

LITERACY FELLOWS
INTRO TO ACTIVISM
APRIL 2022

Critical Race Theory



Derrick Bell photographed by Steve Liss

“The problem is not bad people. The problem is a system that reproduces bad outcomes.”

*—Mari Matsuda, law professor
at the University of Hawaii and
early developer of CRT*

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Disclaimers:

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has garnered a lot of attention recently. We created this zine not to push some agenda, but to attempt to educate on a vastly misrepresented topic. You are free to have whatever opinions or criticisms you may have about CRT, but we ask first that you try to fully understand it.

CRT is NOT the end-all, be-all explanation for everything. It looks at society and history through a purely racial lens; however, it is a tool, and one of many that you should have in your toolbox. Many issues are not racial issues at all, and many racial issues are not just racial issues. Use CRT when appropriate, but don't let it limit your worldview!

PART 1: WHAT IS CRITICAL RACE THEORY (CRT)?

In this section, we'll take you through the history behind CRT and its principle tenets.

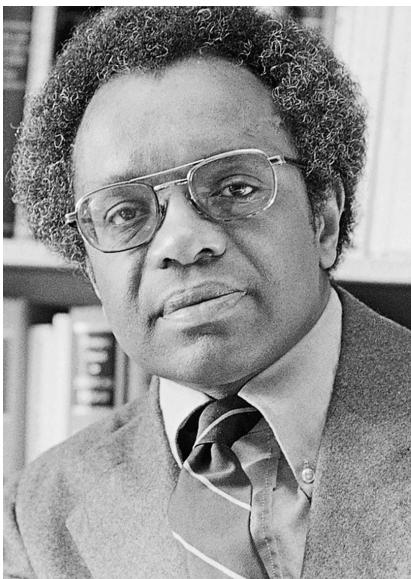
“Critical Race Theory is a method that takes the lived experience of racism seriously, using history and social reality to explain how racism operates in American law and culture, toward the end of eliminating the harmful effects of racism and bringing about a just and healthy world for all.”

—Mari Matsuda, law professor at the University of Hawaii and early developer of CRT

A BIT OF BACKGROUND

After the Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights Movement's advances ended de jure segregation (racial separation enforced by law), but de facto segregation (separation that exists without a legal mandate) remained. Subtler forms of racism were becoming more prevalent, and several legal scholars, including Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw in the mid-1970s realized that new theories and strategies were needed to combat them. They came together to create a theory which considered the same issues as traditional civil rights but through a different lens, one which takes into account historical context, economics, and other factors. Out of this effort came Critical Race Theory.



Derrick Bell

Kimberlé Crenshaw



Critical legal studies & the case against liberalism

These scholars took inspiration from the Critical Legal Studies (CLS) movement of the 1970s, which sought to demonstrate how legal institutions and the system of law itself tend to serve the interests of dominant society. CRT does largely the same thing, but from a racial perspective; it examines how the systems of society tend to serve the interests of the dominant race.

This is why CRT scholars pushed against liberalism and reforms. They saw how the Civil Rights Movement made great strides, yet still left behind de facto segregation. The political liberalism — which embraces a slow, step-by-step approach to progress — of the civil rights era seemed insufficient to do away with racism as a whole. Rather than reforms, CRT scholars began to posit, we should begin unpacking the foundations of the system.

From legal theory to mainstream media

Until recently, CRT was staying within legal scholars and small activist circles. Even criticisms of the theory rarely strayed outside of academic papers. But now CRT is in the spotlight, and everyone's talking about it.

However, it's often misrepresented within media. The following pages will outline what CRT is actually about to help you stay informed.

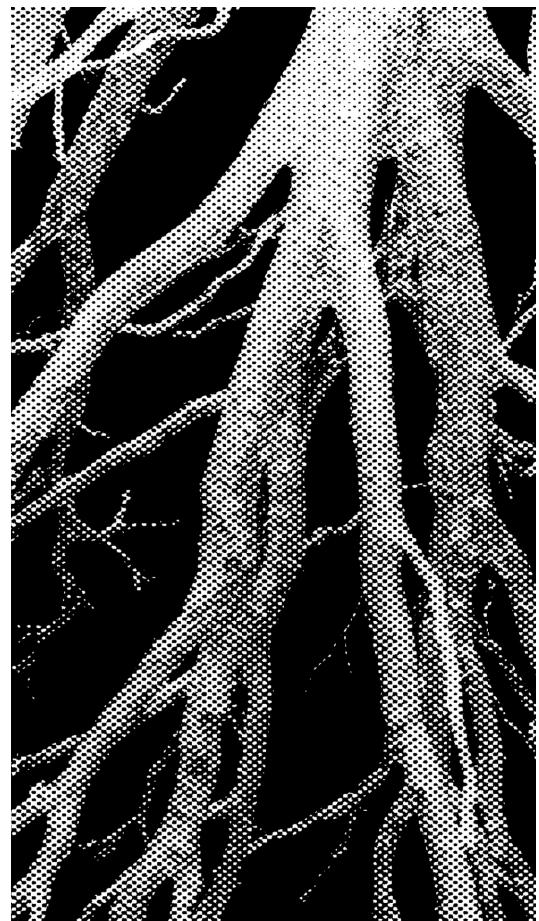


INDIVIDUAL VS. SYSTEMIC RACISM

Possibly the largest misconception about Critical Race Theory is that it teaches that all white people, as individuals, are inherently racist. This is not the case. CRT hardly deals with racism on an individual level. Rather, it's about the system.

This is not about you.

Critical Race Theory is not accusing you of being racist. It's urging you to consider yourself both as a product and a moving part of a larger system. Society has shaped the way you think about the world and about race, and your actions continue to either work with or against this system. Recognizing this relationship is the first step to understanding Critical Race Theory. Whether or not you have personally discriminated against a person of color (POC) is largely irrelevant here (though we hope you haven't!). This not about you; it's about examining the racism that is built into the very fabric the systems of our society.



This is about getting to the root of the problem.

Critical Race Theory will help us examine the system and find its issues. It looks at the origins, meaning, and ramifications of race; the effects of past discrimination on the present day — how it shapes the way we think about and act around race. The principle tenets of CRT make statements about the nature of race itself and how it's been built into society itself.

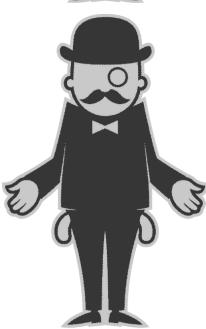
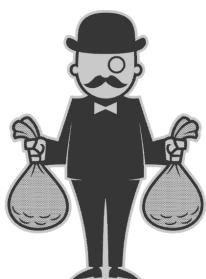
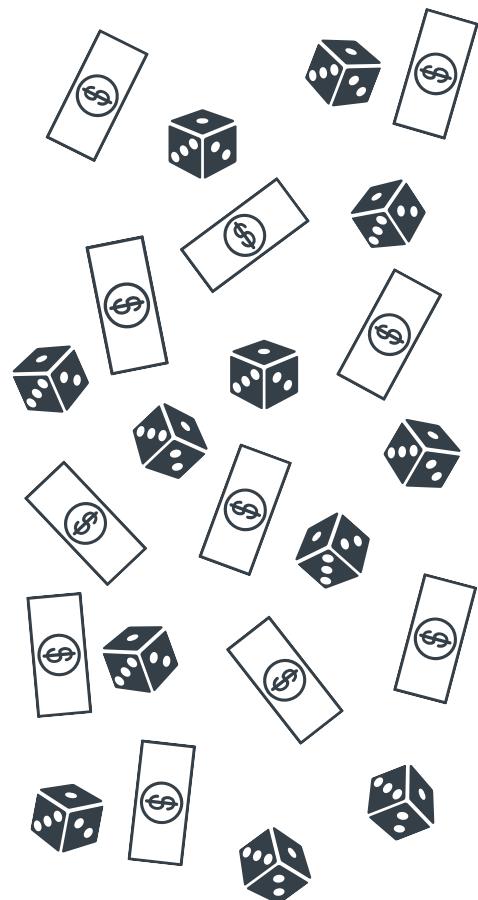
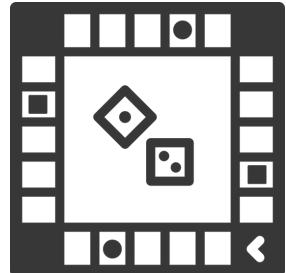
THE PAST IS NOT JUST THE PAST

CRT urges us to see the effects of de jure segregation — segregation by law; e.g. slavery, Jim Crow legislation — within society today, to recognize that it's not over just because the laws have been repealed.

Board games & taking history into account

Author Kimberly Jones said it well in a video that went viral: systemic racism is like a game of Monopoly.

"If I right now decided that I wanted to play Monopoly with you, and for 400 rounds of playing Monopoly, I didn't allow you to have any money, I didn't allow you to have anything on the board, I didn't allow for you to have anything, and then we played another 50 rounds of Monopoly and everything that you gained and you earned while you were playing that round of Monopoly was taken from you.... You can't win. The game is fixed."



400 years of events don't just disappear once the rules change.

250 years of slavery followed by 100 years of legal discrimination and the destruction of Black self-sufficient cities like Tulsa and Rosewood: the effects of oppression don't disappear once you repeal the laws that enforced it. Our culture and system is built on top of and inseparable from its history.

RACISM IS ORDINARY

Racism is the normal, ordinary experience of people of color in America. Any instance of racism is not an aberration or freak incident. It is a part of our society. The sooner we realize and accept this, the sooner we can get to work on fixing it.



Racism is a part of our society.

Racism is still very alive in America. It might manifest in different ways, but the normal experience of people of color in America is to experience racism. It is common and ubiquitous throughout our country.

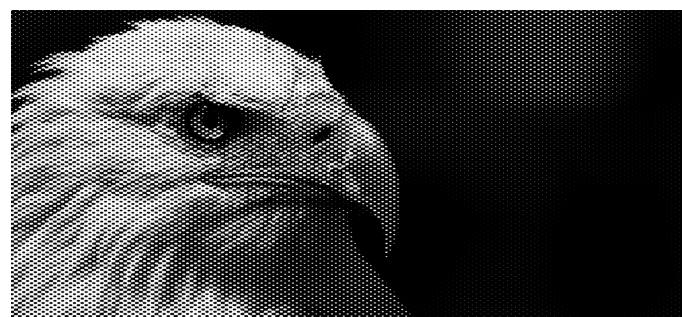
This is a really hard pill to swallow. It feels like you have to make a choice between being patriotic and believing CRT, but you don't. A part of loving your nation is wanting to amend its issues.

What does this really mean?

It not only means that racism is the common experience of people of color in America, but that America's very foundations and values uphold racism.

Majority culture — on which American democracy is largely built — promotes ideals like color-blindness and meritocracy, which both sound positive.

But they both uphold white supremacy by ignoring the inherent disadvantage POC are at, not by their nature, but by the nature of the system. The game is not fair, and pretending that it is invalidates the experience — the ordinary experience — of POC.



INTEREST CONVERGENCE

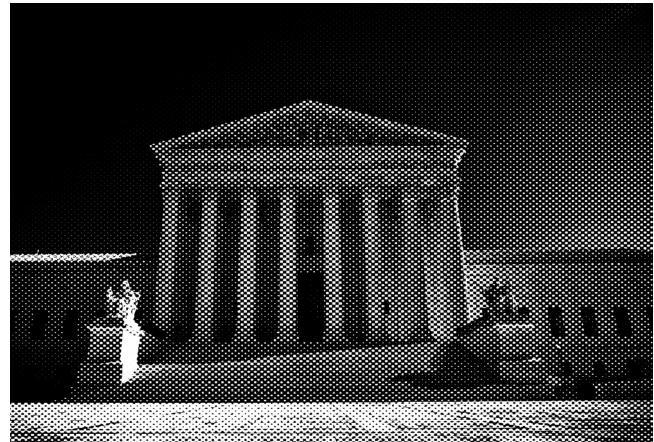
Interest convergence is the idea that white majority will only support any legal advances or other moves towards racial equality if it benefits them, and that such advances are only ever achieved when they benefit white majority. The interests of the oppressed converge with those of the oppressor.

"Progress" for the oppressed is often in the interest of the oppressor.

Derrick Bell first introduced the idea of interest convergence in the context of the landmark Supreme Court Case, *Brown v. Board*. He theorized that this was only able to happen for two reasons:

1. The white majority was concerned about potential unrest among Black soldiers returning to lives of oppression when they knew they should be war heroes.

2. They were also concerned that the United States's reputation and influence within the world would be diminished by being seen as a racist society.



At the time, Bell's idea was dismissed and pushed aside, but by now it's been highly supported by historical research.

It's important to note that this is not necessarily a consciously malicious action by dominant society. This is why you should examine the beliefs you have and the policies you support. They could be products of interest convergence.

Since racism advances the interests of white elites and working-class people, large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it unless it simultaneously helps them.

RACE IS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

The "social construction thesis" says that race is not biological or in any way inherent to humans, but rather a social construct. It's an artificial association between a set of physical and behavioral characteristics.



Race: how it's made and how it's used

Race has been used by dominant groups — in the case of the United States, the white majority — as a justification for the oppressive and exploitative treatment towards other groups on the basis of their supposed moral inferiority or their incapacity for self-rule (i.e. the "White Man's Burden.")

"Race is the child of racism, not the father."

—Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

"Races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient."

—Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic,
Critical Race Theory: An Introduction

But race is genetic, isn't it?

It's true that people with common lineage will share common physical traits — skin color, hair texture, facial features — and some genetic predispositions. But this is not race.

Race, through the nature of its creation, isn't just genetics or physical traits; it includes assumptions about morality and intelligence, too. And even if these assumptions — these stereotypes — have since been denounced, they are an inherent part of race. Remember: race was created solely to deem others inferior based on these assumptions, justifying racism.

DIFFERENTIAL RACIALIZATION

Race is not only a social construct, but fluid, too. Differential racialization describes the evolution of the connotations of race and of the stereotypes attributed to different races.

Why does this change happen?

Remember that race was created by the dominant culture to alienate other groups of people and justify their oppression. Racialization is the process of attributing a set of stereotypes and preconceptions about a group of people, creating the race and its image.

The different racializations of different groups rely on the needs of dominant society.

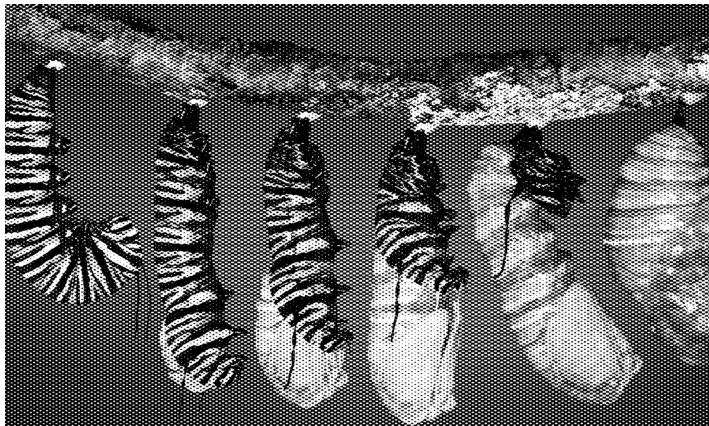
A historical example

In the 19th century, following the influx of Irish immigrants, Irish-Americans were lower-class, poor laborers. To justify their cheap labor, dominant society racialized Irish-Americans, associating them

with Black Americans and pushing them into oppression. Irish-Americans realized this association was keeping them oppressed, and pushed against it, working different jobs and separating themselves. Eventually, their racialization faded, and by today, they are almost never thought of as their own race, often racialized as white instead.

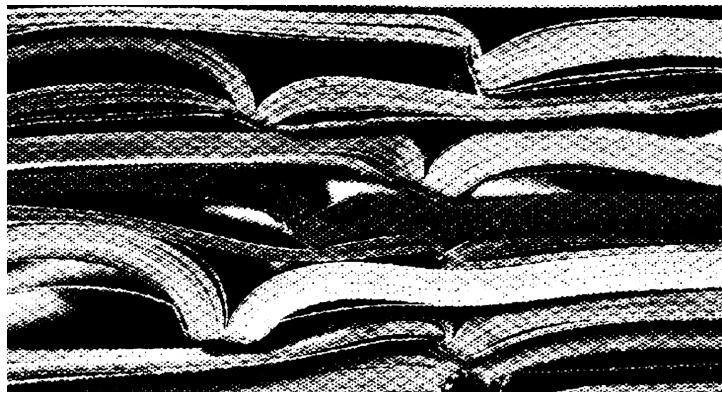
The previous oppression of Irish-Americans does not mean that white people are oppressed, and it does not overthrow the racial dynamics we're familiar with. Rather, it's crucial to understand that race is fluid, and Irish-Americans were not always white.

Race and the connotations it holds are fluid and ever-evolving.



THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COUNTER-NARRATIVE

The counter-narrative, or counter-storytelling, is meant to highlight the stories, experiences, and voices of marginalized communities in order to push against — to counter — the dominant culture narratives around which we center our history. Elevating counter-narratives helps us truly understand the experiences of marginalized peoples through their own words.



Empathy and the counter-narrative

Empathy is at the heart of this tenet. We must be willing to listen to voices that we might not be used to listening to and understand that their identity is not separate, but absolutely essential, to what they have to say.

"Counter-storytelling creates space for community voices to create the narrative that defines their own experiences and lives."

—Luna Castelli, The Noise Project

The "voice of color" thesis

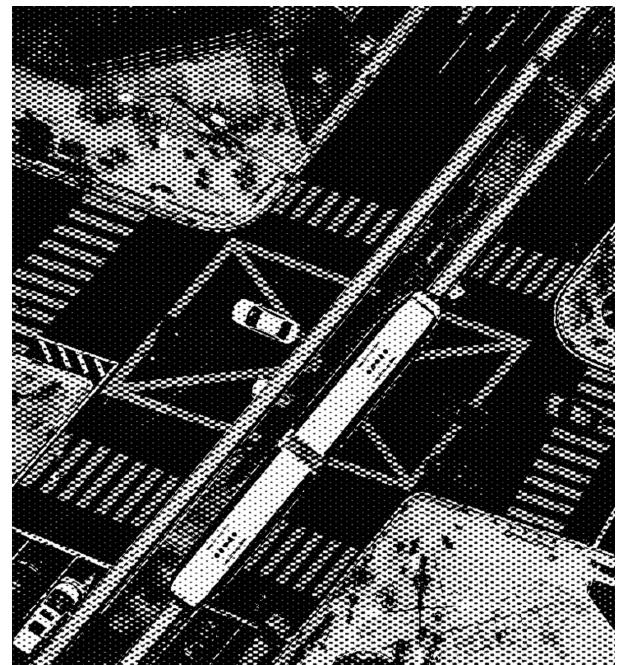
People of color are uniquely qualified to speak about the effects of racism on the other people of their group. This is why the counter-narrative and the emphasis on elevating minority voices is so important: if it wasn't coming from them, it would be going through the filter of the dominant culture.



INTERSECTIONALITY AND ANTI-ESSENTIALISM

Intersectionality within Critical Race Theory highlights the nuance of individuality and the role it plays within racial issues. Each person is a part of many different groups, which lets each individual within any group have different experiences from others within the group, despite their shared identity.

While Critical Race Theory places race at the forefront of a person's experiences, it also recognizes the importance of an individual's other identities and the interactions between their identities. For example, even if they are both Black, the experiences of a wealthy lesbian woman will be drastically different than that of a poor straight man. There is an infinite number of possible intersections within an individual between every group identity.



"No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity.... Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances."

—Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*



PART 2: USING CRT TO EXAMINE THE REAL WORLD

In this section, you'll see how CRT can be applied to modern day issues to understand them through a racial perspective.

THE FACTS:

The typical white American family has roughly 10 times as much wealth as the typical African American or Latino family.

Wealth is an incredibly important factor to look at because as opposed to income, it not only ensures more choices and greater opportunity in the present, but also in the future. CRT helps us understand that the long legacy of discrimination, inequality, and exclusion towards POC in this country has resulted in centuries-long disadvantages that affect people today.

CRT is the key to seeing why this wealth gap has come to what it is. CRT takes into account the historical background and inherently racist policies that have helped create this country's wealth inequality.

Wealth is a result of a mixture of factors from owning property and business, to education and career opportunities.



Government policies such as slavery, Jim Crow laws, the New Deal, and the GI Bill, prevented POC from obtaining the same quality of housing, health care, education, careers opportunities, and general lifestyle that were available to white people. POC have been continuously denied the same access as white people to wealth in this country. When you hear people say "systemic racism" this is what they mean.

THE FACTS:

The unemployment rate among Black job-seekers is roughly twice the rate for whites.

There is no single explanation for the disparity in employment rates between Black and white Americans. This is why CRT is so useful in examining this issue as a whole. It allows us to look at factors both past and present in order to see the bigger picture.

Lack of employment cannot only be attributed to one variable. It's not solely because Black workers had less access to education, or less likely to marry, or happen to live in struggling parts of the country. It has to do with all of these factors and more. Researchers have tried to isolate and study each of these factors yet there still seems to never be just one answer.

In the U.S., the job market rewards those who are educated, specialized, and experienced. Access to the kind of education and general life experiences that benefit job seekers is not universal. Metropolitan areas in the U.S. remain racially segregated, especially between Black and white households; a combination of housing market discrimination, exclusionary zoning in higher-income/white neighborhoods, and “white flight” when minorities enter these neighborhoods perpetuates the segregation over time. And, since enrollments in public K-12 schools depend primarily on where people live, segregated residential neighborhoods generate segregated schools, that limit student achievement and employment outcomes over time.

"Slavery and Jim Crow concentrated workers of color in chronically under-valued occupations."

—americanprogress.org

THE FACTS:

Black Americans were kept from buying and owning property outside of "redlined" areas for decades. The effects are still visible today.

After FDR's New Deal, which created provisions to make housing more accessible, the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) created "Residential Security Maps," like the one to the right depicting redlined Atlanta, to differentiate "bad" areas from "good" areas, mostly based on their racial and socioeconomic demographic makeup. The residents of the red areas (here, they're the darkest grey) were almost entirely Black Americans, with some immigrants and lower-class white people. The HOLC made it almost impossible for residents of these areas to get federally-backed loans and mortgages. This in turn made it extremely difficult for these people to buy homes outside of the designated red areas, concentrating the Black population and their poverty and trapping them inside.



The 1968 Fair Housing Act outlawed redlining, but this new statute was enforced very rarely. Even if it had been enforced fairly, too much damage had already been done. Ownership of valuable property is one of the main sources of wealth, and Black Americans were locked out of it for decades, helping to create the vast wealth inequality we see today.

Critical Race Theory takes this history into account when assessing the racial inequalities we see today, and redlining is one of the most impactful parts of this history.

"Predominately nonwhite school districts receive \$23 billion less [in] funding than majority white school districts, despite serving the same number of students."

—Report of a study done by EdBuild

Public schools are funded by the property taxes of the area they serve. Because of redlining, the schools that serve the redlined areas — made up of primarily Black and impoverished individuals — receive less funding, since the property taxes are lower. This disparity in funding puts a disproportionate amount of minorities in schools with larger class sizes, lower-track curricula, and lower-quality teachers.

According to the US Government Accountability Office, Black students were disproportionately disciplined — even suspensions and

expulsions — starting in preschool.

This inequality in public education suppresses the possibility for socioeconomic mobility, further exacerbating the concentration of poverty within Black and other POC populations, as well as the physical concentration of these populations within areas that were once redlined.



THE FACTS:

Black Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at nearly five times the rate of white Americans.

The prison system as we know it today didn't exist until the ratification of the 13th Amendment, which abolished slavery, with the exception of incarcerated individuals.

Ever since, Black Americans have been disproportionately incarcerated, now making up less than 13% of the US population but 38% of the prison population.

Black people are ten times more likely to be imprisoned for drug offenses, despite the fact that drug use rates do not vary significantly between white and Black people.



The concept of differential racialization as well as the social construction thesis can help us understand how this occurs. Black neighborhoods (that remain largely segregated due to redlining) have are more closely monitored by the police. Why? During the time of slavery, Black people were racialized as submissive and docile. But now, since the prison system has effectively replaced slavery, Black people are often racialized to be more violent. Society's resulting prejudice towards them, along with the concentrating effects of redlining, create disproportionately high rates of incarceration among Black Americans.



When you hear "the system" within the context of racial discrimination, this is what it means.

The criminal justice system, the housing market, the public education system — all have been affected by past laws that enforced discrimination, and now continue to perpetuate that discrimination.

PART 3: CRT, EDUCATION POLICY, AND THE PUBLIC EYE

Critical Race Theory has become one of the most discussed topics in politics and in media. The issue is that these conversations revolve around fundamental misconceptions of CRT. Let's talk about it.

CRT AND VIRGINIA POLICY

Gov. Glenn Youngkin: CRT is "inherently divisive"

On his first day in office, Glenn Youngkin signed 11 executive orders, as he had promised. The executive action that has solicited an angry response from many Virginians was his order that aims to end the instruction of "inherently divisive topics" in schools, such as Critical Race Theory. His orders were denied by a state Senate



committee in early February, but the order still had an impact, stirring up conversation about CRT and education policy.

His decision immediately received angry feedback from parents and teachers alike that a ban on CRT is useless because a course in the subject does not even exist in our schooling system. Youngkin remained unmoved even under a rainstorm of criticism, stating that, "the fundamental building blocks [of CRT], of actually accusing one group of being oppressors and another of being oppressed, of actually burdening children today for sins of the past, for teaching our children to judge one another based on the color of their skin," is ample reason to ban all instruction of the topic.



What does Gov. Youngkin actually want?

In his executive order, Gov. Youngkin writes: "We must equip our teachers to teach our students the entirety of our history — both good and bad." Remember that Critical Race Theory seeks to describe not only our history, but its effect on our present, too. If he wants to teach history and historical context, he should be defending CRT.

Another criticism of CRT within his executive order states that it "instruct[s] students to only view life through the lens of race." While this is a valid criticism of CRT — there are many issues in the world that are not primarily racial issues — it also fails to recognize that CRT offers more



nuance than it's often given credit for. Intersectionality (see page [pg number]) is one of the principal tenets of CRT. The theory itself recognizes that race is not the only factor of someone's life experience.

All in all, it seems that Gov. Youngkin's intentions behind the executive order banning CRT should have led him to embrace it.



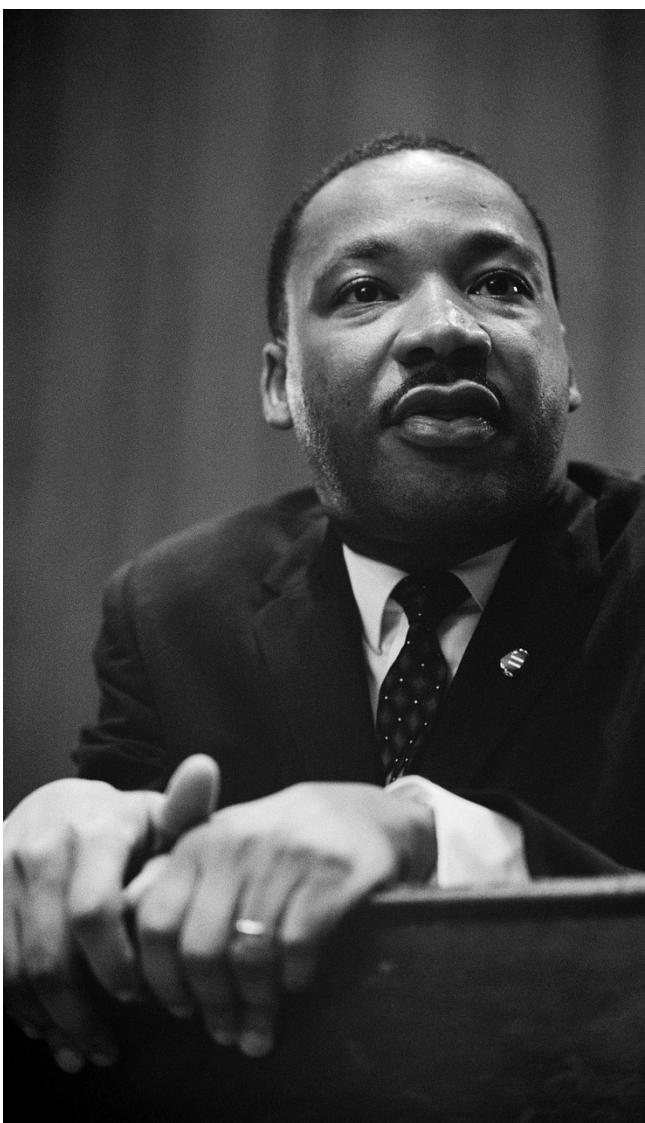
So, what's the problem?

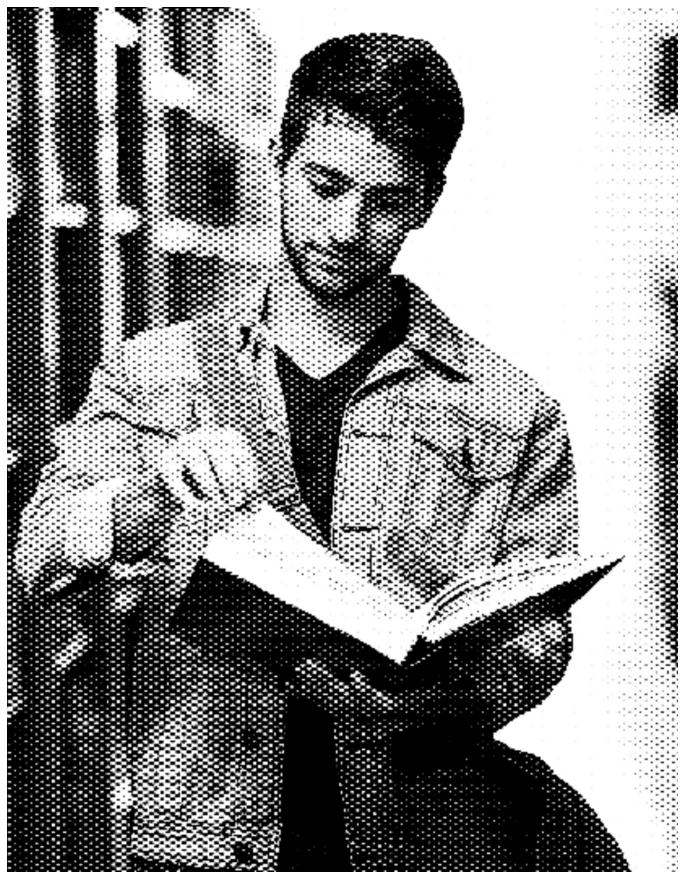
The problem here is a misunderstanding of what CRT actually teaches and of where it's actually taught. There is no Critical Race Theory course in public elementary schools in Virginia. Some argue that even though it's not formally within school curricula, educators' teachings align with CRT's goals and ideology. The goals and ideology in question, however, are the same on both sides of the argument: giving students a quality education that takes history into account. CRT's media presence has allowed people to morph it into something it's not.

CRT is not about blame

Youngkin's implication that CRT is being used to place the blame for America's past sins on today's children, however, is wholly wrong and misses the heart of Critical Race Theory. This is not about blame. This is about studying and discussing race in an academic manner in order to have a wider scope of its effects on America's economic and social culture. It is becoming more clear every day that race is a subject we can no longer avoid. Racism exists. It exists in our society, our governments, our communities; and it has reached its reckoning. Banning the instruction of CRT in schools is not the solution to eliminate racial bias. Instead, it would create a new generation blind to the implications of race on our society.

Youngkin said in his executive order that only with the quality education of Virginia's children "will we realize Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream that our children 'will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.'" Critical Race Theory would help that happen.





What can you do?

Critical Race Theory has been distorted throughout the media. It's being used by politicians as a rallying tactic, misrepresenting the goals and values of the theory. Here's what you can do to combat this misinformation:

1. Know what Critical Race Theory actually is. Reading this zine is a good first step! There's resources and reading recommendations at the end for you to learn more.
2. Educate others. Make sure that if people are talking about CRT, they actually know what they're talking about.
3. Keep an eye out. Once you learn about CRT, it's likely that you'll see the things it describes in your day-to-day life or throughout history.
4. Tell your state and local representatives. If you know they've been presenting a false image of Critical Race Theory in campaigns or through media, let them know that you will not support misinformation.

CRT is not racist or "inherently divisive," and it certainly isn't anything to be scared of. Educating yourself and others is the first step to progress.

RESOURCES & FURTHER READING

Reading this zine was a great start to your education on Critical Race Theory. We encourage you to further your education and grow your knowledge on this topic and widen your horizons! Here's a list of resources to keep you going.

Note: This is by no means an exhaustive list. There are plenty more resources out there to help you continue your education!

Books

The Color of Law by Richard Rothstein

Critical Race Theory: Key Writings that Formed the Movement by various writers

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Critical Race Theory: An Introduction by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic

The New Jim Crow by Michelle Alexander

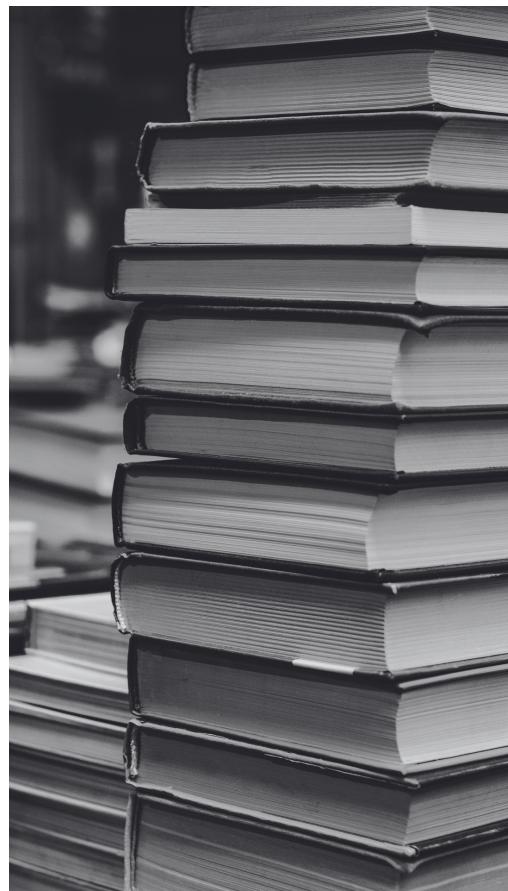
The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas

Killing Rage, Ending Racism by Bell Hooks

The Strange Career of Jim Crow by C. Vann Woodward



Articles

Critical Race Theory — Encyclopedia Britannica

The 1619 Project — The New York Times

The Parent Trap by Jill Lepore — The New Yorker

The Case for Reparations by Ta-Nehisi Coates

What is critical race theory? And why has it received so much attention in Virginia? — The Virginian Pilot

The Color of Justice: Racial and Ethnic Disparity in State Prisons by Ashley Nellis — Sentencingproject.org



Documentaries, Podcasts, and Videos

1619 — Podcast by the New York Times

Why Hugging Out Racism in Education Just Won't Work — Ted Talk by Laura Mae Lindo

The Urgency of Intersectionality — Ted Talk by Kimberlé Crenshaw

How We Can Make Racism a Solvable Problem — and Improve Policing — Ted Talk by Dr Philip Abita Goff

13th — Documentary; available on Netflix and Youtube

Housing Segregation and Redlining in America: A Short History — Video, NPR

Code Switch — Podcast, NPR

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