

Social Justice Feature

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Critical Race Theory and the Teaching of American History: Power, Perspective, and Practice

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Abstract

History classrooms are not neutral: They are contested arenas where legitimacy and hegemony battle for historical supremacy. The representation of marginalized groups within history classrooms is dependent upon the willingness of individual teachers to present material that accentuates contributions, challenges historical givens, empowers the marginalized, and, above all, raises awareness of and reflection upon race and racial images and the impact they have on the historical interpretations of American history. By using Critical Race Theory, which seeks to reduce marginalization through the recognition and promotion of historically disenfranchised peoples, social studies teachers can create classrooms that challenge historical dogmas and offer counter narratives to historical events. This article defines and situates Critical Race Theory and uses the Indian Removal Act of 1830 to illustrate how history and the historical events of “others” can be recognized and valued.

Introduction

If history has taught us anything, it is that America continues to struggle with race and racial stereotyping. We need not look farther than the discussions surrounding the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the plight of New Orleans. From the macroaggressions of verbal and/or

physical violence to the microaggressions of the unsaid comment or the unstated perception, race in America is often used to legitimize the powerful and marginalize the powerless.

To understand racism and racial stereotyping in America's past, one need only examine the African American and American Indian historical experience. Though the experience of these groups may, in fact, be profoundly different, there is a striking similarity: all (including the ubiquitous "Hispanic" and/or "Arab") have—and continue to be—marginalized in American historical discourses.

History plays a vital role in understanding the status of each of these groups. History is a delicate amalgam of fact and fiction, tempered by personal and pedagogical perception. Though the premise of history is rooted in empiricism, the teaching of history is not so objective. History classrooms are not neutral; they are contested arenas where legitimacy and hegemony battle for historical supremacy. The representation of marginalized groups within history classrooms is dependent upon the willingness of individual teachers to present material that accentuates contributions, challenges historical givens, empowers the marginalized, and, above all, raises awareness of and reflection upon race and racial perceptions and the impact they have on the historical interpretations of American history. One way in which negative racial perceptions can be reduced in American history classrooms is through a philosophical and pedagogical framework premised on Critical Race Theory (CRT).

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory draws from and extends the parameters of a broad theoretical construct known as Critical Theory. Critical Race Theory is defined as "A framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization of People of Color" (Solorzano, 1997, p.6). Specifically, Critical Race Theory focuses on challenging the dominant discourse(s) on race and racism with reference to the study and practice of law and how the legal system facilitates and perpetuates the discrimination and subordination of certain ethnic groups (Bell, 1995). Though Critical Race Theory originated within the field of law, its theoretical and practical tenets can be transferred to other disciplines, most notably education (Brayboy, 2006; Gilborn, 2005, 2006; Jay, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1997; Stovall, 2006; Yosso, 2002a).

Critical Race Theory has four themes. First, that race and racism are timeless, endemic, and permanently entwined in the American social (including educational) fabric. Second, Critical Race Theory seeks to challenge constructed ideologies of objectivity and racial sensitivity and argues that such constructs are shelters for hegemonic practices by dominant groups in America. Third, Critical Race Theory is committed to social justice and the eradication of racial subjugation. And lastly, Critical Race Theory seeks to promote the experiential knowledge of Women and People of Color as legitimate and central to the understanding of subjugated or "forgotten" peoples (Solorzano, 1997).

Language is a central tenet inherent in Critical Race Theory (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Solorzano, 1997). The words one uses to define and to describe People of Color are reflections upon their images and perceptions of People of Color (Hatch, 1994). Conscious or not, spoken or not, language has the power to confirm power and privilege or to deny it. From Presidents to pastors, from schoolchildren to strangers, this linguistic/perceptual link and its resultant influence is timeless and is evident throughout the American historical record.

Critical Race Theory and Social Studies

What role can Critical Race Theory play in social studies classrooms writ large and American history classrooms in particular? Ladson-Billings (2003) contends that social studies classrooms are ideal environments by which race and racism can be explored and addressed. Social studies contexts are filled with access and restriction, privilege and denial, power and powerlessness. A fundamental premise of Critical Race Theory is to accentuate and empower the powerless or marginalized, often through the presentation of counter-narratives—the proverbial “other side of the story.” A critical approach to social studies enables both teachers and students to respect the lives of the marginalized by showing the contributions they made and how these contributions impacted historical, social, political, and economic change.

Teachers and Teaching Critical Race Theory

If popular media is the dominant means by which society receives its messages concerning particular races (Gassaway, 1993; Yosso, 2002b), teachers are the conduits for the interpretation and perpetuation of racial stereotyping in schools. Lawrence (1997) believes that, cognizant or not, white teachers inherently obtain and thus profess a set of social, economic, and political privileges that often manifest into biases or perceptions in the classroom. Cochran-Smith (2000) contends that teachers need to initially identify the origin of these biases—personal perceptions, textbook presentation, and media portrayal—and seek to redress them. Such personal awareness is key. “Examination of the biases of one’s own attitudes and beliefs is not only an interesting exercise but an ethical action that teachers can take to assure that [they] are not teaching [their] personal prejudices” (Gewinner, Krohn, & White, 2000, p. 13).

Tyson (2003) argues that Critical Race Theory may be especially important in shaping the perceptions and practices of pre-service teachers, as it helps them to understand the multiple intersections of inequality and race and develops a critical consciousness in them and ultimately their students.

With particular reference to the teaching of history, Wolf (1992) contends that the history of others should be both taught as *their* history and should be seen from *their* perspective not the Anglo-centric filter most commonly found in history classrooms (emphasis original). If history is presented from a single, omnipotent perspective, the inherent misinformation and misconceptions may not be the real issues. What may be the greatest injustice are the cumulative lost opportunities—the opportunities to provide a history rich in difference, enlightening and empowering, and, above all, recognizing that American history is in fact the history of us all.

Infusing Critical Race Theory into American History Classrooms

As an educator of both elementary and secondary pre-service teachers, I am charged with developing and presenting ways in which social studies is relevant, engaging, and insightful. I am also charged with developing ways in which social studies challenges historical dogmas and questions historical interpretations. Though Critical Race Theory can easily be explored through economic (African Aid: Are *They* Really Worth It?), political (Illegal Immigration: American Dream or American Nightmare?), and geographic (Resettlement and Race: Not in *My*

Neighborhood!) contexts, I use the Indian Removal Act of 1830 to illustrate how Critical Race Theory can be used in American history classrooms.

Indian Removal Act

Before I introduce Critical Race Theory, I have my students draw. I hand out blank pieces of paper and ask my students to “draw an American Indian.” Students initially question the ambiguity of this simple directive, yet, ultimately, they have little difficulty in rendering the stereotypical “Indian.” Most pictures are of long-haired males. The majority of figures are wearing varying forms of feathered headdress. Some are riding horses, others wearing moccasins. The mounted *savage* is never without his bow and arrows.

Next, I ask my students to “describe an American Indian.” Here, words range from the pejorative *primitive* and *warrior* to the more progressive (yet still somewhat debasing) “spiritual” and “traditional.” Lastly, my students are asked to write about how their images and perceptions of American Indians are formed. Expectedly, the media (most prevalently old spaghetti Western movies) are the dominant solicitors of American Indian images and stereotypes (Gassaway, 1993; Stutzman, 1993). A discussion follows in which students are asked about how their interpretations and perceptions are formed, how their students interpretations and perceptions are formed, and how these images and beliefs may ultimately spill over into their historical understandings. Though seemingly simplistic in design, this is an excellent preface to understanding the origins of perception and prejudice as well as the role Critical Race Theory can play in moderating, if not modifying, these often disparaging constructs.

To contextualize Andrew Jackson and his “Indian policies,” I have my students read excerpts from his First Annual Message to Congress (Appendix A). In this speech, Jackson makes a moral, philosophical, and logistical case for the support and enforcement of the newly-passed Indian Removal Act of 1830. As language is central to the understanding of Critical Race Theory, I have my students look for key words or phrases that Jackson used in his descriptions and definitions of American Indians. Noted phrases include replacing “savage hunters” with the following: a) dense and civilized population; b) under their own rude institutions; c) to cast off their savage habits and become an interesting, civilized, and Christian community; d) wandering savage; e) red man, and f) children of the forest. Yet, it is the following passage that encapsulates the hegemonic paternalism exposed through Critical Race Theory:

What good man would prefer a country covered with forests ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute, occupied by more than 12,000,000 happy people, and filled with the all the blessings of liberty, civilization, and religion? (Tracking Westward expansion)

By juxtaposing savagery with civilization, in a single sentence, Jackson has both encapsulated and solidified the perception of many concerning American Indians.

After reading Jackson’s “benevolent policy” concerning the Indians, my students read select passages from *The Journal of Jesse Smoke* (Bruchac, 2001, Appendix B). Jesse was a highly educated and astute young Cherokee boy who adroitly kept a journal of his emotions and experiences both prior to and during his own trek from Georgia to Arkansas. As a fundamental tenet of Critical Race Theory is to expose and explore perceptions through personal narrative,

this primary source document is an excellent way of telling the “counter-story” of the Indian Removal Act and the resultant Trail of Tears. Jesse provides a voice to a historical event. He provides the narrative of the *other*. Ultimately, this narrative forces my students to cultivate a deeper, more sensitive and inclusive perspective of a select historical event. They now understand *the other side of the coin*.

This exercise is followed by a class discussion in which we grapple with the notion of perception formation (Jackson), how perceptions can amalgam into action (Indian Removal Act), and how this marriage of perception and action is understood by its recipients (Jesse Smoke).

Pertaining to Jackson, I ask questions such as follows: a) Was there anything in Jackson’s personal history that lead to his instigation of the Indian Removal Act?; b) What external factors may have influenced his policies towards American Indians?; c) Was Jackson simply a “product of his time” in regards to his perceptions concerning American Indians?, and d) In what ways can the stated perceptions of President’s influence both thought and action?

For a discussion premised on the writings of Jesse Smoke, I ask the following questions: a) What did American Indians do to *deserve* this type of treatment?; b) What must it have been like, both physically and mentally, to experience the wholesale relocation of communities and families?; c) Why did the vast majority of U.S. citizens either agree with or turn a blind eye to the Indian Removal Act?, and d) Why is Jesse Smoke important to American history?

Knowing that history textbooks, in particular, are notorious for omissions, biases, and often the marginalization of non-whites (Epstein, 1994; Romanowski, 1999), I ask my students to examine both elementary and secondary level history textbooks to understand how Jackson, the Indian Removal Act, and the Trail of Tears are portrayed and presented. Students consistently state these observations: a) generally, Jackson is portrayed in a favorable light; b) that the Indian Removal Act is approached more from a historical (linear and logical) perspective rather than a personal or emotional perspective, and c) that there are *never* any personal narratives from American Indians concerning the Trail of Tears. Critical Race Theory challenges the often monochromatic (if not heavily biased) way in which textbooks present history. Given this, I encourage my students to supplement the textbook with rich primary source documents, particularly personal narratives. These narrative-based documents challenge assumptions, offer multiple perspectives to historical events, and ultimately create history classrooms that are more balanced, fair, and inclusive.

Lastly, I challenge my students to look into the proverbial mirror and admit that they (we) have perceptions and biases and that these perceptions and biases may influence their pedagogical philosophy and practice. What Critical Race Theory asks is that teachers admit that such biases and perceptions exist. In doing so, teachers can then strive to check these often damaging beliefs at their classroom door. In this light, I urge my students to use Critical Race Theory to create challenging, dynamic, and responsible classrooms where the historical *other* matters.

Conclusion

The sweeping goal of Critical Race Theory is to sensitize in-service and pre-service social studies teachers to their own conscious or subconscious constructs of race and racism and to consider how these perceptions may influence the philosophical and pedagogical presentation of American history. Critical Race Theory also asserts that material used in social studies classrooms must be free of blatant bias or racial/cultural omission. By approaching historical

events from the perspective of the *other*, social studies teachers are redefining the intersection between racial identity and historical significance with our students and society being the ultimate winners.

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Appendix A

**[excerpts from] *President Andrew Jackson's Case for the Removal Act*
*First Annual Message to Congress, December 8, 1830.***

It gives me pleasure to announce to Congress that the benevolent policy of the Government, steadily pursued for nearly thirty years, in relation to the removal of the Indians beyond the white settlements is approaching to a happy consummation. Two important tribes have accepted the provision made for their removal at the last session of Congress, and it is believed that their example will induce the remaining tribes also to seek the same obvious advantages.

The consequences of a speedy removal will be important to the United States, to individual States, and to the Indians themselves. The pecuniary advantages which it Promises to the Government are the least of its recommendations. It puts an end to all possible danger of collision between the authorities of the General and State Governments on account of the Indians. It will place a dense and civilized population in large tracts of country now occupied by a few savage hunters. By opening the whole territory between Tennessee on the north and Louisiana on the south to the settlement of the whites it will incalculably strengthen the southwestern frontier and render the adjacent States strong enough to repel future invasions without remote aid. It will relieve the whole State of Mississippi and the western part of Alabama of Indian occupancy and enable those States to advance rapidly in population, wealth, and power. It will separate the Indians from immediate contact with settlements of whites; free them from the power of the States; enable them to pursue happiness in their own way and under their own rude institutions; will retard the progress of decay, which is lessening their numbers, and perhaps cause them gradually, under the protection of the Government and through the influence of good counsels, to cast off their savage habits and become an interesting, civilized, and Christian community. These consequences, some of them so certain and the rest so probable, make the complete execution of the plan sanctioned by Congress at their last session an object of much solicitude.

Toward the aborigines of the country no one can indulge a more friendly feeling than myself or would go further in attempting to reclaim them from their wandering habits and make them a happy, prosperous people. I have endeavored to impress upon them my own solemn convictions of the duties and powers of the General Government in relation to the State authorities. For the justice of the laws passed by the States within the scope of their reserved powers they are not responsible to this Government. As individuals we may entertain and express our opinions of their acts, but as a Government we have as little right to control them as we have to prescribe laws for other nations.

With a full understanding of the subject, the Choctaw and the Chickasaw tribes have with great unanimity determined to avail themselves of the liberal offers presented by the act of Congress and have agreed to remove beyond the Mississippi River. Treaties have been made with them, which in due season will be submitted for consideration. In negotiating these treaties they were made to understand their true condition, and they have preferred maintaining their independence in the Western forests to submitting to the laws of the States in which they now reside. These treaties, being probably the last which will ever be made with them, are characterized by great liberality on the part of the Government. They give the Indians a liberal sum in consideration of their removal and comfortable subsistence on their arrival at their new

homes. If it be their real interest to maintain a separate existence, they will there be at liberty to do so without the inconveniences and vexations to which they would unavoidably have been subject in Alabama and Mississippi.

Humanity has often wept over the fate of the aborigines of this country, and Philanthropy has been long busily employed in devising means to avert it, but its progress has never for a moment been arrested, and one by one have many powerful tribes disappeared from the earth. To follow to the tomb the last of his race and to tread on the graves of extinct nations excite melancholy reflections. But true philanthropy reconciles the mind to these vicissitudes as it does to the extinction of one generation to make room for another. In the monuments and fortresses of an unknown people, spread over the extensive regions of the West, we behold the memorials of a once powerful race, which was exterminated or has disappeared to make room for the existing savage tribes. Nor is there anything in this which, upon a comprehensive view of the general interests of the human race, is to be regretted. Philanthropy could not wish to see this continent restored to the conditions in which it was found by our forefathers. What good man would prefer a country covered with forests and ranged by a few thousand savages to our extensive Republic, studded with cities, towns, and prosperous farms, embellished with all the improvements which art can devise or industry execute, occupied by more than 12,000,000 happy people, and filled with all the blessings of liberty, civilization, and religion?

The present policy of the Government is but a continuation of the same progressive change by a milder process. The tribes which occupied the countries now constituting the Eastern States were annihilated or have melted away to make room for the whites. The waves of population and civilization are rolling to the westward, and we now propose to acquire the countries occupied by the red men of the South and West by a fair exchange and, at the expense of the United States, to send them to a land where their existence may be prolonged and perhaps made perpetual. Doubtless it will be painful to leave the graves of their fathers; but what do they more than our ancestors did or than our children are now doing? To better their condition in an unknown land our forefathers left all that was dear in earthly objects. Our children by thousands yearly leave the land of their birth to seek new homes in distant regions. Does Humanity weep at these painful separations from everything, animate and inanimate, with which the young heart has become entwined? Far from it. It is rather a source of joy that our country affords scope where our young population may range unconstrained in body or in mind, developing the power and faculties of man in their highest perfection. These remove hundreds and almost thousands of miles at their own expense, purchase the lands they occupy, and support themselves at their new homes from the moment of their arrival. Can it be cruel in this Government when, by events which it can not control, the Indian is made discontented in his ancient home to purchase his lands, to give him a new and extensive territory, to pay the expense of his removal, and support him a year in his new abode? How many thousands of our own people would gladly embrace the opportunity of removing to the West on such conditions! If the offers made to the Indians were extended to them, they would be hailed with gratitude and joy.

And is it supposed that the wandering savage has a stronger attachment to his home than the settled, civilized Christian? Is it more afflicting to him to leave the graves of his fathers than it is to our brothers and children? Rightly considered, the policy of the General Government toward the red man is not only liberal, but generous. He is unwilling to submit to the laws of the States and mingle with their population. To save him from this alternative, or perhaps utter annihilation, the General Government kindly offers him a new home and proposes to pay the whole expense of his removal and settlement. . . .

May we not hope, therefore, that all good citizens, and none more zealously than those who think the Indians oppressed by subjection to the laws of the States, will unite in attempting to open the eyes of those children of the forest to their true condition, and by a speedy removal to relieve them from all the evils, real or imaginary, present or prospective, with which they may be supposed to be threatened.

Appendix B

Select Passages from *The Journal of Jesse Smoke****November 6, 1937***

A few days after my father went back to see our plantation, a soldier came to our door. Like many of the white men under General Wool's command, he was a Tennessee Volunteer. Also, like most of Wool's men, he showed not only politeness to our people but even respect and liking. Despite conflicting orders from President Jackson, Wool strove to be fair to white and Indian alike while making matters ready for the emigration of our people. More than once, he had jailed white men or punished them for offenses against Cherokees, even though such an action resulted in angry communication from Old Hickory.

February 1, 1838

I finally received a letter from one of my friends and schoolmates who was part of the wagon train of Cherokees that left for western lands last October. My friend, Mary Timberlake, now in the western lands, has given me the good news that all of my other mates survived that awful trek. However, she has urged me, above all, to remain here.

Soon after leaving Calhoun, Tennessee, trouble began. People became sick from drinking stagnant water and eating sour grapes by the roadside. So many were ill that the caravan halted more than a week. People began to die, especially the children and the old.

June 4, 1838

I am now one of the many held prisoner by the armies of General Scott. We are crowded like hogs into a sty inside a high wall of timbers. No roof above us but sky and what few blankets can be spread to make shade from the sun. Few blankets, indeed. Most here have no blankets at all. Indeed, many have almost no clothes on their backs. Like my mother and my sisters and I, they were dragged from their homes before sunrise and shoved at bayonet point into the night and made to run before the soldiers down the dark roads. The darkness was lit not only by the torches carried by the soldiers, but by the brighter light of barns and houses burning. Whether by accident or design, many of our Cherokee homes were set on fire as we left them. Perhaps it was done by the soldiers. However, I remember seeing other men darting into our homes. White men, following the troops to take whatever they might steal as soon as we were gone.

June 12, 1838

Reverend Butler tells me that General Scott gave firm orders from his troops to treat the Cherokees gently. Many of his men tried to follow his orders. Not so the Georgia Volunteers. Scott was shocked to hear a group of Georgia soldiers joking about which of them would gather the most Cherokee scalps. "What is that you say, sir?" Scott asked one of them. "Beggin' your pardon, General," a Georgian replied, "But it is well known that them Cherokees ain't truly human."

July 4, 1838

Today was their Independence Day. It was not ours.

November 28, 1838

My mother and my sisters and I have been chosen for a later detachment. It took all morning to form the line of wagons, perhaps fifty of them. I am not sure of the estimate. The wind blew dust into my eyes. It was hard at times to breathe because of the dust clouds. Finally, at noon, all was ready. What a sight it was to behold, that long line of people and wagons stretching for a mile along the road that was edged by heavy forest. Perhaps one-fifth of the party were in the wagons or on horseback. Those in the wagons were mostly those too young, too old, or too infirm to walk upon their own feet. The rest would try to walk the whole way.

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