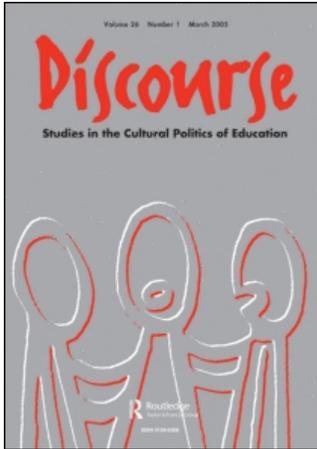


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# Cracking Silent Codes: Critical race theory and education organizing

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Critical race theory (CRT) has moved beyond legal scholarship to critique the ways in which “colorblind” laws and policies perpetuate existing racial inequalities in education policy. While criticisms of CRT have focused on the pessimism and lack of remedies presented, CRT scholars have begun to address issues of praxis. Specifically, communities of color must challenge the dominant narratives of mainstream institutions with alternative visions of pedagogy and school reform, and community organizing plays an important role in helping communities of color to articulate these alternative counter-narratives. Yet, many in education organizing disagree with CRT’s critique of colorblindness. Drawing on five case study organizations working towards school reform in the South Bronx neighborhoods of New York City, this article traces the difficulty of implementing anti-racist practices in education organizing groups. It also analyzes specific practices that may help such groups to transform race-consciousness into positive political action.

## Introduction

In the 2003–04 school year, Bronx high schools in New York City reeled from a series of stabbings. Several schools were labeled dangerous and violence-prone. In these schools, students waited in long lines to pass through metal detectors each morning, and faced quite a few police officers along the way. In response, Neighborhood Parents Together (NPT), a group of parents involved in community organizing efforts for school reform, cited the need for additional safety patrols. NPT assumed that the police officers were doing their job, and if they were primarily targeting black male teenagers in the schools, that was because these teenagers were more likely to be criminals.

A student-led education organizing group, Youth Power (YP), disagreed. These leaders asserted that not all existing safety patrol officers were treating students humanely, thus exacerbating tensions within the schools. Further, they raised issues of race in their campaigns, highlighting the ways in which officers had engaged in discriminatory racial profiling in their work. Finally, they invited the officers to join them in a workshop they constructed, where the students and officers scripted and

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acted in skits playing out their perceptions of one another. Soon thereafter, the police implemented new safety protocols in their schools.

In effect, NPT and YP forwarded different storylines, different narratives and counter-narratives, on who was to blame for the original stabbings. Was it the perpetrating students, the violence-prone officers, or systemic forces, like concentrated poverty? These groups work with the same Bronx constituencies, and they share strikingly similar missions of community power and school reform. Still, they pursued very different strategies, some of which sidelined issues of race, and others of which tackled them head on, with positive results.

This article uses tenets from critical race theory (CRT) to analyze how education organizing groups can help oppressed people of color to articulate and voice their own *counter-narratives*, in order to combat the falsely neutral, colorblind, and dominant narratives of mainstream American society. CRT forces scholars to look beyond well-intentioned rhetoric and liberal notions of equality. Instead, it suggests that we should examine the everyday practices, patterns of inequality, and results of real-life struggles for racial justice. In the context of education policy, this means community organizing should be an integral component of policy-making, as this is how people of color might get a chance to voice *their* vision of what good pedagogy and education looks like (Tate, Ladson-Billings, & Grant, 1993). Despite a rich body of legal scholarship on translating CRT into practice, there remains room for an analysis of how community organizing groups do this in the field of education. I hope to contribute to understandings of CRT praxis by investigating five such groups working towards school reform in the South Bronx. Though these groups share similar goals, their everyday practices and campaign struggles reveal dramatically different approaches to issues of race, especially when viewed through the lens of CRT.

In the next sections, I briefly review the literature on CRT and education, the article's case study organizations, and the methods I used to collect data. I then examine how, although education organizing groups aim to help leaders articulate anti-racist counter-narratives, they do not always succeed. This is because, in their pursuit for political power, some education groups operate with the very sort of colorblindness condemned by critical race theorists. I focus on how education organizing groups might provide consistent, substantive opportunities for the exchange of race-specific narratives and counter-narratives on issues of race, even as they maintain that race is socially constructed.

### **Critical Race Theory and Education**

CRT began as a body of legal scholarship examining the ways in which facially neutral, "colorblind" laws perpetuated decidedly unequal protection of rights and privileges in American society (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995). It has grown in both depth, moving beyond black-white binaries (Bettie, 2000; Gregory, 1993; Yosso, 2005), and breadth, considering social phenomena far beyond official

legal studies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; López, 2003). In analyzing education policy, scholars have suggested that CRT could be useful in articulating the ways in which incremental reform, such as increasing school funding in this year's federal budget, often inhibits anti-racist social change, such as altering national funding formula in a way that guarantees adequate resources for poor communities of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, 1999; Stovall, 2005; Tate, 1997). The reach of such work has even crossed national borders, as CRT has been used as a means to examine anti-racist policies in the UK (Gillborn, 2006).

As Tate et al. (1993) write, "The elements that characterize CRT are difficult to reduce to discrete descriptions, largely because critical race theorists are attempting to integrate their experiential knowledge into moral and situational analysis of the law" (p. 210). Nevertheless, a relatively consistent set of tenets, or themes, emerges. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), these include:

1. Racism is commonplace, and colorblind conceptions of equality will only address the most egregious forms of individual-based racism, rather than structural inequalities between social groups.
2. "White-over-color ascendancy serves important purposes" via the notion of *interest convergence*. Most anti-racist reforms are expected to only happen incrementally, and only when they also serve the interests of white elites.
3. Race is socially constructed and historically embedded.
4. In contemporary American society, the *unique voice of color* serves important purposes. This is a controversial point. Alongside its firm stance against notions of racial essentialism, CRT contends that the social realities of people of color nevertheless give them experiences, voices, and viewpoints that are likely to be different from mainstream, dominant narratives. It therefore becomes imperative that people of color advance their own *counter-narratives*, often via storytelling modes that fall outside the usual confines of academic discourse.

Further, although CRT began as legal scholarship, its applications in education policy were apparent from the beginning. Bell's work on *Brown v. Board of Education*, for instance, contended that the landmark US Supreme Court decision for racial desegregation in the public schools was structured in such a way that did not seriously threaten dominant interests. Thus, its limited impact could have easily been predicted via CRT (Bell, 1979, 1980, 1987). *Brown v. Board of Education* not only failed to break away from patterns of interest convergence, but it also prevented people of color from shaping education policy by withholding financial resources and governance control.

In addition to racial desegregation, CRT scholars have also tackled issues such as affirmative action in university admissions, school choice, and education financing (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Taylor, 1999). More recently, analyses of American multicultural education have pinpointed the ways in which mainstream American pedagogy marginalizes and subjugates the experiences of not just African-Americans, but also Latinos, Asian-Americans, Native Americans, and others in distinct, but

patterned, ways (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Yosso, 2005). Whereas many in the educational literature support policymakers' efforts to improve schooling by focusing on the basics, particularly via standardized curricula, CRT scholars have assiduously mapped and analyzed the many ways in which these efforts, in and of themselves, would do little to help people of color (Tate, 1997).

Yet, a common critique of CRT is the contention that the theory has been much stronger at criticizing pervasive racism in major institutions (such as public education) than in forwarding potential remedies. Some have even argued that CRT is essentially nihilistic in its pessimism (Rosen, 1996); in response, CRT scholars point to the many remedies they have helped to forward (Delgado, 1988; Yamamoto, 1997). Guinier (1994), for example, has argued that low university enrollment rates for African-Americans and Latinos are not reflections of their lack of ability, but of facially neutral, specious, and discriminatory admissions criteria. When the Texas state government decided that its public universities would automatically admit the top 10% of all high school graduates, regardless of their standardized test scores, university enrollment and graduation of under-represented minorities *and* poor whites skyrocketed (Guinier & Torres, 2002).

The challenge, then, is to articulate other remedies needed in education policy (Crenshaw, 1988). To critical race theorists, true equality pays attention to the results as well as processes. This gives new weight to the voices of those who had been forced to play by the rules, but who had thus far not received the opportunity to help make the rules. Specifically, Tate et al. (1993) cited parent and community involvement as one of the key components of CRT-driven, anti-racist education policy-making. They write of this involvement as a means of allowing parents and students themselves to articulate a "vision of...how the school would meet the needs and interests of its multiethnic, multiracial, language-diverse population" (p. 269).

In response, scholars have begun to consider the central role of organizing in constructing positive visions of schooling for communities of color (Stovall, 2005; Warren, 2001). Such organizing provides an essential link between teachers, administrators, students, and parents, providing a non-conventional opportunity to "challenge hegemony in urban schools" (Stovall, 2005, p. 12). With some exceptions, however, the struggles of contesting colorblindness in multiracial education organizing remain relatively unexplored; in fact, many in education organizing might disagree with CRT (Delgado, 1994; Warren, 2001; Wood, 2002). More detailed CRT remedies in education require analyses of just how organizing challenges colorblind hegemony in multiracial communities, and which elements of education organizing are most helpful.

### **Case Studies and Methods**

In the American popular media, the South Bronx is portrayed as the quintessential ghetto, full of drugs, blight, and violence. Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan both

chose the South Bronx for their symbolic “troubled-inner-city” campaign stop during their respective Presidential runs (Jonnes, 2002). Although the area is not quite as dangerous as it used to be, it still suffers from severely underfunded and overcrowded schools, lack of affordable housing, and concentrated poverty. By all measures, unemployment and drop-out rates in the South Bronx remain high.

This study draws on five ethnographic case studies of community organizations that work on education reform in the South Bronx: Communities for Change Bronx (CC), Faith and Neighborhood Network (FNN), Neighborhood Parents Together (NPT), Parents in Action (PIA), and Youth Power (YP).<sup>1</sup> All five organizations in this paper had been working on education campaigns for around seven years, though CC and FNN first organized Bronx residents around affordable housing issues in the 1980s.

In contrast to the overall 20% poverty rate for New York City as a whole, the neighborhoods served by these organizations have poverty rates between 39 and 44% (Infoshare, 2004). In addition, all of the organizations work with primarily Latino, African-American, and African populations, in descending order by percentage. I used Census data for the specific neighborhoods organized by the different groups, and present basic characteristics of the organizations and their constituencies in Table 1 (Infoshare, 2004).

Though some of the organizers hail from middle-class backgrounds, almost all of the interviewees were poor or working class. The exact gender breakdowns of the membership pools were not available. Based on my observations, however, fathers were rarely present at meetings at most of the organizations, though they sometimes attended larger rallies. YP was an exception, as the youth constituency is fairly evenly split between males and females.

The five groups all aim to make the public school system more accountable to parents, namely the overwhelmingly low-income communities of color that serve as the organizations’ core constituents. They do this by forwarding public policy proposals, and pressuring elected officials and civil servants to heed these proposals through organized meetings, petitions, rallies, and protests. All share the same declared mission of local school reform via grassroots, community power. Such a mission would seem to fit well with a model of CRT praxis. After all, research on CRT and education emphasizes the role of education organizing in helping racial minorities to articulate new counter-narratives affirming community-appropriate pedagogies and school reforms, including increased funding and equal access to quality education.

CRT does not purport that liberals who forward colorblindness are in fact racists, but it does suggest that in practice, the policies often proposed by such liberals perpetuate existing institutional racism. Informed by such themes from CRT, I conducted research to examine not just the missions of these organizations, but also their everyday practices. I worked with the premise that the participants themselves can help to shape the themes and direction of my research. At first, I simply tried to learn as much as possible about the organizations. As interviewees became used to

Table 1. Basic characteristics and constituencies of case study organizations

Organizational characteristics/ constituencies	CC	FNN	NPT	YP	PIA
Number of education organizers	Two to three	Two to four	Two to three	Two to four	Two to three
Higher rank staff members (of overall organization, not just education campaigns)	One white female	One white female, one white male	One African-American male	One African-American male, one Latina female	One white male, one Black Latina female
Lower rank staff members	Latino and African-American females	Latina female	One Latina female and one Latino male	One mixed-race female, one African-American male	One mixed-race female, one Latina female, one African-American male
Constituencies by race <sup>a</sup>					
% Black	44	37	42	35	32
% Hispanic/Latino	61	56	60	59	72
% Non-Hispanic White	1	6	1	5	1
Constituencies by income					
% at or below poverty level	44	38	41	39	44
Leadership and membership					
Core leaders	10	20	10	20	15
Estimate of base membership	7000	2000	150	300	450
Estimate of education campaign membership	Unknown	150	100	100	150
Main issues issue(s) addressed in campaigns during fieldwork period	Teacher quality, privatization	Overcrowding, poor facilities, lack of classroom space	Teacher quality	Discriminatory practices by safety agents/ counselors, inequities in quality of education	Animosity between school staff and parents, lack of grievance procedures

CC, Communities for Change Bronx; FNN, Faith and Neighborhood Network; NPT, Neighborhood Parents Together; PIA, Parents in Action; YP, Youth Power.

<sup>a</sup>Percentages for Black and Hispanic/Latino populations add up to more than 100% because Black constituents are calculated by race, Hispanic constituents are calculated by ethnicity, and many constituents report as Black Hispanics, i.e., Black Puerto Ricans.

my presence and trusted me more, they began to open up and share many of the stories that, collectively, form the sorts of counter-narratives essential to CRT praxis.

Overall, data were collected via archival research, direct observation, and semi-structured interviews. Archival research involved examining the organizations' literature, newsletters, flyers, and other documents. Direct observation took place between May 2003 and July 2004, and it included attending meetings, rallies, and retreats. In total, I attended over 100 events over the investigation period, where I took handwritten notes of observations. While most events were two-hour meetings or rallies, I also attended day- or weekend-long retreats. Forty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted one-on-one, with in-depth discussions on their roles in the organizations, the activities and practices of the organizations, and the political strategies of the organizations. In this context, "organizers" are paid staff members of the organizations, and "leaders" are active members.

This study engaged in several iterations of fieldwork, data analysis, triangulation and data verification, to articulate findings that foregrounded the voices of the participants themselves. Throughout this article, the names of all fieldwork participants and case study organizations have been changed for confidentiality reasons.

### **Surfacing Counter-Narratives: Shifting from rhetoric to practice**

Because the five education organizing groups look so similar on paper and via the popular media, advocacy groups or research centers often name them together in policy reports. A careful analysis from a CRT perspective, however, allows us to delve into the nitty gritty negotiations and contradictions of their everyday practices. The following sections use key tenets of CRT to examine, first, why surfacing counter-narratives is so difficult even in education organizing groups, and second, what practices help these groups to grapple with complex issues of race.

#### *Racism as a Norm in American Society, and the Slim Rewards of Interest Convergence*

Reflecting CRT's critiques of hegemonic narratives of colorblindness, most interviewed leaders and organizers asserted that race was not an issue. At first glance, this may have been surprising, since the constituencies served are overwhelmingly black and Latino, and many believe that the South Bronx is the poorest area in the city partly because of institutional racism. Still, in several instances, interviewees stated that a person's ethnicity did not matter in their work, since everyone involved is in the same economic boat. Yet, their later comments revealed that race clearly matters. One CC leader noted that to the extent that race did appear to be an issue, she was not sure it was justified. The leader, a visiting public school teacher from Jamaica of African descent, explained,

I'm probably too educated to say there is racism. I would say that, yes, there are racist people. But I don't think we must cry "wolf" too early ... I think that the

basic nature of the African man . . . attempts to give each person a chance, and does not stereotype, but other people stereotype very quickly. Because I am very much a personality of education . . . the chance is very low that someone will be discriminated against . . . I have grown up in a society where we have two major races, Indians and Africans. And the Indians, very much and very often, talk about discrimination in our [Jamaican] society. When I do not even see it . . . I think some people tend to . . . use [allegations of racism] very quickly . . . I think we tend to play on that sympathy.

While others did not go so far in their assertions, they also operated on similar sentiments, that of colorblindness superseding any isolated incidents of racism. This clearly flies in the face of CRT's core tenets. Part of the reason for this discrepancy is the dominant perception that racism is always intentional and committed by individuals. Such a perception leaves little room for structural analyses of institutional racism, or for policy responses in situations where no specific "evildoers" can be pinpointed.

Sometimes, counter-narratives are also submerged in education organizing groups because a focus on sustaining majority support prevents organizers from addressing issues of race head on. Even though most of the organizers and leaders at the five case study organizations sometimes spoke of issues of race in American society at large, they nevertheless exempted their organizations from this critique. This was partly because they clearly had good intentions, and they were working on progressive campaigns to strengthen the public school system. For the most part, when some organizers and leaders explicitly talk about the notion of "divisive" issues, one quickly realizes that they are talking about issues that appear to affect one racial subgroup more than another. "Divisive" issues are always discussed pejoratively, and so, it is important to investigate how different organizations classify which issues fall into the category of social injustice, and which are instead labeled "divisive". Tara, the head organizer at CC, remarked:

We have to be a democratic organization, but we also have to be thoughtful and do our homework . . . any meeting can deteriorate into people blaming the parents or the teachers, or wanting to organize around issues that are divisive.

In this case, it is worth noting that the task of avoiding "divisive" issues is portrayed as a trade-off of being "democratic". In order to accomplish the tricky work of encouraging overworked, weary parents to pursue CC-sponsored education organizing campaigns, Tara has chosen to focus on facially neutral issues, those that need little further investigation. More specifically, Tara also noted that she feels the organization works by "avoiding divisive issues. Like I can imagine Latino parents organizing because there aren't enough Latino teachers in the schools, but African-American parents would be offended, or would be upset". In some ways, this ensures that a subgroup is not ostracized; on the other hand, it also runs the risk of avoiding campaigns that disproportionately affect a minority group, such as police brutality against black or Latino males. While one can imagine obviously divisive issues in which one subgroup is attempting to exclude another, the situation hypothesized by Tara lies in slightly murkier territory. A diverse teaching staff that includes Latinos as

well as African-Americans, after all, could raise the quality of education afforded to all students. In attempts to be race-neutral and form “broad-based” coalitions, race-delineated issues are sometimes avoided rather than tackled, even when it can be cast in positive terms and does not necessarily exclude the participation of others.

The second key CRT tenet of interest convergence, which predicts that dominant groups are unlikely to join anti-racist campaigns unless it also serves their own self-interest, dovetails directly with the first one. Since significant segments of society currently benefit from existing power inequalities, appealing to their articulated self-interests often sidelines deep-seated issues of race. According to some leaders in the case study organizations, issues of race are unlikely to be “winnable” if they do not automatically garner the support of *most* members. Since members belong to different racial groups, it appears too risky to confront a racially delineated issue. Some argue that in contrast, an issue that involves the entire neighborhood or all working-class people is more likely to win the support of all members (Miller, 1996).

Others have argued that such a stance uses class as a “lowest common denominator”, one that ignores significant issues of race (Delgado, 1994, 1985). Advocates of such winnable campaigns would argue that they are doing important work on securing more money for South Bronx schools, for example. Certainly, important wins have been secured through such broad-based campaigns. Still, from a CRT perspective, even when everyone is gathered to denounce overt racism, such strategies make it difficult to work towards substantive social change.

As long as no overtly racist acts are committed, issues of race remain unexamined, and institutional racism ignored. In turn, school reform is best achieved by rallying everyone together, downplaying any patterns of inequality that might exist amongst the supporters.

Sometimes, the potential pitfalls of such colorblind strategies can only be gleaned with direct observation of the everyday struggles of campaigning for education reform. Much of this study’s data lie in statements *not* made, which nevertheless hint at emerging counter-narratives. Many of the education organizers from the case study organizations would not refute the critiques in this article; nevertheless, they might rebut that sacrifices need to be made in smart politics, and contradictions are impossible to completely avoid.

This section, then, relies on the sort of “story-telling” at the core of CRT, employed precisely because issues of race often refuse to be neatly pigeonholed into analytical boxes (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Some of the most telling counter-narratives seep through the gaps and silences of everyday practices, especially when racial divides are overt. This was indeed the case when I accompanied CC Bronx on a bus trip to Washington, DC.

I arrived at the CC office at 6 a.m. and boarded one of two chartered buses. Carol, an African-American organizer, her mother, brother (who rode with us to DC but left the group upon arrival in DC), and a friend sat in the first three rows. None spoke Spanish. I sat in the fourth row. Latinos, most monolingual Spanish-speakers, all sat in the fifth row or beyond. Several had brought their children with them. The group was fairly evenly split between men and women.

Carol also repeatedly spoke to monolingual Spanish speakers in English, and sometimes went on in her instructions without allowing for them to be translated.

We arrived in DC around noon. We marched to several actions, primarily asking for more school funding for federal legislation. Other than the first few speeches, there were no translations into Spanish, so many members had stopped trying to follow the conversations. As we were getting ready to leave the Department of Education, other organizers were leaving to go to another protest. Carol kept repeating, "I was never told of this, so we can go home". We got on the highway, headed back for the Bronx.

Half an hour later, Tara, the head organizer, called from the other bus. Carol said that the bus driver did not have the directions, that we had passed the highway exit, and it was too late to turn back. The bus driver told her to not blame it on him. Tara told Carol to take a vote on the bus. Carol did, and 11 (of approximately 40) people voted to go home. Without asking for the question to be translated into Spanish, however, she turned around and said, "That's it! Call Tara back and tell her they voted, and we're going home".

We watched videotapes Carol had brought with her, one of which discussed adult sexual relationships in the African-American community. There were repeated requests from the rest of the bus for something appropriate for children.

Some of the Spanish-speaking people behind me spoke of their disappointment in our early return. A few days later, when I spoke with Tara, she said, "It's too bad that your bus couldn't go to the [other] action because the bus driver got lost, huh?"

This story highlights some of the ways in which surfacing counter-narratives remains difficult in education organizing groups. First, organizers and leaders must overcome language barriers. Second, they also fear that any critiques of racial divides will be construed as racist, or as detracting from the larger mission of the organization. They are, after all, in the same boat, trying to fight even more formidable forces of disenfranchisement from outside the organization.

Again, the day's events did not reveal many moments of overt racism by individuals, so much as institutional segregation and disparate treatment by race. Carol probably decided to go home because she was exhausted, not because the Latino leaders would have wanted to stay. Further, principles of interest convergence did work in CC's favor in some ways. The organization succeeded in gathering thousands of supporters from around the country, and it successfully pressured the Department of Education to award grants to some poor schools.

Still, the conspicuous, race-delineated divisions are remarkable because all of the case study organizations are known for effective, progressive campaigns. CC has helped the working poor to fight school privatization in several states, and few progressive activists would argue with its rallies for community power. The organization has also released important reports on racial inequities in school funding, and it is not afraid of calling elected officials or policies racist. Whereas CC is able to rally large numbers of protesters for more school funding, then, it is a lot less likely to tackle issues of race in its campaigns with such deep racial divides *within*

the organization, and this has an impact on the tenor of CC's local education campaigns.

In the context of CRT, such stories are not surprising. Even as education organizing in communities of color is an integral component of CRT praxis, then, counter-narratives and a redefinition of "winnable" campaigns can only be realized with further investigations of how racial divides are crossed in such groups.

### *Addressing Social Constructions of Race, via Unique Voices of Color*

In order for education organizing groups to truly engage in anti-racist views of school reform, they need to build community power without resorting to short-term strategies of interest convergence. This section attempts to draw lessons by focusing on the third and fourth key tenets of CRT, regarding the social construction of race and unique voices of color, which are inextricably intertwined. The hardest part of realizing equitable education is addressing a core tension between these two tenets. How are the case study groups supposed to allow counter-narratives to emerge, when they want to pursue campaigns as united fronts?

According to the case studies, bridging organizational spaces plays a key role in helping education organizing groups to resolve the tension between CRT's third and fourth key tenets. Here, organizational spaces are not just physical meeting places. Rather, they consist of consistent opportunities for meeting, conversation, and exchange. Borrowing terminology from the social capital literature, "bonding" spaces would be those that facilitate meetings among members of fairly well-defined subgroups (Warren, 2001; Woolcock, 1998). In this paper, "subgroups" refer to small, relatively well-defined cliques or clusters of members within the larger education organizing groups or organizations. These subgroups are largely identified by racial background and immigrant status, i.e., African-American, Latino, and African immigrants. "Bridging" spaces are those that facilitate meetings and exchange between members of different subgroups.

All five case study organizations are careful to provide subgroups with the organizational bonding space to meet freely, develop their own campaigns, and recruit new members; these subgroups meet with organizers who speak their language, and meetings are scheduled to accommodate members. The bonding spaces can be seen as places where leaders are given the means to voice their struggles and experiences.

The organizations' records on bridging spaces are more complex. Whereas bonding spaces allow unique voices of color to flourish, bridging spaces help subgroups to break down essentialist notions of the "other". Such spaces are important so that different subgroups can mediate issues of race, and so that different voices of color engage in conversations with one another. Amongst this article's education organizing groups, three basic patterns emerge.

The clearest pattern appears in CC, where there is little interaction between subgroups. There are concrete reasons for this; most CC organizers are monolingual,

and translation is sporadic. During the period of my fieldwork, then, there were several months in which CC's sole English-speaking education organizer could not speak with the majority of her leaders and constituents, who were primarily Spanish speakers. Further, when a member of one subgroup wanted to work on an issue currently pursued by another subgroup within the organization, he or she was encouraged not to join and shape existing campaigns, but to launch new ones. Members were then told to recruit others, usually from the same racial background, until a critical mass is formed. Their own campaigns and protests could then be staged. In this way, large but separate campaigns were pursued, with little conversation between subgroups, and dissent about existing campaigns was usually not voiced through verbal discussion, but via exit. Indeed, several organizers and leaders noted that they left when they disagreed with campaign issues.

From the perspective of CRT, members of CC never received the chance to articulate the social construction of race, partly because the unique voices of members from different subgroups were never communicated to the entire organization. Critical race theorists might argue that, instead of fearing that conversations about race would split the groups in half, that surfacing counter-narratives would show members how race is socially constructed and, in turn, how to tackle issues of race.

The second pattern that emerges involves existing, but limited, bridging spaces. In these cases, translation is consistently used and subgroups meet regularly with one another, but issues of race are rarely broached.

At NPT, leaders tried to address issues of race, but they did not always have the chance to dig deeper, and to investigate whether one person's complaint touched upon a pattern of inequality:

I don't think there are any race issues . . . I don't think it's because people are too scared, either . . . There's real consensus . . . I'll give you an example. One and a half years ago, at the rally then, one child didn't get to speak . . . The parent complained . . . But we explained to her that it was because the child didn't show up during the assigned prep time. We don't discriminate.

At FNN, Monica, the education organizer, spoke about how the Latina, primarily Catholic parents had a lot of trouble working with the African, primarily Muslim parents, and vice versa. The cultural rift could be seen along many lines, especially via language barriers and concerning shared views on proper ways to discipline children. After some meetings disintegrated into shouting matches, Monica made concerted efforts to learn about the grievances articulated by all individuals involved. She then worked extensively with each subgroup independently, hoping to gain a more nuanced grasp of each subgroup's dynamics and assumptions, before successfully working on a newer, collaborative project with all of the subgroups together.

Still, one FNN leader said that organizers sometimes broached issues of race in superficial ways, which sometimes allow stereotypes or essentialist constructs to fester:

Race, and a lot of racist dynamics, are still alive . . . There's a lot of manipulative propaganda about race . . . [Somebody] will be like, "Oh Elena, you're Puerto Rican." It's like Elena's the representative. And then we have one group that's mostly Korean, so she needs a Korean, and one of those . . . [There are] certain assumptions about people.

Another FNN leader, Nicole, noted that official rules dictate that organizers remain silent, with the intention that opinions and campaign ideas are truly generated by the constituents. Yet, this silence can be an artifice; organizers hold opinions and can easily manipulate discussions so that the group comes to a similar decision.

Several leaders and organizers took pains to state that authentic counter-narratives were also likely to be more nuanced. Bridging spaces allow members of different subgroups to speak from experience without being seen as token representatives. According to these observations, FNN had worked to provide some room for voices of color, but perhaps not enough so that the uniqueness of these voices shines through. Wider representation of different subgroups can eventually highlight diversity as well as consistency within subgroups and make it difficult for leaders to resort to stereotypes. After FNN went on to launch intra-organizational events around the theme of "strength through diversity", some leaders commented that they no longer saw different cultural or religious rituals as divisive, so much as different, but complementary, ways of addressing similar concerns.

The third and final pattern of bridging spaces focuses on substantive, anti-racist alternatives to colorblindness by facilitating positive and repeated exchange between subgroups. In these organizations, leaders ask uncomfortable questions such as, "What's been the experience of Latinos on this issue, in these schools? Blacks? Is it different for African-Americans than it is for African immigrants?" As they do so, they heed unique voices of color and begin to tackle larger issues of race, but the varied personal stories they hear in response often end up being even more unique than anticipated. Together, these stories also suggest that race is not an essentialist construct. When leaders are given the opportunities to speak from their personal experiences, they often broached issues of race with ease, and the results were often far from divisive.

Over time, bridging spaces allow leaders to address issues of race in positive ways. All leaders are bound by campaign issues and troubled schools, like those at the other case study organizations, but they also share books like *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, poems used at meetings, and downloaded music files. Such cultural objects are rarely race-neutral, and the youth treat such racial identifiers as positive tools for exchange. Because stories are so intensely personalized and interdependence is so emphasized, members are comfortable with conversations about race, without feeling as if they are defined solely in terms of race.

Finally, bridging spaces allow YP leaders to relate to and empathize with members of other groups, even when patterns of inequality do exist. YP also works with a group of young, African and South Asian Muslim women who call themselves the Young Intellectuals. Conversations between the Young Intellectuals, who claimed that they were contacted by their guidance counselors for private meetings several times a year,

and YP leaders, who claimed that they could not get appointments with their guidance counselors despite repeated pleas for help, led to new campaigns documenting, protesting, and proposing alternatives to unequal access to academic counseling in two Bronx high schools. YP's bridging spaces help the leaders to acknowledge difference in order to walk down the tricky road towards more meaningful equality. Further, the subgroups are united in spite of, or maybe even because of, their disparate social conditions in the schools.

At PIA, leader Michele commented that while earlier campaigns sometimes dealt with overt racism between school districts, the current organizer manages to address racially-delineated issues within school districts or schools in a different way:

Before, the staff set you up to think that you had picked the campaigns. I can tell the difference . . . They would say, "We have lots of these vacant lots in our community. What do you think is the problem with these lots?" "Oh, there's rats. Oh, there's something else ." I thought, "You know what? It's cool." I can sell products, too, if I wanted to . . . [Now,] Katerina's way in directing talk, it's very cool . . . She asks us, "What do you think about this," when she tells us about different districts. The way we see different types of money . . . "Why do you think it's like that?" . . . I like the way she does it . . . Looking at the patterns.

Michele suggests how drawing from participants' own substantive analyses can lead to positive discussions on race, and that leaders can tell when they are being manipulated. Again, such conversations stand in contrast to those at other organizations. At one CC chapter meeting, a leader sounded alarms over a new shelter being built for "100 men who are [*sic*] AIDS . . . Coming out of prison! People from the South Bronx just eat shit and don't fight." Other attendees nodded and murmured in agreement, but did not respond directly. Poor neighborhoods in the United States do share a disproportionate burden of so-called "undesirable facilities" like shelters. Nevertheless, when a seemingly similar situation unfolded at a PIA meeting, a leader resounded, "If something like that is going to be built, we need to meet. People don't say things like that face-to-face."

Bridging spaces at PIA and YP allowed leaders to go beyond liberal notions of equality by tackling issues of race in their everyday practices and via in-person conversations. This way, they collectively tried to disentangle what "equality" might look like in real life. When a woman at the PIA Annual Meeting stated that she might vote for Bush because her Latina, Catholic upbringing informed her stance against abortion, other leaders in the room, both Latino and African-American, bristled. In response, the facilitators noted her comment as an issue of "different values", rather than anyone having "more" values than anyone else, and a constructive discussion on the Presidential candidates' education policies followed. These were instances in which a person's race was mentioned as part of the person's heritage, and so, as in YP, there was a positive, non-essentialist language with which to raise issues related to race.

Bridging spaces, then, are related to what critical race theorists Guinier and Torres call intermediate "free spaces", where communities of color can recognize their solidarity that "those who have been [socially] raced often experience", thereby

constructing political, rather than essentialist, notions of race and “enclaves of resistance” (2002, pp. 95, 147). While participants in all five case studies have experienced this solidarity, I would argue that not all have taken the next two steps, using “strategic deployment of race-consciousness” to experiment in new, deliberative democratic practices and develop a broader social justice agenda (pp. 95–96). It is only by appreciating the disparate experiences of different groups of students in YP, for instance, that the students were able to reconceptualise their campaigns for equitable and decent guidance counseling.

The campaigns pursued by the five case study organizations during my 18 months of fieldwork suggested, however tentatively, that contesting colorblindness in organizing made a difference. According to these case studies, unique voices of color and the social construction of race do not have to exist in uneasy tensions. In real life, these might even be mutually reinforcing principles. PIA and YP, which excelled in building bridging organizational spaces, also pursued campaigns on parent–teacher relationships, racial profiling by school safety officers, and issues of racial discrimination within the schools. In fact, as mentioned in the introduction, when YP leaders met with police officers, they performed skits that dramatized the students’ and officers’ perceptions of one another. The students also presented the officers with a map of the schools’ drug dealings and unsafe spaces from their perspective, and the officers worked with YP to construct new, more amicable school safety protocols. While YP was successful because they worked on authentic counter-narratives that broached issues of race, the remaining education organizing groups responded to school violence by requesting more school safety officers. They also focused on campaigns that demanded more funding for schools, without overtly addressing inequities within school systems.

### **Cracking Silent Codes**

CRT challenges traditional theory by demanding that reforms come from outside the classroom as well as inside. As the case studies have shown, the narrative of colorblindness is often so pervasive that surfacing counter-narratives is difficult even in education organizing groups. Although there were no official signs dividing the CC bus into two, for example, a silent code of purported colorblindness, if not a code of silence per se, served as a barrier between subgroups. On its own, such segregation is unremarkable. The difference lies in the organizations’ collective reaction to such racial divides, and whether the relevant issues are ever broached in conversation, or addressed in action. In their pursuits for political power, some education organizing groups focus only on individual-based acts of racism, resort to interest convergence to build mass support, and ignore more nuanced, and systemic, institutional racism.

Building on Tate et al.’s (1993) notion of true equality in education, the process of community organizing is clearly necessary, but not necessarily enough. Many schools in the United States are so badly under-funded that many education organizing

groups can improve conditions by launching campaigns for greater overall financing, but sidestep issues of equity or race in schools at the same time. Parents and students in the case studies not only wanted to converse across racial lines, they could also tell when they were being used as token representatives, and they were not satisfied.

From a CRT perspective, meaningful bridging spaces can help communities of color to transform race consciousness into political practice, and work towards more radical school reform. Far from being divisive, such bridging spaces actually help education organizing groups to resolve the theoretical tension between CRT's third and fourth key tenets. They allow leaders and organizers to bring up the dynamics specific to a black woman, and not African-American men or white women, for example, who cannot categorize her issues in terms of either race or gender alone. The experiences of any racial community are both patterned and heterogeneous. This possibility is related to the concept of intersectionality, that "individuals or classes often have shared or overlapping interests" that might not be recognized without bringing up the notion of race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 149). Whereas CRT has previously used the notion of intersectionality to show how race- or gender-based laws fail to protect the rights of differently impacted groups like black women, intersectionality also plays an important role in bringing about positive change, in the praxis of education organizing. In real life, after all, if groups of people face similar experiences, it does not necessarily follow that this is because these people are all the same. Only by discussing issues that appear to be racially delineated do members recognize that "race" is not essentialist, but that it can nevertheless be used to build an agenda for social justice.

CRT has, from the beginning, called for action, and education organizing seemed to be the means to achieve it. Yet, education organizing groups construct visions of alternative pedagogy and education policy in drastically different ways. CRT demands that their everyday practices match their rhetoric for social change. Far from being overly pessimistic, this emphasis on process, rather than charismatic or visionary individuals, lends room for social change in all five case study organizations.

As CRT scholars continue to work towards remedies for true social change in education policy, further research is needed on the nuances of different types of education organizing groups, and on the consequences of CRT praxis on political campaigns. Articulating such theory-informed best practices can help organizers and leaders in multi-racial organizations to work towards goals like school reform, without resorting to the "lowest common denominator" in their campaigns (Delgado, 1985).

## Note

1. Although YP is officially affiliated with FNN, it merits its own case study because it abides by its own by-laws, it attends to a constituency composed solely of students and not parents, and most importantly, it engages in everyday practices that look quite different from those at FNN.

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