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Derrick Bell, CRT, and educational leadership 1995–present

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Critical Race Theory (CRT) has become a centered conceptual framework to understand American education and reform (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Solorzano and Yosso 2001; Decuir and Dixon 2004). Indeed, educational leadership scholars have not been far behind in recognizing the explicative and powerful role of CRT studies in their work (Lopez 2003; Parker and Villalpando 2007). As we acknowledge the role of CRT, we cannot do so without reflecting on the life and works of the quintessential Critical Legal Studies (CLS) scholar Derrick Bell (1930–2011). In this article, we use Bell’s collective works to analyze current trends and research in educational leadership. We bring his works into conversation not only with conceptions of instructional and distributed leadership, but with the palpability that CRT has on the current state of educational reform. More specifically, we use Bell’s theories of interest convergence and conversations around ‘racial remedies’ to understand two recent trends in educational leadership: discourses of social justice leadership and the move toward data-driven leadership behaviors. We ask questions like: what has been the impact of research discourses on social justice on the education of African American and Latino urban youth? And, how has the current social structures benefited from such discourses? We conclude with recommendations for educational leadership researchers and professors, and encourage them to consider race as an integral part of their works.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory; Derrick Bell; educational leadership; community-based leadership; neoliberalism

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This article is organized into three general areas. First, we highlight aspects of Derrick Bell’s scholarship. Educational leadership literature is unique in that critical theory is often not considered to be a major part of this body of work. In fact, it was not until the 2000’s that much of the critical race literature made headway into educational leadership studies. Derrick Bell’s collective works allow us to appreciate the second area on which our article will focus – current practices of school leadership and the impact on students. To foreground this discussion, we reflect on McLaren and Farahmandpur’s (2006) statement that characterizes the direction of educational leadership since the mid-1990s:

An emphasis on testing, resulting in a teaching-to-the-test mania, strict accountability schemes, prepackaged and scripted teaching for students of color, and a frenetic push towards more standardized testing (what Jonathan Kozol refers to as ‘desperation strategies that have come out of the acceptance of inequality’) has been abundantly present since the mid-1990s. (95)

This standardization of educational leadership behaviors suggests that there is essentially one way to lead schools that all leaders should exhibit for all students. CRT scholars have noted, however, that such colorblind approaches don’t work, despite the intensification of effort. Our discussion of these high-stakes, neoliberal (to borrow the term from earlier scholars) efforts give way to our third and final area in this article. How CRT can be useful and informative in forging a shared space between school and community. We then explore how these multiple overlapping, community-based spaces can have a positive impact on the lives of children.

**Historical overview of CRT**

According to Crenshaw (1995) CRT embraces a movement of left scholars – mostly scholars of color situated in law schools – whose works challenged
the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in America legal culture and more generally in American Society as a whole (xiii). CRT aims to understand how a regime of White supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America; it seeks to examine the relationship between that social structure and professed ideas such as the rule of law and ‘equal protection.’

CRT often allied with CLS, rejects the prevailing orthodoxy that scholarship could be or should be ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ Crenshaw et al. (1995). The CLS group, of whom the most prominent associates are Derrick Bell, Patricia Williams, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, are marked by their utilization of developments in postmodern and poststructural scholarship, especially the focus on liminal or ‘marginalized’ communities and the use of alternative methodology in the expression of theoretical work. Most notable is their use of ‘narratives’ and other literary techniques (Dunbar 2008).

**CRT**

CRT scholarship stands to contribute greatly to the field of educational leadership because it directly challenges the ubiquitous claims of the colorblind neutrality assumed in data-driven decision-making (Lopez 2003; Aleman 2009). By pushing discourses of CRT, issues of all racialized students (Black, Latino, and Native American among others) will become centered and the focus of leadership and teaching. Five tenets have emerged from the work of CRL and CRT scholars:

- Acknowledging that racism is an invisible norm and White culture and (privilege) is the standard by which other races are measured.
- Committing to understanding that racism is socially constructed and expanded and an inclusive worldview is required for true social justice.
- Acknowledging the unique perspective and voice of people of color as victims of oppression in racial matters and valuing their story telling as a legitimate way to convey knowledge.
- Engaging interdisciplinary dialogue and discourse to analyze race relationships¹ (Mcdowell and Jeris 2004).
- An understanding that racism is systemic, and that many current policies and laws are: (1) neither ahistorical nor apolitical; and (2) are situated to privilege Whites and marginalized minoritized groups.

CRT scholars believe that scholarship about race in America could never be distanced from or written with an attitude of objectivity. There is no scholarly perch outside the social dynamics of racial power from which to merely observe and analyze (Crenshaw 1995). The formal selection process,
collection, analyses and organization of what is called knowledge is inevitably political (Crenshaw 1995).

‘Critical race theory aims to reexamine the terms by which race and racism have been negotiated in an American consciousness, and to recover the radical tradition of race consciousness among African Americans and other people of color’ (Freeman 1995, xiv). This race consciousness tradition was abandoned when integration, assimilation, and the idea of colorblindness became the official norms of racial enlightenment.

In his elaboration of CRT, Bell reveals how civil rights legislation – and later corrective racial laws such as affirmative action and perhaps even education reform – was not passed completely in good faith. He noted that White people seemed to support racial justice only to the extent that there was a convergence between the interest of White people and racial justice. That is, there was something in it for them. For example, Bell suggested that the Supreme Court supported the Brown v the Board of Education because it served the United States Cold War agenda in support of human rights. Below, we further discuss interest convergence, as well as two other central themes of CRT: colorblindness and (counter)-storytelling. We then critique current trends in educational leadership, and while considering CRT, theorize about what school leaders can do to forge relationships with community-based spaces for racialized schoolchildren.

**Interest convergence**

During his desegregation work, Bell wrote an article published in the Harvard Law Review titled Brown v. Board of Education and the Interest Conversion Dilemma. In this work, Bell challenged the dominant narrative of the decision ‘that Brown was a watershed moment in US history making a collective, moral, political cultural shift in attitudes towards race and inequality’ (professorderrickbell.com/scholarship/). Instead, Professor Bell contended that the shift was a result of convergence of interest. He argued that Whites conceded (as a matter of law), the segregation battle over concern with how the US would be viewed on an international arena concerning human rights. The concession was motivated by self-interest and not simply grounded in disposing of social inequalities. In other words, ending segregation of schools was done as a result of preserving the image of the US as human rights advocates and not a deliberate act of ending segregation in US schools. Because the interest of civil rights movements coincided with the self-interest of White elites and preserving an international image the Brown ruling was made. For Bell, the ethos of these civil rights decisions is both disturbing and disingenuous. In his book Ethical Ambition (2002), Bell highlights the underlying tendencies that inhibit real progress in the advancement of relationships, racial and otherwise; in particular, he notes an absence
of truthfulness and a shortage of courage as two primary impediments. He states (2002):

Telling the truth can be hard and even painful work, but lying, keeping the truth secret, is far more painful. When we think lying isn’t hard and painful, it’s rarely because it’s become easy and pleasant; more likely it’s because we have put up a wall between ourselves and our awareness of our captivity. (119)

The captivity Bell speaks of is not just limited to the septic history of racism – past and present; he is also challenging our attachment to the status quo and the requisite implications of our dishonest discourses about change and the supposed motivation behind why it has or hasn’t come to fruition.

Yet such (honest or dishonest) discourses are deeply interconnected with colorblindness and interest convergence. Colorblind proponents find solace in believing that race no longer matters, that they act as individuals, and that they are personally not responsible for the suffering of people of color. But such dishonest discourses only serve to fossilize racialized systems of oppression. Likewise, for Whites not to acknowledge the widespread fact that they benefit more from legislation designed to help Blacks than Blacks themselves, would a concretization of inequity and a reification of the dishonest discourses about which Bell (2002) spoke. In the end, Bell argues convincingly that decisions involving race are only made when the interests of the White majority is benefited or, to some extent, when a decision does not adversely impact them. The will of the majority often tend to the maintenance of the status quo.

The most alarming example of interest convergence in current schooling practice is standardized high-stakes testing policy and requirements, and the ensuing business opportunities. Since the passing of NCLB and similar neoliberal legislation, it has become clear that Black and Latino students have not performed any better on high-stakes tests. Achievement gaps have actually been widening in recent years (Rowley and Wright 2011) with no predictable abatement. Joel Spring (2011) suggests, however, that the overwhelming amount of business contracts associated with textbooks and high-stakes curriculums, Supplemental Educational Services, and the teaching staff who have benefitted from NCLB related positions, have been the White status quo. Scholars have found wide-spread practices of educators pushing low-testing Black and Latino students from their classrooms into special education, or schools altogether (Heilig and Darling-Hammond 2008). Moreover, White students are actually doing better on high-stakes tests, while the White–Black test score widens. Yet, despite government claims that NCLB was ‘working for African American students’,2 Derrick Bell would likely identify the legislation as interest convergence. In other
words, even if small or moderate testing gains were experienced by Black and Latino students, it seems that White students and businessmen benefited so much more.

**Colorblindness**

Colorblindness is in many ways the most useful insight of CRT theorists because its truth allows for us to understand the other aspects of CRT, and in fact, the theory as a whole. Without colorblindness, how could one describe the *presence* of interest convergence or the *need* for storytelling? Proponents of colorblindness argue that race is no longer a factor in how privileges and marginalizations are situated or conferred. Failure or success is often laid at the feet of individuals, and the extent to which they were willing to work hard for what they have earned. However, Bell and others argue that race is so personal that it is inextricably linked to our being and therefore render neutrality and colorblindness unnatural and, perhaps un-achievable and even undesirable. The notion of objectivity can be likened to a false positive not unlike that resulting from a medical test. That is, the notion of ‘colorblindness’ without recognizing the potential for grave consequences when race/color are ignored can result in a false positive. A false positive with respect to race neutrality can be as deadly as a medical false positive not unlike that of ignoring the symptoms of cancer.

**Storytelling**

Storytelling is methodology and practice that allows marginalized peoples to articulate their own realities in dignified, wholesome, and culturally nuanced ways. It can powerfully resist colorblindness because it legitimizes epistemologies and evidences of a very racially oppressive context. It is often characterized as *counter*-storytelling or *counter*-narrative because it resists and often tells an opposing reality to the ‘official’ legal system or version of events. Such counternarratives have always been marginalized by official legal systems and ways of knowing. This approach also counters the traditional way of collecting, interpreting and presenting research, particularly for people of color. Laurence Parker (1998) promotes and legitimates the voices of people of color by using storytelling to integrate the experiential knowledge drawn from history of the other into critiques of the dominant social order; he states:

… the critical centering of race (together with race, gender, sexual orientation and other areas of difference) at the location where the research and discussions are held can serve as a major link between fully understanding the historical vestiges of discrimination and the present day manifestation of that discrimination. (Dunbar 2008, 93).
Storytelling has the potential to act as a persuasive and potentially transformative tool to challenge liberal racist ideology (Rollock and Gillborn 2011). The approach has been taken up by a number of prominent CRT theorists (Delgado and Stefanić 2001; Williams 1991) but Derrick Bell’s scholarship is undoubtedly the most well known and influential. Bell uses chronicles (metaphorical tales) as a powerful and compelling means of critically examining and revealing racial and legal injustices Rollock, and Gillborn (2011) (see Bell 1987, 1993, 1995a, 1995b). Storytelling is useful to educational leadership scholars because it allows for the voices of the marginalized parents and students to be heard. As Theoharis (2008) notes, school leaders who lead with social justice behaviors must value and celebrate such voices of traditionally marginalized groups. Consistent with his belief that ‘courage means putting at risk your own immediate self-interest for what you believe is right (Bell 2002, 43), professor Bell fought tirelessly and fearlessly to unpack social injustice across multiple venues. He and other legal scholars provided space to critically examine race as a fabricated social construct that privileged the White majority culture. His work encouraged others to challenge decisions that adversely impacted people of color and to do so with vigorous rigor.

**Derrick Bell and CRT**

Though our initial exposure to the scholarship of the late Derrick Bell varied, each of us were significantly impacted by his work ‘Faces at the Bottom of the Well’ (Bell 1993). This work was among the first we read concerned with those of us positioned at the social and economic bottom of society’s proverbial ladder. Bell introduced this work around justice and inequality in a book titled, *And We Are Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (1987) infusing a style of writing that chose an imaginative poetic and storytelling narrative style to illuminate his concern about truth, justice, and equality. This style of writing was suspect because it rejected the traditional notion /mandate for scholars to adopt a stance of neutrality when conducting and writing research – a major tenet of Western scholarship. Bell’s critique of America and its persistent, intentional and irrational discriminatory practice against people of color was the catalyst for countless legal scholars’ attention to address oppressive White privilege practices and scholarship that continue to permeate the social and economic fabric of American society. Bell’s critiques would support the position that White privilege makes up the quintessential fabric that comprises our society and its disposition, practice and propensity toward marginalization of students of color in school. In his early work, Professor Bell argued that the constitution was written to protect the rights of the forefathers of this country and their property rights. He further illuminated that Blacks and other minorities were excluded from rights and privileges enjoyed by Whites unless when doing so benefitted the broader White society.
Neoliberal educational leadership and CRT: a Bellian response

In the modern age, it is believed that the success of educational leaders is mostly measured by assessing student test-score data (Halverson et al. 2007; Leithwood 2001). These reforms are closely linked to market-driven reforms, and fall into what scholars refer to as neoliberalism, as Burch (2009) explains: ‘Under neoliberalism, we are expected to believe that the market can do everything better and that the government should be remade in the market’s image’ (2). Unfortunately, discourses about school leaders as anti-racist (McLaren and Dantley 1990), as social justice leaders (Theoharis 2007; Bogotch 2002), as mentors (Tillman 2005), as spiritual (Dantley 2005), as community leaders (Khalifa 2012), as community conduits (Siddle Walker 1993) and as multicultural leaders (Gardiner and Enomoto 2006) have been subsumed by policies that emphasize increasing test scores via instructional or transformational leadership. It is because of these hegemonic data-driven ways of knowing that highlights the importance of Bell’s work, through CRT and storytelling. Thus, perhaps more than any other reform, data-driven school leadership discourses require a critical examination and embracing of Bell’s collective works on CRT; in other words, it is precisely because these reforms claim to be unbiased and objective, that a Bell(ian) prospective is so paramount. To be clear, proponents of neoliberal reform claim that this is virtually the only way to accurately measure school success. What is left invisiblized, however, is that these historically-unique and culturally-specific ways of measuring success are, as Hursh (2008) observed, ‘rarely explicitly invoked as a rationale’ (35). In other words, the validity of high-stakes testing and other neoliberal reforms – despite their overwhelming and disproportionate impact on the students of color and poor students – are assumed to be objective, colorblind, in the best interest of all, and is thus rarely challenged.

Visibilizing the history of neoliberal reforms

As indicated above, educational leadership discourses around improvement of educational standards, data-driven practice, privatization, and market-driven providers have come to dominate current school leadership reform. As professors of educational leadership, we are often astounded at how many our students, many of whom are already practicing school leaders, have not offered serious critiques of high-stakes testing policy. Bell’s critique of colorblindness and Whiteness is poignant to this discussion because, as we later show, neoliberalism purports colorblindness and operates as Whiteness in its oppression of youth of color. Neoliberalism is so ubiquitous and hegemonic that the movement’s origins are often not examined or critiqued. Moreover, as Burch (2009) explains, ‘under neoliberalism, we are expected to believe that the market can do everything better and that the government should be remade in the market’s image’ (2).
Notwithstanding the current deep and lingering economic crisis in which we all now find ourselves, many educators and policymakers assume that an educational system based on a broader societal economic model is also appropriate for schools and will lead to a better educational product. Burch (2009) asserts, ‘The higher competition across suppliers, the higher the quality product and the lower the production costs...creates a creative market for competitive services, increases the quality of these services, and reduces costs for taxpayers’ (3). What is often unspoken, however – and again, herein lies the centrality of Bell and other CRT scholars – is the subjectivities and peculiarities of origins of the neoliberal reforms of education. Those origins are neither neutral nor objective. In point of fact, in unearthing these origins Patricia Burch (2009) explains assumptions embedded within marketization and privatization of schools, and other neoliberal frameworks:

Arguments for privatization also derive from public choice theory. Under public choice theory, government employees are motivated by self-interests as opposed to public service. They do things that will protect this self-interest; for example, by seeking funding increases for their particular department or unit. In the aggregate, the self-interested actions of government employees can build bureaucracy and make government unresponsive, claim the public choice theorists. Privatization is invoked as a means for reducing the control of bureaucracy over government services. (Burch 2009, 3)

Rarely have parents and other stakeholders been given this rationale when neoliberal school reforms have been implemented. And when one close interrogates many of the neoliberal assumptions in this quote, it is very reasonable to acknowledge that may of these assumptions will not apply to education, learning, and indeed, actual children. And moreover, these neoliberal assumptions now with decades of data are not supported by strong educational data. Rather, for the past several decades, school leaders often simply embraced the discourses around test scores, comparative rankings, and what these scores have meant for them, their schooling, even their future life and educational opportunities.

Educational leadership technologies and behaviors have been conceptualized primarily in terms of instructional and transformational leadership. Instructional leadership focuses on ‘the active collaboration of principal and teachers on curriculum, instruction, and assessment’ (Marks and Printy 2003, 371). And transformational leadership emphasizes a shared school/organizational vision and empowering teachers toward collective educational goals (Leithwood 1992). In theory and research, these leadership practices have showed tremendous benefit and promise. What we find troubling is that these leadership practices are mostly colorblind, and are measured almost exclusively within the discourse of high-stakes tests. That is, if someone were an exceptional transformational leader yet their students’ test
scores are low, their effectiveness as a school leader would be greatly questioned. What is perhaps even more frightening is that the importance of test scores seem to trump other indelible challenges that children often face in their school and home contexts (even as it relates to schooling). In other words, schools are not measured on how clean or safe the neighborhoods are, what impact they have in their local communities, how well students do after they actually leave the school, and how involved their parents are in their children’s education. Only recently in fact have schools begun to pay attention to academic improvement over the course of a single academic year (value-added measures). The most troubling recent example is the comparatively little attention given to discursive cultures around school culture and discipline. Dunbar (1999, 2001) and other scholars (see, for example, Ferguson 2000; (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera 2010; Varvus and Cole 2002) have reported that there are deep and discriminatory differences in how school suspensions and discipline policy are implemented. Students of color are far more likely to be sent to the office, and sent home after they arrive.

In all honesty we CRT scholars are not altogether surprised that these startling statistics exist. In fact, we have known that they have for some time. Giroux and Giroux 2008, for example, note that ‘in addition to draining schools financially, both high-stakes testing and zero tolerance policies have served to push out or kick out Black and Latino youth in disproportionate numbers’ (186). What continues to perplex us, however, is that discourses of educational reform have not addressed these types of issues (i.e., community impact, school-community relationships, and disparities in school suspensions). And to be clear, by ‘addressed,’ we mean have started a dialogue and systematically attached incentives or sanctions to these issues. We find it curious that schools are sanctioned or rewarded not based on a child’s comfort in school, or the community’s relationship with school, but rather on standardized test scores. We believe that this is problematic: such community-based approaches, we argue, should be centered and ubiquitously within the purview of school reform.

The lure of neoliberalism is so strong, in part, because it is based on imagined meritocratic American ideals of individuals working hard to get ahead, or not (i.e., those who are lazy or undervalue education). Reflecting on Foucault’s collective works, Davies and Bansel (2007) capture this great American sentiment well:

As Foucault observed, heightened individualism (which marks neoliberal systems) is registered in terms of individual freedoms, of autonomy and choice. Within this discursive framing the individualized subject of choice finds it difficult to imagine those choices as being shaped by anything other than his/her own naturalized desire or his/her own rational calculations. (251)

With such inculpating constructions, it is easy, if not logical, to attribute educational failures to the citizenry themselves rather than the system.
Moreover, enduring racialized structural barriers are invisiblized. Yet, this is precisely why the work of Derrick Bell and other CRT scholars is so relevant; we point to a couple of important realizations in the forthcoming sections. First, schools, knowledge, policy, and reforms are neither objective nor neutral. Derrick Bell (1995a) has explained:

The problem is that not all positioned perspectives are equally valued, equally heard, or equally included. From the perspective of critical race theory, some positions have historically been oppressed, distorted, ignored, silenced, destroyed, appropriated, commodified, and marginalized—and all of this, not accidentally. Conversely, the law simultaneously and systematically privileges subjects who are White. (901)

Bell is not only recognizing that there are multiple histories and subjectivities that are present in America, but is also characterizing the role of power in these histories and subjectivities; he recognizes that White supremacies and Black marginalizations continue to perdure. And the second realization moves from the theoretical to the practical as we look at ways in which a post-racial, objective, and neutral discourse have been devastating to marginalized communities of color, and have served to fossilize injustices and relationships of power and marginalization.

**CRT and deconstructing neoliberalism as ‘objective’**

As scholars of both CRT and educational leadership, we actually recognize that there have been some benefits to educational reform efforts, even those that would fall under neoliberalism. For example, neoliberal reforms have often been conjoined with discourses of accountability. For years, the most inexperienced and underpaid teachers were most likely to teach in predominantly Black and Latino schools. And in part because of cultural incongruencies between students and teachers (Ladson-Billings 1994; Irvine 1990), massive school failure seemed ubiquitous in these communities. Research suggests that when teachers are held accountable for teaching curriculum-based content, student learning can be greatly enhanced. Standardized tests also allow educators to track changes in student progress and learning over the course of a specific period of time.

It is problematic, however, that the testing data is narrowly defined, that it often serves as the only measure, and that it is used as a tool to further penalize schools and communities that have already been historically marginalized. We therefore use Derrick Bell’s collective works to challenge assumption that neoliberal reforms and high-stakes test are neutral, ahistorical, and unbiased against groups of people. He spoke directly to such claims of objectivity:

Decontextualization, in our view, too often masks unregulated—even unrecognized—power. We insist, for example, that abstraction, put forth as
‘rational’ or ‘objective’ truth, smuggles the privileged choice of the privileged to depersonify their claims and then pass them off as the universal authority and the universal good. (Bell 1995, 901)

For Bell, universalizing the particular is hegemonic and oppressive toward racially marginalized groups. Thus one of the main tenets of CRT is to show how knowledge, technologies, and in our case, educational leadership behaviors and reforms, are specifically linked to a very specific world-view. For us, we recognize that to measure educational leadership in the manner done in the US is culturally-specific and from a White, Western European, male, upper-class perspective (Merriam 2007). For example, the principal as a primary leader in the school, as one who makes decisions without the community’s perspectives, as one who was not chosen by the people that he leads, and one who does not speak local languages, as one who may not be spiritual, or even as one who emphasizes hierarchical leadership is all an indication of the very Whitened, Westernized approach to school leadership. Yet, other leadership perspectives that are more suitable for African American (Douglas 2012b; Gooden 2005; Siddle Walker 1993; Khalifa 2012) or Latino (Lopez 2003; Aleman 2009) students are often confounded or delegitimized.

**Historicizing White privilege and objectivity**

When unraveling such a pervasive and widely-accepted American belief as a meritocracy, it is helpful to historically contextualize the two-tiered educational system in this country. In a historical reality, some children were never thought of as students at all. And when schooling did eventually become compulsory for all, reforms were explicit about the expectations they had for some:

A new system of secondary studies had been installed, in which a small minority of college-bound students were expected to pursue intellectually serious work while everyone else was taking courses explicitly designed for these less willing, or less interested. (Powell, Farrar, and Cohen 1985, 245)

Needless to say, former African slaves were not thought of as college-bound. The landmark US Supreme Court case *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954) was an attempt for this country to right this historical wrong, but even until today, deep racialized disparities in nearly every aspect of schooling still exist.

These realizations bring to bear two reflections to our minds: one, that African Americans (and other racial minorities) were *always* expected to perform poorly (and these expectations have a direct relationship with their achievement; see Ream 2003), and two, educational leadership practice has served primarily to reproduce these conditions rather than challenge them.
These oppressive reproductions occur, we argue, because educational reforms (including leadership reforms) have been historically beneficial for the upper-tier of students. And it has been assumed that educational leadership reforms will work for Black and Brown students, and they have not. Even when considering factors such as income, geography, and parental educational background, and even in elite college towns such as Ann Arbor, MI, Austin, TX, or Boston, MA, Black students still perform worse and are suspended far more than their White classmates; this all resonates with Bell’s (1976) earlier reflection:

In essence the arguments are that blacks must gain access to White schools because ‘equal educational opportunity’ means integrated schools, and because only school integration will make certain that black children will receive the same education as White children. This theory of school desegregation, however, fails to encompass the complexity of achieving equal educational opportunity for children to whom it so long has been denied. (478)

Even with desegregation and ostensibly equitable annual per-student expenditures, racial disparities remain. In response, school leaders, university preparation programs, and to a large extent, even the scholarly literature, all obstinately endorse an intensification of the same leadership practices that have yielded little-to-no results in closing these racialized educational gaps (Khalifa et al. 2013).

**Coloring neoliberalism: devastating impacts on students of color**

Critical race theorists have responded to current educational leadership reforms by illustrating the discursive post-racial positioning imbued throughout the literature and preparation programs. In this section, we first theorize about the role of such colorblind educational leadership approaches in reproducing oppressive contexts. Then, we reflect on the deep relationship between race and space, and the impact this has on students of color. And finally, we describe the devastating impact this type of leadership has on communities of color.

**Educational leaders as reproducers of contexts**

In a conversation that one of the authors recently had with a dean of a college of education, he remarked: ‘I am not going to make any major changes anytime in the future. I am going to do everything the same way that my predecessor did it before me.’ Educational leaders often reproduce all social systems and relationships in the contexts they serve, including oppressive arrangements. CRT scholars argue that if school leaders find systemic racial bigotry, then they must challenge it or they will – intentionally or not – reproduce it (Bell 1995b; Lipsitz 1998; Khalifa 2011; Briscoe and Khalifa 2001).
As Ladson-Billings (1998) argued, based on tenets of CRT, racism is normal and normalized in the US educational system; we educational leadership scholars suggest that our field is no exception. When educational leaders deflect issues of race, focus exclusively on neoliberal, data-driven reforms, and then reproduce racialized disparities in school, they are in fact perpetrating racism. We agree with Lipman (2003) in that ‘teachers, like the public in general, learn to acquiesce to a set of policies that deny agency to students and teachers alike’ (337). Based on national and local data published by the US Department of Education and the Office of Civil Rights, educators are indeed acquiescing to power that is detrimental to students of color. This is precisely why scholars such as Gooden (2012), Aleman (2009) and Lopez (2003) have been pushing for the centrality of race in discussions of school leadership studies. Lopez (2003) states, ‘as scholars who prepare future educational leaders, we cannot continue to marginalize and/or trivialize issues of race and racism within the larger discourse of educational leadership and policy’ (86). Hence for Lopez, educational leadership literature had woefully neglected critical perspectives around conversations of race.

As we scanned educational leadership journals, we were not able to locate educational leadership articles that relied on CRT earlier than the early 2000s. This is unfortunate given the dire learning environment that students of color often face. One could ask: how could educational leaders not discuss race given the current challenges and racial disparities in schooling? It is important to note that neoliberal policies, and colorblind positionalities, have deep implications not only for students of color, but also spaces they occupy, as Lipman (2003) indicates:

I argue that these policies further differentiate educational experiences by race, ethnicity, and social class and that the constellation of policies serves to regulate and control African American and Latino youth, in particular, and sort and discipline them for differentiated roles in the economy and the city. (Lipman 2003, 331–332)

CRT offers powerful ways of understanding of America’s racialized past exploits of communities of color. Even including a justification for slavery itself, economic advancement and property rights are recognized as primary discourses that served to subjugate Black, Latino and Native American bodies. And in the aftermath of slavery and Jim Crow, government-sponsored policies perpetuated regimes of racism and marginalization, and continue to do so. This is why Bell and CRT scholars stand so diametrically opposed to now assuming colorblind epistemologies with exclusive attention to high-stakes tests and other decontextualized technologies of reform. For even now, communities of color are still disproportionately penalized in high-stakes testing regimes, which are to purportedly improve the economic forecast of the country and those communities.
Yet, Burch (2009) explains how space and opportunity are so interconnected to schooling: ‘Schooling inequities derive in large part from residential segregation by race and class. Families with the financial resources exercise choice options by buying real estate in communities with good schools’ (125). This indicates to us that schooling is much more than a test; it is a racialized, politicized, historical, and local experience. And in this quote, Patricia Burch is drawing a strong connection between space and opportunity. Indeed, redlining, racial covenants, gerrymandering, and other policy-based maneuvers have crippled economic and educational opportunities in Black communities throughout the US. Notably, in Bell’s (1976) lengthy analysis of the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision, he noted the deep resource depravation and ineffective solutions in the years to follow. In addition to describing the normality of racism, Bell and other CRT scholars highlight that space – through property rights, citizenship and economic opportunity – are ways that people of color are continually marginalized.

Cyclical failures and typical responses
We theorize about the cyclical nature of these reforms because the narrative almost always resembles the following: poor Black and Brown students attain low standardized test scores, and so neoliberal practices at their schools are intensified, and then since their curriculum has become even more scripted, the students are not able to receive the culturally-specific pedagogy and leadership needed, so their scores worsen on the high-stakes tests, and the cycle continues. Ladson-Billings’ (1994) captures this very occurrence: ‘These are also the schools most subject to a narrow, test-driven curriculum at a time when the students urgently need an education that helps them struggle against oppression and critique the new social inequalities enveloping their lives’ (339). Certainly, there are very real questions about how these high-stakes tests have improved the lives of children. We are not aware of any benefits for the children, their families, the communities in which they live, or for their future educational engagements. Rather, other adverse effects have resulted from such test scores, as Lipman (2003) explains:

Over a hundred elementary schools (kindergarten through eighth grade) and high schools (ninth through twelfth grade) in African American, Latino, and immigrant communities have been placed on ‘probation’ because of low test scores. Probation schools are subject to strict central administration oversight of all aspects of administration, budgeting, and curriculum and instruction. (332)

The neoliberal response has not changed, but the condition of African American and Latino students has not changed much either. In fact, in recent years gaps have widened. In 2012, the US Department of Education
and the Office of Civil Rights released a study – based on 85% of the students in the US, representing 72,000 schools – that highlighted deeply oppressive trends in school discipline data. Among the study’s many findings were that African American students were many times more likely to be suspended than their White peers. This holds true for the ill-defined categories such as disrespect, or teachers’ favorite, insubordination, as well as offenses such as fighting, truancy, or dress code violations. Moreover, though Black students only made up 18% of student populations, they represented between 35–46% of school suspensions depending on the frequency of suspensions (US Office of Civil Rights). Despite teachers’ racially biased role in these racially oppressive suspensions, this is ultimately a school climate, and thus a school leadership issue.

With the increasing prominence of CRT, the shortcomings of current educational leadership practices and research, a pressing economy, and the per-during failures of students of color, some scholars are pushing hard in new directions. We explore the deep connections that school leadership has with multiple spaces of Black and Latino students. We posit that space is often coterminous with educational opportunity and acknowledge that schools must interface and value community spaces in order for a more just and whole education for children. In the coming section, we center CRT and suggest ways that marginalized bodies might actually thrive in inclusionary indigenous spaces.

Seeing color, valuing space: (re)contextualizing urban school leadership discourses

CRT challenges scholars and practitioners to beware of the numbing capacity of terms like multicultural leadership and social justice leadership, which have become hallmarks of educational leadership discourses and urban education reform even as neoliberal ideals have become more prominent. Language and labels are indissoluble aspects of any reform effort, neoliberal or otherwise. In fact, how individuals, ideologies, and institutions are described have significant ramifications for educational reform, and the discourses and distributions of power that greatly determine how and why issues are addressed, and by whom. Ironically, language and labels also have a way of cloaking these tensions, while simultaneously shrouding the waning criticality of terms, ideologies, and theorizations that were once used to disrupt hegemonic manifestations. Bell (2002) speaks to these tensions between our language, our motivations, and our actions:

I cannot emphasize enough what I see as the potentially dangerous and destructive consequences of words and actions intended to do good. Medicine has long had the term ‘iatrogenic’ to describe conditions accidentally caused by the doctor, whether through treatment, diagnosis, or even manner. We
might say that, as with the healing arts, so with the practice of those of us who seek to heal the bodies politic, social and economic. It is the most frequently ignored pitfall of those motivated by good intentions, particularly those involved in social change and progressive politics. (160–161)

Breaches between language and lived experience exemplify the ‘abstraction’ Professor Bell saw as the ‘decontextualization...[that] too often masks unregulated – even unrecognized – power’ (Bell 1995b, 901). In this sense, language and labels can exemplify and reflect ‘standards and institutions created by and fortifying White power,’ which must be ‘resisted’ (Bell 1995b, 901) and (re)contextualized. Much like laws and reforms are not written from a neutral perspective, language is neither neutral nor benign. Bell’s (2002) work reminds that we must be sufficiently courageous and honest to acknowledge these biases if we seek to engage in authentic and ethical reform efforts.

Language and labels often become tools for the systematic and systemic perpetuation of racism. Drawing on the work of Marable (1983), Bell declares (1985), ‘all of our institutions of education and information – political and civic, religious and creative – either knowingly or unknowingly provide the public rationale to justify, explain, legitimize or tolerate racism’ (399). Thus, scholars who adhere to the CRT tradition must challenge educational leaders to wrestle with the realities of race and racism and the inequities that are rampant, reified, and recursive in schools. Bell (2002) asserts and we concur:

Without a willingness to continually critique our own policies, question our own motivations, and admit our own mistakes, it is virtually impossible to maintain programs and practices that are truly ethically related to the real needs of those we wish to serve. (161)

Notably, within the context of urban education, little has changed since Kantor and Brenzel (1992) made this disturbing observation:

After two and a half decades of federal, state and local efforts to improve urban education for low-income and minority children, achievement in inner-city schools continues to lag behind national norms and dropout rates in inner-city high schools (especially among African-American and Hispanic youth) remain distressingly high, while many of those who do graduate are often so poorly prepared they cannot compete successfully in the labor market. (279)

In this light, the work of Professor Bell demands that we acknowledge and address the reality that Black and Brown children are most vulnerable to hegemonic, Eurocentric norms and paradigms (Howard 2010); Black and Brown children are most often on the short end of social justice (Cooper and Gause 2007); and Black and Brown children are the subject (and
victims) of most urban education discourses and reforms (Giroux and Giroux 2008).

CRT is characterized, in part, by attentiveness to the dangers of colorblind stances and similar ideologies that have led many educational leaders to do great damage to students with seemingly good intentions (Bell 2002). Specifically, CRT discourses have rightly problematized the privileged ‘I don’t see color’ stance of some school leaders, since not seeing color is to miss key aspects of identity (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Crenshaw 1997), which lead to normative presumptions and oppressive readings of the Other. Still, the work of Professor Bell reminds us that CRT is not a static construction, but is, instead, a transgressive and transformative mechanism for resisting and rupturing standards and institutions created or used for ‘fortifying White power’ (Bell 1995, 901).

One of the fundamental tenets of CRT is the acknowledgement of the historical and contemporary linkages between racism and US property rights (e.g. the Constitutional and exclusive rights of wealthy, White males to own property – in the form of land and the bodies of African American slaves). While CRT scholars have contended that vestiges of this oppressive arrangement are evident today (e.g. Black students being treated as property in schools), CRT can also be employed and extended to consider how the property and community spaces of Black people are ignored and rendered invisible. In essence, attempting to or claiming to not see color can also be applied to space – in this context, urban or minority space. Many school leaders do not see urban communities, in part because they drive into them from their homes in the suburbs without ever engaging in or with the community. Ideologically, culturally, and educationally, these spaces are invisible to many school leaders. Bell’s (2002) work is informative in this regard. He notes: ‘Humility gives us space to see that we do not have all the answers, even in our so-called areas of expertise; it lets us listen and respond to what is actually happening, being said, being felt’ (165). Sadly, too few school leaders have the time, interest, or humility to visit and appreciate the cultural capital of urban communities, and even fewer see potential solutions that can emerge from urban communities. This is why CRT’s focus on the dangers of colorblind ideologies and the significance of racism within the context of US property (space) rights are vital to discourses on urban education and leadership. In essence, Bell helps us understand that colorblind leaders have no need (and likely lack the ability) to see the value in community spaces that define and are defined by minoritized students.

A large part of the problem within educational leadership discourses has been the obfuscation of languages that could actually better serve children of color. Notably, within academic discourse there seems to be a blurring between terms like multicultural leadership and social justice leadership. Bell’s contribution to educational leadership in this regard, is in his ability to poignantly argue that discourses around race must not be diluted to the
extent that they become ineffectual. Rather, they should be constantly centered and dynamically addressed. Though it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between these terms, scholars who have articulated key components of multicultural leadership (for example, Gardiner and Enomoto 2006) and those who have helped characterize key aspects of social justice leadership (see, for example, Theoharis 2007) consistently acknowledge the centrality of community engagement. For example, Theoharis (2007) rightly asserts that one characteristic of a social justice leader is that she or he ‘becomes intertwined with the life, community, and soul of the school’ (252, emphasis added). Similarly, Gardiner and Enomoto (2006) declare that a task of a multicultural leader is ‘building connections between school and communities’ (575), while the third cog in Riehl’s (2000) vision for multicultural leadership is ‘fostering strong relationships between schools and the community’ (3). Clearly, there is a community emphasis that runs through social justice leadership and multicultural leadership discourses. Still, there has to be investment in the urban and community-based spaces surrounding the schoolhouse (Douglas and Peck 2013) if we are to apply CRT in a manner that is congruent with the ethos of Professor Bell’s work. Bell (1995b) asserts, ‘Critical race theorists strive for a specific, more egalitarian, state of affairs. We seek to empower and include traditionally excluded views and see all-inclusiveness as the ideal because of our belief in collective wisdom’ (901). For this to occur, there must be a rupturing of constructs that not only marginalized Black and Brown bodies but also those that ignore Black and Brown space. Ideologically and culturally, the schoolhouse is reflective of White, middle-class standards (Howard 2010). As a result, K-12 students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds often feel like ‘strangers in a strange land’ (Bell 1970, 540) as they seek to navigate the schoolhouse norms that are often different from the cultural norms of their home environments and communities (Baldridge, Hill, and Davis 2011; Douglas and Peck 2013). Still, the value of collective wisdom and community-based pedagogical spaces (Douglas 2012a) is not a novel concept for people of color – a people who have consistently drawn on extended kin constructs and community-orientated learning environments to buttress the miseducation of and alienation from mainstream schools (Douglas and Peck 2013; Williams 2005). Clearly, there is much wisdom that school leaders can draw from educative spaces outside the schoolhouse where traditionally marginalized groups have consistently created educative networks in non-school based contexts (Douglas and Peck 2013; Williams 2005). This reality is consistent with Kantor and Brenzel (1992), who opine:

Restructuring efforts and reform within urban schools must come from within schools themselves and the communities they serve so that principals, teachers, and parents can envision fresh approaches to teaching and learning that build on the contextual knowledge and experiences in communities. (297)
Heeding Bell’s (1995) counsel to ‘include traditionally excluded views’ not only means hearing the voices of leaders in community-based spaces, but *seeing* these community-based spaces, perhaps for the first time, as existent, relevant, and resources for potential solutions. Specifically, colorblind ideologies have not just blinded school leaders to the identities of individuals but this problematic approach has also blinded school leaders to the relevance of ideologies and community-based spaces like Black barbershops and Black churches (Douglas 2012a, 2012b; Douglas and Peck 2013; Harris-Lacewell and Mills 2004; Mills 2006) which must be considered in reform efforts. As noted previously in this article, discourses of educational reform have not addressed issues such as community impact and school-community relationships in a manner that systematically attaches incentives or sanctions to what it means to be a successful school leader. This reality, which has been impacted by neoliberalism, must change. Much like CRT has been the impetus for asking different questions about the significance of race and racism in past policy decisions, we believe that interest convergence ideals can be leverage to help shift the educational marketplace so that the relationships between schools and community spaces are not only encouraged but these relationships can also lead to tangible investment in the community-based educative settings that serve school constituents.

Additionally, school leaders, in preparation programs and those in practice, must spend time in the community-based settings that serve their students. School practitioners must explore how their leadership practices can be enhanced by observing and learning from the formal and informal pedagogical and leadership strategies employed in spaces outside of schools (Douglas 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Khalifa 2012). Educational leaders, along with their staff members, must be proactive in visiting, embracing and creating partnerships with the communities and non-school educative spaces that surround and impact their schools and students (Wilson, Ek, and Douglas 2013). We concur with Dantley (2005) who asserts that ‘what happens in the schoolhouse is inextricably linked to what is going on in the local and wider community’ (653). Thus, school leaders who avoid or are afraid of the urban community spaces that surround their schools will struggle to see and appreciate the cultural contexts that invariably affect their schools. It takes courage to see and address that which we would prefer to avoid. Bell (2002) puts it this way:

> Courage is our tool in vanquishing fear, but its not always an easy tool to use, truth be told, it’s rarely glamorous. It’s a daily decision to wake up and try to do the right thing, no matter how big the reward or how great the fear. (43)

Professor Bell lived this experience. His activism costs him something; real activism always does. Bell not only fought with his pen but also put his livelihood and career on the line through protests, resigning from positions,
public critiques, and boycotts to make others aware that racism continues to
be a part of the fabric that make up this country. His efforts have not been
in vain. CRT, despite the wealth of resistance to its tenets (from many liber-
als who suggests that CRT is divisive), continues to provide a vehicle or a
perch for young scholars to ‘grab a hold of’ in efforts to better understand
the ‘peculiar institution’ of White privilege. His work provides directions on
how to unpack decisions that on the surface appear to represent one thing
but in reality tell a different story. His legacy looms large in courtrooms and
law and university classrooms when questions about racially charged inci-
dents occur and there seems no rational answer that makes sense. CRT pro-
vides a lens to examine the unexamined, to provide some rationale for the
irrational and, for many, to make some sense of our lives. We hope this
CRT lenses and legacy come to imbue and define the very foundations of
educational leadership practice and research.

Notes
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