

CHAPTER 1

LIES MY TEACHER STILL TELLS

Developing a Critical Race Perspective Toward the Social Studies

Gloria Ladson-Billings

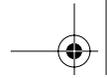
In his widely read book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, author Jim Loewen (1996) argues that high school students hate history. When they list their favorite subject, history always comes in last. They consider it the most irrelevant of twenty-one school subjects; “boring” is the adjective most often applied to history as a school subject. Loewen spent two years at the Smithsonian Institution surveying twelve leading high school textbooks of American History. What he found was an embarrassing amalgam of bland optimism, blind patriotism, and misinformation pure and simple, weighing in at an average of four-and-a-half pounds and 888 pages.

In response, he wrote *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, in part a telling critique of existing books but, more important, a wonderful retelling of American history as it should—and could—be taught to American students. But, despite Loewen’s brilliant critique of the high school history curriculum (and the social studies curriculum in general), we continue to tell our students lies about our history, our world views, and our culture. In this chapter I want to argue that one of the central concepts that we predicate many of our

Critical Race Theory Perspectives on the Social Studies, pages 1–11
Copyright © 2003 by Information Age Publishing
All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

1





2 G. LADSON-BILLINGS

social lies on is the concept of race. And, for the purpose of this discussion I want to suggest that race is an ever-present concept in the social studies—in the curriculum, the profession, and its policies and practices.

What is race? The question invariably creates a sense of discomfort. No one wants to talk about it since it represents such a contradiction of American life. We like to talk about having transcended race or at least having gotten past it. But, we still have a contradictory and intertwined stance toward it.

In its 1998 statement on race the American Anthropological Association asserted that:

In the United States both scholars and the general public have been conditioned to viewing human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences. With the vast expansion of scientific knowledge in this century, however, it has become clear that human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups. Evidence from the analysis of genetics (e.g., DNA) indicates that most physical variation, about 94%, lies within so-called racial groups. Conventional geographic “racial” groupings differ from one another only in about 6% of their genes. This means that there is greater variation within “racial” groups than between them. In neighboring populations there is much overlapping of genes and their phenotypic (physical) expressions. Throughout history whenever different groups have come into contact, they have interbred. The continued sharing of genetic materials has maintained all of humankind as a single species. (see: www.aaanet.org)

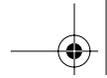
This assertion that science no longer recognizes the concept of race baffles us because we have organized so much of our society around the concept. Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison (1992) suggests that:

Race has become metaphorical—a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological “race” ever was.

Expensively kept, economically unsound, a spurious and useless political asset in election campaigns, racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment. It seems that it has a utility far beyond economy, beyond the sequestering of classes from one another, and has assumed a metaphorical life so completely embedded in daily discourse that it is perhaps more necessary and more on display than ever before. (p. 63)

So, if race does not exist from a scientific perspective, but is ever present from a social perspective, what do we teach our students about race? On one level we might argue that we teach them nothing about race. Most social studies and history textbooks avoid the term “race” altogether. Psychologists tell us that children develop awareness of skin color differences





as early as 3 years old. That awareness is not unlike the awareness that children develop as they select a red shirt over a yellow one. However, it is the meaning that others ascribe to these differences that begin to shape how children perceive themselves and others.

Olneck (1995) points out that “ethnic identities are not inheritances or preservations but are, rather, on going active constructions that emerge out of interactions among groups within social-political and symbolic contexts. The nature of those identities depends upon the interpretations parties make of their interactions” (pp. 318–319).

RACE AND THE CURRICULUM

One of the places that race still operates is in the social studies curriculum. If one were to attempt to construct the history of African Americans based on the information presented in a typical U.S. History textbook that history might consist of the following: Africans were first brought to the Americas in the early 1600s as slaves and indentured servants. Some fought for the British in the American Revolution because King George offered freedom from bondage to those who fought on the British side. One notable African American who died protesting Britain’s colonial rule was Crispus Attucks. In the 1800s African Americans were responsible for the economic prosperity of the nation—particularly that of the South. In the mid 1800s tensions between the North and South over slavery led to the Civil War. After the North won the war the Reconstruction period was a difficult time for the South and many restrictive laws were enacted to subvert the new amendments to the Constitution that guaranteed Black rights. Black people fought for their civil rights in the 1960s.

Sprinkled in this history students might encounter the names of people such as Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King, Jr. However, they will not leave their history course with any sense of a coherent history of Africans in the Americas. In social studies courses other than history, African Americans are virtually invisible.

In the case of American Indians a similar erasure occurs (see Rains chapter in this volume). We see them as welcoming European settlers, joining them in a Thanksgiving celebration, guiding them as they explore the west, being massacred as settlers push westward, and finally being removed and subdued by Andrew Jackson. After the “Trail of Tears” American Indians disappear from the pages of our textbooks and the curriculum. For our students American Indians are museum exhibits. No discussion of the ongoing plight of Indians in America is available to most students in our schools. The contemporary Indian rarely emerges in the classroom. At most, our national discussion of American Indians focuses on gambling





4 G. LADSON-BILLINGS

casinos and alcoholism. We rarely configure race into our discussion of American Indians.

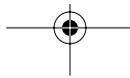
This discourse of invisibility is true of every non-European group of people who constitute our nation. Asian Americans appear in our discussion of the Chinese participation in the building of the transcontinental railroad and the Japanese-American internment during World War II. Latinos appear briefly in the Battle of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the United Farm Workers formation and protests. Throughout our history we present an incoherent, disjointed picture of those who are not White.

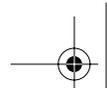
Perhaps this erasure would not be as damaging to the body politic if it were merely a matter of not seeing the other in our courses and curriculum. However, this erasure is compounded by a societal curriculum (Cortés, 1979) that operates within and beyond the school and classroom. This is the hidden curriculum that articulates social locations and social meanings. Students have access to this curriculum whenever they turn on their evening news and see people of color as menacing, dangerous social outcasts. They have access to this curriculum when they see inverse relationships between who the student population is and who the teachers and administrators are. If the people who look like them occupy the lowest skilled jobs in the school—janitors, cafeteria workers, instructional aids—then they begin to calculate their own understanding of people. The official curriculum only serves to reinforce what the societal curriculum suggests, i.e., people of color are relatively insignificant to the growth and development of our democracy and our nation and they represent a drain on the resources and values.



RACE AND THE SOCIAL STUDIES PROFESSION

In addition to the curriculum shortcomings regarding race, the social studies profession itself continues to exclude race as a part of its focus. Despite the salience of history and social issues to people of color, the profession has done little to recruit and retain teachers of diverse backgrounds. While this lack of diversity among social studies teachers is symptomatic of the overall teaching profession, the social studies seem to be a place of curious absence for such teachers. Some of the nation's most eminent historians and social scientists are people of color—John Hope Franklin, Kenneth Clark, Clayborn Carson, Ronald Takaki, Gary Otero, Nell Painter, Sterling Stuckey, Manning Marable, Robin D.G. Kelley, Darlene Clark Hine, William Julius Wilson, and Elsa Barkely Brown are but a few of those whose work has shaped our perspectives on American history, life and culture. Their work has documented the way life in our nation is a complex contradiction of traditions, customs, laws, and practices, and how people of vari-



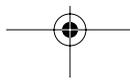


ous races have used the tenets of the nation to challenge injustice and inequity. Surely such a noble work should draw other people to a field that holds such promise for human liberation.

To be sure, I am not suggesting that having teachers of color would be the remedy for the myriad problems that plague education in the United States. Indeed, there is no empirical evidence to support such a claim. Rather, I argue that diversity is always a valued added phenomenon. It is a linchpin of democracy, for without diversity there is no need for democracy. If we are all the same—we look, think, act, and believe the same things—we can be governed by consensus or acclamation. But democracy insists on different ideas, dissent, and failure to acquiesce to majority power.

The social studies profession should be the most overt of the school subjects to insist upon the recruitment, training, and retention of a diverse professional teaching force. My own experience as a social studies teacher is instructive as to the way schools as organizations actively discourage new professionals and their new perspectives. As the only woman and only African American in my department my views were regularly challenged. To some degree I chalked this up as my running counter to the “old boys network.” However, by the time I became a part of the academy and was considered a scholar of some import, I thought that some of that might change. I am sad to report that at the college and university level, social studies education remains as frozen in its old paradigms as it was in the late 1960s. The governance, research agenda, knowledge production, and demographics of college level teaching in social studies education look very much like it looked more than 30 years ago when I was preparing to teach. Of course, some faculty have included “diversity” topics in their syllabi but much of it remains the same. Social studies educators continue to debate the definition of social studies. They continue to argue over the need for single discipline study versus integrated social sciences. They continue to fight about depth versus coverage. They pay almost no attention to their complete failure to nurture a new cadre of social studies educators who can move us past these old debates.

In contrast to the social studies professional organization, my “adopted” professional association, the National Council of Teachers of English has been explicit in its attempt to address issues of diversity and social justice in its programming, teacher recruitment, and research agenda. The winter 2003 NCTE Homepage (www.ncte.org) advertises a summer workshop titled, “Teaching multiAmerica: Redefining multiculturalism and U.S. Literature” with noted authors Maxine Hong Kingston and Ishmael Reed. It also contains a link to something it calls the “African American Read-In” that is sponsored by the Black Caucus of NCTE and NCTE. There is also a link to something called the “Langston Hughes Poetry Circles.” In the Winter 2003 Mid-Year Research Forum, which is one of the major research





6 G. LADSON-BILLINGS

activities of the organization, NCTE focused exclusively on race. When I have attended NCTE annual meetings the number of people of color who attend and participate on the program has pleasantly surprised me. NCTE seems to always incorporate people from the community in which it holds its annual meeting. At a meeting in Nashville, Tennessee NCTE invited in a group from Fisk University and a group from Tennessee State University, two Historically Black Colleges/Universities, to showcase aspects of their program and simultaneously get to know the professional organization. When I attended the NCSS annual meeting in Nashville (located in the same hotel), it seemed as if the conference attendees were in a hermetically sealed bubble, untouched by the Nashville community.

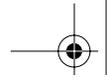
I do not mean to idealize NCTE. Clearly it has its own set of professional challenges. However, it is amazing that the social studies organization with its expressed mission toward citizenship and democracy cannot seem to seriously engage issues of diversity and social justice *within* the profession. My decision to leave the social studies professional organization came as a result of the clear message the organization sent regarding its lack of commitment to issues of diversity and social justice. For three years running, the organization held meetings in cities serving large communities of color (Detroit, Washington, DC, Cincinnati) and did almost nothing to engage the larger community. Our meeting rooms and programs were so culturally exclusive it was stifling.

At the Cincinnati meeting, a Black Heritage Tour was scheduled and was later cancelled, “for lack of interest”—how apropos! As we sat in those meetings watching our chairs set up, our water glasses filled, and our trash removed by low paid people of color, my colleagues seemed untroubled by the growing distance between the organization and the social conditions in which we found ourselves. My own conscience made my participation in this situation intolerable. I could no longer financially and politically support the hypocrisy. From time to time I receive messages from my graduate students that someone in the organization has inquired as to whether or not I would consider rejoining the group. I always ask, “How have they changed?” This question typically is met with a blank stare. That stare is my answer. The profession continues to ignore one of the more pressing social issues of our day—race (and social justice).

RACE AND SOCIAL STUDIES POLICIES

In addition to the curriculum and the profession, the social studies rely on a set of policies that define what it is and what it stands for. These policies can influence curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Most social studies policies are developed and enacted under the aegis of the National Coun-





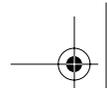
cil for the Social Studies (NCSS). For example, in the 1990s NCSS decided to appoint a task force¹ to develop a set of curriculum standards so that social studies could be better aligned with the national call for higher standards. Rather than acquiescence to the pressure to create narrowly prescriptive standards, the task force opted for a broader, more flexible set of standards that left maximum responsibility in the hands of local school districts, schools, and individual teachers. The NCSS Standards entitled, *Expectations for Excellence* (1996), were ten thematic strands:

- Culture;
- Time, continuity, and change;
- People, places, and environments;
- Individual development and identity;
- Individuals, groups, and institutions;
- Power, authority, and governance;
- Production, consumption, and distribution;
- Science, technology, and society;
- Global connections;
- Civic ideals and practices.

While these strands are broad enough to allow for the academic freedom and ingenuity of teachers, they may also suggest that issues of race and racism are not particularly urgent in the social studies. No statement regarding race and racism was incorporated into the standards. Ongoing social problems such as environmental degradation, poverty, and maintaining national security are directly addressed. However, race and racism are submerged under the more palatable rubrics of “prejudice” and “discrimination.” This strategy reinforces the idea that attitudes and behaviors need to be changed without addressing the structural and ideological foundations from which these attitudes and behaviors emerge.

NCSS has adopted a range of policy and position statements (see NCSS website at: www.ncss.org) including statements on early childhood education, ability grouping, academic freedom, character education, the Columbian Quincentenary, testing, and sexism. The organization’s statement on “Curriculum guidelines for multicultural education” represents a 1991 revision of a document adopted in 1976. However, there is little evidence that such policy and position statements have had any significant impact on social studies practice. The typical K–12 social studies curriculum has changed very little in the past thirty years. Many elementary schools continue to use the expanding horizons approach starting with family and moving to school, community, state or region, nation, and world history. Secondary schools (from grades 7–12) continue to offer two years of U.S. History (typically grade 8 and grades 10 or 11), a civics or U.S. Government course, and a world history course. Depending on the





8 G. LADSON-BILLINGS

size of the high school, a wide range of social studies electives might be offered. The national association's policies have done little to impact course offerings and no evidence exists to suggest that the association impacts course content.

Given its lack of impact on practice, one might presume that the association would take greater liberty in expressing its opinion. Since no one seems to listen, why not speak with a more forceful voice? Instead, the association seems to have responded in just the opposite way. During the mid 1990s reorganization of committee structure, NCSS saw fit to eliminate its committee on race and racism. With the exception of the multicultural education curriculum guidelines, almost nothing about race and/or racism is featured in NCSS policy and position statements.

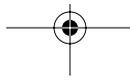
BREAKING THE RACIAL SILENCE²

The failure of the social studies to meaningfully engage in dialogue about one of the nation's persistent social justice issues is not surprising. However, it is disappointing. The historical, social, economic, and political records provide compelling blueprints for the way the nation has recruited the concept of race to justify hierarchy, inequity, and oppression. The social studies can serve as a curricular home for unlearning the racism that has confounded us a nation. Yet, we still find teachers continuing to tell us lies.

This volume is designed to make race a centerpiece of our understanding about social studies. The contributors discuss the way the curriculum, the profession, the policies, and even the new embrace of technology conform to a racial script. By employing critical race theory, the contributing authors prevent readers from casting their gaze in some other direction to explain the persistent inequities we find in our schools and in the society.

Critical race theory sprang up in the mid-1970s with the early work of legal scholar Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, both of whom were distressed over the slow pace of racial reform in the United States. They, along with other scholars, formed alternate civil rights legal perspectives. The first attempt at this alternate theoretical lens was something termed, "Critical legal studies" (CLS) which drew heavily on Gramsci's (1971) notion of "hegemony" to describe the continued legitimacy of oppressive structures in American society. CLS scholars critiqued mainstream legal ideology for its portrayal of U.S. society as a meritocracy but failed to include racism in their critique. Thus, Critical race theory (CRT) was a logical outgrowth of the discontent of legal scholars of color.

CRT begins with the notion that racism is "normal, not aberrant, in American society" (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv), and, because it is so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears both normal and natural to peo-





ple in this culture. Derrick Bell (1992) argues that racism is a permanent fixture of American life. Thus, the strategy of critical race theorists is one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations.

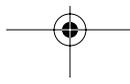
Second, CRT departs from mainstream legal scholarship by sometimes employing storytelling to “analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down” (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv). Critical race theorists . . . “integrate their experiential knowledge, drawn from a shared history as ‘other’ with their ongoing struggles to transform a world deteriorating under the albatross of racial hegemony” (Barnes, 1990, pp. 1864–1865). Thus, the experience of oppressions such as racism or sexism is an important aspect of developing a CRT analytic standpoint.

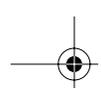
Third, CRT insists on a critique of liberalism. Crenshaw (1988) argues that the liberal perspective of the “civil rights crusade as a long, slow, but always upward pull” (p. 1334) is flawed because it fails to understand the limits of current legal paradigms to serve as catalysts for social change and its emphasis on incrementalism. CRT argues that racism requires sweeping changes but liberalism has no mechanism for any such cataclysmic change. Rather, liberal legal practices support the painstakingly slow process of arguing legal precedence to gain citizen rights for people of color.

Fourth, and related to the liberal perspective, is the argument posed by CRT that Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation. For example, while Whites decry the policy of affirmative action, they regularly benefit from it since White women are its biggest beneficiaries. White women are more likely to live in households with other Whites and share those benefits (income, occupational prestige, and status) with those in their households.

In the case of social studies, CRT examines the way racism is made invisible through the curriculum, participation in the profession, and its policies. CRT can serve as an analytic tool to explain the systematic omissions, distortions, and lies that plague the field. Rather than search for a “multicultural palliative” to suggest that the field is changing, CRT points to the way such inclusions always come at a cost. For example, the increased “multicultural presence” in many social studies textbooks typically represents what King (1995) terms, “marginalizing knowledge” (p. 274). This is a “form of curriculum transformation that can include selected ‘multicultural’ curriculum that simultaneously distorts both the historical and social reality that people actually experienced” (p. 274). Social studies textbooks exhibit this marginalization by including people of color in “features” that literally adorn the margins of the text while leaving the monocultural, exclusive narrative undisturbed.

CRT’s analysis of the social studies profession helps to uncover the systematic way that people of color are discouraged from pursuing careers in





10 G. LADSON-BILLINGS

the social studies. If, for example, people are mentored into professions, what is the likelihood that students of color are actively encouraged to participate in classes and activities that feed into the social sciences? How do the students access history and geography bees? How are their questions about their missing stories addressed in classrooms? In addition to drawing students into the social studies, what professional initiatives exist to support those teachers of color who are already in the profession? How are they made aware of the opportunities for professional growth and career advancement? How are the stories of teachers of color incorporated into our understanding of the profession? What specific obstacles and challenges do they face? How might new professionals avoid them?

CRT's analysis of the social studies policy and position statements calls for a textual deciphering, not unlike that of Morrison (1992) that requires us to look, not only at what is present in these documents, but to ask pointed questions about what is missing. This analysis would also raise questions about how such documents are formulated. Who is asked to serve on committees and task forces that formulate such policies? What are the rules of governance that move position statements from individuals to committees to association?

The role of this volume is to begin to pry open some of the silences that have defined the social studies. This text is deliberate in its move to include "race talk" in the study of history and the social sciences in our schools. Rather than pretend that we live in a society and world where social justice and equity prevail, the contributors to this volume understand the urgency with which we must address the disconnect between the artificial life of the classroom and the real lives of the students who attend our schools.

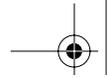
NOTES

1. I was a member of the NCSS National Standards Task Force.
2. Portions of this section adapted from, Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *Qualitative Studies in Education*, 11(1), 7-24.

REFERENCES

- Barnes, R. (1990). Race consciousness: The thematic content of racial distinctiveness in critical race scholarship. *Harvard Law Review*, 103, 1864-1871.
- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well*. New York: Basic Books.
- Cortés, C. (1979, April). The societal curriculum and the school curriculum: Allies or antagonists? *Educational Leadership*, 36(7), 475-479.





- Crenshaw, K. (1988). Race, reform, and retrenchment: Transformation and legitimation in antidiscrimination law. *Harvard Law Review*, 101, 1331–1387.
- Delgado, R. (Ed.). (1995). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. Q. Hoare & G. N. Smith (Eds. & Trans.) New York: International Publishers.
- King, J.E. (1995). Culture-centered knowledge: Black studies, curriculum transformation, and social action. In J.A. Banks & C.M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 265–290). New York: Macmillan.
- Loewen, J. (1996). *Lies my teacher told me: Everything your American history textbook got wrong*. New York: Touchstone Books.
- Morrison, T. (1992). *Playing in the dark: Whiteness and the literary imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- National Council for the Social Studies. (1996). *Expectations for excellence*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Olneck, M. (1995). Immigrants and education. In J.A. Banks & C.M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 310–327). New York: Macmillan.

