

Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education Edward Taylor, David Gillborn and Gloria Ladson-Billings (Eds.). (2009). New York: Routledge. 364 pp. ISBN 10: 0-415-96144-0

“Does the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States prove that critical race theory is not true, or at least has overstated its contrarian claims that racism is permanent?” This is the question that co-editors Ladson-Billings, Gillborn and Taylor (2009) pose in their foreword to *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education* (p. ix). In a recent New York Times article, Westen (2011) has suggested that Obama failed expectations because he has not told the right story. Westen (a professor of psychology) explained that we come to expect certain stories, usually centered around heroes and villains, and that that the kind of story that Americans were hoping to hear from Obama would have provided a clear alternative to the dominant narrative of the right. With Obama, “there was no story—and there has been none since” (p. SR, 6). Meanwhile, here in Canada, Stephen Harper is said to be systematically spinning a revisionist Canadian story, one that undermines the long-held Liberal narrative of Charter, flag, peacekeeping and multiculturalism and that revolves instead around conservative symbols of: the Arctic, military, national sports and, especially, monarchy (Taber, 2011, p. A3). Foundational to critical race theory (CRT) is stories. The truth about stories, Indigenous writer and scholar Thomas King (2003) says, is that they are all we are. Stories convey what we believe; what we imagine and experience, as well as insulate us from what we don’t want to think about. Writing about the Canadian treatment of Indigenous peoples, Thomas King is not a card-carrying critical race theorist, but his method of counter-story telling, by combining critical analysis with personal storytelling, is in keeping with CRT, the foundational tenets of which are addressed in this edited volume. One of its key tenets is storytelling.

As the title of *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education* suggests, the volume is intended to serve as an introduction to CRT and how it can be applied to educational theory, policy and practice. Except for Taylor’s introduction, all chapters were previously published, most in the 1990s, half in legal journals, the rest in journals devoted to education and qualitative research, saving an article from *American Psychologist*. Of the twenty chapters, six were published post-2000. As several of the contributors point out, CRT started out as a branch of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) and as such, originated as a critical response to the treatment of race in legal discourse and practice. CLS, which had its inception in the 1970s, has focused on the power relationships embedded within legal decisions. CRT concentrates on race, and arose in response to the stalling of civil rights litigation, especially from watershed cases like *Brown v Board of Education*. CRT has several main tenets: that racism is a permanent, normative feature of (American) society, that any apparent legal progress has been due more to interest convergence (benefits to Whites) than to genuine social justice, that racism needs to be understood historically and that the narratives of oppressed peoples stand as privileged accounts of lived experiences of racist policy and practice (Taylor, 2009). CRT carries on CLS’ interest in the law but extends it to other spheres, notably, education. Like CLS, CRT defines itself as a counter-discourse that explores alternative forms of expression and evidence and is highly critical of claims of positivistic social science to neutrality.

Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education is divided into eight sections: the first definitional (Critical Race Theory in Education), the second and third historical (History and Evolution, and Affirmative Action), the fourth on methodology (Critical Race Research Methodology in Education), the fifth on studies in schools (Race in the Classroom), the sixth and seventh on further developing the theory (Intersections: Gender, Class and Culture, and Intersections: White Supremacy and White Allies) and the eighth on critiques of CRT. The three editors are well-positioned to be co-editors of such an important collection, Taylor and Ladson-Billings being household names in the field of CRT and Gillborn, though a recent arrival, well-steeped in race and education as well as being editor of the journal, *Race, Ethnicity and Education*. All three contribute chapters to the volume.

The first three chapters (by Ladson-Billings, Bell and Gillborn) address definitional issues of CRT in education. Ladson-Billings emphasizes the importance of storytelling and experiential knowledge to CRT: “parables, chronicles, stories, counter-stories, poetry, fiction, and revisionist histories” (p. 23), which provide the “necessary contextual contours” (p. 22) to both understanding the prevalence of racism as well as unmasking it. She reviews how CRT applies to different domains of education: curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding and desegregation. In such a “nice” field as education, she comments, CRT researchers and school personnel need to risk speaking from the edge. Derrick A. Bell is likewise well-known for his CRT scholarship and in particular, his poetic approach to abstract concepts, here beginning with a critique of the notion of the bell curve. Bell urges CRT to stand its own ground as a mode of resistance that uses stories rather than seeking to justify itself on traditional grounds. Gillborn situates CRT within critical scholarship on whiteness, arguing that whiteness is a performatively constituted set of identities that have become integral to educational policy and practice and that the effects of white supremacy (overtly practiced or tacitly condoned) can be verified empirically.

The five chapters on the history and evolution of CRT as well as on affirmative action each expose prevailing liberal myths about how American society was apparently transformed from being racist (founded on slavery) to being an emancipated democracy. Bell argues that far from serving black children and families, *Brown v Board of Education* represented a calculated move on the part of the American government to improve its image abroad in a post-war world in which it had emerged as a leader. A leader could not be perceived to endorse racist practices of educational segregation. Dudziak provides further evidence of this argument by linking the desegregation cases to America’s positioning vis-a-vis other countries, especially its main rival during the Cold War, Russia. Tushnet and Taylor (respectively) each debunk the myths surrounding affirmative action as a neutral discourse.

Two of the more useful essays in the volume (in the view of this reader) appear in the Methodology section. Solorzano and Yosso set out a clear rationale for the use of storytelling in CRT, linking it to experiential knowledge and perspectives rooted in a commitment to social justice, thus: the counter-story. They delineate a typology of three types of counter-stories: personal stories; other people’s stories; and composite stories. They provide examples from CRT literature of each type. Parker and Lynn situate CRT within qualitative research and methodology, linking the historical origins of CRT to its inclining towards narratives and storytelling. Parker and Lynn usefully identify how CRT can be used as a lens to critique qualitative research studies, for instance, those that claim to represent the voices of marginalized students.

The two chapters in “Race in the Classroom” are among the most interesting but are also confusing. Neither paper explicitly adopts a CRT perspective, yet the study findings (it could be argued) support or further CRT tenets. For instance, Steele advocates taking the viewpoint of the social actor when studying how stereotypes shape intellectual identity and performance, here the marginalized social actor. Datnow and Cooper’s research emphasizes the importance of structural and cultural factors in academic identity formation and goes a step further by stressing agency, here of African American student peer groups. Steele’s is an empirical study, Datnow and Cooper’s a fairly conventional qualitative case study. Following on the section on methodology, it is unclear how these two chapters ‘perform’ CRT methodologically. Neither uses narrative as theoretical lens or methodology. The chapters are perhaps consistent with Parker and Lynn’s point that CRT can be used as a lens through which to read research studies; here, the already CRT reader is trusted to bring such a lens.

The following four chapters (by Crenshaw, Brah and Phoenix, Leonardo and Tatum) help push the boundaries of CRT, forcing the theory to contend with and accommodate issues of gender and color (for Crenshaw and Brah and Phoenix) as well as how to position white people within CRT: in terms of privilege (Leonardo) or as possible allies (Tatum).

The last three chapters consist of two critiques of CRT on the part of legal scholars and Delgado’s response to CRT’s critics. The thrust of the critiques is primarily philosophical, taking issue with CRT’s reasoning as well as problems with using storytelling. The legal scholars are primarily interested in determining the value of CRT to legal studies, and how well it can stand its ground relative to legal counter-arguments. The section seems anachronistic, focusing on debates largely external to education.

Taken as a whole, *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education* will undoubtedly prove indispensable for students of CRT in education as well as for instructors in undergraduate and graduate courses looking for seminal essays in the field. CRT in education is still an emerging field, therefore the volume manifests some of the limitations attendant on trying to map out a field of study that is still finding its feet. First, the volume is broad in its sweep, ranging from study of (legal) cases to classrooms to policy to theory to methodology. Despite the beginning chapters, which help define the field, the field turns out to be incredibly diverse, differently manifesting various aspects of CRT tenets. This may be considered a strength (because it shows the range, breadth and accommodation characteristic of CRT) but it can also detract from a “foundations” focus. Moreover, some ‘foundational’ aspects still seem to be under construction. For instance, narrative is a key feature of CRT yet its use is by no means ubiquitous. Also, narrative is used in different ways, sometimes tangentially, sometimes centrally. More critically, a theory of narrative is generally lacking (except in the chapter that focuses on theory and narrative) thus giving the general impression that CRT scholars rely on narrative in loose ways, thereby opening CRT to the kinds of critiques evinced in the last section. A related question: how central are CRT’s links to CLS? Some chapters draw on the legal; some do not. Yet, the Critique section would suggest that this aspect is a central thread. Such features potentially weaken the coherence of the volume and take away from its “foundational” intention but on the other hand, also serve to map a divergent field, which CRT (as per its editors) aspires to be.

Finally, the chapters on methodology suggest that a CRT methodology is being, and can be, developed, yet the actual studies featured (in the Classroom section) not only do not rely primarily on qualitative sources (as the Methodology section would seem to endorse) but do not proclaim themselves as CRT studies. Does this mean that one can be a CRT scholar without explicitly aligning oneself with this approach? What territory, then, is CRT claiming for itself, and which (academic) communities/conversations does it count as its neighbours or allies? And who are those communities?

Unlike Obama, CRT has little difficulty in communicating the story it wants to tell; its story (which is a counter-story) is needed, and needs to be heard, in research, theory and practice. The rest, we trust, is gradually being assembled and articulated, in collections like this one, which folk in education will appreciate as a key source for motivating examples of CRT scholarship and practice.

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