Critical Race Theory as a Space of Interdisciplinarity

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Researching the experiences of minority ethnic groups highlighted to me the limitations of bounded categories. Such categories locate particular constituencies in what Wright (2004) refers to as a space of contradiction. In such spaces one can be visible and invisible, erased and present. How can one attend to such contradictions in a way that captures the complexities and ruptures boundaries? Crenshaw (1991) and the figure of Obama demonstrate how the body is a site where history, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class etc intersect so the body itself becomes a site of interdisciplinarity. Moraga (1981) and Crenshaw (1991) show how ‘in the flesh’ lived experiences demand alternative theoretical lenses and methodological approaches which transgress boundaries of genre, method, content, and disciplines. This paper explores the ways in which Critical Race Theory, itself an interdisciplinary framework, reaches into and out of the academy to disrupt fixed categories to bring into relief that which may not be seen or missed.

Introduction

This paper revisits elements of previous writings grappling with the tensions associated with the spectre of race and my own position as a Black woman in academia. Race is a socially constructed concept yet has material effects which are experienced as real. Researching the experiences of minority ethnic groups highlighted to me the limitations of bounded categories. Such categories locate particular constituencies in what Wright (2004) refers to as a space of contradiction. In such spaces one can be visible and invisible, erased and present. Pondering the phenomenon of race within initial teacher education, Callender and I (2013) find that the spectre of race haunts educational practice, materialising and dematerialising from policy discourses at key moments in time and space. It seems to have the capacity to morph into something more appealing, comforting, manageable, something that will not speak its name. Yet, its silence and seeming absence punctures the spaces we occupy. In a paper presented at the British Educational Research Association, John Schostak and I (2009) explored the symbolic significance of the Obama victory in 2008. The figure of Obama illustrates the contradictions and tensions associated with the phenomenon of race. Back in 2008 when Obama was first elected, I was struck by the way in which his body was written as emblematic of spatial and temporal shifts, hopes and fears. For many, the past, present and future converged in such a way that the struggles for racial equality were overcome through his victory. As transgressive symbol ‘Obama’ mediated the passage from a ‘violent history of slavery and racism’ and opened up the possibility of a new politics – a ‘new man’ (Fanon...
2008) or ‘last man’ (Fukuyama 1992) - where ‘race’, ‘nation’, civilisation(s)’ ‘Empire’, the ‘global’ were ‘re-imagined’ and ‘re-represented’ forming a new ‘cartography’. Obama’s victory was heralded as signalling a new post-racial era. The post-racial discourse marks a ‘retreat from race’ (Cho, 2009 cited in Vaught, 2013: 370), yet in this absence and silence, race continues to make its presence known in all spheres of life, particularly in the lived experiences of those marked as raced others. Kwebena Boateng, a barber as cited in Dodd, 2012, talking about race and racism commented ‘You can’t see it, but sometimes you can feel it’. How can one attend to such contradictions in a way that captures the complexities and ruptures boundaries? Crenshaw (1991) and the figure of Obama demonstrate how the body is a site where history, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class etc intersect so the body itself becomes a site of interdisciplinarity. Moraga (1981) and Crenshaw (1991) show how ‘in the flesh’ lived experiences demand alternative theoretical lenses and methodological approaches which transgress boundaries of genre, method, content, and disciplines. This paper explores the ways in which Critical Race Theory, itself an interdisciplinary framework, reaches into and out of the academy to disrupt fixed categories to bring into relief that which may not be seen or missed.

Finding a Theoretical Voice

I don’t think that they’d have that respect for me as a teacher. they won’t see me as the teacher that I am I want them to see me as a teacher. Because then I’ll have the same status as everybody else. If they see me as an Afro-Caribbean teacher, they’ll probably nit pick and find some faults

. . . From her perspective the school had unrealistically high expectations of her, ‘picked on’ her relentlessly . . .

If you are the only ethnic minority staff in the school I think people look at you in a different way. You have to prove what you are capable of. . . . I don’t think they really expect high standards from you, so you have to prove that.

When I went first I think they were quite shocked to see me in my dress . . . I think they expected me not to be able to fit into the group or be able to converse or whatever, or generally sit with them . . . And then I think they had this assumption that I wouldn’t really be able to shout out to the class . . . shy little Asian girl and I don’t know where it comes from really
I don’t know where the roots of it are
I think we have to fight a lot of implicit stereotypes like that . . .
Because I wear a scarf I think I have to sort of break through a lot of stereotypes and
sort of prejudices.

. . . because of the way you choose to dress,
you are making yourself very different to the pupils
and that doesn’t make you really fit in well here,
but you should fit in quite well there because of the mix.

In the blackness, then, I have been erased, I can no longer say my own name. I can no
longer point to myself and say ‘I’. In the blackness my voice is silent. First, then, I
have been my individual self, carefully banishing randomness from my existence,
then I am swallowed up in the blackness so that I am at one with it. (as cited in
Wright, 2004, p. 1)

Wright (2004) highlights the ‘in between space’ (p. 2) which Blackness occupies, which is
captured by Kincaid’s prose poem. For Wright, this space is one of contradiction, so whilst it
is a location where one’s individual sense of self is erased and silenced, it is also a space from
which one can affirm one’s identity and speak as a way of resisting that othering, racializing
process. It is in experiencing and negotiating Blackness within the contradictions of
visibility/invisibility, erasure/presence, individuality/collectivity that this ‘in between’/
liminal space becomes one of possibility, engendering alternative ways of seeing, thinking,
and doing, hence the ‘becoming a Black researcher’.

As a novice researcher initially exploring my own practice as a lecturer on a Black Access
Course and later the experiences of minority ethnic trainee teachers I often encountered
spaces where I or the participants in the research were silenced. I soon found that the
research training I received and the literature I was engaging with did not speak to my
experiences of the world and certainly did address the lived realities of those participating in
my research. The first project I was engaged with explored minority ethnic trainee teachers
experiences. Participants were asked how they would identify themselves and I was quite
intrigued by the responses. The responses troubled ethnic and racial categories as illustrated:

I’d just say I was black (Tracy)
I’m a teacher, I’m a Muslim and I’m Indian Muslim . . . that’s the way I’d say it Indian Muslim . . . or British Indian Muslim [laughs] I think. (Fatima)

I would definitely say that I was black. I would have to mention it some way and I don’t know if that would be because I’d want to, but it’s just because I’m so conscious of being different. (Evadney)

I’m a black Britain? . . . I’m not sure that’s how I see myself but that’s what I tick [laughs]. . . . I see myself as a human really. (Anne marie)

I’d say as a woman of colour really, I like to use that term because it’s what embraces. . . . It sounds kind of spiritual, it kind of embraces how I feel inside. (Joyce)

The participants categorisations pointed to the complex histories and cartographies - areas I wanted to further explore. However, I was told that the project was about discovering factors which contributed to trainees withdrawal from initial teacher training programmes.

During this same research project, I was confronted with participants who whilst narrating experiences were moved to tears. Emotions figured quite strongly in my experiences of my research whether it be those of the participants or my own. In reflecting on experiences of ‘becoming a Black researcher’ Roberts (2013) I wrote:

It became clear to me that I was implicated /embedded in the stories that emerged through the research process. I listened to the research participants narrating their experiences and could not help but be moved by the intensity of feelings. Trying to make sense of my data, I found myself returning to a point I had reached some years earlier during my master’s study, a position which is captured by Yancy’s opening quote: ‘Being embodied in the world is a condition of my philosophical voice’. Moya (1997), citing Moraga (1983), explains that our theories and knowledge are shaped by the ‘physical realities of our lives’ (p. 135).

Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2005) review the implicit and at times explicit visceral feeling of positioned oppression that BME groups (people of colour) routinely experience. They write:

We seek a methodology and a theory that seeks not merely reversal of roles in a hierarchy but rather displacement of taken-for-granted norms around unequal binaries. . . . We see such a possibility in Critical Race Theory . . . a new analytic rubric for considering difference and inequity using multiple methodologies. (p. 291)
When I encountered critical race theory, I found a framework that provided an intellectual space to explore not only our own racial positioning within the academy and wider society but also that of the communities we work with in our research to achieve greater social justice. Critical race theory emerged from critical legal studies and the activism of scholars of colour. CRT is not one theory per se but an interdisciplinary approach which has key unifying themes (Delgado & Stephanic, 2001; Parker & Roberts, 2005, 2011). As an interdisciplinary framework, CRT draws on postmodernism/poststructuralism, Marxism, feminist theory, postcolonialism, and queer theory. CRT places race at the centre of analysis, and there is a recognition that racism is endemic to life. Notions of neutrality, objectivity, colour blindness, and meritocracy are viewed with scepticism. This approach questions ahistoricism. It stresses the need for a contextual and historical analysis of the law.

CRT places emphasis on the experiential knowledge of people of colour. Narrative analysis is key to this.

In the 2013 paper I play with data ranging from a number of projects:

As something akin to a ‘thought experiment’, I insert below a patchwork of data knitted together from a range of research projects, some of which I have been involved with and mentioned earlier and some not. The research ranges from 1998 to 2008 and across different geographical areas. I am struck at how easy it was to weave a seamless narrative from the individual voices – both male and female.

**Patchwork data**

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Critical Race Theory and Community-based Research

Critical race theory has given me a framework through which to talk back. It has enabled me
to think about the ways in which my intellectual being had been colonised through my
educational career and how my practice may objectify lived experience. I recognise the
knowledge and expertise of those on the edge, excluded. It means that I adopt alternative
approaches to research. As Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2005) argue, ‘intellectuals must
move into spaces beyond the academy to participate in real change’ (p. 297). An example of
such an approach can be seen in a recent small-scale project where I worked with a
community organisation to gain young people’s perceptions of their educational experiences.
The community group is a voluntary organisation which works to improve educational
outcomes for African Caribbean young people. Our starting point was not one where the
young people were problematised or seen as having some deficit which needed to be
identified so an appropriate remedy could be found. We wanted to look at the lived
experiences of young people’s lives expressed in their own words and actions – exploring
barriers, access, aspirations, gaps, and achievements. We decided to take a workshop
approach. The workshop was facilitated by a teacher who used poetry and drama to engage
the young people in an exploration of their educational experience. I as the researcher also participated in the activities. This was one of the most invigorating projects I had ever worked on. I did not interview young people but observed and participated. Young people were given particular topics and asked to work out a dramatisation of the theme, which was then performed. In one session, young people performed raps to express their aspirations. The data produced challenged many of the stereotypes of young black men as at risk. Counter to the prevailing discourses of a lack of aspiration, we see young people with dreams and ambitions, and we saw how school processes impacted some negatively.

Young people were given a space in which they could reflect creatively on their lives and educational experiences. Through this experience the young people were empowered. For many it was the first time anyone had ever engaged them in a discussion about their educational/career futures. They were excited by the workshops and were very disappointed when we reached the endpoint of the six-week programme. The sessions were videoed and photographed. Young people were invited to take part in the editorial decision-making and editing process. We envisaged that the end product would be used to speak back to policy makers.

Here I see a way in which critical engagement in the academy can meet critical engagement on the ground. Engagement in creative approaches enables an alternative way of doing, thinking, and seeing. For me a space is opened up where a dialogue can emerge – a space for further thinking about what counts as data and what it means to research when the tools of research change. With CRT I make no apologies for foregrounding race. I see how I have been framed and how such framing influences my movement through the world. I am free to see through my lens but not be limited. I continue to work with community groups and see the way forward as building research from the ground up.
References


