



3. Theoretical Intersections: Using CRT and Afropessimism to Understand the Current Bans on CRT

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Abstract: Within the last two years, politicians, school boards, university leaders, and community members have fervently attacked Critical Race Theory as being racist, divisive, and wrong. Supporters of CRT argue the opposite – that CRT is an important tool for examining how racial power is reinforced within the United States, particularly around white supremacy. However, what is truly at the root of CRT bans is antiblackness, a concept not directly addressed by CRT. In this article, we bring CRT into conversation with Afropessimism to outline how the intersection between CRT and Afropessimism offers a structure to understand why the push for CRT bans is so strong.

Keywords: Afropessimism, Critical Race Theory

Introduction

In the summer of 2020, the United States erupted in a series of protests designed to confront this nation’s problem with race. As conversations about racial justice took hold in the public sphere, Critical Race Theory (CRT)

featured prominently as a framework to explain why the United States remains rooted in racism. However, on September 4, 2020, Office of Management and Budget (OMB) director Russell Vought sent a letter mischaracterizing CRT, which subsequently incited a crusade of disinformation and misguided rage.¹ The ensuing fallout led to an educational crisis as educators grew fearful of any engagement with race-centered topics. Rather than critically evaluate how the systems (e.g., educational, judicial, political) within the United States reinforce white supremacist ideology, the focus shifted toward the very theories used to understand this phenomenon. What had the potential to be a racial reckoning instead became an attack on CRT.

The attacks on CRT continued as politicians, schoolboards, and colleges and universities within the United States attempted to ban and eliminate CRT (or topics associated with CRT) from the discussion. While critics of CRT framed their opposition as an attempt to *decrease* racism by not giving it any attention, the pushback against CRT actually reflects some hard truths – that the historical accuracy CRT demands is an existential threat to white supremacy. Trying to censor theories of race is an example of the very thing CRT highlights – that systems are designed to reinforce whiteness. Legislating the erasure of CRT then becomes a form of white supremacy. Critical theories of race, in particular, CRT, offer an important theoretical understanding of how presumably neutral institutions (e.g., legal, educational) offer disparate outcomes based on race. CRT highlights the insidious nature of racism and demonstrates how deeply embedded it is within our societal structures.

At the same time, the applications of CRT are often limited in their scope when addressing antiblackness present within educational research. We argue that future engagement with CRT, both academically and publicly, calls for a theoretical intersection between CRT and Afropessimism. Afropessimism is a critical framework that describes the ongoing effects of racism, colonialism, and enslavement, and their influence on the structural and lived experiences of Black Americans. As Kevin Lawrence Henry, Jr. and Shameka B. Powell note, both CRT and Afropessimism aim to make legible various grammars of violence, because current applications of CRT

¹ Fabiola Cineas, “Critical Race Theory, and Trump’s War on It, Explained,” *Vox*, September 4, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/9/24/21451220/critical-race-theory-iversity-training-trump>.

² Ashley Woodson, “Afropessimism for Us in Education: In Fugitivity, through Fuckery and with Funk,” in *The Future Is Black: Afropessimism, Fugitivity, and Radical Hope in Education*, ed. Carl A. Grant, Ashley N. Woodson, and Michael J. Dumas (New York: Routledge, 2021), 16.

purposefully ignore how “Black people’s structural inferiority”² is necessary to uphold whiteness.³ Given that the ideological, material, and psychological forces that continue to persecute and subjugate Black people are ever changing, scholars should have more nuanced understandings of racism.⁴ Although the role of CRT as a theorizing framework cannot be understated, the future calls for theoretical spaces dedicated to Black freedom and liberation. We argue that educational spaces centered on these ideas should keep CRT in conversation with Afropessimism.

Current theoretical approaches to Black education are often integrationist and reflect what Saidiya V. Hartman argues is “the attempt to make the narrative of defeat into an opportunity for celebration, the desire to look at the ravages, and the brutality of the last few centuries, but still find a way to feel good about ourselves.”⁵ In this paper, we argue that understanding CRT bans requires a theoretical space where “blackness has to be articulated and rearticulated, not as a burden to be endured, but a blessing, that is itself enduring.”⁶ We push past theoretical notions that “reduce the whole of Black life to realization that the US only has the capacity to engage the Black body through plunder and extraction”⁷ and instead suggest that Afropessimism and CRT, in conversation with each other, can address both antiblackness and the limits of multiculturalism present in current conversations on CRT. We begin our article with a brief overview of the history and tenets of CRT. We then discuss various theoretical perspectives within CRT conversations in higher education, making sure to include how other scholars engage with CRT’s relationship to Black critical thought and antiblackness. Afterward, we explain why aligning Afropessimism with CRT makes theoretical sense. Lastly, we conclude by suggesting how CRT and Afropessimism together provide a structure to understand CRT bans.

³ Kevin Lawrence Henry, Jr. and Shameka Powell, “Kissing Cousins: Critical Race Theory’s Racial Realism and Afropessimism’s Social Death,” in *The Future Is Black: Afropessimism, Fugitivity, and Radical Hope in Education*, ed. Carl A. Grant, Ashley N. Woodson, and Michael J. Dumas (New York: Routledge, 2021), 79–86.

⁴ Henry, Jr. and Powell, “Kissing Cousins.”

⁵ Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, III, “The Position of the Unthought,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (2003): 185.

⁶ Chezare A. Warren, “From Morning to *Mourning*: A Mediation on Possibility in Black Education,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 54, no. 1 (2021): 100.

⁷ Warren, “From Morning to *Mourning*,” 99.

A Brief Overview of CRT

CRT arose, in part, to explain the backlash against the Civil Rights movement, the racial entrenchment of the Reagan era, and how race and racism are embedded within US law. We are not surprised to see political leaders try to ban CRT as communities across the United States continue to grapple with state-sanctioned racism, because CRT explains how racism remains embedded in every state structure within the United States. Developed by Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams, CRT began an important critique of racial erasure within critical legal studies.⁸ Derrick Bell argued that CRT offered a mistrust of the liberal agenda, and attempted to create a more egalitarian state of affairs that empowered traditionally excluded views.⁹ Therefore, scholars engaging with CRT do so as a form of resistance, as a way to call out the reinforcement of whiteness as the norm present within US institutions.

CRT engagement as a form of resistance continues within the educational research community today. Although a full discussion of the history and tenets of CRT falls outside the scope of this article, we want to briefly highlight some key points within the CRT that informs our meaning-making around the need for Afropessimism and CRT to be in conversation with each other. In their foundational work, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic describe four propositions of CRT.¹⁰ The first proposition acknowledges that racism is not an aberration, it is the primary organizing principle within systems and organizations.¹¹ The second proposition notes that the white-over-color hierarchy advances the material interests of the white elites and the psychic interests of working-class people, at the expense of racialized people.¹² Given this, large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate racism. The third proposition argues that race is socially constructed but that differential racialization exists, making intersectionality and anti-essentialism important points to remember.¹³ Race identification is not static but rather fluid, sometimes dependent on what the dominant group requires. Lastly, the fourth proposition of CRT recognizes

⁸ Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "The First Decade: Critical Reflections, or 'A Foot in the Closing Door,'" *UCLA Law Review* 49, no. 5 (2002): 1343–1373.

⁹ Derrick Bell, "Who's Afraid of Critical Race Theory," *Univ. of Ill. L. Rev.* (1995): 893–910.

¹⁰ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York Press, 2012).

¹¹ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*.

¹² Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*.

¹³ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*.

the importance of storytelling and the acknowledgment that those who are racialized as best suited to discuss racism.¹⁴

We also draw from Bell's concepts of racial realism and interest convergence.¹⁵ Racial realism argues that the domination and subjugation of Black people is immutable. Efforts made to address racial disparity are often short-lived and organized around maintaining white supremacy. Full equality cannot be achieved because the institutions and organizations are not designed to include Black people as equal participants, and acknowledging this enables Black people to avoid despair.¹⁶ This despair, Bell points out, is not caused by actual racial domination, but by a false belief that things will get better and that equality is an achievable goal.¹⁷ The rhetoric of equality creates false hope, and this false hope prevents true, radical change. Interest convergence explains that Black victories cannot happen without being aligned with white desires. Any racial victories that do occur are legislated and implemented through a white lens of equity and advancement.

Although CRT started within the field of critical legal studies, CRT was adapted for educational research,¹⁸ and is increasingly applied by scholars in various fields.¹⁹ Given its range, it is important to note that CRT is both a theory and a field of study. While the field has some general consensus (e.g., race is socially constructed), there are also intense disagreements about what CRT can and cannot do. We will not take up those disagreements here, but want to acknowledge their existence. We conclude by noting that CRT was not initially designed to be a stand-alone theoretical framework, but rather

¹⁴ Delgado and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory*.

¹⁵ Bell, "Who's Afraid?"

¹⁶ Bell, "Who's Afraid?"

¹⁷ Bell, "Who's Afraid?"

¹⁸ Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate IV, "Toward a Critical Race Theory in Education," *Teachers College Record* 97, no. 1 (1995): 47–68.

¹⁹ Daniel G. Solorzano and Tara J. Yosso, "Critical Race and LatCrit Theory and Method: Counter-storytelling," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 14, no. 4 (2001): 471–495; Delgado and Stefancic, *CRT: An Introduction*; Michelle Christian, Louise Seamster, and Victor Ray, "Critical Race Theory and Empirical Sociology," *American Behavioral Sciences* 65, no. 8 (2021): 1019–1026; Nolan Cabrera, "Where Is the Racial Theory in Critical Race Theory?: A Constructive Criticism of the Crits." *The Review of Higher Education* 42, no. 1 (2018): 209–233. 24. Tara Yosso, William Smith, Miguel Ceja, and Daniel Solórzano, "Critical Race Theory, Racial Microaggressions, and Campus Racial Climate for Latina/o Undergraduates," *Harvard Educational Review* 79, no. 4 (2009): 659–691.

was designed as a theorizing counter-space on the role of whiteness in societal structures, as opposed to a theory in and of itself.²⁰

Theoretical Perspectives within CRT in Higher Education

As noted in the previous section, there are many disciplinary debates as to what CRT can and cannot address with regard to racism.²¹ Related, what the theoretical tenets of CRT argue are sometimes less important than how scholars apply CRT within their own field-specific locations.²² Given this, we want to point out the various theoretical perspectives around CRT that help us understand why Afropessimism should be in relationship with CRT.

As a theorizing space, CRT is often critiqued for serving as a problem-posing framework that asks *what kind* of racism exists within institutions, rather than a problem-solving framework that asks *what we can do* to make institutions less racist. CRT is considered a problem-posing framework, in part, because when applied, CRT often takes on a race-neutral approach. CRT itself is not a race-neutral theory as it acknowledges the role of whiteness as property²³ and how whiteness is embedded within our institutions. However, the lack of racial theory in CRT in higher education theorizing spaces “is problematic because the framework allows for a description [of] what is (racial inequality, double consciousness, or microaggressions), but with a limited understanding of the means by which these phenomena are structured (aside from property rights.”²⁴ The limited understanding of how racism is structured means that applications of CRT do not always provide the theoretical strength to confront racism head-on.²⁵ CRT examines how racial power in the United States is reinforced, sometimes explicitly and sometimes through what seem like neutral laws that nonetheless work in discriminatory ways, and also highlights how cultural and discursive practices of whiteness

²⁰ Nolan Cabrera, “Where Is the Racial Theory in Critical Race Theory?: A Constructive Criticism of the Crits.” *The Review of Higher Education* 42, no. 1 (2018): 209–233.

²¹ Cabrera, “Where Is the Racial Theory in Critical Race Theory?”

²² James Holly, Jr. and Stephanie Masta, “Making Whiteness Visible: The Promise of Critical Race Theory in Engineering Education,” *Journal of Engineering Education* 110, no. 4 (2021): 798–802.

²³ Cheryl Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harv. L. Rev.* 106, no. 8 (1993): 1707–1791, https://harvardlawreview.org/wp-content/uploads/1993/06/1707-1791_Online.pdf.

²⁴ Cabrera, “Where Is the Racial Theory in Critical Race Theory?,” 221.

²⁵ Cabrera, “Where Is the Racial Theory in Critical Race Theory?”

“serve to naturalize unequal social relations along the color line.”²⁶ Engaging with theories that do not naturalize whiteness is critical for Black education.

Lori D. Patton extends Ladson-Billings and Tate’s understanding of CRT and offers three propositions that “inform educational inequity in postsecondary contexts and the embedded complexities of racism/White supremacy.”²⁷ Patton argues that higher education’s past is deeply rooted in white supremacy, and maintains that stronghold because white supremacy remains palatable for those involved.²⁸ Patton also contends that “the functioning of U.S. higher education is intricately linked to imperialistic and capitalistic efforts that fuel the intersections of race, property, and oppression.”²⁹ Lastly, higher education institutions are places where knowledge production is rooted in white supremacy.³⁰ Given this, Patton notes that the higher education enterprise is often silent on racism, even when addressing topics of race. Patton’s observation suggests that CRT needs more explicit engagement with theories that focus directly on racism and its affects.

As we think through why the relationship between CRT and Afropessimism makes sense for the future of Black education, we consider the work of Michael J. Dumas and kihana miraya ross, who theorize a Black Critical Theory.³¹ BlackCrit necessarily extends CRT because “CRT is not intended to pointedly address how antiblackness – which is something different than White supremacy – informs and facilitates racist ideology and institutional practice.”³² There are three main framing ideas around BlackCrit that Dumas and ross suggest. The first idea is that “antiblackness is endemic to, and is central to how all of us make sense of the social, economic, historical, and cultural dimensions of human life.”³³ One could argue that it is antiblackness driving the current push to ban CRT in higher education because within the current sociopolitical climate, race equals Black. The second framing idea of BlackCrit is that “Blackness exists in tension with the neoliberal-multicultural imagination.”³⁴ Within a neoliberal-multicultural imagination, the reason for

²⁶ Cabrera, “Where Is the Racial Theory in Critical Race Theory?,” 223.

²⁷ Lori D. Patton, “Disrupting Postsecondary Prose: Toward a Critical Race Theory of Higher Education,” *Urban Education* 51, no. 3 (2016): 317.

²⁸ Patton, “Disrupting Postsecondary Prose.”

²⁹ Patton, “Disrupting Postsecondary Prose,” 317.

³⁰ Patton, “Disrupting Postsecondary Prose.”

³¹ Michael J. Dumas and kihana miraya ross, “‘Be Real Black for Me’: Imagining BlackCrit in Education,” *Urban Education* 51, no. 4 (2016): 415–442.

³² Dumas and ross, “‘Be Real Black for Me,’” 417.

³³ Dumas and ross, “‘Be Real Black for Me,’” 429.

³⁴ Dumas and ross, “‘Be Real Black for Me,’” 430.

Black people's material condition is due to *their* failure to assimilate into the "melting pot" of American society, not because the United States remains a society embedded in white supremacy. In a multicultural ideology, there are "good" Black people and "bad" Black people, and the "good" ones are those who assimilated into whiteness and the "bad" ones are those who did not. The third framing idea is that BlackCrit "should create space for Black liberatory fantasy, and resist a revisionist history that supports dangerous majoritarian stories that disappear Whites from a history of racial dominance..."³⁵ We build on Dumas and ross's third framing idea and offer that CRT and Afropessimism should also engage with Afropessimism because CRT and Afropessimism combined offer a theoretical space for freedom from antiblackness.

Aligning CRT and Afropessimism

Aligning CRT and Afropessimism makes theoretical sense because antiblackness is at the root of many contemporary theories of race, multiculturalism, and diversity and is not wholly addressed by CRT. As Chezare A. Warren and Justin Coles argue, "understandings of race and racism in the U.S. are severely limited without more direct interrogations of the social conditions that facilitate black people's incessant dehumanization."³⁶ The alignment between Afropessimism and CRT offers a theorizing space for a more direct interrogation of antiblackness.

Afropessimism asks different questions about race and racial conditions than CRT. For example, Jared Sexton notes that several questions continue to emerge within an Afropessimism theoretical space.³⁷ The first question is whether or not there are multiple forms of racism or is racism simply a variation of a fundamental structure? If it is the latter, Sexton asks "what provides the model or matrix (colonialism, slavery, anti-Semitism)?"³⁸ Or, as he wonders, is racism a single history of violent occurrences?³⁹ These questions are important because they get at both the malleability of racism and its hegemonic nature, and also point to factors missing from current theorizing on CRT. Afropessimism recognizes the irreversible devastation of colonialism

³⁵ Dumas and ross, "Be Real Black for Me," 431.

³⁶ Chezare A. Warren and Justin Coles, "Trading Spaces: Antiblackness and Reflections on Black Education Futures," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 53, no. 2(2020): 384.

³⁷ Jared Sexton, "Ante-Anti Blackness: Afterthoughts," *Lateral 1: Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 1 (2012).

³⁸ Sexton, "Ante-Anti Blackness," 1.

³⁹ Sexton, "Ante-Anti Blackness," 1.

and chattel enslavement, and is often used as a “shorthand insistence that the subordination of Black interest and exploitation of Black labor are inherent in Western imperialism and Western modernity.”⁴⁰ CRT does acknowledge the endemic nature of this subordination, but does not directly link it to imperialism and modernity. Therefore, aligning Afropessimism with CRT has the potential to create a stronger, more nuanced understanding of the relationship between whiteness and antiblackness. We need theories that address why people are trying to ban CRT (antiblackness) and what they are trying to protect by doing so (whiteness).

By situating itself within the context of slavery and Blackness, Afropessimism makes a critical shift in focus by moving away from the Black/white binary and instead argues for a Black/non-Black binary.⁴¹ Afropessimism distinguishes generalized racism, which is racism directed by white people but experienced by all non-white people, from the more categorical violence generated by white people and non-Black people directed toward all Black people.⁴² By moving toward a Black/non-Black binary, Afropessimism deemphasizes the statue of whiteness and centers analysis on the antiblackness foundations within our current society.⁴³ It is within this current civil society that the hegemonic structure for antiblackness exists, which reproduces and sustains the divide between white/non-Black people and Black people.⁴⁴ Antiblackness, therefore, is the assumption that Black people and Black self-determination are inherently pathological.⁴⁵ Our current civil society depends on Black subordination, so eliminating antiblackness would also mean eliminating the current societal structure as we know it. The despair of Black communities is not from their lack of strength or aptitude, instead

⁴⁰ Terrell R. Morton, Destiny S. Gee, and Ashley N. Woodson, “Being vs. Becoming: Transcending STEM Identity Development through Afropessimism, Moving toward a Black X Consciousness in STEM,” *Journal of Negro Education* 88, no. 3 (2019): 327–342.

⁴¹ Frank Wilderson, *Afro-pessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Racked & Dispatched, 2017), http://monoskop.org/images/f/f2/Wilderson_III_Frank_B_et_al_Afropessimism_2017.pdf.

⁴² Dhanveer Singh Brar and Ashwani Sharma, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Studies? From Black British Cultural Studies to Black Critical Thought in UK Arts and Higher Education,” *New Formations* 99, no. 99 (2019): 88–109.

⁴³ Wilderson, *Afro-pessimism*.

⁴⁴ Victor Erik Ray, Antonia Randolph, Megan Underhill, and David Luke, “Critical Race Theory, Afropessimism, and Racial Progress Narratives,” *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 3, no. 2 (2017): 147–158; Wilderson, *Afro-pessimism*.

⁴⁵ Morton et al., “Being vs. Becoming.”

despair results from “the extent to which Black communities and Blackness are regarded as illegitimate points of reference for understanding the human experience.”⁴⁶ Afropessimism also argues that the construction of the human experience/human is antiblack, relating to the subjugation of Black people within chattel slavery and colonization. Frantz Fanon explains that real freedom is living as Black people dictate for themselves, without an understanding of who is and is not a master, historically and presently; however, living without knowledge of Black subjugation is not possible for Black people.⁴⁷

Afropessimism also specifically calls out the afterlife of slavery,⁴⁸ which acknowledges both the impact of the historical rupture from homelands, communities, and inheritances, and the ongoing erasure and alienation experienced by Black people as a result of the ongoing effects of slavery.⁴⁹ In fact, *everyone* exists within the afterlife of slavery because “global systems of governance were created to manage our [Blacks] enslavement and exploitation, and the pillars of those systems organize the expansion of the empire still today.”⁵⁰ Within the afterlife of slavery, Afropessimism understands Black liberation as both a form of refusal and renunciation toward any reform efforts, because while those efforts might decrease suffering by Black communities, any reform project invested in preserving society will likely not lead to Black liberation.⁵¹ The afterlife of slavery leads to a type of social death, which is “the permanent, violent, domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons.”⁵² Derrick Bell also acknowledged the role of social death in his work on CRT.⁵³ The remembrance and passed-down knowledge of slavery functions as a reminder of ultimate racial subjugation, and white US citizens allowed slavery and its after effects (i.e., Jim Crow) to be permanent reminders of social status, maintaining the social death of Black people. Bell wrote “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 slides into irrelevance as racial

⁴⁶ Woodson, “Afropessimism for Us in Education,” 19.

⁴⁷ Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

⁴⁸ Saidiya Hartman, “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors, Souls,” *A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 18, no. 1 (2016): 166–173.

⁴⁹ Morton et al., “Being vs. Becoming.”

⁵⁰ Woodson, “Afropessimism for Us in Education,” 19.

⁵¹ Wilderson, *Afro-pessimism*.

⁵² Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 9.

⁵³ Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books Publishing, 1993).

patterns adapts in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance.”⁵⁴

Black people cannot live without passing down the knowledge of chattel slavery and coloniality; rather, Afropessimism suggests that the freedom of Black people is to escape the escape.⁵⁵ Rather than look for multicultural and cosmopolitan solutions to social justice, Afropessimism envisions community-minded spaces where cultural knowledge of Black people being enough in their current form is passed down. Jarvis R. Givens, kihana miraya ross, and Ashley N. Woodson describe this aspect of Afropessimism as fugitivity.⁵⁶ Pairing fugitivity with Fanon’s idea of freedom, Black people are aware of racialized hierarchies and stereotypes; however, as a community, Black people put forth the effort to create a place that represents Black freedom. Imagining Black freedom takes a lot of effort, time, and trial and error, but the efforts toward freedom are a unique part of blackness that work to support Black dreams without reliance on and hope of US systemic change.

Slavery was not about forced labor, it was about domination. That domination continues today economically, materially, and physically. Preserving society, in our current climate, often requires an appeal to whiteness to garner legitimacy, and actions taken within this framing can exclude, and even endanger, the Black communities that reject such pandering.⁵⁷ The appeal to whiteness, or confronting whiteness, serves as the organizing schema for CRT work – white supremacy is the reason for the subjugation of non-white people. However, Afropessimism organizes itself around antiblackness, arguing that in the afterlife of slavery, Black people are fundamentally alienated and excluded from society as fully participating members. And while CRT implicates white supremacy, and Afropessimism explicates antiblackness, CRT and Afropessimism share important intellectual connections.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, 12.

⁵⁵ Woodson, “Afropessimism for Us in Education.”

⁵⁶ Jarvis R. Givens, “Literate Slave, Fugitive Slave: A Note on the Ethical Dilemma of Black Education,” in *The Future Is Black: Afropessimism, Fugitivity, and Radical Hope in Education*, ed. Carl A. Grant, Ashley N. Woodson, and Michael J. Dumas (New York: Routledge, 2021); kihana miraya ross, “On Black Education: Antiblackness, Refusal, and Resistance,” in *The Future Is Black: Afropessimism, Fugitivity, and Radical Hope in Education*, ed. Carl A. Grant, Ashley N. Woodson, and Michael J. Dumas (New York: Routledge, 2021); Woodson.

⁵⁷ Wilderson, *Afro-pessimism*.

⁵⁸ Henry, Jr. and Powell, “Kissing Cousins.”

Derrick Bell's form of racial realism explains the macro-level positioning of Black people by arguing that while the mechanisms of race may alter, equality is an unachievable goal. By focusing on this goal, Black people remain in a state of despair. Afropessimism and the concept of social death offer a paradigmatic shift in the way we understand structural domination and violence in the United States.⁵⁹ As Bell rightly points out, Black people will never gain equality in the United States as racism is structural. One reason Bell (and CRT scholars) offer for this lack of equality is the role of interest convergence. Interest convergence argues that any changes in the racial order will result from shared white and Black interests, and that white interests will also supersede Black interests.⁶⁰ Afropessimism offers social death as a primary reason for failed equality. Social death precludes subjects (Black people) from being viewed as human, which renders Black people as non-human, and therefore excluded from society.⁶¹

CRT theorizing is often skeptical about the racial progress narrative (e.g., that equality can be achieved), something it shares with Afropessimism. One key racial progress narrative involves the pervasive ideal of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is not Afrocentric; rather, multiculturalism assumes all members of society have relational identities that allow for similar desired social outcomes. The discourse around multiculturalism is extremely white and often takes a race-neutral view of US society.⁶² Multiculturalism reinforces the problems inherent with interest convergence. Civil rights victories are spun as victories for the entire nation, even though both CRT and Afropessimism argue that none of these victories represent true progress for Black people. Afropessimism furthers CRT by assuming that US organizations were never meant to serve Black people, and we cannot expect systems to change unless the entire racialized structure of the United States changes.

Afropessimism also explicitly critiques prominent liberal discourses that make the presumption that the system is ultimately fair and the state wants to protect its fairness.⁶³ However, these liberal discourses around justice and accountability do not acknowledge the state's fundamental investment in self-preservation, which is inextricably linked to white supremacy. CRT accurately points out through interest convergence that white self-preservation is

⁵⁹ Henry, Jr. and Powell, "Kissing Cousins."

⁶⁰ Ray et al., "Critical Race Theory, Afropessimism, and Racial Progress Narratives."

⁶¹ Henry, Jr. and Powell, "Kissing Cousins."

⁶² Christine Sleeter and Miguel Zavala, *Transformative Ethnic Studies in Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Research* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2020).

⁶³ Wilderson, *Afro-pessimism*.

always the goal. However, Afropessimism implores us to reframe the state's goal of self-preservation within the context of antiblackness since the state's actions are disproportionately leveled against Black people. Afropessimism does not suggest that there is no Black life, only that Black life is "not lived in the world that the world lives in, but it is lived underground, in outer space."⁶⁴ Given that both CRT and Afropessimism push back against racial progress narratives, and both argue that Black life cannot exist wholly because of white subjugation, how might aligning both theories offer a problem-solving framework approach to understanding the ongoing debate about banning CRT in higher education, and more broadly, Black education as a whole?

Afropessimism and CRT and CRT Bans

When thinking about the ongoing assault against CRT, it is useful to consider how Afropessimism and CRT together provide a structure to understand the current bans on CRT. On its face, the battle against CRT seems to be one of misinformation. Opponents of CRT make false statements about what CRT argues, and proponents of CRT counter that CRT is an advanced field most people never encounter. And while the public dialogue around CRT bans takes up these points, at its core CRT bans represent a key idea from Afropessimism which is that racism in the United States is first anti-Black and second pro-white. Although CRT takes a somewhat neutral approach to racism (e.g., "racism is endemic"), and does not engage with the structural and material harms of antiblackness, it does create a common language theorists can use when describing the systemic functionality of racism. CRT bans represent one's discomfort with the systemic acknowledgment of racism as an ongoing, structural event. However, Afropessimism takes this a step further and recognizes that antiblackness is not an aberration but the foundation of systems and organizations.

Together, CRT and Afropessimism acknowledge that CRT bans reflect the white/non-white hierarchy, which advances the material interests of white elites, and the psychic interests of non-whites (in all economic classes) at the expense of Black people. Together, Afropessimism and CRT acknowledge that CRT bans exist because there is no incentive to even *discuss* eradicating racism by whites and non-whites if there is *some* potential for Black equality. Together, Afropessimism and CRT highlight that CRT bans are just more politically aggressive forms of multiculturalism that want to diminish and devalue Black lives.

⁶⁴ Sexton, "Ante-Anti Blackness," 7.

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