What Are You Not Reading? Critical Race Theory for HCI

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Last year, after reading Katta Spiel's discussion of the political nature of one's reading and writing [1], I began pondering the sort of scholarly work shaping my thought beyond my current project interests. Since then, I have considered making the personal political by reflecting on some of the implications of the decision to engage (or not) scholarly with critical race theory (CRT).

As an early-career researcher, at first, I thought about the possibilities that engaging more profoundly with issues such as race, gender, and class in my work might make clear the unintended consequences of digital technologies in futuring (and defuturing) specific organizing features of communities in Africa. The prevailing argument in African HCI is how diverse social values, cultural attributes, and lived experiences can be drawn into conversations about the applicability and sustainability of HCI methods, approaches, and techniques to technology design projects. Within narratives about appropriation and localization, for example, issues of race and racism don't figure prominently, and my initial thought was, *what would CRT offer in furthering the understanding of the politics of design—ontologically and epistemologically?*

I wondered whether CRT should be approached as a critical perspective for understanding the situatedness of lived experience to better design with, not for, communities; or be adopted as an ideological frame to sensitize oneself to the deeply rooted power relations of "development-like" tactics shaping transnational ICTD/HCI4D projects; or rather be viewed as a theory that could enable describing/inferring interesting insights about the complexities of the social world.

To avoid the legitimacy trap—a trap that "arises when the claims that one makes to the legitimacy of one's practices become a limit on that practice" [2]—I did a quick scholarly search of the term *CRT*, and confirmed my suspicion that it is a North American term rooted in cultural imperialism that seeks to create or demarcate safe spaces for supposedly deconstructing systemic inequalities in social and institutional life. Although I contemplated the intellectual value of extensively engaging with its ideological assumptions and projections, I concluded, as suggested by Thomas Sowell in *Intellectuals and Race*, that one would be better off not leaning toward the ideals of *race hustlers*. I know what you might be thinking, dear reader, that labelling race theorists or critical race theorists as race hustlers in unfair (assuming they hold the same ideological stand). Well, what else does their perspective espouse? The social anomaly and symbolism of race and colour, the prowess of black voices [3], and the intersectionality of interest toward historical legacies of oppression.

In HCI, engagement with the topic of race has developed on different assumptions. Some are calling for a critical analysis of the racial biases in technology, the unintended consequences of technological interventions, and the immaterial labour of technology design and use. Others are keen on developing allyship for addressing the unresolved challenges of racial disparities, social justice, and institutional inequalities. More recently, the basis for adapting CRT to HCI's diversification effort is to challenge the structural effect of unequal power relations—relations that could inform how research projects or technological interventions are imagined and practiced [4]. Regardless of its theoretical engagement in expanding technoscientific knowledge practices, I, as an African, find the issue of "race" as set forth in the original tenets of CRT dismissive of other forms of recognition (e.g., ethnicity, religion, gender, and class) that might not necessarily be intersectionally oppressive.

Therefore, this reflection is a response to the call to "re-engage, ever more vigorously, in the struggle against racism within ourselves, our communities, and in the sociotechnical world" [4], and the intellectual invitation toward "a more just definition of what we consider the Black experience in the fields of HCI and design, and what tenets are perpetuated in how this experience is defined" [5]. In a

way, I am attempting to further complicate the tension inherent in centering specific precepts as the focus of HCI's engagement with issues of power, knowledge, and politics; but I am also pointing to the subtle risk of perspectivism, exceptionalism, and essentialism often associated with North America.

To further complicate the issue of race as a determinant of being is the conviction that "race" as a social construct came out of the pseudoscientific tradition of Europe for gaining an advantage in an economic "contest." In other words, the idea of race was born out of Western economies' contest over materialism—with racism as its unintended consequence. The common argument is that racism is an institutional system of power and not a mutation of individual values and behaviour—and that the Euro-North American black experience, regardless of its inherent hierarchies and contradictions, should be taken at face value in contemporary discourses. The first thing that comes to mind is, which historical episode, geographical location, and political standpoint should direct the analysis of the black experience? How should the sequence of lived events be contextualized in the counternarrative they are championed for? Are we to naively embrace the epistemological claim that situated perspectives from below are closed for contestation (or that subjugated standpoints position specific actors to produce strong, subjective, and objective knowledge by their ontological second sight of being marginalized)? Or that the community should politically espouse the essentialization of incidental experiences as the determining history and future of the coloured perspectives? [3]

The issue I am raising here is that CRT, like any trendy slogan that focuses on race, will be a thing of the past, as the emphasis on "the black experience" might not translate to any substantial political and economic power for the collective. While some have argued that "sitting on the side-lines because one is not directly affected by discrimination is not sufficient…to address the systemic and institutional racism that has led Black people in computing to be pushed out of the field or exit the field" [6], one has to account for how those subjugated experiences might risk erasing or demonizing other situated ones. As such, CRT's appeal toward quantifying the black experience of the darker sides of modernity might be considered as speaking for/about the "Other" in ways that foreground the oppressor/oppressed narratives over every day lived social relations and might even be considered as perpetuating different facets of self-inflicted powerlessness by its insistence on belonging to and becoming a racialized being. As a collectivist vocabulary, CRT is drifting toward the retrogression of the collective, and as an African, one might not appreciate the prescription that the experience of the world ought to be classified and ordered according to the colour of one's skin.

To further complicate the centrality of the black experience in the scholarly landscape, let's consider a complex political phrase that depicts how one's purview directs the (re)presentation of a specific timeline of history. In *The Isis Papers*, Frances Cress Welsing explores the paradoxical symbolism of the white supremacy system in showing how power operates beyond the social manifestation of certain logic [7]. Of specific relevance here is the case for understanding how symbolism binds the psyche and culture. In problematizing the political question of who the "Original Mother Fuckers" (OMF) are, Welsing presents the case that white males in North America, specifically the South, are the OMF. The narrative presented depicts scenarios where the white male is consciously aware of the black male's genetic potential to annihilate the white population—thus engaging in an offense-defence game to ensure survival.

In the white supremacy game structure, the reference to the North American black man as a "*Mother Fucker*" psychologically and emotionally charges one as a "*powerless baby,*" thus unconsciously triggering an often aggressive behavioural reaction. Welsing's position is that "White-skinned (albino) persons were most probably the genetic mutant offspring from Black parents"; therefore, the white man is continuously striving to be born again without defect or of the original sin, emphasizing that "the original sin in White supremacy's Christianity, on close examination, is the act of sex that produced the appearance of nakedness or the genetic mutation of albinism or white skin" [7]. The argument presented was that while it was common for *black females* to nurse *white babies* during

slavery, often the *white man* unconsciously fantasizes about being nursed by his original *Black mother*. In Welsing's terms, "each time the *white male* imposed (imposes) himself sexually upon a *black female*, at the deeper level of symbolic thought, he can be viewed as having intercourse with the reflection of his original *Black mother*" and that "through the subtle and intricate dynamics and the unconscious underweening of the white supremacy system/culture, the *white male* has projected his image of himself as a "*Mother Fucker*" onto the total black collective throughout the world" [7].

However, a different interpretation of the provocative phrase might lead to an uncommon explanation of the emotionally charged reaction of the North American *black males* being referred to (and referring to their peers) as "Mother Fuckers". As a result of the abolition of slavery, slave owners in the Deep South devised the investment policy of slave breeding. In Richmond, Virginia, and on Maryland's eastern shore, systematic breeding by white or black males and a pronatalist economic strategy was adopted to ensure the natural increase of slaves across the country. One of the most troubling aspects of the breeding strategy was that people were mated indiscriminately without consideration of maternal relationships, in so far as incest was encouraged among slave owners and breeders. The interpretations of the phrase '*Mother Fucker'* presented above highlights an archival dilemma whereby at face value, both propositions are discursively logical, can be supported by historic data, and might be taken as a factual representation of events. But the issue that remains is how to negotiate the tension at play when varying historic accounts are presented to uphold a political standpoint.

At first sight, both positions can be considered as emanating from the compression of historical events, the recalibration of the building block of the records, and the invention of politically motivated narratives. In reading and writing against historic records, one is expected to continuously contest historical accounts for a greater perspective through the restoration of the sequence of events or shifting traces of the record. The point I am trying to make is that by placing an overly CRT emphasis on the "black voices," *specific North American white males* are the OMF; however, the question that then comes to mind is how is it that the statement is normalized within the black American population and its utterance triggers a particular reaction from within that same group? From Welsing's perspective, symbolism binds the psyche and culture, which in turn could point to the logic behind certain patterns of speech and behaviour and their implications within the white supremacy system. From this perspective, *specific North American black males* are psychologically preconditioned as powerless babies to embrace the "Mother Fucker" connotation and to respond to it—in most cases, aggressively. This then raises the question of how to better understand the symbolism binding the black psyche and the black American subculture as a pair, or as it has been perceived and practiced across North America.

The first point of contention is that there is no clear-cut demarcation of the black American subculture. In the abstract sense, there are differences in the supposedly colored subcultures across the globe, differences that can be attributed to the spatial social selection of the pattern of thoughts that are expressed in the sociability of a group of people. The Arabs, the Yorubas, the Dinkas, and the Zulus are different ethnic groupings of Africans; as a collective, they represent subcultures that are at times celebrated and contested. The second challenge is that of tracing the black American subculture to specific ethnic groups across the African subcontinent or elsewhere as a token of an "expression of an elementary entanglement" without separability [8]. One plausible direction is that since specific Africans were first enslaved by members of another ethnic grouping in Africa [9] and then re-enslaved and mixed and matched with other groupings across the Atlantic, they experienced epistemicide, linguicide, and culturecide [10]. Arguably, the subculture in the Deep South during and after slavery can be attributed to rural white labourers (often referred to as the rednecks or the Celtics) who emigrated from the borderland of England and Scotland. This grouping of people lived in a disorderly land where the appeal for order was low, and the exhibition of inappropriate behaviours was high; therefore, there is a good chance that the enslaved population in the South were inbred into the Redneck value system.

Fast-forwarding to recent historical events in North America, if the narrative advanced by CRT is that racism is institutional, one has to explain the swift ideological shift from the progressive to the liberal era about "the Negro problem" (W.E.B. Du Bois's term). During the progressive era, socioeconomic differences were attributed to race, whereas in the liberal era the emphasis was that racism brought about socio-political differences. So, in a post-racial society, what utilities would CRT offer in a technoscientific contest? The reader might, of course, be thinking of equality, fairness, justice, and liberation. Isn't it the case that in a competition, one would prefer to alight with one's own group over others? Isn't it the case that supposedly minority groups in the U.S. are often championing for preferential policies and palliatives? Isn't it the case that a significant proportion of the black American population only embraces the continental African cultural heritage when it serves a particular interest [11]? Isn't it the case that competition can be a good thing, as it encourages independence, imagination, curiosity, and creativity? My point is that there are subtle differences in the global colored subculture(s). Some are inborn and others inbred; we can sensibly celebrate and contest them without separability or complicity.

This reflection shouldn't be misunderstood as disregarding the Race in HCI Collective appeal underway [12], but rather be considered as an invitation that directs attention to how subtle power relations might have perpetuated a particular effort toward making HCI more race-conscious. The central argument of this piece is that the mere focus on a specific geographical perspective on "race" as a quick fix to longstanding power struggles in today's sociotechnical world will not deliver any substantial ontological and epistemological changes in the academy. And as identified by the Race in HCI collectives, race-oriented scholars in HCI "should avoid forcing racial identities on people in the name of diversity and inclusion" [12] or making the inference that "those who do not suffer from racism still benefit from its absence" [4]. I am not intimately engaging with CRT as a theoretical lens or a pedagogical practice; however, I am open to persuasion if it doesn't risk erasing other situated perspectives.

With the proliferation of a "race-bound" framing of computing and the call for a more "racially inclusive" HCI, I am keen on how ideas about post-racialism or post-capitalism can be drawn into the counternarratives of race-bound discourse, partly to further demonstrate the complexities of embracing a historical perspective that starts with the figure of Man. One can learn from the performativity of the postcolonial computing tactics that turned out to be enclosing the supposed uniqueness of marginalized voices—an issue that has received considerable attention in discussions of decolonizing African HCI. One can also recognize how CRT's acceptance of Western-led racial dialectic might have given rise to the repetition of perspectives that manipulates historic events for the sake of a self-serving story. My appeal is that, as agential beings, we can reason ourselves out of the mentality that Blackness/blackness, with its fragmentation, is to be likened to oppression and the oppressed.

Insight

- o What do we mean when we talk about the Black experience in HCI? What might we be centering or erasing with those answers?
- o In HCI, we can reason ourselves out of the mindset of binary thinking. The future is not black and white; it is multi-coloured.

Endnotes

1. Spiel, K. What Are You Reading? *Interactions 27*, 6 (2020), 23–26.
2. Dourish, P. User experience as a legitimacy trap. *Interactions 26*, 6 (2019), 46–49.

3. I am making a subtle distinction between *Black* and *black* here to denote how both biocentric categories function in historical discourses. The Black-on-black category as a closed entity is often assigned to a grouping of people or inferred as a collectivist identifier. For example, in postcolonial African studies, the emphasis has been on how the Black entity was adopted to represent the more recent inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa, whereas its adaptation as an identifier by the Sudanese—from the Arabic word *Bilad al-Sud* that implies the country of the blacks—denotes the complication of dialectics. My use of the black category is to showcase the improper depiction of Blackness as a fixated state within Western grammatical structures. Therefore, in the context of this piece, I refer to African American experiences as the *black* perspective and that of continental Africa as the *colored* ones—with the *Black* perspective as a complicated example. This distinction "allows us to imagine sociality, in such a way that attending to difference does not presuppose separability, determinacy, and sequentiality, the three ontological pillars that sustain modern thought" [8].

4. Ogbonnaya-Ogburu, I.F., Smith, A.D., To, A., and Toyama, K. Critical race theory for HCI. *Proc. of the 2020 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, New York, 2020, 1–16.

5. Harrington, C.N., Johnson, B., Ford, D., and Smith, A.D. Designing for the black experience. *Interactions 28*, 5 (2021), 22–27.

6. Brown, Q. et al. Reflecting on being black in computing. *Interactions 28*, 5 (2021), 34–37.

7. Cress Welsing, F. *The Isis (Yssis) Papers: The Keys to the Colors*. C.W. Publishing, 1991.

8. Silva, D. On difference without separability. In *Incerteza Viva/Living Uncertainty: 32ª Bienal de São Paulo*, exhibition catalog. J. Volz and J. Rebouças, eds. Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2016, 57–65.

9. Nwaubani, A.T. My great-grandfather, the Nigerian slave-trader. *The New Yorker*. Jul. 15, 2018; https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/my-great-grandfather-the-nigerian-slave-trader

10. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J. Decoloniality in Africa: A continuing search for a new world order. *The Australasian Review of African Studies 36*, 2 (2015), 22–50. Note: Epistemicide involves the disposition of Indigenous knowledge systems; linguicide implies the devaluation of people's language of imagination and expression; and culturecide entails the continual destruction of the organizing principles of a grouping of people.

11. With the recent increase in transatlantic pilgrimage and heritage tourism, one has to recognize how, as identified by Louis Chude-Sokei, the "American lust for an identity that can be purchased and a history that can be exchanged" has created an unbridgeable divide between the Black and black experience. This is an issue that doesn't seem to interest CRTs, as it might demand decentering Blackness (whatever that means nowadays) from particular political geographies. See Chude-Sokei, L. Invisible missive magnetic juju: On African cyber-crime. *The Fanzine*. 2010; http://thefanzine.com/invisible-missive-magnetic-juju-on-african-cyber-crime/

12. Smith, A.D.R. et al. Keepin' it real about race in HCI. *Interactions 28*, 5 (2021), 28–33.