

Seeking a Way

A White Teacher's Journey from Critical Race Theory to Black Power Pedagogy

ALEXANDER B. PRATT
University of Oregon

THE NARRATIVE BELOW THAT OPENS this article describes the first unit that I taught in my second year as a full-time classroom teacher at Jane Smith Elementary on the west side of Chicago. This narrative is my own recollection aided by notes and assignments collected at the time, though I am confining the discussion to my preparation for the instruction and my reflection upon completion of the instruction. As such, it is the kind of narrative re-tell that is used most often in works of narrative inquiry and in Pinar's (1975) understanding of teaching autobiography and *currere*, which I will describe in more detail in the Methodology section.

The purpose of the analysis in this article is to describe the ontology of race, specifically Blackness, as it is theorized in Critical Race Theory and how that ontology problematizes the way I thought about issues of race and racism in my first week of teaching and, more generally, the way such things are being addressed in current liberal and neoliberal classrooms. This problematic underestimates the impact of racism within our societal structure, leaving many teachers and students, myself included, the victims of an unrealistic and destructive conception of how racial justice and equality can be achieved. I suggest that one potential way forward that addresses this unrealistic expectation can be found in the pedagogy put forward in the literature of the Black Power Movement.

Restorying the Past: The Problematics of My Liberal Disposition

I considered myself well-prepared by the undergraduate education courses I had taken, the life experiences I had gained in the intervening years, and the alternate certification program that I had successfully completed. Since this was my second year at Jane Smith Elementary School on the west side of Chicago, I knew many of the students and had developed a reputation among them as (I thought) tough but fair. In addition, I had worked to steep myself in critical pedagogy before and during my tenure, soliciting book suggestions from friends in the school and in other areas of academia. My whiteness in a majority Black¹ school did not garner much thought in my

preparation, though I had been told by colleagues and professors that my maleness and height would likely be an advantage due to the relative rarity of both in the teaching population the students had encountered.

The first unit in the curriculum purchased and supplied to us by the administration centered around the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as published by the United Nations in 1948. This is an important historical document, and as I read through it during my preparation, I was excited to use it and its supporting documents as a source for teaching my students both how to read and analyze highly complex language and as a jumping off point for teaching elements of a social justice curriculum. The objectives supplied in the curriculum aligned with the Common Core, focusing on the complex skills that students would need as they continued in their educational journeys.

The unit took up the first four weeks of the term, and as those four weeks drew to a close, I reassessed what I had taught and what I thought my students had learned. The lessons went smoothly, and as I taught the material, I remember thinking about how well the short story about a child in Tibet who was struggling to complete school was connecting with my students' lived experience and how engaged they were in attempting to illustrate graphically complex ideas like freedom of speech. I was pleased that, despite the curriculum's "teacher-proof" aspects, I was able to add in a few pieces of content that I thought were particularly relevant to the students' lives in Chicago. Specifically, I included an article from the UDHR that was omitted in the provided curriculum about unwarranted detaining of protesters and had the students connect it to the ongoing "Black Lives Matter" protests.

As a young teacher, it was my earnest belief that if I only connected with the students and inspired them to work hard I would be able to help them overcome a system designed to keep them ensnared. This feeling, when combined with the relative success of the lessons and my knowledge of my students (whom I knew to be as capable as any group of students I had worked with), gave me confidence that they would pass all of their tests, allow their middle school teachers to assign activities with more high-level thinking, be accepted to the most prestigious high schools in Chicago, graduate with honors, go to college, complete college, and lead successful, happy, and prosperous lives.

Methodology

This article is the explanation and manifestation of a proposed method for teacher reflection. This form of reflection finds its foundation in the teacher practical knowledge movement and more specifically the work of William Pinar (2004) on educational autobiography and the concepts and methodology of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, 1996). The method that I will explain and employ here includes four steps. Though the concept of a "step" necessarily implies a distinction between each (with a fifth step not included here), I prefer to think of these steps as continuous and flowing into and out of each other and not necessarily occurring sequentially. The first step, akin to Pinar's (1975) regression, is a retelling of a past teaching experience in which the teacher (in this case me) works to recreate a period of pedagogic work. The second is a period of reading and research in which that teacher troubles their perspective as a means of active listening and learning. The third step, akin to Pinar's (1975) progressive phase, is the creation of a future possibility where the teacher can reteach the material differently as inspired by their troubled and broadened perspective. I propose an additive fourth step that has

distinct implications for a progressive future possibility and that is informed by the ontological and epistemic conclusions drawn by racial realism, which posits that racism is inherent in our current system and, as such, cannot be removed completely from any teaching practice. Thus, the fourth step is the process of problematizing that future narrative in an effort to see those places where even this improved lesson still reinforces oppressions. The final step is the application of that revised future possibility to actual teacher practice with the understanding that this practice will be necessarily flawed and in need of further revision. In short, the method that I advocate here begins with a given teacher (myself in this case) (1) reflecting upon previous experience, (2) problematizing their own work in the classroom by expanding their perspective through listening and learning, (3) envisioning their lesson as presented in the future to include those new perspectives, (4) while assuming that their revised and refined lesson will necessarily also include elements that reinforce oppression (racism specifically here), in order to look for those elements in the prospective narrative and to address them as much as possible in actual practice, and (5) applying that future narrative to one's actual teacher practice. The result of this process is a lesson that has been changed to address new perspectives and the inevitable presence of oppression in any teaching activity *and* a teacher who has acknowledged the premises of racial realism, thus, freeing them to “*to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph*” (Bell, 1992a, p. 374, emphasis in original).

Currere

In his book *What is Curriculum Theory?* William Pinar (2004) describes “our pedagogical work [as] simultaneously autobiographical and political” (p. 4). This article began with a short autobiographical narrative describing my first four weeks of teaching in my second year at Jane Smith Elementary. Both the political and autobiographical nature of pedagogy as described by Pinar are salient here, but it is the autobiographic point that is crucial to my methodology. Pinar’s method of *currere* “provides a strategy for students of curriculum to study the relations between academic knowledge and life history in the interest of self-understanding and social reconstruction” (p. 35). His theory resonates with the work of John Dewey (1960) when he explained that

imaginative recovery of the bygone is indispensable to successful invasion of the future, but its status is that of an instrument ... the movement of the agent-patient to meet the future is partial and passionate; yet detached and impartial study of the past is the only alternative to luck in assuring success to passion. (p. 28)

Currere is formed primarily from both a look backward at past classroom experience, called the “regressive” phase, and a look forward toward a possible future, called the “progressive” phase (Pinar, 2004). The regressive phase of *currere* requires us “to slow down, to remember even re-enter the past” (p. 4). The progressive phase advises us “to meditatively imagine the future” (p. 4). These phases are put into practice here in two narratives denoted in italics, the first of which opened this article and embodied the regressive phase of *currere*. The second narrative will be the conclusion of the progressive phase.

The purpose of this methodology as Pinar describes it is not only to reflect on one’s own past experience, since a reflection is simply a review of a past with no deeper discussion or scrutiny. Philosopher of science Karen Barad (2003) makes a similar critique of reflection when

she states, “social constructivist approaches get caught up in the geometrical optics of reflection where, much like the infinite play of images between two facing mirrors, the epistemological gets bounced back and forth, but nothing more is seen” (pp. 802–3). Pinar’s (1975) regression requires more than simply (re)presenting the past to oneself. “One returns to the past, to capture it as it was, *and* as it hovers over the present” (p. 6, emphasis added). The present must be influential in this work and, more specifically, the present understandings that cast different light and shadow on the past.

Once one has (re)presented the past, it is the work of that same person to imagine a future in which that past has been (re)created in light of new knowledge and experiences. This progressive phase specifically

acknowledge[s] difference and discontinuity over sameness and identity. Such writing occupies the “seam” of the conscious/unconscious where boundaries between internal and external intersect (Benstock, 1988). Benstock’s point seems right to me, but there are racial and gender differences that can be usefully acknowledged. For heterosexually identified white men, finding the seams, discovering the traces of rejected fragments, and creating interior spaces may well prove pedagogically useful, potentially self-shattering. (Pinar, 2004, p. 51)

This point is crucial to a more complex and thorough process of the progressive phase. The point is not only to identify those seams through the lens of continued experience; it is also to employ additional outside learning and knowledge in that process. “The first things that come to mind are merely that, the first things. One must wait for the second, third, and fourth, until one has found clues pointing to what the first things hide” (Pinar, 2004, p. 53). I claim that those second, third, and fourth things that will come to mind can only do so in light of a different perspective on education, history, or society. Without attempting to step outside of one’s own perspective to trouble one’s own assumptions, the second, third, and fourth things become mere echoes. Those new and different perspectives open up past experience in ways that were not only not thought of at the time of the experience, but were also not possible at that time.

To this point, I have discussed Pinar’s method of *currere* and specifically the regressive and progressive phases of that method. In order to more fully explain the process of restorying past experience and storying future possibilities, it is important to turn to narrative inquiry. The next section will discuss the methodology of narrative inquiry and its place in the framework of the method employed here.

Narrative Inquiry: Storying and Re-storying

The method of *currere* lends itself to the use of Narrative Inquiry, which I employ at both the beginning and end of this work. Narrative inquiry is a form of arts-based research characterized by the use of narrative, or “telling a story” (Kim, 2016, p. 6), in the formulation of knowledge, a conception with strong historical roots (Kim, 2016). Narrative Inquiry was developed in the 1980s and 1990s as part of the “Teacher Knowledge Movement” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Rosiek & Atkinson, 2005; Shulman, 1986), which sought to validate the experiential classroom knowledge of teachers. Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (1993, 1999) describe the need for the cultivation of new teacher knowledge through the development of teachers’ desire to engage

in inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). “Such a stance would permit teachers to refine and extend existing insights based on their own experiences, reflections, and participation within a community of inquiry” (Chang & Rosiek, 2003). The use of narrative and particularly fictional narrative as I employ at the conclusion of this article, constitute a departure from the positivist aims of research, that is the search for truth, and instead offer to re-story my past experience as informed by my continuing intellectual development following the methodology of *currere*. Chang and Rosiek (2003) explain that

this shift from describing actual meanings to describing possible meanings is justified. Its aim is to produce a kind of scholarly speculation that remains accessible and germane to teachers’ personal practical experience. To put it in the terms used by Clandinin and Connelly (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), this research seeks to offer new public, private, and sacred stories about teaching practice that we hope can support and sustain more culturally responsive forms of [social] science teaching practice. (p. 254)

One of the significant issues with conducting this work is most clearly described in the work of critical whiteness studies (CWS). A personal narrative is just that, and because of one’s positionality, that narrative has certain clear limits suggested by CWS. CWS had two waves (Jupp et al., 2016), the first of which brought to light the need to acknowledge and name whiteness as an identity and more specifically a race-evasive identity. While this was hailed as a step forward in that, without identification, there is no way to discuss, let alone critique, the identity of whiteness, it did engender a second wave. This wave argued that (1) the first wave had become establishment rather than insurgent, (2) it described whiteness as a monolith losing the nuances inherent in the category, (3) nuance is key to discussions of race, and (4) simplistic identity must be rejected in favor of those more nuanced understandings (Jupp et al., 2016, see also Lensmire, 2010, 2017; Lensmire et al., 2013; Tanner, 2016). In addition, Tanner (2016) described second wave CWS as

attempting to theorize the ongoing production of whiteness in ... teaching and research with more care than a white privilege framework has allowed. [The] scholarship has considered: [1] what whiteness means for white people; [2] ways that whiteness continues to matter; and [3] how white supremacy informs institutional and social practices. (p. 423)

The framework has similarities to CRT including the validation of personal experience and the use of narrative as method.

Another set of works that speaks to whiteness as an identity in relationship to research can be found in the scholarship of critical race theory and feminist standpoint theory. In the article, “What is Critical Whiteness Doing in OUR Nice Field Like Critical Race Theory: Applying CRT and CWS to Understand the White Imaginations of White Teacher Candidates,” Matias et al. (2014) discussed these two frameworks with a focus on the idea of “the imagination.” Briefly, the imagination as it is used here is the internal ability of individuals to construct experiences based on present circumstance that are and potential future experiences that they might encounter if circumstances were changed. Matias et al. argued that the Black imagination is constructed through oppression to identify and understand both blackness and whiteness in the world as accurately as possible if for no other reason than survival. The white imagination is constructed to obscure both blackness and whiteness in one’s experience, thus, reinforcing a kind of color-blind racism. This

phenomenon is apparent in much of the research on white people and race (Castagno, 2008; Crenshaw, 2019; Mazzei, 2008; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Tanner, 2018) Sarah Ahmed (2004) also discussed CWS in her work called “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism.” She proposed that

anti-racism is not performative. ... An utterance is performative when it does what it says. ... I will suggest that declaring whiteness, or even “admitting” to one’s own racism, when the declaration is assumed to be “evidence” of an anti-racist commitment, does not do what it says. In other words, putting whiteness into speech, as an object to be spoken about, however critically, is not an anti-racist action, and nor does it necessarily commit a state, institution or person to a form of action that we could describe as anti-racist. (p. 2)

Here we see two significant issues with the use of white experience in anti-racist work. First, experiences had by white people are unreliable because of their already-constructed imagination that is working to obscure moments of antiBlack racism. Second, the admission or confession of those experiences is not in itself anti-racist.

What, then, should be the path forward for white teachers in general and for this work specifically? The vast majority of teachers in this country are identified/self-identify as white, meaning that they (I) all must grapple with a white imagination that is obscuring their (my) experiences. While one answer might be that white people should no longer be teachers, especially of Black and Brown students (Milner, 2006; Seale, 1991; Ture & Hamilton, 1992), that is unrealistic. I propose that what must happen is that white teachers must learn to listen without speaking (Mercurieff & Roderick, 2013) to the voices and experiences of Black and Brown people and only to respond through their actions in the classroom *without* declaring authority as a remedy to their inherent imagination. We must learn to question every level of our own understanding of our own experiences and accept that the story about race we have been telling ourselves is wrong.

In the next section, I will describe the works of Black and Brown scholars that I have read in an effort to change my imagination starting with racial realism as it is conceived of by one of the founders of CRT, Derrick Bell. In the third section, I will describe the pedagogy displayed in three foundational texts of the Black Power Movement. This theoretical work, while not necessarily intended for my use as a white teacher, offers insight into how racial realism and its ontological consequences can be included in our classrooms to more effectively and affirmatively combat racism and will inform the problematization of my classroom experience.

Problematizing Through Listening and Learning

Critical Race Theory is often described as having several major tenets that help to define it as a theoretical framework. While not all theorists agree on the details, there are five tenets that are commonly mentioned. These are (1) the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992a, 1992b; Leonardo, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002); (2) counter-storytelling (Delgado, 2015); (3) whiteness as property (Harris, 1993); (4) interest convergence (Bell, 1976; Leonardo, 2013); and (5) a critique of liberalism (Delgado, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For the purposes of this article and my re-storied narrative, I am most interested in the first: the permanence of racism or, as Bell (1987, 1992a, 1992b) names it, racial realism.

Derrick Bell's Racial Realism

Bell's work in legal realism and critical legal studies formed much of the foundation for racial realism and, by extension, CRT. The legal realists pushed back on the classical structure of law by arguing that any given legal decision could be argued either way based on which legal precedent, or even which aspect of a single given legal precedent, was being employed (Bell, 1992a; Singer, 1988), undermining the assumption of legal objectivity that undergirds much of legal scholarship (Kramer, 2006). Bell took legal realism and applied it to the field of race and racism, arguing that the idealism of future equality was akin to the idealism of legal objectivity, both are mirages of water on the road ahead, where no matter how fast a car goes, it will never reach the puddle. In "Racial Realism," Bell (1992a) argued

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary "peaks of progress," short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it and move on to adopt policies based on what I call: "Racial Realism." This mind-set or philosophy requires us to acknowledge the permanence of our subordinate status. That acknowledgement enables us to avoid despair, and frees us to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph. (p. 374, emphasis in original)

Zeus Leonardo (2013) explained Bell's "Afro-Pessimism" as defiance in the face of impossibility (p. 18). Racial realism, he explained, is the attempt to understand "actual race relations" in spite of ideologies of "utopian thinking" (p. 18).

The conception of antiBlack racism as permanent within the American system is further explicated in Bell's narrative chronicles including most famously the final chapter of *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* ("The Space Traders") (1992b) and in "The Chronicle of the Slave Scrolls" and "The Chronicle of the Black Crime Cure" in *And We Are Not Saved* (1987). "The Space Traders" describes an alien encounter wherein the aliens offer to the government of the United States the technology to solve their economic crises including income inequality and the technology to clean and restore the world's environment from centuries of misuse. All they ask in exchange is for America to hand over all Americans of significant African heritage. In the end, the government decides to send the Black population away with no assurances of their safety in exchange for the technologies. "The Chronicle of the Slave Scrolls" depicts the narrator coming across a scroll in a bottle that contains the whole lost history of slavery from the point of view of the slave. This scroll fills in the holes in the Black identity and allows Blacks to progress and develop on par with and eventually to outpace the progress of white Americans. The white population, threatened by the upward progress of the Black population, forces them to burn the scrolls, reestablishing the endangered racial hierarchy. Finally, in "The Chronicle of the Black Crime Cure," a gang finds stones in a cave that make the Black person who eats them unwilling to commit any crime and instead to put their efforts toward moral and economic uplift. This cure meant that those Black people who had committed crimes (a percentage statistically equivalent to the percentage of criminals among whites) were the only people significantly affected by the cure. The stones only worked on Black people and resulted in one of the proclaimed reasons for racism, Black criminality, to be eliminated and no longer part of white supremacist discourse. The result of this

change was not that those who had previously barred Black people from advantage because of their supposed criminality suddenly threw their doors open and welcomed their Black neighbors. Instead, the oppressive actions of the white majority remained the same; only the reasoning behind those actions changed. Instead of the proclaimed excuse for racial hierarchies being supposed Black criminality, those in power quickly switched to arguing for the intellectual superiority of white people.

Each of these three narratives illustrates a different aspect of racial realism. “The Space Traders” demonstrates that, while we claim to have made progress in our current iteration of liberal democracy, given the opportunity, it is easy to believe that the white majority would accept the trade offered. When push comes to shove, our progress is a mirage. In “The Slave Scrolls,” Bell demonstrates how any time there is a movement to heal the psychic damage done by the loss of history and identity to slavery, which tends to lead to a collective uplift of Black people, the white majority actively opposes that healing, erasing again that which was originally erased through slavery. “The Black Crime Cure” is the most pointed of the chronicles, showing that the excuses given for the condition of Black Americans are not the true foundation of the barriers built around them. Instead, they are a palatable veil draped over actions that would have been taken regardless of how appetizing they appeared.

Racial realism, as formulated by Bell, is suggestive of several ontological consequences, though here I will be focusing on only two. The first is an ontology of racism whereby racism, no matter its source (whether through the process of human interaction, social orchestration, or an agent of its own reproduction) is ontologically *real* (Haney-López, 1996) and permanent within this system. Though most discussions of race and the state are concerned with how race is created/perpetuated by that state (Du Bois, 1935; Ture & Hamilton, 1992; Woodson, 2006), Glenn Bracey (2015) argued that racial hierarchies are built into the structure of the state and that a Critical Race Theory of the State claims in its simplest form that (1) “Every aspect of the state is racialized, meaning it shapes and is shaped by racism,” and (2) “The state is white institutional space and, thus, inherently white racist. The state cannot be considered racially neutral” (p. 563).

The ontological claim that anti-Black racism is permanent presents a problem for educators in that, if they cannot end racism, what are they to do in their lessons, since actively promoting racism is absolutely not an option? These are primarily critical premises in that they critique a particular curriculum, and the applied nature of education makes the reliance on critique impractical. In other words, a teacher cannot walk into a classroom and not speak or, if they do speak, simply tell students what they are not to do. What is needed for a teacher in the field, for a teacher educator addressing issues of institutionalized racism in schools or for a policy maker writing education into law, is an affirmative way forward; the teacher needs words to say to her class.

An affirmative way forward can be found in the second ontological consequence of racial realism: that if racism is real and permanent, then race, in all of its constructed, material, and discursive aspects, is real as well. By this I do not mean to claim that race is a biological reality nor to endorse any conception of race that would underwrite eugenics. Instead, I acknowledge both that there is a socially constructed aspect of racism and that there is a protean phenomenon that we refer to as race that has real consequences for our experience. In other words, an adequate response to institutionalized racism cannot be simply to deny or omit the reality of race. The epistemological claim that I will focus on in this work and that follows from the second ontological consequence of racial realism is that, since race is real, it must have certain experiential knowledge² associated with it, a conclusion with many consequences for antiracist pedagogy.

CRT scholarship is not the only literature in which realist social ontologies are applied in antiracist ways to the analysis of institutionalized racism. The ontology of race and specifically of blackness has recently been theorized in Afro-Pessimist literature in the work of Jared Sexton (2016), Christina Sharpe (2016), Saidiya Hartman (2007, 2008), Bracey (2015), George Weddington (2018), and Michael Dumas (2016b). One of the distinguishing characteristics of Afro-Pessimism is the political ontology of blackness—that it is not “solely the result of the actions and agency of black people” (Bracey, 2015, p. 283). Instead, it is constituted through the shared history of slavery and the subsequent “ontological death” (Wilderson, 2010, as quoted in Sexton, 2016, p. 5) of former slaves and those who look like them, due to society’s structural anti-Black solidarity.

Why We Need Racial Realism

Much of antiracist curriculum in recent years has taken on the features of neoliberalism now embedded in the more general curriculum of American schools (Giroux, 2013). Neoliberalism is generally considered to be a theory of individualism, meritocracy, and a culture of measurable accountability that supports both (Lipman, 2011). When applied to antiracist curriculum, the consequent content taught is characterized by the inclusion of heroes, holidays, and half-truths. In February students read Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” Speech and watch videos of the Civil Rights movement, and by March they move on to study the Suffragettes and Sally Ride. Even more concerning than this tokenism are the effects of the promotion of individualism and meritocracy on students. If a student living in poverty (as the majority of public school students now are; see Layton, 2015) is being taught in a school that employs a neoliberal curriculum, the lesson that they learn is that any failure or falling behind national averages is entirely their fault because they have not worked hard enough. Based on my experience in the classroom, there is little mention of the data showing that standardized tests are designed to be biased against students who are not members of the white middle class (Campbell et al., 1997; Jones, 2018; Steele & Aronson, 1991). The effect of these measures of accountability is that students either continue to perform poorly and so are often labelled deficient as individuals, or they work to conform to the status quo in an effort to improve their scores and are, thereby, likely to leave behind any identity that was considered “other.” The effect of this curriculum on students in poverty is no different from the effects on Black and Brown students and may, in fact, be more pronounced because the individual nature of neoliberal education aims to erase the collective racial identity that could empower those students. The culture of neoliberalism in education that focuses on the individual and individual achievement or lack thereof frames racism itself as an individual affliction (Kendi, 2017) created through certain social interactions, which, thus, can be treated or cured by simply changing those interactions much the way a chronic back problem can be treated or healed by changing one’s posture.

It is important to note here that there are exceptions to these claims. In hundreds of classrooms around the country, there are teachers who are quietly or loudly pushing back against the culture of measurable accountability and individualism and thousands of others who recognize the damage being done even if they don’t have the ability to affect change. However, these classrooms remain exceptions to a much larger rule that is gaining momentum under current national education policies of financial austerity and restrictive accountability through narrow forms of measurement.

The neoliberal conception of individualism and meritocracy contrast sharply with racial realism. In a racial realist framework, because race is ontologically real as described above, its effects cannot be removed but only ameliorated through an individual's hard work. Thus, the neoliberal goal of a meritocracy of individuals where each person puts in their maximum effort and then rises to their place in society based on that performance is misguided. The only measuring stick that a student's performance can be assessed against is already racialized, promoting the students who most closely fit a specific racialized ideal. Further, by centering not only assessment and promotion but also content and instruction around this goal, students who are most "other" in relation to that ideal are forced to remove more of themselves in order to approximate the ideal in the hope of receiving promotion. Racial realism is one framework that can be used to show the fallacy in this argument by forcing the acknowledgment of the racial identities of those students deemed "other" as real and related. In other words, race cannot be ignored and the heroes, holidays, and half-truths currently making up efforts at an inclusive curriculum are not sufficient to respond to this reality.

One significant consequence of the conclusion that race and racism are ontologically real and inherent in our system is that there is no future possibility that includes our system where racism is eliminated. Thus, when a teacher envisions their future lessons, they must include in their vision that reality of racism and its actions on their teaching. Every action of teaching includes an inherent reproduction of the oppression that it may be attempting to ameliorate (Kumashiro, 2002), and so the teacher who is taking that action must first acknowledge this truth and then begin taking steps to create and enact the best possible lesson despite those limitations.

A second set of voices that informed my listening and learning was the pedagogic work of the Black Power Movement (BPM) which, while problematic in a number of ways, began to address questions of equity in our system. The BPM did not have the opportunity to implement many of the educational ideas set forth by its leaders due to government and antiBlack interference (as well as problems within the movement), but they did write down many of their pedagogic ideas. These ideas provide a jumping off point for conversations about how to teach against racism while honoring the second ontological consequence, the ontological reality of race, in a way that acknowledges the implications of racial realism.

Black Power Pedagogy: The Texts

The BPM evolved in the United States to include a complex theoretical understanding and a pedagogy that it attempted to implement in its own educational programs (Austin 2006; Burke & Jeffries, 2016; Pearson, 1994). This theoretical pedagogy provides some ideas for addressing the problematics set forth by racial realism in a proactive way. It is also important to note that there were elements of the BPM that were problematic. In promoting misogyny, homophobia, and discrimination against other non-majoritarian groups. I acknowledge the critiques of the work of the BPM regarding the politics of gender, sexual orientation, bigotry against other peoples of color, and elements of drug culture and participation in narco-capitalism. I believe, however, that the work done to develop a pedagogy of positive empowerment among the Black community should not be ignored despite these failings.

The three primary texts that I will be using as the basis for Black Power Pedagogy were selected specifically because they represent varying times and perspectives within the BPM. Kwame Ture's and Charles Hamilton's (1992) book was written just before Ture (then known as

Stokely Carmichael) left the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee or SNCC and describes firsthand the SNCC political activities in the south in the 1960s. Ture would go on to be an important intellectual leader in the BPM (Pearson, 1994).

The second book, *Seize the Time*, was written by Bobby Seale (1991), the chairman of the Black Panther Party. The book was transcribed from tapes and notes made by Seale while “a political prisoner in the San Francisco County Jail in 1969 and 1970. ... *Seize the Time* was published while [he] was incarcerated and a defendant in two major political trials” (Introduction). The book was written as a manifesto, as a recruiting tool for new members, and as a fund-raiser to cover mounting legal fees. As such, I am not taking the text as a declaration of the philosophical ideal of Black Panther education.

The third and final book that I use is *Assata: An Autobiography*, written by Assata Shakur and published in 1987 during her exile in Cuba. In her forward to the book, Angela Davis asserts that

[Assata] speaks to all of us, and especially those of us who are sequestered in the growing global network of prisons and jails. At a time when optimism has receded from our political vocabulary, she offers invaluable gifts—inspiration and hope. (p. x)

When taken together, these texts offer a coherent philosophy of race and accompanying pedagogy of resistance.

In each of these texts there are two main categories of description that recur and speak to the affirmative Black Power Pedagogy. The first are descriptions of white education either endured by or observed by the authors, which help to frame the problems with education as understood by the movement and against which their pedagogy was framed. The second are descriptions of the values and practices of a Black resistance pedagogy.

White Education

Within the writings of Black Power Leaders, we find many ideas that resonate with the first ontological consequence of racial realism, that of the permanence of racism inherent in the system, though these suggestions are by no means as well constructed as they would later become in CRT. Ture, for example, described racism as real (p. 83) and invisible within the structure of American society when he explained “no one accepts the blame. And there is no ‘white power structure’ doing it to them” (Ture & Hamilton, 1992, p. 23). Seale (1991) went further, describing how the racism was so powerful within the system that Black intellectual activists were “hav[ing] their minds so f***ed up in the system and in pawn to the system that they couldn’t believe [that racism was systemic]” (p. 33). Shakur (2014) described the systemic invisibility of racism in her own educational experience. The goals of her education were pride and dignity and that those were to be attained by being “just as good as white people” (p. 20). The work of Ture, Seale, and Shakur all accept racism not as a contingent construction, but as systematically real and, to one degree or another, invisible.

Shakur’s (2014) quotation above points to one of the educational repercussions of permanent racism, i.e., students’ need to remove parts of themselves in a reproduction of the white middle class ideal. To be successful, a Black child must aspire to assimilate. Ture cites Kenneth Clark’s book, *Dark Ghetto*, which explains how children look to their own experiences for clues

to their identity and self-worth. His conclusion is that, through assimilative education, “[Black children] have come to believe in their own inferiority” (Ture & Hamilton, 1992, p. 29). Seale (1991) identifies the same idea as underlying Huey Newton’s effort to teach Black school children before and after school about the true history of Black Americans so that they can develop and maintain a distinctive sense of self as Black and so resist and counter the narrative being presented by the teacher (p. 105).

These three texts display a complex understanding of racism and its permanent place in the structure of mainstream education. They describe the consequences of such an education system for Black children, not in terms of improving outcomes or empowering students, but in terms of assimilation of those children into white society as inferior.

Black Resistance

Describing education as part of a system in which racism is inherent and permanent is important in the same way the first step in treating a chronic condition is to find and describe it. The second step is to begin applying treatments, assessing those treatments, and continuing to improve the ministrations. The treatment in this case is based in the ontological reality of race, which must be acknowledged in a resistant pedagogy. The Black Power texts offer ideas for a curriculum that acknowledges such an ontological reality.

Seale (1991) was the most direct when he stated that he wants Black children to be taught their *true* history and place in present day society (p. 61). He leaves this idea of a true history unexplored, but Ture offers some clarity. He proposes actively “reclaiming” Black history and identity and not simply demanding it of the education system. “When we begin to define our own image, the stereotypes—that is, lies—that our oppressor has developed will begin in the white community and end there” (Ture & Hamilton, 1992, p. 37). And while Ture argues that stereotypes of blackness will begin and end in the white community, I would extend his claim to argue that there is the potential that those stereotypes will begin and end in certain segments of the white community as a Black Power Pedagogy is introduced in that community as well.

But how then does a teacher actively “reclaim” a “true” Black identity? Shakur (2014) offers an anecdote that gives a concrete example of a short set of lessons with the potential to reach that goal.

On the first day of the arts and crafts class i had nothing really prepared, so i asked everyone to draw themselves. When i looked at the drawings i felt faint. All the students were Black, yet the drawings depicted a lot of blond-haired, blue-eyed little white children. i was horrified. i went home and ransacked every magazine i could find with pictures of Black people. i came in early the next day and plastered the walls with pictures of Black people. We talked about what was beautiful. We talked about all kinds of beauty in the world and about all the different kinds of flowers in the world. And then we talked about the different kinds of beauty that people have and about the beauty of Black people. We talked about our lips and our noses. We made African masks out of clay and papier-mache, made African sculptures, painted pictures of Black people, of Black neighborhoods. (p. 188)

This is an example of reclaiming Black identity, of teaching Black children about their role in society as beautiful and valuable. One important aspect of this lesson that can be overlooked,

but that makes the lesson one that addresses the ontological reality of race, is that it is not merely additional content in African mask making. There is currently legislation in Oregon and other states requiring lessons be taught covering the history and welfare of Indigenous Tribes of the state. But a unit on African Masks or Indigenous Tribes can be effectively meaningless to students unless it includes the direct connection and affirmation of race itself, of the Black (or Indigenous) identity of the students, countering the racism that they experience within the education system. This is the key point. It is not enough to include unconnected content that checks a curricular box of diversity. The lessons must address, must “reclaim,” the history and identities of the students.

Problematizing My Work

The teaching work that I conducted on the UDHR was informed by my education up to that point and my experiences with those students in that classroom. Since then, however, I have attempted to listen to and learn from the theoretical work of racial realism and the BPM. As I have moved through my own education and have continued to read different perspectives on teaching, I have felt as if I have seen my past teaching experience as an old Da Vinci painting, with each new perspective or framework stripping away another layer of dust or dirt to reveal more and more of the painting. And while I know that I will never see it fully in its original state and that the addition of time is fading the colors even as I seek to reveal them, the process is still important in that the purpose of this process is not to eventually see the true original painting, but instead to be a service to future painting projects. As Ewa Ziarek (2001) explains, “It is the tear, or the separation of the self from its sedimented identity, that enables a redefinition of becoming and freedom from the liberation of identity to the continuous ‘surpassing’ of oneself” (p. 39).

The narrative of teaching the UDHR viewed race and racism as important yet able to be overcome through hard work both on my part and on the part of my students, implying that the main source of any failure was their fault or mine. The UDHR curriculum is not unique in the work of educators of Black and Brown students (Dumas, 2016a), and it expresses a belief in the system of meritocracy/neoliberalism.

In light of both the description of racial realism and the explanation of why it is a necessary framework for teachers, I also see the specifics of the lessons that I taught in a new way. The UDHR contains within it articles proclaiming the rights of all people to learn, freedom from arbitrary arrest, and freedom to assemble peacefully. The lessons provided in the curriculum framed these rights as international, external, alien issues, and the students learned them as such. Arbitrary arrest applied only to dissidents in Russia. Police attacking protesters was something that happened in China. Kids weren’t allowed to learn in Afghanistan. The externalization of these rights from these students reinforced for them and for me a framework wherein I could teach and they could work hard enough to overcome and eventually achieve the rights declared to be theirs. Through the lens of racial realism, however, I can see that I was reinforcing and reproducing the indiscernible nature of anti-Black racism in this society. Through this process of reflection, I am acutely aware of how I failed my students despite (and in some ways because of) my initial feelings of success.

This problematization of my teaching narrative is necessarily brief, but it does suggest several areas of improvement for myself as a teacher. The next step in my method informed by the Black Power Movement is to envision a lesson, or in this case set of lessons, that will address these areas of improvement while maintaining the understanding that, regardless of the quality of my

lessons, they will still have elements that reinforce oppressions and that there is no magic lesson that I can teach that will end oppression. My goal in this prospective phase is to build an affirmative pedagogy with the aim of ameliorating the effects of structural racism and, thereby, improving student outcomes (Mattison & Aber, 2007; Priest et al., 2014).

The Progressive Phase

The following narrative is my engagement with the progressive phase of *currere* and my understanding of racial realism and its consequences for teaching. It describes what a future might look like in which I had the chance to teach the UDHR curriculum again to a similar group of children. The student responses included are based on both my meditative imagination and interaction with my former students.

A Progression Narrative: The Imagined Speculative Future

I took the temporary position as a fifth-grade teacher to get myself back into the classroom in the hope that it would better connect me with the future educators that I was instructing as a professor. I had not taught an elementary school class for an extended period since I left Jane Smith Elementary to begin my PhD program, and while this position would be temporary because the teacher I was replacing was on maternity leave and I was on sabbatical, I hoped to immerse myself in the world of the classroom teacher as completely as possible.

To say that I was nervous about this job would not be entirely accurate. A better description would be that I was full of the strained excitement usually reserved for professional athletes' pregame warmups or that moment just before the last card is flipped in a particularly tense hand of Texas Hold 'Em. I was excited to meet these students who demographically resembled my former fifth graders, excited to test my own pedagogical practice in the crucible of a public-school classroom, and excited to make changes to a curriculum that I was already familiar with. This school was employing updated versions of the UDHR modules that had been in use at Jane Smith, giving me a chance to improve upon my previous practice and improve the understanding of my students. I had researched and read a great deal of the works about education in the BPM and the works of Derrick Bell and Critical Race Theory. My ontology of race had shifted since my first pass through these lessons, and the hope was that, with this new understanding of what was possible and impossible in this society, I would be able to give my students a better experience.

I began the first module with an historical account of the founding of the United Nations in the wake of World War II as a second try at the League of Nations, the brainchild of President Woodrow Wilson, who said that Birth of a Nation was "like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." At the time of the founding of the UN, only four African countries were politically independent, Egypt (at the time under a British military presence), Ethiopia (recently liberated from Italy by Britain), Liberia (which began as a settlement of the American Colonization Society who believed Black people could never integrate into American society and must instead return to Africa), and apartheid South Africa. With this in mind, we began our reading of the declaration. The rights as outlined in the language of the UDHR were accepted at face value by the students initially, and I didn't push them while they were working to decode and understand what was in front of them. But once they had a working understanding of the

document, we began to discuss the rights and where we understood them to come from. We talked first about the inequality of the application of those rights, how some peoples in some places were not only denied their stated rights, but also ignored when they stood up and demanded them.

When we had finished the legal realist portion of our discussion, I introduced the students to several short lessons about non-western religions including Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam as well as Indigenous philosophies by Vine Deloria Jr., Manulani Aluli Meyer, and Eve Tuck. We made lists of what we understood to be the basic assumptions of those belief systems, making sure to note that these were brief studies and promising ourselves to return and do more research in the near future. With our lists in hand, we returned to the UDHR and identified places where the U.N. text ignored the ideas and beliefs of peoples that were not historically associated with Western Europe or white America. This led to the broader question of who these rights, as well as other documents that guarantee rights, were written by and for, including the Magna Carta, the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights. Finally, I presented pacifism as a belief system and asked students to find the right that protected their choice not to engage in war. The students were unable to find such an article.

As we drew to the end of the module, I asked the students to create a character that they would write a story about. This character would be someone for whom the UDHR was not written, someone who was overlooked by the writers and ignored by those who finalized the declaration. This could be a Muslim girl from India, or a Buddhist boy from Tibet, or even a Black girl from Chicago. Then I wanted them to write a story about this person going through the module that we had just completed. What would they think about us studying the UDHR, and what points would they raise in the class discussions and small groups? What would they think as we pointed out the shortcomings of the document? Their story was to continue telling about how this person decided that they should be included as humans with rights and what they would do to begin changing the UDHR. I stressed that this activity was to be realistic fiction. No one was allowed to have their main character simply place a mind-control spell on the leaders of the world and make them rewrite the declaration. The students had to do some research on the people and places that they were talking about, picking names for their characters from lists of names used in the country they had chosen. They also had to research what kinds of careers their person might have after college that might affect the UDHR. I gave the students outlines to build their stories and flesh out their characters and time both in and out of class to finish their narratives. In the end, I was apprehensive about what I was going to receive. Here are four excerpts of narratives that capture the themes I saw most often.

Paul: *My story is about a boy named Chege from Kenya. ... He graduated with our class and went on to finish college in the U.S. Once he was done, he moved back to Kenya and became the secretary of education, making all education in the country free to everyone. Once education was free, all Kenyans learned about their rights and began demanding that the world treat them as equals.*

Shawna: *This is the story of Alicia from Honduras. ... She was the valedictorian of Harvard and when she graduated, she moved back to Honduras and started her own college, which was free. There she trained new lawyers in the UDHR and how to make sure that everyone was given their rights.*

Daisha: Irene is from Indonesia and has been in our class with us during this module. ... When she finished her schooling and went college, she went to the University of Indonesia, which was ranked 601 in the world, and she worked so hard that it became the number 1 ranked university for girls.

Jaheem: I wrote about Carl who is from Washington D.C. where my auntie is from. He wanted to know why we cared so much about other places in the world when his school is not good and there aren't any jobs. ... When he graduated from college, he became a businessman and hired everyone in his old neighborhood. He paid them well and everyone could afford to buy a house and a car and send their kids to good schools. Soon other people wanted to work for him, but he always made sure that the people from his neighborhood had jobs.

Employing Racial Realism

I find that this narrative, while an improvement over the lessons that I remember teaching, still falls short of being the ideal anti-racist curricular unit (which I know is impossible based on my understanding of racial realism). Upon subsequent review, it also still contains elements of heteronormativity, classism, and other ideologies that reinforce our unfair social structure. The stories that the students create are also necessarily confined by the capitalist structure of our economy that is part of the structure that contains inherent racism, as well as the “merit-based” education system that has the same flaws. The next step for me is to revise this speculative narrative to again attempt to address these issues with the eventual understanding that I will teach these lessons as flawed. Engaging in this process is crucial for (white) teachers because it forces us to grapple with the necessary inadequacy of every lesson and to acknowledge the ontological reality of racism in our own teaching and, through that acknowledgement, to avoid the despair that accompanies our inadequacy and instead allows us to implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph (Bell, 1992a).

Notes

1. Throughout this paper I will employ the capitalization choices employed and explained by Michael Dumas (2016b) in his article “Against the Dark: Antiracism in Education Policy and Discourse” (pp. 12–13).
2. Here the term “knowledge” is employed in the Deweyan construction of knowledge as experience (Dewey, 1938).

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