Article

Race . . . to the Top, Again: Comments on the Genealogy of Critical Race Theory

GLORIA LADSON-BILLINGS

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has made inroads into a variety of fields beyond law. Education is an area that fostered critical race theory scholarship for more than fifteen years. In this Commentary Article the author describes critical race theory's development in education and documents pivotal incidences that both challenged and propelled the theory in education. Thus, while CRT in education has experienced some parallels with its development in legal scholarship, it also had some unique unfolding in the education research community.
Race . . . to the Top, Again: Comments on the Genealogy of Critical Race Theory

GLORIA LADSON-BILLINGS*

This Commentary Article1 is supposed to address Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw’s article in this volume, Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back To Move Forward.2 In reality it serves as yet another look back, another narrative of origin, this time from the field of education as well as a commentary. The discussion explains the introduction of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education, its reception, and its future prospects given the current discourse of colorblindness and post-racial America.3

In 1992, William F. Tate4 and I were beginning our tenure at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Professor Tate was a newly-minted Ph.D and the Wisconsin job was his first academic position. I had been out of graduate school for several years and began my post-graduate life as an academic staff person at Santa Clara University in California. I arrived at Wisconsin with an up-and-running project directed at documenting the

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1 The title is a play on words concerning the U.S. Department of Education’s $4.35 billion initiative to improve the performance of students in low performing schools. See Press Release, La. Dep’t of Educ., Department Releases Louisiana’s Race to the Top Application (Jan. 25, 2010), http://www.louisianaschools.net/offices/publicaffairs/press_release.aspx?PR=1383 (identifying the 2010 federal education grant amount as $4.35 billion dollars); Race to the Top Fund, U.S. DEP’T OF EDUC., http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html (last visited Feb. 10, 2011) (compiling information on the program’s purpose, performance, application process, and operations). In the context of this commentary I am talking about race as a human category and how it maintains its place atop the U.S. social and cultural agenda.

2 Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back To Move Forward, 43 CONN. L. REV. 1253 (2011) [hereinafter Crenshaw, Twenty Years].

3 See ELLIS COSE, COLOR-BLIND: SEEING BEYOND RACE IN A RACE-OBSESSED WORLD, at xxvii (1997) (“For over a hundred years America’s ostensible commitment to racial equality has faltered over our inability to see beyond race. . . . [T]hat may be equally true of the next hundred, unless . . . we can learn to stop using the misbegotten assumptions of America’s past as our template for the future.”); THOMAS J. SUGRUE, NOT EVEN PAST: BARACK OBAMA AND THE BURDEN OF RACE 1, 7 (2010) (discussing colorblindness and stating “the election of Barack Obama . . . confirms the view of many . . . that the United States is a postracial society”); Daniel Schorr, A New “Post-Racial” Political Era in America, NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO (Jan. 28, 2008), http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18489466 (discussing the post-racial era since President Obama’s election and stating that “[t]he nation may have a way to go yet to reach colorblindness”).

4 William F. Tate is currently the Edward Mallinckrodt Distinguished University Professor in Arts and Sciences and Chair of the Department of Education at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri. Department of Education: William F. Tate, WASH. UNIV. IN ST. LOUIS, http://education.wustl.edu/people/tate_william-f (last visited Feb. 27, 2011).

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expertise of teachers who were successful with African-American students. This project was an outgrowth of my work on school inequity and racial discrimination in schools. During the early meetings of newly appointed faculty, Tate and I started talking about our research agendas. He indicated that, as a mathematics educator, he was working on mathematical functions; however, much of his casual conversation dealt with questions of inequality, race, and racism. When I suggested that he should consider moving his research agenda to those issues, he seemed genuinely surprised that such an option was available to him. After a scholarly collaboration on the intent and impact of the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, however, we discovered that we really did have more in common than our backgrounds. Immediately, we began planning for another scholarly collaboration.

Tate’s fiancée, Kimberly Cash, was living in Madison after having completed law school and was serving as a clerk for a federal district judge. At the time, she was undecided about exactly what direction she wanted her law career to take and was continuing to read law journals to stay current. She expressed an interest in teaching at law school but was unsure about her next steps. She brought home an article, *Race, Reform, and Retrenchment: Transformation and Legitimation in Anti-discrimination Law* that she shared with Tate and that he subsequently shared with me. After reading that article, we realized that earlier pieces we had read, along with many other articles, took race as their central analytic tenet. Much of our own graduate school training had taken a more classical sociological tack on race where it was seen as a “variable” with a “stable” meaning. The legal scholars’ works that we were beginning to read, however, actually suggested that the inverse was operating, that race (and racism) was being made into a stable, permanent feature of U.S. society, but with variable contexts, including employment, college admission, housing, affirmative action, and diversity, to name a few.

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7 Both Tate and I grew up in major Northern cities and were taught in urban public schools, and we had some friends in common.


9 See DERRICK BELL, AND WE ARE NOT SAVED: THE ELUSIVE QUEST FOR RACIAL JUSTICE 3 (1987) (attempting to “provoke discussion that will provide new insights and prompt more effective strategies” with regard to racial equality); Derrick Bell, *Introduction* to *Shades of Brown: New Perspectives on School De Segregation*, at i, x (Derrick Bell ed., 1980) (stating that the essays in the collection “are offered not as a total solution, but as a stimulant for debate and reconsideration”).

10 E.g., PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS, THE ALCHEMY OF RACE AND RIGHTS 256 (1991) (recognizing that “terms like ‘black’ and ‘white’ do not begin to capture the rich ethnic and political diversity of Williams’s subject. . . . [T]he simple matter of the color of one’s skin so profoundly affects the way one is treated, so radically shapes what one is allowed to think and feel about society, that the decision
Once we realized that legal scholars had begun to think differently about race and racism, we knew that we had to spend more time in the law library and less in our School of Education library. Those months in the library made us feel like we were returning to graduate school. Neither Tate nor I was familiar with the legal writing style, and we certainly were unfamiliar with legal precedents. Reading one law review article would send us to another, or to an actual legal case, and so on. This “legal education” laid the foundation for our understanding of how CRT could provide us with a new way to explain educational inequality.11

Tate and I began working on a paper that explained how race could be used as an analytic tool for understanding inequality. We called that paper Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education.12 After writing a first draft of the paper, Tate and I decided to hold a colloquium where we could discuss the paper with colleagues and graduate students. We photocopied about fifty copies of the paper13 and left them in our department office, where faculty and students were free to pick up a copy. We were not optimistic that many folks would show up, since we planned the colloquium for a Friday afternoon. Much to our surprise, we were greeted with a packed room of faculty colleagues and some graduate students. The discussion was, as we say in academe, “spirited.” Our colleagues found the work “provocative” and “politically daring”; however, they did not dissuade us from doing the work.

Tate and I took the comments and critiques, both oral and written, and set about revising the paper. We decided to submit the paper to the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA)14 for...
what is called an “advanced paper session.” This session required attendees to write an advanced copy of the paper so others could read it thoroughly beforehand. Typically, professional conference presentations provide presenters with ten to twelve minutes to race through a paper and leave the audience wanting much more information. Unfortunately, no one wrote for a copy of the paper. Tate and I believed that our session would be a flop. When we arrived at our assigned room for the session, however, we were greeted with a standing-room-only crowd. Our session was seen as a radical break from multicultural education orthodoxy, and at least one group of scholars challenged us for prioritizing race over class and gender. At the end of the session, I told Tate that I thought we should focus on getting the paper published so that it could become a part of wider debate. We devoted the summer to revising and editing the manuscript and sent it off for publication.

Since its publication, Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education has been cited 693 times according to the Google citation index. Before long, we began seeing CRT in education articles in a number of other publications. Laurence Parker published an article in 1998 to ask questions about the use of CRT in qualitative research. By 1999, Parker, Donna Deyhle, and Sofia Villenas published an edited volume on CRT in education. By that time, Tate had already published CRT in mathematics education and general education articles. In 1997, he published what

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16 Id.

17 The first journal we sent the manuscript to rejected it. Its publication in Teachers College Record in 1995 represents a second submission. See supra note 12.


20 RACE IS . . . RACE ISN’T: CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND QUALITATIVE STUDIES IN EDUCATION (Laurence Parker et al. eds., 1999).

21 See William F. Tate, From Inner City to Ivory Tower: Does My Voice Matter in the Academy?, 29 URB. EDUC. 245, 248 (1994) (exploring emerging research in education that incorporates the voice of African-American scholars); William F. Tate, Race, Retrenchment, and the Reform of School Mathematics, 75 PHI DELTA KAPPAN 477, 477 (1994) (exploring the idea of teaching mathematics in a pedagogical manner that builds upon the experiences of African-American students).
might be considered the most synthetic article on CRT in education.\footnote{William F. Tate, Critical Race Theory and Education: History, Theory, and Implications, 22 REV. RES. IN EDUC. 195 (1997).} This article was designed to place the movement in a historical context and help education scholars understand its origins, relationship to legal scholarship, and utility for education research and scholarship.\footnote{Id. at 196–98.} In 1998, I published an article that tried to explain why CRT made sense in the analysis of educational inequity but also asked education researchers to proceed with caution in this theoretical terrain.\footnote{See Gloria Ladson-Billings, Just What Is Critical Race Theory and What’s It Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?, 11 INT’L J. QUALITATIVE STUD. IN EDUC. 7, 9 (1998) (“I am attempting to speak to innovative theoretical ways for framing discussions about social justice and democracy and the role of education in reproducing or interrupting current practices. . . . However, given [CRT’s] incompleteness, I implore readers to grapple with how it might advance the debate on race and education.”).}

One of my major concerns was the reception of (or resistance to) the theory in the field and how it might stifle the careers of young scholars of color. Interestingly, one of the reasons I have remained at Wisconsin is that my colleagues not only supported my work but encouraged it by using the article that I published with Tate as one of the two exemplary articles for my tenure dossier.\footnote{The tenure process at Wisconsin requires candidates to identify two exemplary pieces of work on which the university level committee will judge the case. I was nervous about the CRT piece based on both its subject matter and the fact that it was a co-authored article. Fortunately, it was well-received at that level, and at least one of the committee members was from the law school.} The process in my department allows candidates to see their entire dossier after the committee has voted on the case for tenure. One of the letters in my file was quite telling. A well-known scholar who raved about my research on teachers indicated that he or she was “less sanguine about the work on critical race theory” because he or she did not like it in law or the social sciences and did not want to see it in education. A few years later, when Tate went up for tenure at Wisconsin, his article on the history of Critical Race Theory in education was one of his exemplary scholarly articles. He, too, successfully made it through the tenure process. We recognized that the University of Wisconsin-Madison, as the site of both Critical Legal Studies and Critical Race Theory Conferences, might be more accepting of a scholarship that challenged traditional paradigms. We were unsure, however, about how willing the rest of the education research and scholarship community would be to respond.

Soon, we began to see pockets of CRT in education in schools like UCLA and the University of Utah, with Daniel Solórzano, Miguel Ceja, and Tara Yosso publishing a CRT article in the \textit{Journal of Negro Education} in 2000.\footnote{Daniel Solórzano et al., Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate: The Experiences of African American College Students, 69 J. NEGRO EDUC. 60 (2000).} Later, they moved their CRT focus to what is called
LatCrit, while concurrently, at the University of Washington, Edward Taylor was examining CRT in educational leadership and higher education.

Marvin Lynn began crafting his work on Black teachers into a CRT framework, adding a pedagogical emphasis on CRT in education. Bryan Brayboy argued for a “Tribal” CRT in education that incorporated the experiences of indigenous peoples.

I began international collaborations with colleagues at the Institute of Education, University of London, which resulted in a spread of CRT into global contexts. David Gillborn, a Professor of Critical Race Studies at the Institute of Education, began moving his scholarship from anti-racist education to CRT. Ultimately, Taylor, Gillborn, and I would collaborate on a volume that pulled together what might be considered foundational literature in CRT and education.

As a part of the ten-year anniversary of the Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995 article that signaled the introduction of CRT in education, Adrienne Dixson and Celia Rousseau compiled a volume that attempted to look at where the movement had been and where it was going in education.

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29 For a sample of Lynn’s work, see Marvin Lynn, Critical Race Theory and the Perspectives of Black Men Teachers in the Los Angeles Public Schools, 35 EQUITY & EXCELLENCE IN EDUC. 119, 121 (2002) (providing a critical race analysis of the education literature, and discussing “Black men’s perspectives on their own racial identity in relation to their sense of connection and responsibility toward their students.”); Marvin Lynn & Maurianne Adams, Critical Race Theory and Education: Recent Developments in the Field, 35 EQUITY & EXCELLENCE IN EDUC. 87, 87–90 (2002) (applying critical race theory “to the school and schooling experiences of children and young adults from black, Latino/a, and Asian American communities of color as well as to the school structures, policies, and personnel that shape their education and the practices of their teachers.”).
30 See Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, Toward a Tribal Critical Race Theory in Education, 37 URB. REV. 425, 441 (2005) (“TribalCrit endeavors to expose the inconsistencies in structural systems and institutions—like colleges and universities—and make the situation better for Indigenous students. TribalCrit practitioners take part in the process of self-determination and in making institutions of formal education more understandable to Indigenous students and Indigenous students more understandable to the institutions.”).
33 FOUNDATIONS OF CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN EDUCATION (Edward Taylor et al. eds., 2009).
34 See Gloria Ladson-Billings & William F. Tate IV, Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education, in CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN EDUCATION: ALL GOD’S CHILDREN GOT A SONG 11, 11
Dixson was a student of mine, and Rousseau was a student of Tate’s. Now
it appeared that CRT in education was being passed on to the next
generation of scholars. Several years ago, education scholars interested in
CRT began hosting a companion conference that coincided with the AERA
to allow participants at the major professional meeting to take advantage of
work devoted solely to CRT in education. More recently, the organizers
began a stand-alone association, known as the Critical Race Studies in
Education Association (CRSEA), which meets independently of the
AERA at various university campuses.

To this point, I have focused on summarizing the way CRT has
developed in education. Now, I want to focus on points from Crenshaw’s
article that I see as relevant to education. Crenshaw indicates that CRT in
law has its genesis in Black law student unrest at Harvard Law School in
1982; however, it became more definitive as a result of the “blow-up” at
the 1986 Critical Legal Studies (CLS) conference. At the subsequent
year’s conference, entitled the “Sounds of Silence,” race became a central
theme, and legal scholars of color defined their own scholarly project.
Although CRT did not emerge in education scholarship until 1995, some
organizational moves analogous to those in CRT in law happened in
education.

The AERA, as noted previously, is the largest professional education
research organization in the world. Its organizational structure is
comprised of an Executive Director, who is paid to manage the
organization; a professional staff; and a governing council. The AERA
Council is comprised of a president, past-president, and president-elect,
along with a group of twelve vice-presidents, a representative from the
special interest groups (SIG), a graduate student representative, and two
members-at-large. The twelve vice-presidents provide leadership for the

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(Adrienne D. Dixson & Celia K. Rousseau eds., 2006) (attempting to theorize race and use it as an
analytic tool for understanding school inequity).

35 For more information on the CRSEA, see About CRSEA, CRITICAL RACE STUD. IN EDUC.

36 See Crenshaw, supra note 2, at 1264 (“The eruption that served as a point of departure in
CRT’s trajectory [toward the formation of Critical Legal Studies] was the institutional struggle over
race, pedagogy, and affirmative action at America’s elite law schools.”).

37 See id. at 1290–91 (noting, in reference to the 1986 FemCrit conference, that “[s]everal of the
usually erudite and cool CLSers became angered by the framing of the debate leading one to denounce
the session as simple ‘Mau-Mau-ing’ that threatened to tear the organization apart”).

38 See id. at 1297 (“The conference [the Sounds of Silence] was an important transitional moment.
It moved to center stage a variety of debates about race both within CLS and also within the academy
more broadly.”).

39 Bylaws of the American Educational Research Association, AM. EDUC. RESEARCH ASS’N
Bylaws]; Who’s Who in AERA: Council, AM. EDUC. RESEARCH ASS’N (May 11, 2010),
AERA].

40 Who’s Who in AERA, supra note 39.
Association’s divisions. Each member is required to select at least one divisional membership (although they may select more by paying additional membership dues). The divisions include sub-fields such as administration, curriculum, learning and instruction, history, social context of education, education policy, and politics. The divisions are each represented on the governing Council and have total control over their own budgets. For additional fees, members can choose to affiliate with SIGs. One person is elected to the Council to represent every SIG, although there are close to 150 SIGs in the Association. From an organizational standpoint, a division is more like a congressional district, while a SIG is more like a ward or, perhaps, a neighborhood. To form a SIG, members must identify at least thirty interested members and demonstrate that their interest does not substantially overlap the interests of an already established SIG or division.

In 1997, members of the Research Focus in Black Education (RFBE) SIG petitioned the Association to turn its SIG into a division. The membership of the RFBE, at about 400 members, was as large as the Association’s smaller divisions (such as History and Historiography and Education in the Professions), and members felt that the concerns of Black education were central to much of the research in which scholars across the Association were engaged. The work being done on special education, drop-outs, suspension, poverty, achievement disparities, urban education,

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41 Id.; see also AERA Bylaws, supra note 39, at Art. IX § 5 (“Each Division shall have a Vice President of the Association for the Division . . . .”).
44 See AERA Bylaws, supra note 39, at Art. IX § 3 (“Divisions shall receive an annual budget established by Council that shall govern Division expenditures and be administered under the authority of the Executive Director.”); Who’s Who in AERA, supra note 39 (“The Council is comprised of . . . the Vice President from each of the twelve Divisions . . . .”).
45 See 2011 Membership Form, supra note 42 (identifying both a “SIG Fee” and “SIG Membership Dues”).
49 Correspondence from William Watkins to Gloria Ladson-Billings (June 2, 2011) (on file with author); see also Council Minutes: January 31–February 1, 1998, EDUC. RESEARCHER, Apr. 1998, at 40, 41 [hereinafter January 1998 Council Minutes] (reporting the various reasons RFBE wanted divisional status); SIG HANDBOOK, supra note 47, at 4 (detailing the petition process for active AERA members).
school desegregation, and compensatory education centered primarily on schools and communities serving Black children and their families. And, one could argue, many educational researchers were making their careers off the backs of those children and their families.

During the time of the debate over whether RFBE should become Division M (the other 12 divisions are identified alphabetically from A to L), I was serving as the secretary of Division K (Teaching and Teacher Education). The division’s vice-president, Marilyn Cochran-Smith was unable to attend the council meeting due to a family commitment and requested that I substitute for her, since divisions only have two elected officers—the vice-president and the secretary. This may have been the first time a divisional vice-president had requested a surrogate. The Executive Director decided that I could come to represent the division, but that I would not be permitted to vote.

When the discussion of the proposed Division M commenced, council members who opposed the proposal offered the following objections: Black education was not a recognized sub-field of education like curriculum, history, or administration; creating a separate Black education division would cause the other divisions to lose their current Black members; and, if the association created a Black education division, members who were Latina or Latino, or Asian-American, or American Indian would also want a division. The supporters of the proposed Division M rebutted each of the points. They argued that not every one of the current divisions represented actual sub-fields of education. For example, the division on Research, Evaluation, and Assessment in Schools was not a sub-field, nor was Education in the Professions. The question of losing members had no empirical basis, as when Division L was formed,
the other divisions did not lose substantial membership. Indeed, members are permitted to join as many divisions as they are willing to pay the membership fees for.\(^{56}\) The third objection, that other groups of color would request their own division, was seen as irrelevant to the proposal. The AERA Council would have to deal with each proposal on its individual merit; it could not hold the proposed division hostage to the speculation that others would make a similar request. Finally, the supporters raised a question about how divisions were formed, and it became clear that there was no clear policy for forming divisions.\(^{57}\)

After much debate, the council members were set to vote. For the first time in memory, one of the council members asked that the vote be by secret ballot. When the votes were counted, it turned out that the proposal had a majority of supporting votes, but not the two-thirds majority required by association bylaws.\(^{58}\) The proposal therefore failed. Afterward, the association president asked to speak privately with me, and he apologized profusely for what had transpired. In addition, he offered me an opportunity to create a proposal to fund a project focused on research in Black education. That proposal resulted in the creation of what would become known as the Commission on Research in Black Education (CORIBE).\(^{59}\) The Commission was led by Professor Joyce King, then Provost of Spelman College,\(^{60}\) and it went on to engage in a variety of research and public scholarship activities that went longer and further than the AERA Council anticipated. The Commission met in a variety of locations that had significance to Black people, including St. Simon’s of the Sea Islands, Detroit, New York, and Atlanta.\(^{61}\) The Commission set up

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\(^{56}\) See AERA Bylaws, supra note 39, at Art. IX § 2 (noting that the only division membership requirements are that (a) division members are members of affiliate members of the association, (b) only members of the association are eligible to vote in division elections, and (c) membership dues for divisions are determined by the association council).

\(^{57}\) See January 1998 Council Minutes, supra note 49, at 41 (noting concerns about the fairness of changing the rules in the middle of the process).


\(^{59}\) See id. at v ("The Commission [on Research in Black Education] is a direct outgrowth of the decision by the AERA Council not to approve a proposal by the Research Focus on Black Education Special Interest Group (SIG) to establish a new AERA Division (M) of Black Education.").

\(^{60}\) Planning Group: Joyce E. King, COMM’N ON RESEARCH IN BLACK EDUC., http://www.coribe.org/Pages/planGroup.html (last visited Mar. 26, 2011) (noting that King has been the recipient of two prestigious national fellowships, served on the California Curriculum Development and Supplemental Materials Commissions, was appointed by the State Board of Education, is a member of the advisory board for Stanford’s Hass Center for Public Service and Our Developing World, and is an affiliated scholar with the Council on Islamic Education).

\(^{61}\) See, e.g., COMM’N ON RESEARCH IN BLACK EDUC., ACCOMPLISHMENTS & RESOURCES 1, available at http://www.coribe.org/PDF/resources.pdf [hereinafter CORIBE, ACCOMPLISHMENTS] (noting that the Commission sponsored or participated in, among other things, a Research Priority Panel in Detroit and a working colloquium at St. Simon’s Island, Georgia).
a “Council of Elders,” and thirteen widely known scholars, policy makers, and practitioners were named as commissioners. Two of the products that came out of CORIBE included a published volume entitled Black Education: A Transformative Research and Action Agenda for the New Century and a report entitled Vital Principles for Education, Socialization, Research and African People.

The first product (the edited volume) was introduced to the AERA membership through a book forum at the National Press Club in 2005, and, in addition to these more public products, CORIBE sponsored an online graduate institute, a culturally nurturing research demonstration project that introduced New York high school students to Songhoy language instruction, a community research and outreach project with Detroit community activists and parents, a working colloquium with senior and junior scholars at St. Simon’s Island, and a joint meeting of

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62 Our Elders, COMM’N ON RESEARCH IN BLACK EDUC., http://www.coribe.org/Pages/elders.html (last visited Mar. 26, 2011). The individuals appointed included Adelaide Stanford, Chair of the New York State Board of Regents; Franklin Bonilla, Emeritus Professor of Sociology at Hunter College; Baba Ishangi, a traditional African priest and culturist; Asa G. Hilliard, III, Fuller E. Calloway Professor of Urban Education at Georgia State University; and Edmund W. Gordon, John M. Musser Professor of Psychology, Emeritus at Yale University.

63 The commissioners included Congressman Major R. Owens of New York’s Eleventh Congressional District; Kathryn Au, Professor of Education, University of Hawaii at Manoa; Lisa Delpit, Benjamin E. Mays Chair of Urban Educational Excellence, Georgia State University; Mary Hatwood Futrell, Dean of the School of Education and Human Development, George Washington University; Kimberly Edelin Freeman, Director of the Frederick D. Patterson Institute, United Negro College Fund; Antoine Garibaldi, President, Gannon University; Donna Gollnick, Senior Vice President, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education; Shirley Brice Heath, Professor of English and Education, Stanford University, and Senior Scholar at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and former McArthur Fellow; Irving McPhail, Chancellor, Community Colleges, Baltimore County; Susan L. Taylor, Director of Publications and Senior Vice President, Essence Communications; Jonathan Kozol, public intellectual and social critic; Henry T. Frierson, Jr., Director of the Research Education Support Program and Professor of Educational Psychology, Measurement, and Evaluation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and Dr. Irving Hamer, Jr., member, New York City Board of Education. Meet the Commissioners, COMM’N ON RESEARCH IN BLACK EDUC., http://www.coribe.org/Pages/commissioners.html (last visited Mar. 26, 2011).


66 See COMM’N ON RESEARCH IN BLACK EDUC., VITAL PRINCIPLES FOR EDUCATION, SOCIALIZATION, RESEARCH AND AFRICAN PEOPLE 1–2, available at http://www.coribe.org/PDF/principles.pdf (asserting the common humanity of African people; a priority of family over individualism; solving problems through adaptation, improvisation, and resistance; a willingness to appropriate the ways of knowing employed by the arts and humanities; a search for meaning and understanding over facts and universal truth; recognition of the dialectic relationship between research and practice; and a recognition that people of African descent are not “empty vessels,” but come to education environments with knowledge and resources).


68 CORIBE, ACCOMPLISHMENTS, supra note 61, at 1.

69 Id. at 2.

70 Id.

71 Id.
the CORIBE commissioners and Congressman Major R. Owens at the Congressional Black Caucus Education Braintrust Conference.\(^72\)

The work of CORIBE energized members of the RFBE because it helped to re-orient the scholarly terrain. In Crenshaw’s terms, we were attempting to engage in “frame alignment.”\(^73\) Rather than wait for the professional association to allow scholars committed to the education of Black people to join an already established hierarchical and hegemonic organization, CORIBE was providing an opportunity to re-conceptualize our scholarly work. Like CRT in law, CORIBE “was not . . . a product of a philosophical critique of the dominant frames on racial power. It was also a product of activist engagement with the material manifestations of liberal reform.”\(^74\) The AERA could, however, continue to keep Black education on its periphery and pat itself on its collective back by pointing out that it provided the initial funding for the CORIBE activity.\(^75\) In the end, the AERA successfully quashed the transformation of the RFBE into a division through an exercise of budgetary and governance power. Changing the tenor of education research and scholarship would therefore require taking another approach.

In 2004, I was elected president of the AERA and would serve as the third African American to lead the 22,000-member association in its eighty-nine-year history.\(^76\) Having seen the inner workings of the association from my time as a substitute at the council meeting and later as an elected at-large member of the council, I realized that the president had a limited and circumscribed time\(^77\) to try to press her case for the importance of a research focus on Black education, even if there was no divisional structure for this work. The AERA president-elect has two important decisions to make upon election—naming a program chair for the annual meeting and selecting an annual meeting program theme. I immediately chose Tate as the program chair and, together, we set about developing a theme that was large enough for the entire association to embrace, but relevant enough for researchers interested in Black education.

\(^72\) Id. at 3.

\(^73\) See Crenshaw, Twenty Years, supra note 2, at 1259 (noting that “frame alignment” is the notion that the Civil Rights movement was “buoyed and pushed forward by a rhetoric that created a broad consensus on the relevant frame” and examining how frame alignment aids in scholars’ understanding of Critical Race Theory).

\(^74\) Id. at 1260.

\(^75\) In the years after the AERA’s funding, CORIBE garnered funds from the Soros Foundation Open Society Institute. CORIBE, ACCOMPLISHMENTS, supra note 61, at 3.


\(^77\) AERA presidents have three years on the governing council—one as president-elect, one as president, where they help set the agenda, and one as immediate past-president. About AERA: Organizational Structure, AM. EDUC. RESEARCH ASS’N, http://www.aera.net/AboutAERA/Default.aspx?menu_id=96&id=224 (last visited Mar. 17, 2011).
to endorse. We settled on “Education Research in the Public Interest.”

In addition to settling on a theme, Tate and I were approached by a publisher to produce a volume on that theme, which we did. It was, however, a circumstance well beyond the control and location of the AERA that ultimately shaped my address to the 5,000 members who attended the presidential address and awards ceremony. In late-August 2005, the U.S. Gulf Coast was hit by a catastrophic hurricane that the world came to know as “Katrina.” The horror of the event and the even more horrific response of the local, state, and federal governments provided me with a way to push a new conceptualization of achievement and school inequity. Instead of talking about an achievement gap, I introduced the concept of the “education debt.” The thrust of my argument was not that African-American (and Latino) students needed to “catch up” with White students, but, rather, that a debt had been incurred by the historic, economic, socio-political, and moral inequities that had been allowed to persist since the founding of the nation. It was not African Americans (and other groups of color) who were at fault and needed to run faster, but, rather, it was the collective responsibility of the nation to pay back the groups that had been systematically excluded from the promise of democracy through a quality education.

I ended my presidential address by asking the audience what it might look like if we had a living laboratory where we could start “paying back” from scratch—a place where we would not have to fight entrenched political opposition or longstanding customs that did not allow for change. What, I asked, if we could find a place that just needed to start over? At that point, I displayed a montage of photographs on the screen

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79 See EDUCATION RESEARCH IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST: SOCIAL JUSTICE, ACTION, AND POLICY 1 (Gloria Ladson-Billings & William F. Tate eds., 2006) (explaining Ladson-Billings’s reasons for participating in the aforesaid project on education research in the public interest).
82 Id. at 6–9.
83 See id. at 8 (quoting President Lyndon B. Johnson as stating in a 1965 address at Howard University that “[y]ou cannot take a man who has been in chains for 300 years, remove the chains, take him to the starting line and tell him to run the race, and think that you are being fair” (internal quotation marks omitted)).
84 See id. at 9 (“Taken together, the historic, economic, sociopolitical, and moral debt that we have amassed toward Black, Brown, Yellow, and Red children seems insurmountable, and attempts at addressing it seem futile. . . . But . . . just because something is impossible does not mean it is not worth doing.”).
85 See id. at 10 (“The only thing that would matter in an environment like this would be that education researchers were bringing their expertise to bear on education problems that spoke to pressing concerns of the public.”).
from Hurricane Katrina with a soundtrack of Aaron Neville’s version of “Louisiana 1927.” It was an emotional moment in the address, with some in the audience openly weeping. The point, however, was not to make them cry, but rather to make them feel, and for those feelings to spur them to action. The images I shared clearly underscored the salience of race in the debate about quality education, not to mention housing, healthcare, and employment. In that moment, I tried to transform the debate about CRT from the scary polemic that many had made it out to be toward discussion on the fact that this is a basic daily reality for people living in the so-called colorblind twenty-first century.

Two years later, after my AERA presidency and my time on the council was over, Americans found themselves in the midst of one of the most exciting presidential campaigns we had witnessed. Seemingly, from out of nowhere, a Black man was winning presidential primaries, and was looking like the likely winner of the 2008 presidential contest. It was a magical moment, because few of those people of my era believed it was possible. As Crenshaw points out, CRT was moving from “the ‘lunatic core’” to what I might call the “island of irrelevancy.” We no longer need a “race-based” analysis, because we are said to be living in a “post-racial” reality. On the day after the 2008 election, I went to teach my graduate class and apparently seemed too subdued for my students. They assumed that perhaps I had stayed up much too late celebrating, but they were determined that my somber mood was not going to bring them down. For the first time in a long while, they could shout, “We won!” Finally, one of the students asked me why I was not more ebullient. I harkened back to the story of Thurgood Marshall after the NAACP victory in the Brown v. Board of Education decision of 1954: while the other lawyers, NAACP staff, and plaintiffs were celebrating, Marshall shook his head and muttered that the celebrants were foolish to believe that the battle was over.

My response to the students was that I was a critical race theorist before the election, and I remained a critical race theorist after the election. More important, I could explain what transpired in this election using a CRT analysis. What we had just witnessed was a classic example of interest-convergence: African Americans wanted to support what they saw as a progressive Black leader, and enough Whites believed that the new

86 AARON NEVILLE, Louisiana 1927, on THE VERY BEST OF AARON NEVILLE (Interscope Records 2000).
87 Crenshaw, Twenty Years, supra note 2, at 1310.
89 See DERRICK BELL, SILENT COVENANTS: BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION AND THE UNFULFILLED HOPES FOR RACIAL REFORM 14 (2004) (quoting Marshall as saying “[y]ou fools go ahead and have your fun, but we ain’t begun to work yet”).
candidate would bring some degree of economic revitalization after a total collapse of the financial markets. The glow of a bright tomorrow, however, did not last long.

I would contend that race has become a more powerful signifier since President Obama’s election, because racist thoughts and ideas can be spewed with impunity and be covered over with a question of “how can we be racist if we have a Black president?” The actual ethnic breakdown of the election results, however, indicates that we are as racially polarized as ever. More telling is the rhetoric that has emerged with the ascendency of the Tea Party Movement and the dramatic “shellacking” the Democrats took in the November 2010 mid-term election. From the moment of his election, Obama’s legitimacy to serve as President has been challenged by conspiracy theories circulated about his place of birth, his supposed allegiance to Muslims, and his supposed plot to stage a socialist takeover of the U.S. “free” society.

Crenshaw discusses the question where does CRT go from here in the final section of her article. In the specific case of education, I would argue that CRT is more viable and more visible than I could have ever imagined. School inequality is more apparent and accepted as a fact of U.S. life. Race is a reliable predictor of school dropout, suspension, expulsion, assignment to special education, and the likelihood of being taught by unqualified and under-qualified teachers. The teaching force

60 Sixty-seven percent of Latinos voted for Obama, sixty-two percent of Asians voted for him, sixty-six percent of those designated as “other” voted for him, and ninety-five percent of Blacks voted for him. Mark Hugo Lopez et al., Dissecting the 2008 Electorate: Most Diverse in U.S. History, PEW RESEARCH CTR. (Apr. 30, 2009), http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1209/racial-ethnic-voters-presidential-election. Fifty-five percent of Whites voted for John McCain. Id. Rather than colorblind or post-racial, this election seemed to indicate just how racially specific politics in the U.S. are.


92 See Jonathan Alter, “The Illustrated Man,” NEWSWEEK, Sept. 6, 2010, at 22 (listing some of the more outlandish lies that have been put forth about President Obama).

93 Crenshaw, Twenty Years, supra note 2, at 1346.


95 See 147 CONG. REC. 26,355 (2001) (discussing the need for a bill to ensure that minority students are not taught by unqualified teachers at a higher rate than other students in the United States’s school systems); Matthew Ladner & Christopher Hammons, Special but Unequal: Race and Special Education, in Rethinking Special Education for a New Century 85, 87–88 (Chester E. Finn, Jr. et al. eds., 2001) (finding a disproportionately small number of minority students in several states’ special education programs); MA. DEP’T OF EDUC., STUDENT EXCLUSIONS IN MASSACHUSETTS PUBLIC SCHOOLS: 2002–03, at 2, 5 (2004), available at http://www.doc.mass.edu/infoservices/reports/exclusions/0203/full.pdf (noting exclusion rates by race or ethnicity and exclusions by type of offense and by race or ethnicity for students enrolled in Massachusetts public schools, and observing that these rates are higher for minorities than for nonminorities); GARY ORFIELD ET AL., LOSING OUR FUTURE: HOW MINORITY YOUTH ARE BEING LEFT BEHIND BY THE GRADUATION RATE CRISIS 2 (2004),
remains overwhelmingly White, and urban schools are abandoned to neoliberal approaches to management and private ventures like Teach for America (TFA)\(^\text{96}\) and KIPP\(^\text{97}\).

Today, these two programs receive millions of public and private dollars to provide schooling for students of color in mostly low-income urban (and some rural) communities\(^\text{98}\). Although the programs boast of improving educational outcomes, the jury is still out on their effectiveness. We have not seen a wave of TFA teacher graduates or “Kippsters” entering elite college programs.\(^\text{99}\) What we do see is a more regimented, and less imaginative, approach to education that is largely focused on maintaining discipline and order and posting some gains on standardized tests of dubious quality.\(^\text{100}\) These types of programs are reminiscent of most

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\(^{96}\) Teach for America (TFA) is a project to place graduates of elite schools into hard-to-staff schools with minimal teacher preparation. See About Us, TEACH FOR AMERICA, http://www.teachforamerica.org/about-us/ (last visited Mar. 16, 2011) (“Teach for America is the national corps of outstanding recent college graduates of all academic majors and career interests who commit two years to teach in urban and rural public schools . . . .”). Today, many urban schools depend heavily on Teach for America teachers to fill most of their vacancies. See Alejandra Cancino, Teach for America Supplies Charter Schools, Chi. Trib., Sept. 28, 2010, at C7 (reporting that Chicago Public Schools have started relying on TFA almost as a “placement service” for teachers); Melissa Bailey, City To Double TFA Hires, New Haven Indep. (Aug. 18, 2010), http://www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/teach_for_america_partnership_expands/ (stating that New Haven, Connecticut public schools have drawn heavily from TFA in past years). The program requires a two-year commitment from participants. About Us, supra. New Orleans has seen TFA as a steady supply of cheap labor that avoids dealing with teachers’ unions. See Teach 4 America: Union Busters?, WADE RATHKE: CHIEF ORGANIZER BLOG (Aug. 18, 2009), http://chieforganizer.org/2009/08/18/teach-4-america-union-busters (observing that, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans vacated the contract of the United Teachers of New Orleans union, the largest union in the city, and noting that the city was hiring Teach for America participants in place of experienced teachers).

\(^{97}\) KIPP (or Knowledge Is Power Program) was started by two Teach for America graduates (one of whom married the TFA originator). History, KIPP, http://www.kipp.org/about-kipp/history (last visited Mar. 16, 2011). The founders studied the practices of an African-American woman, Harriet Ball, at a Houston school when they were TFA teachers who were failing miserably in the classroom. They sat in Ball’s classroom, took notes on what she did, and marketed her approach as KIPP in their charter schools that took public monies. See U.S. Charter Movement Gains Traction, NPR—WBUR 90.9 (June 16, 2009), available at www.wbur.org/npr/10546173.US-charter-school-movement-gains-traction.


\(^{100}\) See Eight Questions for Wendy Kopp, ECONOMIST (Apr. 3, 2010), http://www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2010/04/wendy_kopp_interview/print (suggesting that standardized tests
reforms in education where African-American children are at the center—they make big names for the adults and leave children virtually in the same place they started.

Thus, when I think of where CRT in education will go, I am reminded of a debate I had when the RFBE of the AERA was attempting to gain divisional status. I mentioned to a White colleague that I thought some of the Special Interest Groups and committees in the professional association had outlived their usefulness and needed to be sunset. He remarked, “well, I don’t hear you talking about sunsetting the RFBE,” and I replied, “RFBE will go out of business on the very day that every Black child in this nation gets a quality education!” The look on his face told me that there would be plenty of CRT work in education to last well past my lifetime.

cannot, in and of themselves, capture “inspiring a love of learning, fostering the highest levels of critical thinking, [and] building perseverance in working towards academic excellence”).