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## Utilizing the Lens of Critical Race Theory to Analyze Stories of Race

Lorenzo Bowman, Tonette S. Rocco, Elizabeth Peterson, and Willene A. Adker

**Abstract:** In this paper the authors analyze three personal stories of race using Critical Race Theory (CRT). The analysis reveals common themes which speak to the tragic impact of racism on the lives of African Americans.

An analysis of the processes that replicate injustice and racism form the basis of critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001). One of the key tenets of CRT is that racism is ordinary and pervasive. The ordinariness of racism means that all those who hold power or privilege (Rocco & Gallagher, 2004) are racists and do not acknowledge their views or actions as racist but normal, typical and part of the status quo. The status quo is reinforced by the interest convergence of “white elites (materially) and working-class people (psychically)” (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001, p. 7) who work together by consensus to maintain the status quo. Interest convergence maintains that Whites are only willing to change the power differential when there is a clear benefit to the interests of Whites. The power held by the White elite results from control of material resources and capital. Although working class people do not share these resources, they derive psychic benefit from the existence of a subordinate racial group.

CRT scholars argue that race not only matters, but it will always matter. Racism is a fundamental characteristic of American life. CRT starts with the premise that racism and race are endemic and permanent in our society. CRT looks at the social, political, and economic inequity among groups acknowledging that race intersects with other characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, and class (Yosso, 2005). As an example of the ordinariness of racism when a Black man with a white girlfriend was found dead from a gunshot wound to the groin and bled to death it was ruled a hunting accident (Witt, 2005). It is nonsensical to believe hunters would abandon an accident victim and not get immediate medical attention. In another case, a Black man dating a White woman was found hanging from a tree. Local officials ruled it a suicide, despite the persistent doubts of the family and civil rights officials (Witt, 2005). People of color know this pre civil rights and modern history, and live its impact in silence. Even those who would dare to speak up are told that these events are ancient history and are not relevant today. When in reality these events are relevant because they speak to the continuation of racism in modern times. CRT asserts that “members of this country’s dominant racial group cannot easily grasp what it is like to be nonwhite” (p. 22). In CRT, storytelling and counter storytelling is powerful because it reveals the racist acts people of color face daily while challenging the beliefs universally held by the majority. The interpretation of the experience of racism is very different based on the degree of power and authority a person holds in this society. To change our future, these stories and lived experiences need to be told, listened to, and analyzed in a way that connects the stories to CRT. This means that once the story is told an examination of the key elements of the story should be based in the tenets, propositions, and legal arguments developed in the CRT literature. This analysis must also be based on an evident understanding and portrayal of CRT as a form of critical legal analysis. In this paper, Elizabeth, Willene, and Lorenzo share their personal stories related to race.

**Elizabeth’s Story: A Reflection on a Racial Incident.** Elizabeth shares a story that chronicles her childhood experience of having a cross burned in her yard after her family moved to the suburbs when she was nine years old. She described how her family sought to protect her by blocking her view of the burning cross and refusing to talk about the incident. She came to feel

that she should have been ashamed of what happened to her family. Elizabeth also discussed the experience of entering elementary school in her new neighborhood and striving to blend in. She was initially considered a novelty by her classmates, then invisible as they eventually did not notice that she was Black. She later acquired friends who knew she was Black and accepted her; however, race was never discussed.

**Willene’s Story: The Family Secret.** Willene shares her story about witnessing her Uncle Adam being lynched in front of her house by the Ku Klux Klan. She noted how the memories are still vivid: the white man in a choir robe with the gun as her Uncle hung from the tree. Silence followed this incident. There was never any discussion or even a funeral. Willene also shared her experience of being bused to a White high school and being surprised at registration when a White teacher said “Nigra, speak up!” She was suspended on the first day of school for speaking back to a White woman in a disrespectful tone. She never returned to school and instead obtained her GED.

**Lorenzo’s Story: The Creation of Racial Distrust.** Lorenzo shares a story that chronicles his childhood experience of repeatedly being told of the deaths of his maternal grandmother and grandfather. He recounts how his grandmother was apparently killed for the sport and entertainment of a White ferry driver and how his grandfather was beaten to death by the Ku Klux Klan because the Klan believed that his wife was White since she often “passed” when she went into town. As a consequence of these experiences, Lorenzo’s parents often warned him not to trust White people. Lorenzo also shared his experience of being transferred to the White elementary school in his neighborhood following desegregation. He discussed how he was suddenly conscious of his race since he was now the only person of color in his 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. Suddenly his inner voice was now louder than his outer voice.

### **Analyzing the stories using CRT**

We are living out the tenants of CRT through these stories. We read and reread the stories to move the work forward as a piece of writing. As we tried to stay on task issues, concepts, and additional stories emerged. Some we followed into in depth discussions thinking we had gone off task, returning to the editing task only to return to our discussions. Eventually, we realized that the conversations were in fact part of CRT – the exploring of the stories, the telling of new stories, and the unpacking of race in the stories, in our own experiences and in the experiences of those close to us. From this process, several themes emerged: isolation in the midst of the American Dream; watching through the night – the loss of safety; blending in, forced out, and being visible; “Nigra speak up” – keeping people of color in their place; shame in silence; and “you can’t trust white people.”

**Isolation in the Midst of the American Dream.** In 1931, “the American dream,” was introduced in Adams’ *The Epic of America*. While Adams maintained that circumstances of birth or position did not impede the dream of a social order where people were judged by their abilities the lived reality of African Americans stands in direct opposition to the American dream. Thirty years later, Dr. Martin Luther King (1963) dreamed that his children would “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” As opportunities opened up and the Black middle class grew, there was a sense that “King’s Dream” had been realized. Therefore, it was shocking when Derrick Bell (1981) first proclaimed the permanency of racism, declaring that racism had not gone away, but had become so ordinary in our society that it often went unrecognized until some abhorrent event brought it to the fore.

Elizabeth’s family was able to buy property and eventually build their family home. The American dream was not to include “Racial slurs, bomb threats – we were to get out or else - all

from an anonymous caller” recalled Elizabeth. Elizabeth’s family was quickly reminded that no matter how successful and prudent they may have been in working and saving money to accomplish the American dream, they could never obtain the version of the American dream that is experienced by Whites because of racism. Racism rears its ugly head even in the face of economic and professional career success for Blacks to remind them that race still matters in American society and that even in the midst of their success; they are still subordinate to Whites.

**Watching through the night – the loss of safety.** The dream which Elizabeth’s family pursued by moving to the suburbs to have a better life for the children in the family includes a sense of safety and being safe. Instead as Elizabeth shares, “That night, and for several nights afterward, my father and uncles kept watch. My father with his rifle and my uncles with their flashlights stayed up listening and watching to make sure we were safe.” Pursuit of the American dream includes a place for children to grow, be nurtured and be safe. While most Whites take for granted that their neighborhoods are safe for their children to explore and homes are secure when their children sleep for many Blacks this sense of security is nonexistent. The lack of security and safety is so prevalent it extends to all aspects of Black life.

The illusion of safety was shattered for Willene when she recalled that “we stood on the porch crying with mama who was holding daddy trying to keep him from being killed by the Klan.” Hate crimes are twice as likely to be perpetuated against Blacks as Whites according to the FBI statistics (Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund, 2004), churches are burned (General Board of Global Ministries, 1996), and Blacks are targeted by law enforcement. Indeed, many Blacks become conscious of their whereabouts in urban areas and even fearful because of the reality of “driving while Black” phenomenon in which people of color are targeted by law enforcement primarily because of the color their skin (Harris, 1999). There are places Blacks do not go because of fear of racial reprisal in large cities across America. This information is passed on to new arrivals to a city and to the next generation.

**Blending in, forced out, and being visible.** Gotanda (1995) provides a critique of the Constitution that challenges the color-blind nature of the document and therefore challenges the ability of laws, based upon constitutionality, to be color-blind. He explains that the Supreme Court uses race to cover four distinct ideas: status-race, formal-race, historical-race, and culture-race (p.257). Status-race is the traditional notion of race as an indicator of social status, or more simply put the belief that some racial groups are inherently inferior to others. Formal-race refers to socially constructed formal categories. Black and White in this context are seen as “apolitical descriptions, reflecting merely skin color or region of ancestral origin” (p. 257). Historical-race, however, goes further in that it encompasses all past and continuing racial subordination. Culture-race refers to the broadly shared beliefs and practices of a community and can serve as a bridge for building cultural diversity. Gotanda points out that no matter which racial idea you are referring to “. . . race is considered a legitimate and proper means of classifying Americans” and “While the social content of race has varied throughout American history, the practice of using race as a commonly recognized social divider has not” (p. 258).

Elizabeth experienced the classification and use of race as a social divider. She described her experience with school friends, “with classmates I was first a novelty (many stares), then invisible (colorblind-they did not even really notice that I was Black) and then eventually I acquired a group of friends that knew I was Black, but were ok with it. Nevertheless, even with my friends that were ok with me I did not talk about race. I never talked about being Black . . .” The white students treated Elizabeth in a relatively nonthreatening way seeing her primarily as an exotic other (Williams, 1998).

Lorenzo's experiences differed from Elizabeth's because his race became the central focus of interactions and as in the historical race category, his skin color made him subordinate. Lorenzo became aware that his color and race denoted an inferior status recalling, "I remember my first day of classes vividly. My race which had been invisible to me when I attended a segregated all Black school was now suddenly, visible. I was the only person of color in the class. My inner voice was now louder than my outer voice. I was now reminded of my race on a daily basis."

**"Nigra speak up" – keeping us in our place.** When Willene's teacher called her "Nigra" she reminded her of her "place." Most people of color have at one time or another been called a racial epithet or they've seen it scribbled on the walls of restrooms, dorm rooms, or on the side of their churches. So every time a White woman clutches her purse as a Black man walks by or steers clear when a group of Black or Latino youths approaches she sends out a signal that says, "You are dangerous and something to be feared by all "decent" people." And yet historically, more violence has been directed at African Americans (both physical and emotional) than the other way around. These are acts of overt racism, which have a powerful impact on the psyche. Over time, however the subtle insensitive remarks and actions of White folks build and have a greater impact on the psyche of African Americans. Subtle acts of microaggression are often unconscious reactions on the part of White perpetrators and therefore unintentional, but over time they are no less damaging because they undermine the self-concept and well-being of those they are directed against. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) found that microaggressions, "the subtle insults (verbal, non-verbal, and/or visual) directed at people of color," are experienced in both the academic and social spaces on college and university campuses" (p. 60).

**Shame in Silence.** Stories of what happened to a relative who stood up, spoke out, or in some other way offended and paid for it dearly are passed on from generation to generation, sometimes as a warning or a whisper and sometimes as a celebration of strength and courage.

Stories also serve a powerful psychic function for minority communities. Many victims of racial discrimination suffer in silence or blame themselves for their predicament. Stories can give them voice and reveal that others have similar experiences. Stories can name the type of discrimination, once named, it can be combated (Delgado & Stefania, 2001, p. 43).

The lynching of Willene's uncle was burned in her memory even though she was only two when it happened and there was no funeral and the incident was never discussed. But "daddy changed" speaks to the devastation that her family experienced. In a similar fashion the overt threat embodied in the cross burnings that Elizabeth shared was powerful becoming a vivid memory of a young girl. The act itself caused fear, but the silence that followed brought confusion and a sense of uneasiness. For her parents to talk about the incident let people know that it meant something to them and was an admission that White people had gotten to you and had power over you. For them, it was just best to forget it, but for a young girl it was difficult to forget.

**You can't trust white people.** Racism and memories of racism are woven into the Black experience in a way that most Whites can never fully understand. Each of the stories presented here represent a moment when the storyteller encountered racism in such a profound way that the memory of the incident(s) not only endured, but also in many ways created the lens through which later racial experiences would be viewed and filtered.

Tensions that have built up from decades of aggressions and microaggressions (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000) have conditioned people of color to expect racist behavior from Whites and to recognize it when it occurs. Whites who commit unintended slights are often



stunned when their actions are deemed racist and wonder how their actions could be seen as such. For people of color it is easy – they’ve been victims of racism enough to know it when they see it. They know it because they’ve been taught to expect it. Lorenzo’s story points out how he was taught not to trust White people. This lack of trust was born from the stories of what had happened to his grandparents at the hands of White people and was supported when he enrolled in a White school and his race was suddenly visible in a way that it had never been before. What happened to Lorenzo’s grandparents was an act of hate, what Lorenzo experienced was microaggression, both were damaging.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

The field of adult education from its very beginning held a strong connection to the promise of democracy and commitment to social justice (Heaney, 1996). Telling the story of “the people” is at the heart of social justice work. It is easy to dismiss what happened to Elizabeth, Willene, and Lorenzo as isolated events that happened in an era long past. Consider the tragic death of James Byrd Jr. who was beaten and dragged by a truck (Cropper, 1988) and the death of a Black woman who was shot in the head at a stoplight in Louisiana – her assailant stated that God would bring her back as White (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2008). In the last seven years, the civil rights division of the Department of Justice brought forty-one cross-burning prosecutions (United States Department of Justice, 2007). These stories reveal a deeper societal issue.

The memories of racial subordination, humiliation, and violence that African Americans have suffered still impact them today. As painful as it was for each to share her or his story, the stories need to be told to challenge our collective understanding of the myth of the “end of racism.” If people remain silent, it is impossible to dismantle the myth and for real healing and reconciliation to take place.

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