help illuminate how educators place blame on students, especially those in lower-level classes. These students are blamed for the types of classes they attend and for the conditions of those classes. Students are given “primitive” conditions and resources—creating “primitive” spaces—and then blamed for not appropriately or adequately using and enjoying those spaces. Analyzing how those classes are racialized can shift blame from the students and put it on the practices that place students in lower level classes and contribute to the inferior conditions of those classes.

T: That was one of my bigger problems with CRT; I sat and thought about it but couldn’t figure it out. 95% of honors classes are white, and we’ve tried to work to change that. We’ve taken away all restrictions to get into honors classes, any minimum grades, no writing samples, just sign up. And we still have 99 percent of the classes...I have 3 black kids out of 75 honors. I just don’t know how it’s being done. I wish we could stop it from happening.

BB: Do you see social and cultural capital as factors in any way?

T: I think that is definitely the case. I teach English and we are the only department that has honors. There are more minority students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade honors, and then they seem to drop out. And perhaps its because the students don’t have that discourse with the teacher, there grades drop and then they get discouraged from continuing. Because they aren’t expressing their knowledge the way white kids are then they think why am I bothering. That’s cultural capital, knowing how to play the game.

Researchers can analyze classrooms as racial spaces to work with teachers to understand how students are segregated in multiracial settings and how

teacher practices, like discourse, do affect their students' access to property. By shifting the blame for lower student achievement away from the students and more to structures that race students and classrooms, teachers can begin to change the discourse of their teaching practice.

### Whites Doing The Work—Committing

As much as the above tools of analysis have helped me understand the schools I continue to work in, I want to be cautious in my use of CRT. On the one hand, I have never experienced first-hand the discrimination that a person from a racial minority group has experienced. On the other, I want to be cautious with claims of what I can add to the inquiry into race and racism. That is to say, what can I say that has not already been said by a scholar of color? This becomes a question of legitimation—i.e., why should something be more legitimate when it is said by a white researcher versus a researcher of color? Delgado (1995) and Villenas (1996) have raised the issue about whites doing this kind of work. Once I decided to pursue a research agenda (a career) that involved inquiry into issues of race and racism, I realized the difficulty and complexity of that decision. Nevertheless, work by scholars such as Villenas' has inspired me to stick with the issue of race in education. Rather than deny the colonizing facets of her practice, Villenas both owns up to it and tries to work against it. As a Chicana scholar, she has made the commitment to advocate (Noblit, 1999) for her research participants (and sometimes has done so openly in her research projects), in particular her Latina/o participants, and for communities of color.

If white researchers are going to do the work of anti-racism, we need to make that same commitment to communities of color. Whites must not deny the way we do reinscribe whiteness in our research,<sup>4</sup> but we must not let that be all our research does. Specifically, we can heed Villenas' call for white researchers and highlight our own histories of and complicity in the marginalization of people of color. In doing so, we can attempt to follow Gómez-Peña's (1996) thinking and get past honoring ourselves, feelings of guilt, and simple self-sacrifices and join in the struggle against "the multiple crises that afflict contemporary American society" (p.18)—an agenda that I believe research that honors CRT can follow.

As a white researcher doing race, I will always be somewhat positioned as an outsider. I will have insider status in the academic community broadly speaking and in the white, middle class; but in some ways, I will be an outsider to many of the folks I hope to work with and whose lives I wish to affect. White researchers must not deny this outsider status but rather work through it to find possibilities. In this working through, whites must be careful not to be, as Gómez-Peña (1996) asserts,



mere ventriloquists for communities of color. Gómez-Peña asserts that in some sense everyone is hybrid, everyone both an insider and outsider, everyone a border-crosser, though he also highlights that different implications exist for those who cross from North to South (tourists) and those who do so from South to North (aliens). As those, then, who travel from North to South—i.e. travel with privilege—white researchers must be careful in their work and not claim to speak for communities of color. Perhaps, however, they can advocate for them. In being advocates, white researchers also must always remember the position of privilege and highlight that, in the end, it is ultimately themselves they speak for. So, when I use theory like CRT, I must be careful not to present the ideas as my own. Rather I believe I must respect the theories (knowing that my whiteness influences my take on them) and underscore where they came from. I must commit to understanding and learning from these theories rather than trying to take a more leading position on them.<sup>5</sup>

Brantlinger (1999) discusses the importance of doing work in the communities to which we belong. I see as one of these communities the scholars committed to social justice and the elimination of racism. By committing (Noblit, 1999) to this community I can use my position as white researcher (also a teacher-educator, also from the middle class) to work in solidarity (as Villenas [1996] calls for) towards common goals. By looking inward (Brantlinger, 1999) at myself to address, own up to, and work through my positionality I can get past mere ventriloquism and help create the new system of symbols Gómez-Peña (1996) calls for. I can contribute to a discourse that allows people to not be as bound to static, limiting notions of identity. For whites, this new system may start with a language that names whiteness.

In addition to committing to the people we work with, Noblit (1999) also discusses committing to understanding and learning. I see CRT as valuable to countering racism and to being an advocate for marginalized students. If, as a white researcher, I am going to make the commitment to CRT and its agenda of eliminating racism (Matsuda, 1991), I must take the time to understand the theory. This type of understanding does not come easily or quickly. My whiteness will always affect how I come to know, but a commitment to understanding and learning can help me get past the limitations that whiteness puts on me. In addition, a commitment to learning can move me from using CRT as a methodology to understanding it more as a paradigm of thought, as a new way to think. Using CRT only as a methodology—i.e., only as a set of analytical tools—leaves it more susceptible to being co-opted by whites and a white way of knowing. Understanding CRT as a new way to think leaves intact the theory's commitments—i.e., its underlying premises and motivations—and not just its modes of analysis.

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Whites can come to new ways of thinking by interrogating their own way of thinking, and in particular, the whiteness of their thinking.

### Complicity

A good place for whites to start this interrogation is by heeding Villenas' (1996) call to highlight their own histories of complicity in marginalization of people of color. Addressing their own complicity is an important step for white educators in understanding their whiteness and a necessary one for those who want to practice anti-racist education and work against marginalization.

I was an ESL teacher for five years before I returned to pursue my PhD. As an ESL teacher, I wanted to believe that I helped some of my students. Rather than focus on that now, I will focus on the way I also practiced benevolent racism (Villenas, 2001). In my agenda of "helping" my primarily Latina/o immigrant students, I also subscribed to experiential (and sometimes cultural) deficit models of thought. My students were "needy" and "at-risk" and I had the way to help them out of their "unfortunate" circumstances. I was usually good at not ascribing their plight to their culture broadly speaking, usually believing that they just didn't have the experiences necessary to be as successful in school as I thought they should be, but I did develop opinions about them according to my white cultural way of knowing. I often judged their academic and career aspiration in accordance with my white, middle-class upbringing, and while I thought I valued their cultural heritages (e.g., Colombian literature and Mexican art), I attempted to frame their lives according to my own values. For example, I would criticize students who wanted to drop out and work, failing to acknowledge the contexts of their lives and the economic pressures on them. In addition, as Valdés (1996) finds in her research of Mexican families and the primarily white teachers who teach their children, I did not honor enough their literacies or even recognize the critical thinking skills they brought. While I generally valued these students as people, and even as intelligent people, I failed to understand them apart from my cultural notions of education and ability—i.e., to me, the smart ones were those who tended to do well in school. I did not recognize that my understandings of literacy and critical thinking were raced, and thus I failed to value aspects of their identities.

I have since come to new understandings of my teaching and the students I have taught. I have had the privilege as an academic to be able to reflect on my experiences. What that privilege has taught me is that my work will always be raced. It has also shown me that I can recognize my marginalizing practices and change the way I work. Furthermore, I

have learned that I can use the story of how I have come to work against my marginalizing practices in order to communicate experiences of transformation to the pre- and in-service teachers I work with. One of the primary goals of my research is to have open discussions about race and racism in high schools in the hope that it will transform teaching practice. As I stated earlier, a big part of this work has been naming whiteness. I have tried to work with white educators to understand how our practices are white. CRT has offered me the tools to work towards this understanding. It has helped me come to a new way of thinking—a new system of symbols—to think about whiteness, privilege, and colorblindness. It has enabled me to use my experience as a teacher and my transformation to open up this dialogue with other white educators in the hope that we will become more color conscious in anti-racist ways.

I believe there is something to be said for teachers who acknowledge race, want to acknowledge it, and truly want all of their students to succeed. As it is important not to essentialize white teachers (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004), it is also important not to demonize teachers for their privilege. White teachers do have a privilege their minority students do not. At the same time, teachers often do not hold the same status as other middle-class white-collar professionals. Because of this, they may not see themselves in a situation of privilege. I think of new teachers I have known or supervised who work from sunup to sunset every day in their beginning years and of the veteran teachers who still do. While I do critique the colorblind practices I see, I find it hard to criticize such teachers for colorblind practice without also trying to tap into their commitment to see every student as a 10, without working with them on ways to be color-conscious. CRT, for me, makes working towards that consciousness possible.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> CRT has also moved to international and global analysis of race dynamics. See Valdes, McCristal Culp, and Harris (Eds.), *Crossroads, Directions, and a New Critical Race Theory* (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Ladson-Billings, G. & Tate, W.F. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47-68.

<sup>3</sup> By naming whiteness I am referring to Parker's (1998) claim that CRT can be used to examine the social construction of whiteness.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in my interviews with teachers, at times I say "culture" when I mean "race," in a sense failing to acknowledge race as directly as I feel I should.

<sup>5</sup> Some questions that can and should be asked then are: How is this article itself a re-inscription of whiteness? What does it offer that the work of scholars of color has not already offered? How has my take on CRT and an inquiry into race colored by my whiteness?

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