CHAPTER 6

THEORY OVER GIMMICKS

Finding Your North Star

I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.

—BELL HOOKS[1]

BLAME GAME

It may seem odd or cruel to find joy and comfort after reading about someone's pain, but when I first read the words above by bell hooks, I smiled. I felt my emotions take a deep breath of relief. My body went still and began to repair itself. I needed these words in my quest for wholeness, not only as a dark person but as a human being wrestling with a world that prides itself on being unrecognizable to humanity. I smiled because hooks, like she has done as a writer and critical thinker for the past

forty years, conveyed in written form what my entire being had been trying to express for years but lacked the emotional and intellectual understandings to do so. I needed a way to pull my thoughts and feelings together to say something that explained to myself the world in which I lived.

School shootings. Families living out of their cars despite working sixty hours a week. Cops shooting unarmed dark bodies with impunity. Teachers murdering the spirits of students. Families being targeted and torn apart by hateful immigration policies. Mosques being burned to the ground. Black trans women being murdered and no one caring outside the Black queer community. CEOs making billions while their employees fight for a living wage. Hospitals dumping their patients onto the streets. Finding out your favorite actor is a sexual predator and a disgusting human being. Listening to callous updates on America's endless wars followed by bland news reports on our possible entrance into a new war. Our country's children walking out of schools to demand their own safety at school, what should be the simplest of requests. Athletes taking a knee during the national anthem to protest dark death. And Black lives still not mattering. These momentous events were all just blips in one twenty-four-hour news cycle of our humanity screaming for help. While it is almost too much for any one person to take, educators must digest these realities and more.

By more, I mean that abolitionist teachers must process and respond in some meaningful way to the lives of our students and their own lives as well. But how do we understand what we are experiencing all around us with our own biases, inundated with political sound bites that never truly explain anything regardless of political party, and centuries-old myths about children of color, their families,

and their communities that get remixed for present-day forms of suffering? How do we make sense of it all without losing our minds, retreating from reality, giving up, and/or spirit-murdering children? When the world does not make sense, when we are desperate, yearning to comprehend and frantically needing to place blame for what we see, how do we make these decisions? How do our conclusions about who is to blame impact our teaching and interactions with our students and their families?

If some teachers believe that the system is just, that racism and sexism are only individually distributed and not systemic (if they exist at all), and that hard work is the only key ingredient to becoming whatever you want to be in life, then how do teachers make sense of poverty (e.g., intergenerational racial wealth disparities), failing schools, crime, violence, the prison-industrial complex, and health disparities?

TEACHER EDUCATION GAP

As a teacher at a predominantly White institution, I see that many of my undergraduate students have never had meaningful interactions with dark people. My students are mostly White, middle-class young women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, which is the demographic of most teacher education programs in the US. I even have students whose grandparents were in the KKK. The first, and only, time I had a number of dark students in one of my undergrad classes—five, to be exact—one of my dark students overheard a White classmate call another student's Black boyfriend a "nigger" at a party off-campus. In the spring of 2018, another student describing an Asian man in her paper called him "oriental." I had to explain that "oriental" describes a rug, not a person. A few years ago, a student wrote in one of her papers that traveling to South Africa was the first time she had been around African

American students. I simply wrote on her paper, "See me after class." I wanted her to have a conversation with me and not just read my comments in the margins and move on. Worried about her grade, she came up to me right after she got her paper. I informed her that she was not interacting with African American people but with South Africans while she was in South Africa. I told her African Americans are right here in Georgia. I am one of them. You do not need to go across the world to find African Americans. Her face turned red. She was embarrassed and assured me that she knew the difference.

After our brief chat, I was clear about one thing: yes, she knew the difference, but her interactions with African Americans were limited and so much about our very existence was unknown to her and, really, to most of my students. I took this great teaching moment to explain to her and the class that you do not have to go across the world to interact with Black people or people of color, as a number of my students every year go on church mission trips to dark countries. My goal as an educator, teaching overwhelmingly White students, is to get White students to question how they are going to teach children of color with a limited understanding of who these children are, where these children come from, their history, why and how they matter to the world, who loves them, why they should love Blackness, why they should want to see dark children win, how to support their quest to thrive, and how it is intentional that future teachers know so little about dark students. And, most important, how did my White students come to know what they know about dark students. Students knowing so little about dark people is not an accident; racism erases dark bodies from historical records of importance and distorts their everyday reality.

To be clear, not only my students but students in teacher education programs everywhere and, sadly, in-service teachers from all over the country walk into classrooms with preconceived notions and stereotypes about dark children. Research has shown that teacher preparation programs have been largely ineffective in preparing White teachers to teach diverse student populations.[2] For that reason, I am a realist. One sixteen-week class with me will not drastically change my students' ideas of dark children, but it may, hopefully and importantly, interrupt them. I ask my students every year to guess the percentage of Black people in the US population. I am always blown away by this activity because their estimations are so high. Guesses range from 20 to 40 percent. In reality, Black folx make up just less than 14 percent of the US population. So, if you have limited interactions with Black folx, how can you think there are so many of us?[3] Again, Black folx are highly visible and invisible at the same time. The sad truth is that White people can spend their entire lives ignoring, dismissing, and forgetting dark peoples' existence and still be successful in life. The latter is not the same for us.

Teacher education programs also perpetuate the stereotyping and myth-making targeted at dark children and their communities. I call this the "Teacher Education Gap." For example, many education programs have one diversity course in which White students learn about all the ills that plague dark communities without any context of how Whiteness reproduces poverty, failing schools, high unemployment, school closings, and trauma for people of color. Future teachers learn that dark children are in trauma, dark children are "at-risk," dark children are "underprivileged," dark children fall into the achievement gap, and dark communities are underserved, living in poverty. But how did this reality happen, and is that all?

Where is the beauty, the resistance, the joy, the art, the healing, redemption, and the humanity and ingenuity of people making something out of nothing? Just as important, where is the critique of the system that perpetuates injustice and dark suffering in and outside the walls of schools?

Few teacher education programs require their students to take classes in African studies, African American studies, Latinx studies, Caribbean studies, Chicana/o studies, American studies, and/or Native American studies. Teachers of all backgrounds walk into classrooms never studying the history or the culture of the children they are going to teach. So, how can teachers be culturally relevant when they have not studied culture? Culture does not simply fall from the sky. Traditions and ways of being are intentionally created and crafted because culture reflects the educational, social, economic, political, and spiritual conditions of people.

Culture is not as biological as we think. It is a group's knowledge production process that occurs as they understand and respond to their reality and create ways of being to survive or thrive in their everyday lives. Whiteness is also a culture; it was created by the educational, social, economic, spiritual, and political conditions that intentionally and methodically give power to racism. This is why Whiteness is so hard to remove from society. To abolish Whiteness means dismantling the structures that maintain its power and influence. If we, teacher educators, are going to ask teachers to be culturally relevant and culturally competent—which I wholeheartedly believe are fundamental to challenging inequities and develop critical perspectives—then teachers should be required to study culture.

If teachers studied and understood Black culture, per se, they would know that the culture is filled with self-

expression, complex language shifting abilities, creativity, self-advocacy, focus play (i.e., hand clap games), memory, and improvisation. Let me stop here to say: Black folx improv not because we do not understand the structure, but because we know the structure so well. Improvisation is resistance. My point here is not to generalize Black people or paint us as monolithic, but to say that many of us have experienced similar educational, historical, social, economic, political, and spiritual conditions, so we share a culture. Teachers need to know the beauty of that culture, not just the hardships, that produces beautiful minds, many of which are sitting right in front of them. An entry from one of my master's students' reflection logs encapsulates this need to know more about Black culture when learning about culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), dark students in general, and Whiteness. She wrote: "When Dr. Love asked us to describe black culture after reading about CRP, I was frozen. I realized that we as educators do need to know the specifics of what cultural differences look like (I had never considered this before), but also how fine the line is between stereotyping and describing culture. After class that day, I went out to lunch, and Jiwon (a Korean classmate) asked me to describe white culture, what it was like growing up white in Mississippi. I basically couldn't." My student's log illustrates the need for more robust conversations about culture, race, and learning styles. Without examining culture, educators will turn to stereotypes instead of rich examples that explain dark life and provide context to their lived realities.

STARBUCKS

Teacher education programs on the topics of racism, diversity, privilege, and intersectionality are just slightly better than Starbucks on the matter. After two Black men

were arrested at a Starbucks store in Philadelphia in 2018 simply for sitting down, the company decided to close its stores nationwide for a half day of mandatory racial-bias training for its 175,000 employees. Several news outlets reported on employees' reactions after the training. A big takeaway was that Starbucks was asking its employees not to be color-blind but "color brave," a term coined by Mellody Hobson, a Black woman who is president of a Chicago-based investment firm with $12.4 million in assets and a board member of Starbucks. To be color brave means to speak openly and honestly about race.[4] Being color brave is a great idea on the surface, but what happens after those conversations or when the supposedly open and honest conversation is filled with hate, lies, and stereotypes about dark people, with no accountability for reconciliation? Starbucks' adding fancy terms, a high-quality short documentary on racial biases, celebrity cameos, and a few hours of training to address this country's four-hundred-year history of anti-Blackness is almost the equivalent of teacher education programs offering one class on diversity that highlights oppression but never explains it or implicates Whiteness. One Starbucks employee, Jason, a Black man, said after the training, "There were times where I felt like they missed the mark. . . . It seemed like a lot of talking from videos and not enough discussion from us."[5] An Arkansas-based employee, who remained anonymous, said, "While this may be the most cost-efficient way to handle the situation, I don't feel like it will change much of anything. . . . Just driving an hour down the road takes you to towns where racism is alive and well."[6]

Teacher education programs ask students to speak openly and honestly about race and racism without the students having any understanding about where they stand in

relation to systems of privilege and oppression and how these systems function in their everyday lives. Whiteness "is a category of identity that is most useful when its very existence is denied."[7] The invisibility of Whiteness and its extensive history of violence make Whiteness a hard concept to grasp. Therefore, my hope is that my students' personal social justice journey of making Whiteness visible starts in my class, but it cannot end there. The misguided and episodic classes on diversity in teacher education exacerbate the educational survival complex. Teachers go into the field with limited understanding of the children they are teaching and how schools fail students, not the other way around, and therefore they believe we need more testing and zero-tolerance approaches, and that the system is just.

Another facet of the teacher education gap is White students' limited interactions with people of color, which perpetuates the myths about people of color. Many White students believe that their hard work is one of the major reasons they landed at a top university; or that their parents' decision to live in an all-White neighborhood had nothing to do with race, racism, or enclaves established by White rage; and that their privilege—if they recognize it—will not have any impact on their students, because they "love kids," "want to make a difference," and/or "have wanted to be a teacher since they were little girls playing school with their dolls." How can you love something you know so little about? When 88 percent of all teachers in schools are White women, conversations that unpack and challenge their ideas about race, class, privilege, meritocracy, religion, sexuality, sexism, and power are critical to the everyday lives of dark children. If the system is just, then who is to blame for poverty, failing schools, crime, and high unemployment? I use the word "blame" intentionally

because blame assigns responsibility, and as a former teacher and current teacher educator, I have experienced teachers blaming students—blaming eight-year-olds for falling behind—and not the educational survival complex. If we do not know who or what is responsible, then how do we abolish it—how and where do we fight?

Too often, future educators and those teaching in the field conclude that dark children and their families are solely responsible for their life conditions. There is no interrogation or indictment of the system; it is all about personal responsibility and merit. So, when a five-year-old comes to school not reading at a first-grade level like his rich, White counterparts, he is deemed behind in the minds of educators. A working mom is labeled a "bad" parent who does not "care about her kid(s)" because she works and cannot be reached by phone. Parents who risk it all to come to this country for a better life for their children are somehow seen as "undeserving" of America's minimum-wage jobs, which in some places pay only $5.15 an hour. Without fail, every year in one of my teacher education classes, a student says, "I heard some parents don't care about their kids." When I ask who else has heard such a thing, almost all of my students raise their hands. But when I ask how many have actually witnessed this phenomenon, maybe two raise their hands. And when I ask the two students to say more, their responses are still hearsay. So how do we undo what has been done? How do we not only shift thinking but prepare teachers to have the knowledge, language, and understanding to see past ideas of individualized blame and understand the complexities of systemic oppression? The answer: teachers must embrace theory to help fill the teacher education gap.

THE NORTH STAR

Polaris is often called the North Star; it is one of the brightest stars in the sky. Even when a full moon masks the starry skies, the North Star can still be seen. It never changes position—it always points north. For enslaved folx fleeing bondage, the North Star marked the way to freedom. Abolitionists used the North Star to guide escaping enslaved folx north to places like Rochester, New York. It was a constant reminder to freedom-dream. Theory is my North Star: it is a steadfast tool to explain without fluff or gimmicks what I am experiencing first as a human being and then as a Black lesbian living in the US. Theory helps explain and examine our reality and our students' realities. The context (i.e., their block, neighborhood, community, city) in which students learn in 2019 is not the world they created or chose. Students' community realities were not determined by them or their parents, so teachers have to know more than students' everyday realities. Teachers need to have the backstory of the community and why change is so hard because of patterns of injustice reproduced by established systems and structures of inequality. Theory consistently explains patterns of injustice when sound bites, flamboyant yet hollow teaching practices, and myths about dark people block ideas of humanity, justice, and dignity. Theory is a "location for healing," like the North Star.

Theory does not solve issues—only action and solidarity can do that—but theory gives you language to fight, knowledge to stand on, and a humbling reality of what intersectional social justice is up against. Theory lets us size up our opponent, systemic injustice. Theory is a practical guide to understanding injustice historically, the needs of people, and where collective power lives within groups of people. There are many useful theories that explain the world in a way that helps me break down

injustice in small, digestible pieces. Without theory, the moveable mountain of injustice and oppression seems too big and immobile, but theory helps us understand that our job is not to move mountains but to outmaneuver them. For all those reasons, I will use space in this chapter to introduce some theories and highlight how they provide an understanding of injustice concerning particular groups inside and outside an educational context.

WHO WAS HERE FIRST AND WHY IT MATTERS

I hope by now we all know that Columbus did not discover America, and Indigenous people were killed, tortured, and spirit-murdered for their land. These historical facts may seem like just that, historical. But scholars like Eva Tuck, K. Wayne Yang, Patrick Wolfe, and Leigh Patel remind us that settler colonialism "is a structure, not an event," meaning that settler colonialism is a theory that helps to frame how destroying, then taking, Indigenous land is a ceaseless, ongoing project.[8]

For Indigenous people in the US, invasion is a constant. For example, the Indian Removal Act of 1830, signed by President Andrew Jackson, forcibly removed Indigenous people from their land so that White settlers could become slave masters and profit from Indigenous land and free labor. Schools teach this intentional ethnic cleansing as the Trail of Tears, and that is often where the story ends. However, the Homestead Act of 1862 gave 270 million acres of land west of the Mississippi to White settlers. In 1949, the Hoover Commission recommended the "termination" of Native reservations so they could be converted into major cities; by 1952, the "House Joint Resolution 698 established criteria and guidelines for the termination of trustee status of Indian tribes and

reservations."[9] In 1972, almost two hundred Indians mobilized and caravanned from the West Coast to Washington, DC. Referring to themselves as the Trail of Broken Treaties Caravan, they demanded to present President Nixon with their twenty-point declaration that ordered the United States to respect the sovereignty of Indian Nations. These premeditated moves—and many more—to push Indians out of their native lands are masked by fake holidays like Thanksgiving Day and Columbus Day, which depict Indian Nations willfully giving their food, cattle, and land to White men. The truth is, the taking of Indigenous land by the US government never stopped. The theory of settler colonialism is defined this way:

> Settler colonialism is a structure, not an event. This means that settler colonialism is not something that happened in history. It is an ongoing and ever-changing structure that defines everything in settler states. . . . In this moment, the project of settler colonialism is defined by resource extraction and development on Indigenous lands in the name of progress. Resource extraction—like coal mining, oil drilling, pipelines, fracking, uranium and copper mining, etc. —have disproportionately negative health, cultural, and economic consequences for Indigenous people and lands. Settler colonialism is always about moving land into the hands of a few and always through violent means.[10]

Applying the settler-colonialism theory to the present day is not hard. In 2015, plans were approved to start construction on Energy Transfer Partners' Dakota Access Pipeline. The pipeline stretches over 1,172 miles long, cost over $3.78 billion to build, and carries hydraulically fractured crude oil from the Bakken oil fields in western North Dakota to southern Illinois, crossing beneath the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, as well as Lake Oahe, near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation. Initial

blueprints planned for the pipeline to cross under the predominantly White town of Bismarck, North Dakota. That plan was rejected because of the pipeline's close proximity to the town's municipal water sources. The pipeline was then rerouted to run beneath Standing Rock's water supply and ancient burial grounds. Why was it acceptable to run fractured crude oil beneath Standing Rock's water supply but not Bismarck's?

The move violated United States environmental regulations and the Treaty of Fort Laramie of 1868 (also called the Sioux Treaty), as well as the Treaty of Fort Laramie of 1851. Standing Rock elders led an international protest against the pipeline. People from all over the world descended on Standing Rock to stand in solidarity with protecting the reservation's clean water, burial grounds, and sovereignty. Bulldozers, attack dogs, water cannons, armed soldiers, and police in riot gear destroyed the protesters' camp blocking the pipeline's path. Through violent means, land was taken and the pipeline was installed. According to reports, the Dakota Access Pipeline leaked five times in 2017.[11]

Settler colonialism is a lens that helps us understand how Native Americans experience systemic oppression in the United States in a different way than any other dark group. The constant theft of Indigenous land, the extraction of resources, and the cultural genocide of Indigenous people has led to "negative health, cultural, and economic consequences for Indigenous people and lands."[12] In terms of schooling, the US enacted cultural and linguistic genocide of Native American students. Indigenous children were taken from their families and put in boarding schools that viewed them as savages. In order to survive, they had to let go of their language, cultural traditions, and spiritual practices: cultural genocide. Cultural genocide through

education is also another tactic for land invasion. Settler-colonialism theory helps us understand oppression beyond race or class and adds the constant invasion of land to the conversation and ideas of intersectional social justice.

VAMPIRES AND RACISM

People say that racism will die out when all the old racist White men are dead. I guess old racist White men are vampires because racism is alive and well. So, what explains how racism is reproduced, generation after generation, in the midst of the country becoming more technologically advanced, with some of the most elite colleges in the world, and a prideful reputation for diversity (when it makes the country look good for a model of democracy)? Critical race theory, often referred to by its acronym, CRT, critiques how power is maintained century after century through capitalism and racism, while laws are passed that promise equality. During the 1980s, legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Lani Guinier started to question the so-called "gains" and "progress" of the civil rights movement. They found that despite legal solutions intended to address racism and move the US toward equality, racism and discrimination persisted in all the fundamental institutions that make this country run, such as education, housing, banking, employment, and healthcare.[13]

The field of education embraced CRT in the late 1990s when scholars were looking for ways to "work against racism in education."[14] CRT is a tool to "expose hidden systemic and customary ways in which racism works by drawing from a wide variety of sources of knowledge that range from statistics to social science research to personal experience."[15] CRT works to understand the centrality of racism—meaning that racism is permanent and

understanding it is fundamental to understanding how all structures are organized in the US. For critical race theorists, racism is at the center of understanding oppression, which is also linked to gender, class, and citizenship status. CRT challenges color-blindness, meritocracy, and neutrality. CRT also centers knowledge that derives from dark peoples' experiences with racism by using counter-stories, which challenge the normalization of the White worldview of knowledge while affirming the personal and family histories of dark people. CRT pushes to the forefront dark people's intimate knowledge of racism as a tool to challenge it and as a space of collective power and resistance.[16] Lastly, CRT argues that racial remedies for equality can happen only if these remedies benefit White people and their interests. Derrick Bell called this proposition "interest convergence." A good example of interest convergence is school desegregation: a disproportionate amount of money that went to desegregating schools in the South during the late 1950s and 1960s was directed toward White schools that enrolled Black children. Thus, White schools profited from receiving Black students, while Black teachers were replaced by White teachers.

Another manifestation of "interest convergence" is the fact that White women have benefited from affirmative action more than any other group. For example, "a 1995 report by the California Senate Government Organization Committee found that White women held a majority of managerial jobs (57,250) compared with African Americans (10,500), Latinos (19,000), and Asian Americans (24,600) after the first two decades of affirmative action in the private sector."[17] More current data show that, in 2015, "a disproportionate representation of White women business owners set off concerns that New

York state would not be able to bridge a racial gap among public contractors."[18] Simply put, "interest convergence" argues that White people will support civil rights legislation only when it's in their interest to do so.

CRT is such a useful tool in understanding how racism functions in our schools, communities, and laws that offshoots have sprung up. Latinx CRT (LatCrit) provides an analysis of how racism functions in relation to immigration status, language, and culture. Latinx CRT understands that the US government separating children from their families at the border with Mexico and throwing these children in cages like property is a vile tactic that is not new to America; this *is* America. Native American children were taken, African children were taken, and Japanese children were taken and put into internment camps. CRT scholars conclude that the US will always see non-Whites as property; this country was founded on slaves being seen as property, not human beings. Children being taken, caged, and/or sold is America's history.

Asian CRT (AsianCrit) examines immigration policies and the use of the "model minority" stereotype as a form of anti-Blackness. Feminist CRT (FemCrit) investigates the gendered oppression dark people experience. White CRT (WhiteCrit) examines race, racism, racial identity, and the workings of White privilege.

Although conversations involving intersectionality are burgeoning in the field of education, the connections among race, racism, and dis/ability have not gotten much traction. Dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit) examines how dark students are overrepresented in special education, overrepresented among those labeled emotionally disturbed, and overrepresented among those labeled learning disabled, and criminalized for being dis/abled. Subini Ancy Annamma's book *The Pedagogy of*

Pathologization: Dis/abled Girls of Color in the School-Prison Nexus uses first-person narratives to explore how the intersections of race, disability, and gender make dark girls a target for the school-to-prison-pipeline.[19] DisCrit expands our understanding of how racism functions and the need for a racialized lens when working with students of color who have dis/abilities.

Although critical race theorists articulate the permanence of racism, their main goal is to abolish racism by drawing on and utilizing the resources of dark communities. One way to examine the resources of dark communities is through what critical race theorist Tara Yosso calls "community cultural wealth."[20] Yosso stresses that there are six types of cultural capital that educators should understand and use to empower students beyond White narratives of what cultural capital is and is not.

1. Aspirational—that dark folx continue to have "hopes and dreams" despite persistent, structural barriers in education, employment, housing, and healthcare
2. Linguistic—the beautiful and rich storytelling and communication skills of linguistically diverse students
3. Familial—how family members' wisdom, stories, and traditions can be a positive resource
4. Social capital—using your network for accessing college and other social institutions
5. Navigational—how dark people have to maneuver hostile spaces to be successful despite being unsupported
6. Resistance—recognizes that dark folx are committed in the fight for justice and abolitionist work[21]

Yosso's community cultural wealth theory is primarily focused on dark students gaining access to college but I think the theory extends beyond college to the everyday lives of dark folx living and learning on the margins of society. For example, dark folx' aspirations are what freedoms are made of because they dream despite having every reason in the world not to. Dark parents want the best for their children; we must always remember that. Patty wanted the best for me. She did not have a blueprint of what that looked like in real terms, such as college tuition, recommendation letters, and employment, but she believed in me and this flawed system. Her wisdom was in helping me to understand how to navigate hostile spaces as a little Black girl, which became one of my greatest strengths. Using Yosso's community cultural wealth model helps teachers find dark children's strength within their community and within themselves. I found those things earlier in my life through FIST, Mr. Clayton, Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Knight, Coach Nally, Mrs. James, Karen, my friends, my family, and learning that I could resist.

CRT combined with community cultural wealth not only provides an intellectual space to critique racism and understand how it operates in a world with laws that seem just, but also how to empower communities to recognize and affirm the wealth they already have to fight racism.

FEMINISM IS FOR BLACK WOMEN AND ALL MEN TOO (IT ALWAYS HAS BEEN)

In March 2017, a number of Black and Latinx girls went missing from the nation's capital in a two-week period. Community members were outraged and demanded that local police provide answers. On March 22, a town hall meeting was called with the district's chief of police. The meeting was standing room only, filled to the brim with

concerned parents, students, and community members. When all the pictures and live video from the town hall hit the Internet, one thing was clear: there were few, if any, White people there. However, almost exactly two months before (on January 21, 2017), the Women's March, the largest demonstration for women's and human rights ever in the US, took place in Washington, DC. But the All Lives Matter folx were nowhere to be found at the town hall meeting, and White feminists were missing en masse. Situations like the one I am describing are not new or unusual. Typically, when there is a rally called for dark girls, the country goes mute.

However, Black feminists such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Sojourner Truth, Patricia Hill Collins, Cynthia B. Dillard, Charlene Carruthers, Barbara Smith, Andrea J. Ritchie, Brittney C. Cooper, Treva Lindsey, Alicia Garza, Ruth Nicole Brown, Venus Evans-Winters, Joan Morgan, and Melissa Harris-Perry have all fought, written, and organized around the understanding that "women who theorize the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary Black women provide a unique angle of vision on self, community, and society."[22] Black feminism provides an analysis of misogyny, sexism, and patriarchy—along with the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and gender—to disrupt and challenge racialized gender oppression while creating strategies for resistance and community thriving. Black feminism is a theory that mandates practice. Black feminism is not just theoretical, it is an everyday practice of engaging with individuals and of communities centering the lives of dark girls and women. Black feminists deeply care about their communities. Black feminism is not antimale, it is for all individuals who understand what Malcolm X once said: "The most disrespected woman in America is the Black woman. The most unprotected person

in America is the Black woman. The most neglected person in America is the Black woman."[23] Frances E. W. Harper said, "Black women need the [right to] vote, not as a form of education, but as a form of protection." Black feminism centers Black women and girls, and girls of color, because there is an understanding that "racism alone as a phenomenon in the lives of Black women was politically insufficient as an analysis or as a plan of action."[24] Intersectionality grew out of Black feminism because it is "crucial to understand the particular experiences of Black women as compared to White women and Black men, but it also created entry points for Black women to engage in politics."[25]

Black feminism is concerned about the lives of those deemed most disposable by society: dark children, dark queer and trans folx, and women all along the gender spectrum. Black feminism organizes and creates community from a space of Black joy. Black Lives Matter, an organization founded by three Black queer women, demonstrates the power, influence, and real-life outcomes of Black feminism.

IT'S MORE THAN WHO LIKES WHO

In 2010, syndicated columnist and author Dan Savage, along with his partner, Terry Miller, both White men, uploaded a video to You-Tube hoping to inspire LGBTQ youth to stay resilient and hopeful as they experience verbal and physical harassment in their schools, communities, and/or homes. Savage's video was the lynchpin for the international campaign It Gets Better. As the campaign's popularity skyrocketed, celebrities, politicians, and activists posted videos encouraging youth to stay strong and imagine going off to college, leaving bullies behind, or moving away from their small,

homophobic town to the diverse, gay-friendly big city. It Gets Better's simplistic and disingenuous metanarrative argued that once high school ends, miraculously all bullying stops and homophobia is somehow subdued in urban America. It Gets Better, with all the bells and whistles of social media and celebrity star power, revamped the old message of: pull yourself up by your bootstraps and live the heteronormative (that is, the idea that the traditions of heterosexuals are the norms for all members of society) dream of children and marriage.[26]

Equally significant to the heteronormative critiques of It Gets Better, the campaign also Whitewashed queerness. "Queer" is a widely used catchall term in the LGBTQ community. It can describe someone's sexuality or nonconforming gender identity, or it can be used to reject labels and binaries (male, female) altogether, but the word also functions as a space to think, act, perform, create, and be outside what is considered "normal," particularly what White, straight, middle-class America says is normal. It Gets Better's aspirational claims that queer life gets better were solely for White, young, gay men who are middle class to wealthy.

There was not much queer about It Gets Better other than sexuality, and queer is much more than who you love, marry, or have sex with. The monolithic norming of the campaign overlooked and ignored the experiences of dark queer youth, poor queer youth, dark poor queer youth, queer youth who are undocumented, dark queer youth with dis/abilities, and Muslim queer youth. The campaign centered Whiteness, exclusively.[27] According to Michael Johnson Jr., queer youth of color in the It Gets Better videos "appear infrequently if at all, and rarely are such messages addressed to the unique plight that queer youth of color face in American society."[28] It Gets Better's treatment

of dark queer youth is symptomatic of society at large. For example, a report by the advocacy group Advocates for Youth found that 42 percent of homeless youth are queer; however, 65 percent of queer homeless youth are racial minorities. The report also found that queer youth of color admitted experiencing victimization in schools, either because of race or sexual identity; in the same report, more than a third of queer youth said they experienced physical violence. Queer youth of color, particularly dark queer youth, "grow up in a hegemonic White world, living on the periphery of a White-dominant society, ostracized both for their sexual desires and racial identity."[29]

It Gets Better is a good example of why we need theory that centers sexuality as well as race, gender, class, and other identities. Black queer studies is an important field for understanding sexuality in relationship to other identities. The need for Black queer studies came about because queer studies and queer theory ignored the concerns of queer Black people. Political scientist and Black feminist Cathy Cohen suggests that "queer theorizing that calls for the elimination of fixed categories of sexual identity seems to ignore the ways in which some traditional social identities and communal ties can, in fact, be important to one's survival."[30] Queer theory must address how dark people and queer dark people build community together to survive homophobia, racism, classism, and possibilities for intersectional social justice.

This need is why E. Patrick Johnson coined the term "quare" studies.[31] Johnson defines quare in part as

> —*adj.* 2. a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered person of color who loves other men or women, sexually or nonsexually, and appreciates black culture and community.

—*n.* 3. one who *thinks* and *feels* and *acts* (and, sometimes, "acts up"); committed to struggle against all forms of oppression—racial, sexual, gender, class, religious, etc.

—*n.* 4. one for whom sexual and gender identities always already intersect with racial subjectivity.

—*n.* 5. quare is to queer as "reading" is to "throwing shade."[32]

Resistance and loving Blackness are essential elements of quare studies. You do not have to be lesbian, or a gay person, or a bisexual individual, or identify as transgendered to use and/or be quare. Quare studies is interested in the ways dark people subvert spaces, identities, and resources to ensure our survival. We all need quare studies as a lens for liberation, freedom, and abolitionism.

STUDYING WHITE FOLX AND RACISM

Racism does not exist without Whiteness. Whiteness is at the center of the reproduction of structural inequality. White folx truly concerned about understanding racism, about being in solidarity with dark folx, about building community, and who are interested in intersectional justice have to start with learning about Whiteness and how it functions. Critical White Studies (CWS) is a body of scholarship that aims to underscore how White supremacy and privilege are often invisible in society yet are still reproduced. For example, CWS questions how some European-based groups (such as Italians, the Irish, and Jews) became White in America. CWS also looks beyond skin color to ideas of how race is constructed and asks critical questions, such as, "What is Whiteness without Blackness?" In addition to CWS, "dysconscious racism," a term coined by education researcher Joyce King, describes

the habits, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs that justify racial inequality, the social and economic advantages of being White, and White privilege that does not allow alternative visions of society.[33] Dysconscious racism is practiced by teachers who want to celebrate diversity with holidays, food, and cultural artifacts but never challenge their assumptions about dark people and how Whiteness is reproduced for their advantage.[34] Dysconscious racists are the folx who say "I do not see color," denying their students' racial experiences, cultural heritage, and ways of resistance. Color-blindness is racist.

Another useful tool to understanding why addressing Whiteness is such a difficult task for White people is Robin DiAngelo's concept of "White fragility." This theory states that when White people are confronted with minimum amounts of racial stress, which could be a conversation about race and racism in America, their initial reactions are to become angry, fearful, or guilty.[35] This range of emotions leads to argumentation, silence, or leaving the stressful situation with more stress than at the onset. Adding to DiAngelo's work is the concept of "White emotionality," developed by Cheryl E. Matias. White emotionality goes a step further than White fragility by arguing that when race and racism raise up emotions of guilt, shame, anger, denial, sadness, dissonance, and disconcert, those feelings need to be deeply investigated to understand how racialized emotions perpetuate racism.[36] Many conversations, courses, and professional development sessions focused on addressing and challenging racism and privilege with White people end in frustration because White emotionality is never discussed or dealt with. Before we try to teach White people how to work to undo their privilege, we must start with the

emotions of that process—understanding that the emotional process is step one.

White folx cannot be coconspirators until they deal with the emotionality of being White. A cofounder of Black Lives Matter, Alicia Garza, says, "Co-conspiracy is about what we do in action, not just in language." She adds, "It is about moving through guilt and shame and recognizing that we did not create none of this stuff. And so what we are taking responsibility for is the power that we hold to transform our conditions."[37] Studying Whiteness, White rage, and violence is a fundamental step to moving from ally to coconspirator.

WHAT LIES BENEATH

As Americans, we hear talk all the time about the privatization of our healthcare system, prisons, teacher pensions, schools, and Veterans Affairs. The central idea of privatization is to end governmental interventions such as President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and social services that provide a safety net for everyone who is not rich, especially the truly poor. The privatization of America's governmental services and the elimination of "the public good" or "community" is what economists call neoliberalism.[38] Corporate school reformers are an indispensable part of the neoliberal machine gutting our dark public schools and their communities.

The teacher strikes of 2018 have everything to do with neoliberalism. The neoliberal agenda in terms of public education is decades old. School districts such as Chicago's have been experiencing deep budget cuts, mass closures of neighborhood schools, and an increase in charter schools, creating competition for the city's poorest neighborhood schools, for years.[39] Instead of adequately funding schools, ensuring teachers have the resources and support to teach

dark children beyond survival, and increasing teacher pay, school districts and city governments sustain the educational survival complex. For example, in Chicago in 2012, the city gave a gigantic $528 million tax break to the Chicago Mercantile Exchange; at the same time, teachers went on strike demanding increased wages, more training, protection of teacher benefits, and fair evaluation procedures. The strike was championed by abolitionist Karen Lewis, president of the Chicago Teachers Union, who has been fighting the neoliberal education reform model for years. Lewis stated, "Although we don't control the policies, curriculum or purse strings, educators must be in the forefront of developing education policy, not politicians and venture capitalists."[40] She added, "Parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, and community leaders can no longer afford to wait for the Chicago Board of Education to give us educational justice. We must advocate for the schools our children deserve."[41] This is how an educational abolitionist speaks in the face of neoliberalism.

To be clear, neoliberalism is making inroads all over the world. The main thrust of this idea is that competition is good for the economy, that the free market will solve all of our financial and social problems, and that deregulation is best, regardless of how it impacts the environment or job safety. Neoliberalism has put our banks, roads, schools, hospitals, waterways, and highways at risk. We no longer care about the common good for everyone; we leave everything up to the free market and people's so-called merit/hard work. Neoliberalism ensures that the rich get richer and the poor get disposed of. Neoliberalism is a tool of dark suffering. Patricia Hill Collins wrote, "Contemporary forms of oppression do not routinely force people to submit. Instead, they manufacture consent for domination so that we lose our ability to question and thus

collude in our own subordination."[42] Neoliberalism puts already oppressed groups in competition with one another instead of building solidarity bonded by injustice and resistance. Understanding neoliberalism is an important lens to understanding how society keeps us at odds with each other and fighting over the scraps left after the rich have gutted systems that are supposed to help those with the least.

WHAT I HAVE LEARNED

Theory is one of the most important tools I have been able to use to help me understand the possibilities and the limitations of public education and the nonprofit sector. I have had the opportunity to view education from various levels as a student, a teacher, a teacher educator, a parent, and a board member and chair of a charter school, where I sat on hiring committees for teachers and principals, managed grievances, did my best to understand school budgets, navigated an unpredictable school district relationship, and dealt with so-called scandals. Make no mistake, I did not learn as quickly as I would have liked that the ability of education to be a mechanism for freedom, particularly for dark students, is suspended in midair by Whiteness, racism, sexism, and neoliberalism.

When you understand how these theories function, when they become your North Star, you understand why progress is so hard and why survival is a constant struggle. Theories are more than just academic words that folx with degrees throw around at coffee shops and poetry slams; they work to explain to us how the world works, who the world denies, and how structures uphold oppression. It is not by chance or good fortune that top-level staff at nonprofits and charter schools are overwhelmingly White people serving dark populations, who deserve more than a five-year

strategic plan and dreams of saving all the less fortunate. Dark families deserve and have a right to the power of the organization that seeks to determine what is the right course of action for their lives. Meaning the decision-making, the budget, the staff, and the overall goals should be made in conjunction with the community and with an analysis of Whiteness, racism, sexism, homophobia, and neoliberalism.

All the decisions we make must be guided by our moral compass of intersectional social justice. Where we choose to live, teach, send our kids to school, work, go to the movies, dine, and attend college, as well as the TV shows we watch, the clothes we buy, and even where we buy goods can all be traced back to race, racism, Whiteness, classism, sexuality, gender, and whose land we are living on. If our everyday repetitive, mundane life decisions are made by racism, Whiteness, and sexism, then so are our curriculums, discipline policies, teacher hiring practices, school-closing decisions, testing, teacher pay, teacher turnover, and school leaders. The struggle for educational freedom does not somehow vanish when you apply theory, but your barriers are no longer hiding in plain sight; now you have the language, understanding, and, hopefully, coconspirators not only to fight but also to demand what is needed to thrive. Understanding theory does not mean you live an oppressive life. It means you have a deep understanding of oppression and how it works structurally. However, what you are learning about are people's real lives. You theorize it, while some people live it. I often conduct workshops on racism and White supremacy, topics that make many of my participants uncomfortable. I remind them that it's okay to be uncomfortable but also to understand that while you may be uncomfortable for forty-five minutes, other people are uncomfortable their entire lives dealing with oppression. Theory explains what we see; it can take the Whiteness glasses from our eyes.

This powerful and telling drawing by J. David Edwards demonstrates why we need theory. Without theory most of us, not just White people, are wearing what Edwards calls "White Vision Glasses." Teachers spirit-murder children every day through these glasses because their vision is impaired by hate, racism, and White supremacy; they

cannot see Black joy or Black humanity. James Baldwin said, "A child cannot be taught by anyone who despises him, and a child cannot afford to be fooled."[43] As long as teachers turn to gimmicks and not the North Star, they will never understand how they are being fooled by White supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia, and classism, and how their so-called accountability measures really show dark children how much education despises them.