Revisiting BlackCrit in Education: Anti-Black Reality and Liberatory Fantasy

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While Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theory of race and racism more broadly, it enters the fields of both legal studies and education (at least implicitly) as a Black theorization of race. In other words, in its initial formulation, CRT specifically attempts to make sense of and respond to anti-Black racism[1]. In response to a perceived Black-white binary[2] in CRT, other "racecrits" emerge such as LatCrit, AsianCrit, and TribalCrit; these "crits" serve to address the specificity of racial oppressions faced by non-Black People of Color. The absence of a BlackCrit then, either meant that CRT was considered the same thing as a Black critical theory, or that a theory of race and racism was enough to encompass the experiences of Black folks in the United States. Although CRT may have privileged the experiences of African Americans[3] at its inception, in conceptualizing BlackCrit, my colleague Michael Dumas and I, problematize the notion that CRT could (or should) suffice for theorizing blackness and antiblackness. In this brief, I explore BlackCrit as a Black critical theory within and in response to Critical Race Theory and offer insight into the utility of BlackCrit as a theory of (anti)blackness in education specifically.

FROM CRT TO BLACKCRIT

Over 20 years ago, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced CRT to the field of education. Although they do not explicitly name CRT as a critical theory of blackness, similarly to their critical legal studies descendants, their work engages and highlights various forms of anti-Black racism. For example, where Derrick Bell's (1993) Space Traders articulates and analyzes a story of white people choosing to expel Black people from their midst, Ladson-Billings & Tate's work draws on W.E.B. Du Bois, Charles Woodson, and quotes Marcus Garvey to describe how schools become places and spaces where whites exercise their right to exclude Black children. While this does not mean the authors understood CRT as only applicable to Black people, their work centers the ways white supremacy subjugates Black people in particular. At one point Ladson-Billings and Tate quote Cornell West noting, "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). BlackCrit was born out of a desire to explore these "more detailed ways" that blackness continues to matter, and to highlight how a theory of race cannot account for what it means to be racialized Black in an anti-Black world. Dumas and ross (2016) note, CRT in education functions much more as a critique of white supremacy and the limits of the hegemonic liberal multiculturalism[4] (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 a critical theorization of blackness confronts the specificity of *antiblackness*, 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 themselves) in opposition to all that is pure, human(e), and white (Gordon, 1997; Wilderson, 2010). Further, thinking through antiblackness pushes us to confront the ways non-Black people recognize their own humanity, and achieve and maintain their own sanity, vis-à-vis the abject inhumanity of the Black (Wilderson, 2015). In the educational context then, BlackCrit necessitates we problematize a presumed monolithic Students of Color experience and inherent solidarity. Rather, we must call out (and attention to) the "refusal to admit to significant differences of structural position born of discrepant histories between blacks and their political allies, actual or potential" (Sexton, 2010, p. 48), and the ways a misunderstanding of the specificity of antiblackness reinscribes Black students' hyper/in-visibility, uneducability, and their always already necessitating discipline, punishment, and policing more broadly.

Hence, 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[5]. Where the experiences of Black folks are decentered (or pushed out), or ignored altogether, 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'…" (1998, p. 1254). Although Phillips does not articulate what a potential BlackCrit may involve, the notion that its development had become necessary was clear.

Two other scholars, considered the potential of a BlackCrit's explanatory power for underscoring the specific forms of racial oppression Black people experience, both in the United States and abroad. Hope Lewis, a Black feminist law professor (2000), was concerned with expanding iterations of the racialization of Black folks to include Black people outside the U.S. context. Dorothy E. Roberts, a Black professor of law and sociology (1998), noted that her work on the relationship between reproductive policies and Black women would have been impossible outside of a Black-specific theory. Still, both Phillips (1998) and Roberts offer cautions in forwarding a BlackCrit. 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. Roberts' concerns lie in the potential for BlackCrit to become essentialist and presume a homogeneous Black identity. Still, Roberts cautions against allowing such fears to prevent scholars from developing a theory that is Black specific. Roberts notes, "We should be concerned about avoiding blackness when so many people still feel uneasy about 'loving blackness'" (1998, p. 862). Despite these initial forays into the potentiality and utility in conceptualizing what may be called BlackCrit, the notion remained woefully undertheorized.

FRAMING BLACKCRIT IN EDUCATION

In our conceptualization of BlackCrit, we offer three framing ideas[6].

- The first idea centers antiblackness and suggests that the same way CRT scholars may argue that racism is normal and permanent in U.S. society, 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. We do not use antiblackness here to only refer to racism against Black people. Rather, in the Afro-pessimist tradition (Sexton, 2016; Wilderson, 2010), we use antiblackness to signal the broader antagonistic relationship between blackness and the possibility of humanity[7].

- The second framing idea suggests that blackness exists in tension with the neoliberal-multicultural imagination. This framing recognizes the trouble with (liberal and neoliberal) multiculturalism and diversity, both in ideology and practice, in that they are often positioned against the lives of Black people (Dumas, 2016; Sexton, 2008).

- Finally, 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, rape, mutilation, brutality, and murder. Black liberatory fantasy incorporates but is not limited to, making space for Black people, who for example, navigate the constant threat (and reality) of police terror, to conjure various scenarios that may disrupt total subjugation and serve as a ray of hope for larger systemic change.

FORWARD MOTION

For me, the utility in BlackCrit and really in considering Afro-pessimism in education more broadly, is about recognizing the ways antiblackness functions in U.S. schools and that this condition is irreconcilable. Further, in recognizing how these schools are irredeemable for Black children, that "they schools" (dead prez, 2000) will never be ours, we are better positioned to conceptualize liberatory educational experiences for Black children. To be clear, this recognition does not mean that we simply give up on schools and do nothing. Quite the contrary, as Black children will likely remain in these institutions for decades to come. This necessitates us giving attention to what I call the "meantime in between time," or what it is that we can do right now to mitigate Black suffering in schools and make the educational experiences of Black students better. For example, in my own forthcoming work, I theorize *Black educational fugitive space* and explore the ways Black students and educators enact educational fugitivity through the social production of Black space in the margin. I consider the ways Black educational fugitive space manifests as both departure and refuge from the gratuitous violence of the afterlife of school segregation, and spawns the possibilities for rebirth and

resistance. In my work with Black girls specifically, I consider the numerous ways their production of *Black Girl Space* facilitates a reimagining of a Black girl identity and a radical Black subjectivity. Hence, BlackCrit allows us to simultaneously develop liberatory fantasies and imagine a broader fugitive vision, while also putting our collective energy into supporting the parents, teachers, community activists, administrators, and most importantly the students themselves, who work tirelessly everyday to create "livable moments" (Sharpe, 2016) in schools.

NOTES

[1] For a more in-depth look into anti-Black racism specifically, see Sexton, J. (2010). People-of-Color-Blindness Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery. *Social Text*, *28*(2 (103)), 31-56.

[2] 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 race that focuses solely on African Americans and Whites to illuminate how the Black/White binary shapes race thinking and reifies the Black/White paradigm.

[3] In order to honor the language of many of the authors' work discussed in this brief, the terms "African American" and "Black" will be used interchangeably.

[4] "Liberal multiculturalism argues that a natural equality exists among whites, African-Americans, Latinos, Asians and other racial populations. This perspective is based on the intellectual 'sameness' among the races, on their cognitive equivalence or the rationality imminent in all races that permits them to compete equally in a capitalist society. However, from the point of view of liberal multiculturalism, equality is absent in U.S. society not because of black or Latino cultural deprivation but because social and educational opportunities do not exist that permit everyone to compete equally in the capitalist market-place. Unlike their critical counterparts, they believe that existing cultural, social, and economic constraints can be modified or 'reformed' in order for relative equality to be realized" (McLaren, 1995, p. 96).

[5] 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.

[6] For expanded definitions, see Dumas & ross (2016) Be real Black for me: Imagining BlackCrit in education (429-31).

[7] Wilderson (2015) notes, "Afro-Pessimism is premised on an iconoclastic claim: that Blackness is coterminous with Slaveness. Blackness *is* social death, which is to say that there was never a prior meta-moment of plenitude, never a moment of equilibrium, never a moment of social life. Blackness, as a paradigmatic position (rather than as an ensemble of identities, cultural practices, or anthropological accoutrement), cannot be disimbricated from slavery."

[8] "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" (Dumas & ross, 2016, p. 430)

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