

“Be Real Black for Me”: Imagining BlackCrit in Education

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Abstract

The authors put forward a theorization of a Black Critical Theory, or what might be called BlackCrit, within, and in response to, Critical Race Theory, and then outline ways that BlackCrit in education helps us to more incisively analyze how the specificity of (anti)blackness matters in explaining how Black bodies become marginalized, disregarded, and disdained in schools and other spaces of education.

Keywords

Urban Education, race, identity, racism, social, school reform

You don't have to search and roam,
'Cause I got your love at home.

—Charles Mann, Donny Hathaway, and Roberta Flack (1972)

In introducing Critical Race Theory (CRT) to the field of education, Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate (1995) invoke Carter G. Woodson and W.E.B. Du Bois as two foundational intellectual progenitors of analyses that use race as a theoretical lens to understand and explain social inequities.

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Woodson is perhaps known best for advancing the study of Black history, and for his critical exploration of both Black education and *miseducation* in the United States (Woodson, 1919, 1933). Du Bois, of course, is the preeminent sociologist, activist, and Pan-Africanist scholar who authored *The Philadelphia Negro* (Du Bois & Eaton, 1899), the first major study of a Black community, and *The Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois, 1903), which articulates the Black experience of “double consciousness,” which Du Bois describes as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 2). Inspired by Woodson and Du Bois, and drawing on the explication of CRT in legal studies, Ladson-Billings and Tate offer an extended explanation of how schooling becomes a site in which Whites exercise their “absolute right to exclude” (p. 60) Black children. They conclude by echoing Black liberationist Marcus Garvey’s pronouncement that “in a world of wolves,” anti-Black oppression requires a defensiveness in which Black people commit to “the practice of race first in all parts of the world” (quoted in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 62).

Thus, CRT enters the field of education as a decidedly *Black* theorization of race. That is, even as CRT is offered as a tool to analyze race and racism in general, it is, at its inception in education (and arguably, in legal studies as well), an attempt to make sense of and respond to institutionalized racism, as this racism is experienced and endured by Black people. It is not that Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) understood the applicability of CRT as limited to Black people; rather, it is that their explication of CRT centers most decidedly on anti-Black racism. Therefore, one might be tempted to argue that CRT is—inherently—a Black Critical Theory. But it is not a theorization of blackness or even the Black condition; it is a theory of race, or more precisely, racism, based on analysis of the curious administration of laws and policies intended to subjugate Black people in the United States. Although heavily imbued with concern for the psychic and material condition of Black subjects, individually and collectively, CRT in education functions much more as a critique of White supremacy and the limits of the hegemonic liberal multiculturalism (McLaren, 1995; Melamed, 2011), which guides policy, practice, and research in the field. Understanding this distinction between a theory of racism and a theory of blackness (in an anti-Black world) is key: whereas the former may invoke Black examples, and even rely on Black experience of racism in the formation of its tenets, only critical theorization of blackness confronts the specificity of *anti-blackness*, as a social construction, as an embodied lived experience of social suffering and resistance, and perhaps most importantly, as an antagonism, in which the Black is a despised thing-in-itself (but not person for

herself or himself) in opposition to all that is pure, human(e), and White (Gordon, 1997; Wilderson, 2010).

Here, we want to take what seems to us implicit in Ladson-Billings' and Tate's advancement of CRT analysis in education, and make it explicit in a call to revisit and articulate the foundations of a Black Critical Theory, or what we might call *BlackCrit*, within, and in response to CRT. Of course, this brings to mind the number of other racialized "crits" that proliferated in response to CRT's initial formulation—namely, LatCrit, AsianCrit, and TribalCrit. In some sense, all these emerged as critiques of the perceived "Black–White binary" of CRT, and as efforts to more precisely name and address the racial oppression of Latino/as, Asians and Pacific Islanders, and Indigenous peoples (Brayboy, 2005; Chang, 1993; Hernandez-Truyol, 1997). At their best, these "crits" deepen and complicate our understanding of how race is employed ideologically and materially, and extend the theoretical and empirical utility of CRT. However, their existence either presumes that CRT functions in the main as a BlackCrit, or suggests that "race" critique accomplishes all that Black people need; Black people become situated as (just) "race," whereas other groups, through these more specifically named crits, offer and benefit from more detailed, nuanced, historicized, and embodied theorizations of their lived racial conditions under specific formations of racial oppression.

BlackCrit becomes necessary precisely because CRT, as a general theory of racism, is limited in its ability to adequately interrogate what we call "the specificity of the Black" (Wynter, 1989). That is, CRT is not intended to pointedly address how antiblackness—which is something different than White supremacy—informs and facilitates racist ideology and institutional practice. More, it cannot fully employ the counterstories of Black experiences of structural and cultural racisms, because it does not, on its own, have language to richly capture how antiblackness constructs Black subjects, and positions them in and against law, policy, and everyday (civic) life. As Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) insisted 20 years ago, citing the title of Cornel West's (1993) book, *Race Matters*, and, they quickly add, citing David Lionel Smith (1993), "blackness matters in more detailed ways" (cited in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 52). Advancing BlackCrit helps us to more incisively analyze these "more detailed ways" that blackness continues to matter, and in relation to CRT, how blackness matters in our understanding of key tenets related to, for example, the permanence of racism and whiteness as property. And, in conversation with the critique of multiculturalism offered by Ladson-Billings and Tate, BlackCrit helps to explain precisely how Black bodies become marginalized, disregarded, and disdained, even in their highly visible place within celebratory discourses on race and diversity.

In their 1972 duet, “Be Real Black For Me,” Roberta Flack and Donny Hathaway offer what historian Waldo Martin (2008) describes as “an invocation” that invites listeners—Black listeners, most of all—to “embrace blackness [as] ‘an interrelated and empowering emotional psychology and liberation politics’” (p. 245). What sounds, on first listen, to be an exchange between lovers, is, in fact, a love song to and for a collective Black “we” grappling with the liberal aims of the Civil Rights Movement amid a new, more defiant nationalism with a cultural politics, which proclaimed that Black is Beautiful. “‘Be Real Black for Me,’” in Martin’s (2008) analysis, “engaged and thus signifies an audacious and inspiring historical moment of black imagining, re-imagining and nation building” (p. 247). The song does not presume what it means to “be real Black”; rather, it invites a broader (re) imagining of the significance of blackness in our everyday lives. The only truth advanced is that it is important to love being Black, to embrace it as a conscious act of care, power, and healing. We read hints of this same proposition throughout Ladson-Billings’ and Tate’s article as well, as the authors explore the moral and political potentiality of CRT in education.

In our own historical moment, an insurgent #BlackLivesMatter movement demands a renewed critical imagining and praxis of blackness. As activist and community organizer Alicia Garza (2014), one of the creators of #BlackLivesMatter, explains,

When we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. It is an acknowledgement [that] Black poverty and genocide is state violence. It is an acknowledgement that 1 million Black people are locked in cages in this country—one half of all people in prisons or jails—is an act of state violence. It is an acknowledgement that Black women continue to bear the burden of a relentless assault on our children and our families and that assault is an act of state violence. Black queer and trans folks bearing a unique burden in a heteropatriarchal society that disposes of us like garbage and simultaneously fetishizes us and profits off of us is state violence.

In the field of education, we have countless examples of the dehumanization of Black bodies, from the long legacy of federal, state, and district policies and practices designed to deprive Black communities and children of educational resources (Anderson, 1988; Anyon, 1997; Rothstein, 2014; Watkins, 2001), to the absence of culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012), and to the *maladministration* of school discipline policies (Crenshaw, 1991; Ferguson, 2000; Noguera, 2003; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Specific recent incidents attest to antiblackness in schools (Dumas, 2016): A teacher in Illinois repeatedly

referred to two Black students as “nigger,” even after they asked him not to (Malm, 2014). In Florida, school officials ordered a young Black girl to either straighten or cut off her naturally curly hair, or face expulsion (Munzenrieder, 2013). And in New York, a school principal described Black teachers as “gorillas” and derided their “big lips” and “nappy hair” (Klein, 2013). BlackCrit in education promises to help us more incisively analyze how social and education policy are informed by antiblackness, and serve as forms of anti-Black violence, and following from this, how these policies facilitate and legitimize Black suffering in the everyday life of schools (Dumas, 2014). Of course, BlackCrit is not the only critical theory of blackness, just as CRT is not the only way to critically theorize race. That is to say, we do not intend to propose BlackCrit as something altogether new, or as the superlative approach to analysis of Black experience or racial discrimination. We simply wish to offer BlackCrit as a way to enrich our understanding of concepts already developed in CRT, and to suggest ways to move forward the conversation about CRT in education begun by Ladson-Billings and Tate two decades ago.

We begin by exploring the ways that CRT engages blackness and anti-blackness, emphasizing how it speaks to a BlackCrit without explicitly naming or theorizing it. We then discuss the minimal literature that has emerged on BlackCrit (all outside of education), and explain how formations of BlackCrit not only take into account, but also complicate, critiques of the “Black/white paradigm.” Bringing all these ideas together, we suggest some key concepts that might emerge in a more robust BlackCrit, and how these might be useful in critical race analysis in education.

CRT and the Specificity of Blackness

Although CRT is useful for a general analysis of race and racism, particularly as these “do their work” in law and policy, we read in some of the key readings a specific concern with the experience of Black people on the receiving end of racial constructions and racist practice. Our aim here is to highlight explorations of blackness and antiblackness in foundational CRT texts to move toward an articulation of BlackCrit that is consistent with honors and extends work that has already begun.

Trading Away the Black

In Derrick Bell’s (1993) allegorical tale, “The Space Traders,” aliens come to Earth and promise the United States gold and a sustainable solution to the nation’s energy and fuel shortage, all in exchange for the entire Black population. The aliens insist that the decision is entirely up to the U.S. government;

they will not take the nation's Black citizens by force. The news of the aliens' offer provokes a nationwide debate, with the White House and most U.S. citizens heavily in favor of forcing the removal of Black citizens.

Opponents of the trade included some corporate interests, liberal political groups, and of course, Black people themselves, represented primarily by Black civil rights and church leaders. Although corporate executives emphasized lost revenues from Black consumers, and the loss of cheap labor provided by Black workers, liberal activists warned of a slippery slope, in which the aliens might return for other maligned groups. In the end, the decision was put to a "democratic" vote, and Black people lost. Bell's story ends, "There was no escape, no alternative. Heads bowed, arms now linked by slender chains, black people left the New World as their forebears had arrived" (p. 194).

We highlight "The Space Traders" here because it exemplifies much of the theoretical imagination of CRT. Key concepts such as interest-convergence and whiteness as property are explored as racial allegiances are formed and broken, and the nation claimed as the inherent entitlement of White citizens. And, foundational to Bell's future-world is a nation in which the social and economic condition of Black people has drastically declined, laws to address the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow eviscerated, and White commitment to racial equity and justice all but gone. But, what we want to emphasize here is that "The Space Traders," this classic CRT allegory, is not about White supremacy or racism in general, but in relation to Black people and Black experience of racial suffering in the United States quite specifically. It draws on the history of anti-Black animus and disregard to depict a society quite eager to be rid of Black people, and able to craft justifications based not simply on broad ideas about prejudice or opposition to diversity, but a pointed antipathy to Black existence. The story is an exploration of how Whites, across temporal space, participate—here quite literally—in the fungibility of Black bodies (Hartman, 1997), the easy market exchange of Black *things* for other desired goods.

Whites as Propertied

This leads us to Cheryl Harris's (1993) seminal essay, "Whiteness as Property," which traces how whiteness evolved from a racial identity to a form of protected property. Harris argues that whiteness was first constructed to secure for Whites specific entitlement to domination over Black and Indigenous peoples, and then, after the end of formal racial segregation, continued to preserve for Whites certain benefits in social status, material resources, and political power. Because whiteness as property is so rarely

acknowledged, however, claims for redress become powerfully imagined as unwarranted and unequal taking from Whites, even as they operationalize their whiteness to maintain and increase advantage. Harris concludes her essay with a discussion of how, in the United States, the legal and popular conceptualization of affirmative action as “equal treatment” occludes the necessity for “equalizing treatment” (p. 1788)—that is, redistributive policies and practices that might follow from an ideological challenge to the right to exclusivity that is inherent in the social construction of whiteness.

In education research, “whiteness as property” is often invoked in analyses of educational policies and practices that maintain educational disproportionalities in such areas as school discipline, testing and tracking policies, and access to culturally relevant curricula (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011; Matias, 2015; Matias, Mitchell, Wade-Garrison, Tandon, & Galindo, 2014). In general, the argument is that whiteness accords to White students, parents, and communities a sense of entitlement to educational opportunities, privileged spaces, and structural advantages (Dumas, 2015; Leonardo, 2009). This is all valuable work, in its own right. At the same time, Harris is clear that whiteness is constructed as property based on two related notions: one, that Black people are, in fact, not people at all, but a form of property to which Whites are entitled; and two, that all land is White property as well, Indigenous peoples are not entitled to property, or to even be on property. Thus, whiteness puts Black people to work as exploited labor, or more accurately, Black property works to maintain and expand the property of Whites (Smith, 2014). At the same time, whiteness makes necessary the dispossession and extermination of Indigenous peoples, as there is no land upon which they could rightfully stand that is not always already the property of Whites.

Slavery in particular, Harris contends, was both justified by and furthered the need for the construction of whiteness as property. She notes,

The construction of white identity and the ideology of racial hierarchy . . . were intimately tied to the evolution and expansion of the system of chattel slavery. The further entrenchment of plantation slavery was in part an answer to a social crisis produced by the eroding capacity of the landed class to control the white labor population. (p. 1716)

Whiteness, then, as a form of entitlement, a birthright that can be enjoyed and repeatedly cashed in, becomes especially important as a possession of poor Whites who will never have much actual cash. Placated by this fictive property, poor Whites imagine themselves as always worth more than Black beings, and as connected to propertied Whites with whom they otherwise have no shared interests. Because slavery was based solely on race, “it

became crucial to be ‘white,’ to be identified as white, to have the property of being white,” Harris explains. “Whiteness was the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings” (p. 1721).

Our point here is to insist that implicit in the construction of whiteness as property, and in Harris’ theorizing, is an understanding of the foundational importance of Black people as the property of Whites, and, we should say, the lands of Indigenous peoples as always also the property of Whites. Although we may now theorize and identify instances of whiteness as property in CRT scholarship, without actually taking into account Black and Indigenous exploitation and removal, we believe a renascent BlackCrit might more fully explore what it means to take a historical account of being owned by propertied Whites, and then, even in this historical moment, owing an ongoing debt of deference—dare we say, servitude?—to all Whites, regardless of class.

Intersecting Blackness

Within CRT, intersectionality offers an opportunity to analyze the confluence of race and other dimensions of difference, most notably gender, sexuality, and social class (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Delgado, 2010). Although it has been broadly applied to a full range of intersections, the initial formulation of intersectionality in the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw was intended to address the peculiar position of Black women with relation to race and sex discrimination law. In short, Crenshaw argued, Black women could find themselves without a valid claim of sex discrimination, if it were possible that race was a factor in their unequal treatment, and similarly, could be denied a race discrimination claim if it were not clear that it was race *alone* that was the basis of the behavior they suffered. Crenshaw (1989) explains,

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (p. 149)

More than simply a question of law, Crenshaw critiques White feminist scholars for racializing gender as White, and race scholars—particularly Black scholars—for constructing racial grievances in terms of the experiences and needs of Black men. In public discourse and cultural politics, Black women then become either invisible, marginalized, or without an adequate

framework to make sense of and explain their everyday experiences of multidimensional (or multidirectional, to use Crenshaw's traffic analogy) oppression. For example, Black women who suffer domestic violence at the hands of Black men may be less likely to report their abusers, given their own concerns about police violence against Black men. Thus, some Black women may not heed calls by feminists to more severely punish violence against women, because these feminist discourses fail to express any concern about police violence, not only against Black men but also against Black women, who are inevitably, also, racialized by police. At the same time, within Black cultural and political spaces, Black women may face pressure to set aside issues of sexual violence for the good of "the race," even as Black public discourse leaves little room for consideration of violence against (Black) women as a race issue. Black women are thus "theoretically erased" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 2), but perhaps existentially erased as well.

In this regard, intersectionality, as Crenshaw (1991) introduces it, is an attempt to capture the complexity of Black experience, for Black women, first of all, and also for Black men. "I am Black," she contends, is "not simply a statement of resistance but also a positive discourse of self-identification" (p. 1297). She argues that at this historical moment, "to occupy and defend a politics of social location" becomes an important strategy for collective mobilization and identity. Thus, she insists on the salience of race and racial identification. What intersectionality offers is a way to "[reconceptualize] race as a coalition between men and women of color" (p. 1299). That is, Black struggle is inherently and always a coalition of Black people with different social location, across boundaries of gender, but also social class, sexuality, and other differences. BlackCrit finds its meaning not in insisting on a unitary racial location, asserting an essential Black counterstory or political project. Rather, its criticality necessitates an acknowledgment of, and a wrestling with difference, and interdependence across difference.

Our point here is not to debate the issue of the inclusion of Black women and girls—which has emerged more recently in critique of the White House My Brother's Keeper initiative (see, for example, Crenshaw, 2014, 2015)—but to emphasize that, once again, attention to blackness and antiblackness is at the core of key CRT texts and theoretical formulations. To be clear, we are not suggesting that CRT itself is intended to be a Black theory. Rather, we want to demonstrate that much of the early work is motivated by, and seeks to respond to the Black experience of racial oppression. This, of course, raised critiques—some of them valid—of a "Black/White binary," which we turn to in the next section. However, as we want to suggest throughout this article, any limitations of the Black/White binary (or paradigm) only further underscore the need for BlackCrit as a theoretical construct to attend

specifically to the Black experience of anti-Black racism and White supremacy, without attempting to generalize to all racialized subjects.

The Black/White Paradigm

From its inception, CRT sought to demystify racism and racial oppression. CRT scholars seek to understand and challenge the ways race and racial power are constructed and reproduced in U.S. society (Crenshaw, 1995), question the very foundation of the liberal order (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000), and articulate their critiques and challenges through specific insights and principles. Specifically, the acceptance that racism is not an anomaly but rather the norm in U.S. society (Delgado, 1995) where everyday acts of racial inequality and discrimination are firmly rooted in White hegemony (Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2009), allows CRT scholars to interrogate domination from a standpoint that acknowledges race as the organizing principle of society (Leonardo, 2004) and privileges the racialized experiences of people of color.

Although the original tenets of CRT refer to people of color en masse, Phillips (1998) argues that the original CRT workshops, held annually between 1989 and 1997, may have privileged the experiences of African Americans and heterosexuals. Although the workshops were originally conceived of by Kimberlé Crenshaw and organized by scholars with leftist orientations, in the early 1990s, non-Black scholars of color began to critique CRT for its “Afrocentrism,” or the centering of the Black experience to the extent that the experiences of other peoples of color were ignored (Phillips, 1998). At the CRT workshop in 1992, non-Black CRT scholars of color formed a caucus and challenged the workshop’s Black scholars for “[overemphasizing] the history and present circumstances of black people, with an unprincipled neglect of the conditions of non-black peoples of color” (p. 1252). These scholars argued that

the scholarship and discourse produced under the rubric of “Critical Race Theory” generally and effectively has equated African American “blackness” with “race” and measured that experience against Euro-American “whiteness” without examining how Asian American, Latina/o and Native American experiences or identities figure in the race/power calculus of this society and its legal culture. (Valdez as quoted in Phillips, 1998, pp. 1252-1253)

In short, non-Black CRT scholars critiqued Black CRT scholars’ conflating “race” with “Black” to the exclusion of other “outgroups.”

Much of this critique was contextualized within the notion of a Black/White paradigm. Perea (1997) for example, sets out to identify and critique

what has been called the Black/White binary or Black/White paradigm of race and the ways it excludes Latinos and Latinas from full participation in racial discourse, diminishes Latino/a history, and perpetuates negative stereotypes of Latina/os in the United States. Perea points to the robust scholarship on race that focuses solely on African Americans and Whites to illuminate how the Black/White binary shapes race thinking and reifies the Black/White binary paradigm. Perea (1997) notes, “The mere recognition that ‘other people of color’ exist, without careful attention to their voices, their histories, and their real presence, is merely a reassertion of the Black/White paradigm” (p. 1219). Perea painstakingly evaluates the work of scholars such as Andrew Hacker, Toni Morrison, and Cornel West, and suggests that as a result of focusing almost exclusively on whiteness and blackness, they marginalize other outgroups, ignore the ways non-Black people of color are racialized in the United States, and reify the Black/White binary.

Farley (1998), however, argues that the use of the phrase “Black/White paradigm” is a serious flaw in LatCrit theory and risks alienating Black people. Farley contends there is in fact no such thing as a Black/White paradigm except as a “tool for the master” (p. 171) and that discussions of moving beyond the Black/White paradigm may be heard by Whites “as a way to relieve themselves of the burden of having to speak of their former slaves” (p. 172). While Farley points to the importance of examining the ways White supremacy injures non-Black people of color, he suggests reframing the language in a way that forces White supremacy center stage. Hence, rather than moving beyond the Black/White paradigm, discussions that focus on moving “beyond the white supremacist language of black-or-white” (p. 172) or “White Over Black paradigm” (Phillips, 1998) nestle the responsibility within dominant racial ideology.

Furthermore, given the significance of African American ethnicity to U.S. political and social contexts and the “centrality of anti-black racism to the patterns of domination we call white supremacy” (Espinoza & Harris, 1997, p. 1596), attention to antiblackness is a critical component in resisting White supremacy. In fact, Nakagawa (2012) argues, “anti-black racism is the *fulcrum* of white supremacy” (emphasis added). While acknowledging that focusing on Black and White may reify a false racial binary that disregards the experiences of non-Black people of color, Nakagawa points to a real binary in which White people occupy one side—“the side with force and intention” and “the way they mostly assert that force and intention is through the fulcrum of anti-black racism.” Nakagawa notes that the very structure of the U.S. economy has its roots in race slavery and numerous other structures such as the U.S. concept of ownership rights, the federal election system, criminal codes, and federal penitentiaries, are fueled by anti-Black racism and in the case of national politics, a fear of Black people.

Still, all race scholars agreed on the necessity of interrogating the specific oppressions of non-Black outgroups within a White supremacist society. In other words, regardless of the problematic notion of moving beyond the so-called Black/White binary, the need for CRT focused explicitly on non-Black people of color, was indisputable. Hence, these early critiques of the “Black/White paradigm” or “Black/White binary” in CRT lay the foundation for the proliferation of other “racecrits,” namely, LatCrit, AsianCrit, and TribalCrit. These racecrits sought to address the experiences of Latinas/os, Asians, and Indigenous people in ways CRT had failed to do. These “crits” worked to advance our understanding of the ways non-Black people are raced and draw our attention to issues such as language, nativistic racism, and colonialism (Brayboy, 2001, 2005; Castagno & Lee, 2007; Cerecer, 2013; Chae, 2004; Chang, 1993; Haynes Writer, 2008; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Valdes, 1996; Yosso, 2006).

BlackCrit

Still, as other racecrits began to emerge, some Black scholars began to question whether it was necessary to have a line of CRT that explicitly focused on the Black experience. In other words, the proliferation of these other racecrits either meant that CRT was considered the same thing as a critical Black theory, or that a theory of race and racism was enough to encompass the experiences of Blacks in the United States. Although CRT may have privileged the experiences of African Americans at its inception, the notion that it could (or should) suffice for theorizing blackness, became increasingly problematic—both ideologically and practically.

Although the emergence of other racecrits served to deepen our understanding of the racialization of non-Black “outgroups,” it also effectively shifted the focus away from the Black experience. Phillips (1998) notes that Black history and politics were further decentered in the eighth and ninth CRT workshops and suggests that the only attention given to Black folks at this time were “critiques of black homophobia and chastisement of blacks for our role in enforcing repressive aspects of the Black/White paradigm” (p. 1253). Furthermore, Phillips notes that at the conclusion of its first decade, CRT had completely aligned itself with what LatCrit was at its inception. Where the experiences of Blacks are decentered (or pushed out), Phillips questions,

What institutional arrangements are suited to our articulation of the particular culture and needs of African Americans, which may or may not come to be called “BlackCrit,” but which should definitely take into account the

convergence between the politics of the Critical Race Theory Workshop and LatCrit theory? (p. 1254)

Although Phillips does not articulate what a potential BlackCrit may involve, the notion that its development had become necessary was clear.

Indeed, some scholars began to consider the potential of its explanatory power for underscoring the specific forms of racial oppression Black people experience, both in the United States and abroad. For example, Lewis (2000) notes, "The strand of Critical Race scholarship that I am labeling 'BlackCrit' addresses the significance of racial attitudes toward Africans and peoples of African descent in the structure and operation of the international human rights system" (p. 1076). Lewis was concerned with expanding iterations of the racialization of Black folks to include Black people outside the U.S. context. In other words, just as violence and material racism against Black people in the United States has been effectively muted, so have these forms of oppression been ignored against Black people in Africa and the Caribbean for example. Lewis argues that BlackCrit human rights theorists have created or built upon at least three significant critiques of human rights law including a deeper recognition of the role of race in human rights law, or the problems with so-called race-neutral laws, the ways race and gender intersect with human rights, and the primary role of United States in human rights violations both in the United States and abroad.

Still, other scholars' discussion of the development of a BlackCrit situates it within the context of anticipated (or actual) objections. While Phillips (1998) understands why there may be a need to carve space to articulate the specific culture and needs of African Americans, she argues for its development within the CRT workshop rather than as a separate entity or organization. Phillips points to concerns about a regressive Black nationalism that may deny sexism in the Black community, legitimate homophobia, and deny the possibility of African Americans being racist toward non-Black people of color and whites. Another potential danger in constructing a BlackCrit theory is the notion that it would necessarily be essentialist. Roberts (1998) notes,

BlackCrit could erroneously imply that Blacks share a common, essential identity; it could erroneously attribute to all people of color the experiences of Black people; and it could reinforce the white-black paradigm as the only lens through which to view racial oppression. (p. 855)

Still, Roberts cautions against allowing such fears to prevent scholars from developing a theory that is Black specific. In other words, "writing about Black people is not essentialist in and of itself. It only becomes essentialist

when the experiences discussed are taken to portray a uniform Black experience or a universal experience that applies to every other group” (p. 857). Citing the usefulness of a BlackCrit, Roberts notes that studying the relationship between reproductive policies and Black women would have been impossible outside of a Black-specific theory:

I could not have adequately described these policies without focusing on black-white relationships and on the particular meaning of blackness. These repressive reproductive policies arose out of the history of the enslavement of Africans in America. The institution of slavery gave whites a unique economic and political interest in controlling Black women’s reproductive capacity. This form of subjugation made Black women’s wombs and the fetuses they carried chattel property. The process of making a human being’s very reproductive capacity the property of someone else is not replicated in other relationships of power in the United States. (p. 858)

Ultimately Roberts warns about the dangers in advocating an antiessentialism that becomes a detaching from Blackness. Roberts notes, “We should be concerned about avoiding blackness when so many people still feel uneasy about ‘loving blackness’” (p. 862).

Still, more than 15 years later, the notion of a BlackCrit remains woefully undertheorized. Particularly in an age where technology often renders brutal antiblackness visible as public spectacle, and calls of “Black lives matter” echo in the streets, we must ask, what are the theoretical tools that will assist us in an examination of the specificity of the Black. More importantly, for the purposes of this article, what does a BlackCrit in education do for us? Surely Ladson-Billings and Tate’s introduction of CRT into education 20 years ago raised significant questions about the ways structural racism excludes Black children specifically from equitable educational opportunities. Still, how can we build on this initial focus on blackness, and conceptualize a Black theoretical framework that distinguishes racism from blackness, and expands CRT’s ability to illuminate the specificity of blackness in an anti-Black world?

Toward a Conceptualization of a Black Critical Theory

In the first verse of “Be Real Black for Me,” Donny Hathaway tells his lover, “You don’t have to wear false charms.” If indeed this song is, as historian Waldo Martin suggests, a love song to and for Black people, we can read Hathaway as cautioning against a false or grandiose front, a posturing of certainty where there is no need, and where what matters is the ability to hold

blackness gently in one's arms. Part of the "false charm" we want to avoid here is the suggestion that BlackCrit is a theoretical formulation entirely of our own making, or even that we are ready to present it as a coherent theory. Given that CRT, and even some of the other racecrits are often explained through the enumeration of "tenets," there is a temptation to do the same here for BlackCrit. But two things are true: First, there are a number of critical Black theories that inform our thinking (which we will credit below), and second, we are not convinced that BlackCrit is best served by the kind of fixedness implied by the notion of *tenets*, a term most commonly associated with religious statements of faith, or rigid ideological schools of thought. We want to resist that here, at least for now, to leave space for further scholarship and collective deliberation. Instead, what we hope to offer here are some framing ideas that might inspire and serve us well in conceptualizing BlackCrit, and then help us move from initial conceptualization to an ever richer theorization.

We begin with a foundational idea that is probably inherent to any possible formulation of BlackCrit: Antiblackness is endemic to, and is central to how all of us make sense of the social, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions of human life. Of course, this is a more specific iteration of the CRT tenet that asserts that racism is normal and permanent in U.S. society (Bell, 1993; Delgado, 1995). But, antiblackness is not simply racism against Black people. Rather, antiblackness refers to a broader antagonistic relationship between blackness and (the possibility of) humanity. The concept is most developed in an intellectual project called Afro-pessimism (although not everyone who writes in, or in relation to, this project would define themselves as Afro-pessimists). Afro-pessimism posits that Black people exist in the social imagination as (still) Slave, a thing to be possessed as property, and therefore with little right to live for herself, to move and breathe for himself (Gordon, 1997; Hartman, 1997, 2007; Sexton, 2008; Wilderson, 2010). In fact, there is no Black Self that is not already suspect, that is not already targeted for death, in the literal sense and in terms of what Orlando Patterson (1982) calls "social death," in which the participation of Black people in civic life, as citizens, is made unintelligible by the continual reinscribing and re-justification of violence on and against Black bodies. A full explication of antiblackness is beyond the scope of this article, but the essence of antiblackness is that Black people are living in what Saidiya Hartman (2007) calls "the afterlife of slavery," in which Black humanity and human possibility are threatened and disdained "by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (p. 6). To insist that antiblackness is endemic and permanent means that BlackCrit intervenes at the point of detailing how policies and everyday practices find their logic in, and reproduce Black suffering; it is also to imagine the

futurity of Black people against the devaluation of Black life and skepticism about (the worth of) letting Black people go on (see, for example, Moten, 2013, who posits a Black optimism, not so much against Afro-pessimism, but certainly in necessary tension with it).

We offer a second framing idea for BlackCrit: *Blackness exists in tension with the neoliberal-multicultural imagination*. After World War II, the United States began to slowly dismantle laws that overtly inscribed racial discrimination. By the mid- to late-1960s, with the signing of various federal and state civil rights measures, and the end of Jim Crow, the nation came to assert itself as officially antiracist (Melamed, 2011). In this new embrace of multiculturalism, the state first took an active role in the establishment and enforcement of antidiscrimination laws, and even implemented a number of programs (e.g., affirmative action, Head Start) intended to correct generations of racist policies and practices. With the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, the state began to retreat from an active role in addressing racism, and instead entrusted the market with advancing diversity and opportunity for all. An emergent neoliberal multiculturalism celebrated the opening of various markets to a broader range of racially diverse consumers. It is presumed that racism is no longer a barrier to equal opportunity; thus, those groups that do not experience upward mobility and greater civic (and buying) power are presumed to have failed on their own, as a result of their own choices in the marketplace and/or their own inability to internalize national values of competition, and individual determination and hard work.

In this context, Black people become—or rather, remain—a problem, as the least assimilable to this multicultural imagination. The relative successes of some other groups of color are offered as evidence of the end of racism. Persistent joblessness, disparities in educational achievement, and high rates of incarceration are all seen as problems created by Black people, and problems of blackness itself. Here, then, Black people are seen to stand in the way of multicultural progress, which is collapsed here with the advancement of the market, which in turn, under neoliberalism, is presumed to represent the interests of civil society and the nation-state. In our view, then, BlackCrit proceeds with a wariness about multiculturalism (and its more current iteration, diversity) as an ideology that is increasingly complicit with neoliberalism in explaining away the material conditions of Black people as a problem created by Black people who are unwilling or unable to embrace the nation's "officially anti-racist" multicultural future. We do not mean to suggest opposition to coalitions among and between groups of people of color, or even to endorse a kind of essentialist racial separatism. However, we want to recognize that the trouble with (liberal and neoliberal) multiculturalism and diversity, both in ideology and practice, is that they are often positioned against the lives of Black people (Dumas, 2016; Sexton, 2008).

Third, we offer that BlackCrit should create space for Black liberatory fantasy, and resist a revisionist history that supports dangerous majoritarian stories that disappear Whites from a history of racial dominance (Leonardo, 2004), rape, mutilation, brutality, and murder (Bell, 1987). Fanon (1963) notes, “You do not disorganize a society . . . if you are not determined from the very start to smash every obstacle encountered” (p. 3). In the wake of the brutal killings of Eric Garner or Natasha McKenna, for example, we may understand Tupac Shakur’s (1991) call for “every nigga on my block [to] drop two cops” as a manifestation of Fanon’s theory in a way that makes sense in the lived reality of people raced as Black today—people who navigate the constant threat (and reality) of police terror. Still, in reflecting upon this, we understand it is not (as it may appear) a fantasy of murder or the destruction of human beings. We do not see this as a desire on Shakur’s part to witness the death of police officers or to know their families’ grief. Rather, it is a fantasy of the eradication of a prison and the beginning of a necessary chaos. It represents the beginning of the end. It is the first taste of freedom.

This glimpse of freedom stems from the potential of attacking the army of whiteness and the wondrous possibilities of the ensuing pandemonium. Fanon notes, “Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder” (p. 2). Although Shakur’s suggestion is not an end-all solution to racial oppression, it is the disruption of a power dynamic that becomes the ray of hope for larger systemic change. Hence, as we celebrate the “peaceful protests” against the numerous recent police murders of Black men, women, and children, we must also acknowledge the place of Black liberatory fantasy in collective Black struggle. Fanon writes,

The work of the colonist is to make even dreams of liberty impossible for the colonized. The work of the colonized is to imagine every possible method for annihilating the colonist . . . for the colonized, life can only materialize from the rotting cadaver of the colonist. (p. 50)

Hence, BlackCrit should also make space for the notion of chants becoming battle cries, tears becoming stones in clenched fists, and the hand-written signs machine guns—for the idea that the blood of whiteness must flow in the streets.

Toward BlackCrit in Education

BlackCrit encourages policy analysis and advocacy that attend to the significance of blackness in the social construction of White supremacy, and then in

education specifically, how antiblackness serves to reinforce the ideological and material “infrastructure” of educational inequity—the misrecognition of students and communities of color, and the (racialized) maldistribution of educational resources. Such work neither is meant to displace a broader theorization of critical race policy analysis nor is it intended to reify a Black–White binary. For us, BlackCrit takes its place within the broader critical race project, and at the same time, necessarily occupies a location of its own, similar to the other racecrits, in a way that provides space for further development and imagination.

We conclude this article by briefly offering some explanation of how we might apply BlackCrit in analysis of education policy and practice. We chose to highlight school desegregation and school discipline, because these are two areas where Black students, and Black families and communities figure quite prominently, and where the discourses are so heavily informed by (anti) blackness.

School Desegregation: On Carelessly Moving Black Bodies Around

School desegregation research tends to assess effectiveness in terms of legal victories and policy compliance, the willingness of Whites to participate in busing programs rather than flee public schools, and the extent to which desegregation contributes to cross-cultural learning and the reduction of prejudice (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield & Lee, 2004; Wells, 1995; Wells, Duran, & White, 2008). CRT scholars have rightly criticized school desegregation policies, and the aims of integration more broadly, as efforts which have done more to maintain White material advantage than extend opportunities for Black children (Dumas, 2011, 2014, 2015; Horsford, Sampson, & Forletta, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tillman, 2004). White resistance to school desegregation has always been fierce, and opponents have used the courts and the legislative process to undermine integration altogether, or implement policies that provide special educational benefits for White children, and create more segregated spaces within and across schools, in which White children will not have to be in the same classrooms as Black children.

Perhaps most significantly for BlackCrit, critical race theorists have also called attention to the myriad ways that school desegregation has been deleterious to the stability of Black communities and families, the development of healthy Black racial identities, and the emotional and social well-being of Black children placed at risk in what Ladson-Billings (2014) has called “a deal with the devil.” Derrick Bell (2004) in reflecting critically on his own

experience championing school desegregation, notes the damage done to Black children:

In these white schools, black children all too often met naked race-hatred and a curriculum blind to their needs. Black parents, who often lived far from the schools where their children were sent, had no input into the school policies and little opportunity to involve themselves in school life. (p. 112)

BlackCrit follows CRT in interrogating the White supremacy inherent in the formation of, and White resistance to, school desegregation, and embraces CRT's reliance on the lived experiences of Black children, parents, and communities as counterstories to the liberal hegemonic frame used in assessing the effectiveness of integration policies and practices. Where BlackCrit goes further is in analyzing the specific formations of antiblackness that serve as the foundation for opposition to school desegregation, but which are also embedded in various attempts to implement policies intended to bring racial balance. For example, to convince White families to send their children to predominantly Black schools, district leaders often placed attractive magnet programs in these schools, which had often been long deprived of resources. Although these specialized programs were ostensibly open to all students, the overwhelming number of spaces were occupied by White students. The very fact that such programs were not offered to Black students prior to integration is a clear case of disregard for Black bodies, and is informed by a deep belief that Black people are undeserving of strong academic programs, and worse, simply would not have the capacity to succeed in more rigorous courses of study. The antiblackness is only compounded when Black students—children all—had to endure seeing their White peers offered higher status and greater resources in schools that had historically been places of Black pride and community uplift.

More broadly, BlackCrit helps us think about desegregating schools as spaces in which Black children and their families are the objects of education policy that has other aims besides the defense of Black humanity. These other aims—racial balance, prejudice reduction, cultural pluralism—ultimately displace analytical frames that highlight Black well-being and futurity, and thus place Black lives at further risk. Here, BlackCrit might envision a liberatory fantasy in which Black subjects respond to integrationist policy proposals with a decided, “Hell naw” and then “I said, ‘Hell naw!’ with the same decided defiance that *The Color Purple*'s Miss Sophia rejected Miss Millie's offer to serve as her maid. And, we might throw in a direct punch to Miss Millie's husband's face as well, regardless of the cost: “Hell naw!” to going where we are hated and beaten down.

School Discipline: Control of Black Bodies, Already Subhuman, Already Despised

Scholars have argued that school discipline has become the new equity issue as many wrestle with the disproportionate number of incidents of school discipline involving Black students (Bireda, 2002; Gordon, Piana, Keleher, 2000; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Monroe, 2005; Skiba & Peterson, 2003). Even when controlling for socio-economic status, Black students outnumber all other groups in every aspect of the disciplinary system (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2002). BlackCrit promises to address racialized school discipline and the ways that Black children's bodies, clothing choices, and spoken and body language represent the "outer limits in a field of comparison in which the desired norm is a docile bodily presence and the intonation and homogeneous syntax of Standard English" (Ferguson, 2000, p. 72). BlackCrit may also forward our understanding of the symbolic role of discipline in schools. Noguera (1995) asserts,

The disciplining event, whether it occurs in public or private, serves as one of the primary means through which school officials "send a message" to perpetrators of violence, and to the community generally, that the authority vested in them by the state is still secure. (p. 198)

Where Black children's bodies can represent the ultimate threat to authority, the disciplining of Black children can be understood as the definitive reinforcement of security and order.

Still, BlackCrit may offer a more robust theorizing of exactly what Black students are resisting (Nasir, Ross, McKinney de Royston, Givens, & Bryant, 2013). Black students are subjected to the harshest disciplinary actions, such as corporal punishment (Gregory, 1997), zero tolerance policies (Skiba, 2000), the criminalization of student behavior (Hirschfield, 2008), and the school to prison pipeline (Toldson, 2008; Wald & Losen, 2003). Certainly, this "discriminatory disciplining" mirrors racialized state repression within the larger society. As Alexander (2012) notes, "lynch mobs may be gone, but the threat of police violence is ever present" (p. 141). The threat of police violence is real, particularly when there are increasing examples of law enforcement officers' ability to abuse, sometimes fatally, with total impunity. In a song specifically about police terrorism in Black communities and police murders of young Black men, Tupac Shakur famously commented, "tell me what a Black life's worth . . . the truth hurts" (T. Shakur, 1997). If in fact, #Blacklivesmatter in the educational context, BlackCrit should interrogate the dissonance between the hashtag and racialized disciplinary policies and

practices in U.S. public schools. If the demand for recognition of the worth of Black lives is muted by institutionalized repression of Black students, Shakur's question (and answer) becomes painfully salient.

Although scholars tend to focus on the discipline gap itself, or on the connection between discipline and prison rates, the disciplining of Black children must be understood in the context of larger systems of repression. This is necessary to begin thinking about strategies to combat the failure of public schools to effectively educate Black children, and their success in reproducing dominant racial ideology and the repression of the Black body. Referring to the current state of affairs as a "discipline gap" or as "disproportionate rates of discipline" may serve to obfuscate the egregiousness and exact substance of antiblackness.

Love at Home: Carrying It on

As part of refusing to make peace with the war on Black people, Assata Shakur (1987) ends her autobiography with a poem titled, "The Tradition." While this poem is a recognition and celebration of the trajectory of Black resistance, it also serves as a call to action. She writes,

. . . In tales told to the children
 In chants and cantatas.
 In poems and blues songs
 and saxophone screams,
 We carried it on.

In classrooms. In churches
 In courtrooms. In prisons
 We carried it on

On soapboxes and picket lines.
 Welfare lines, unemployment lines.
 Our lives on the line,
 We carried it on . . .

On cold Missouri midnights
 Pitting shotguns against lynch mobs.
 On burning Brooklyn streets.
 Pitting rocks against rifles,
 We carried it on . . .

Carried on the tradition

Carried a strong tradition

Carried a proud tradition

Carried a Black tradition.

Carry it on.

Pass it down to the children.

Pass it down.

Carry it on.

Carry it on now.

Carry it on

To Freedom! (pp. 264-265)

Ultimately we offer that BlackCrit *carry it on*. Carry it on from a place of love. Not just a love for the Harlem Renaissance or the Civil Rights Movement, but love for loud colors and loud voices. Love for sagging pants, hoodies, and corner store candies. Love for gold grills and belly laughs on hot summer porches. Carry it on as a site of struggle—as engaging with the historical and contemporary yearning to be at peace. As forging refuge from the gaze of White supremacy—where Black children dream weightless, unracialized, and human. Where language flows freely and existence is nurtured and resistance is breath. Where the Black educational imagination dances wildly into the night—quenching the thirst of yearning and giving birth to becoming.

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