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First-Year and Common Reading Guide

On Critical Race Theory

Why It Matters &
Why You Should Care

By Victor Ray

Guide written by Rachael Zafer

Random House

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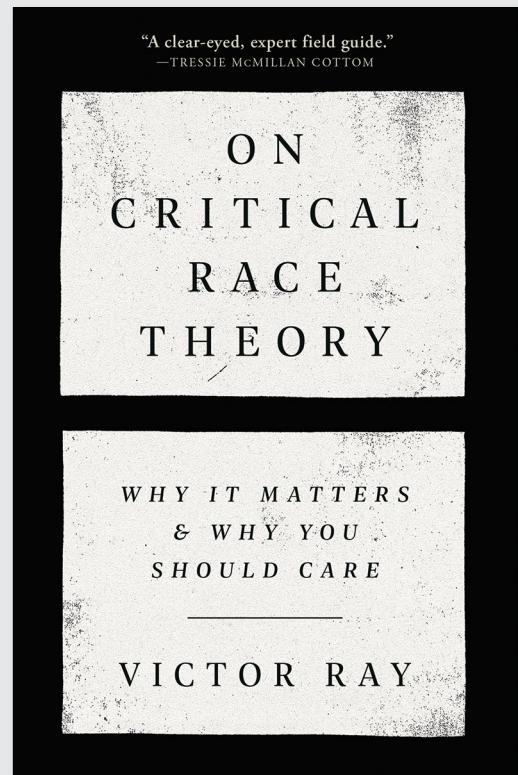
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ABOUT THE BOOK

From renowned scholar Dr. Victor Ray, *On Critical Race Theory* explains the centrality of race in American history and politics, and how the often mischaracterized intellectual movement became a political necessity.

Ray draws upon the radical thinking of giants such as Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to clearly trace the foundations of critical race theory in the Black intellectual traditions of emancipation and the civil rights movement. From these foundations, Ray explores the many facets of our society that critical race theory interrogates, from deeply embedded structural racism to the historical connection between whiteness and property, ownership, and more.

In succinct, thoughtful essays, Ray presents, analyzes, and breaks down the scholarship and concepts that constitute this often misconstrued term. He explores how the conversation on critical race theory has expanded into the contemporary popular conscience, showing why critical race theory matters and why we should all care.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victor Ray was born in Pittsburgh and raised in western Pennsylvania. After receiving his bachelor of arts in urban studies at Vassar, he earned his PhD from Duke University in 2014. His work has been published in a number of peer-reviewed journals, including *American Sociological Review* and *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Dr. Ray is a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and his research has been funded by the Ford Foundation. As an active public scholar, his social and critical commentary has appeared in outlets such as *The Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *Boston Review*. Victor Ray currently resides in Iowa City.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did the author experience racism and discrimination as a young person? How were his experiences with racism similar to or different from your own experiences? How did the racial and gender identities of your family members impact your experiences as a young person?
2. When was the author introduced to critical race theory? When did you first learn about critical race theory? What definition were you taught? How have politicians and other public figures misrepresented CRT in recent years? How can moral panic around CRT lead to support for racist policies?
3. How has racism operated as an organizing principle in American political history? How does CRT demonstrate how race is foundational to the law? How is the fight against racism central to American history?
4. How is ignorance of American racial history and racial inequality used as a weapon in attacks on critical race theory? How are people in power working to legally mandate racial ignorance? What can you do to resist this approach?
5. How does racism operate as a central political fault line in the United States? How does critical race theory explain how this fault line runs through the legal system? What are some of the limitations to using the law to advance racial justice?
6. What is the difference between structural racism and individual racism? How does structural racism impact policy? How does a focus on individual racism obscure how acts of discrimination can impact entire communities? What are some examples of biased processes built into policies or laws?
7. How does segregation facilitate resource hoarding? Have you ever lived in a segregated area? If yes, what consequences did you experience or observe? Has your racial identity impacted your access to resourced schools, parks, healthy grocery stores, and health care? Why or why not?
8. How do people in positions of power (including bosses, teachers, and doctors) operate as gatekeepers for distributing resources? How can their decisions contribute to adverse health outcomes? Has your identity impacted how you interact with people in power? Why or why not?
9. What is colorblind racism? How does colorblind racism shape access to resources, laws, policies, and social practices? Where have you seen people use colorblind language? What can you do to interrupt use of colorblind language?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (CONTINUED)

10. What is interest convergence? Why does progress for Black Americans often come with equal or greater benefits for white Americans? What are some examples of interest convergence in your region or community?
11. Why does critical race theory prioritize centering the narratives of people of color? What is the racial “hierarchy of credibility”? How do these hierarchies distort reality? Whose voices are frequently disempowered, dehumanized, and disbelieved?
12. What is racialized organizations theory? How does race shape how organizations function? How do organizations shape agency between racial groups? How do organizations reproduce racial inequality?
13. How does structural racism impact health care? What is the danger of using algorithms for diagnosis and treatment? Can algorithms be created without bias? Why or why not?
14. What is intersectionality? How are Black women often erased from intersectionality in mainstream conversations? Have you seen this term applied correctly? What are some examples of policies that could be redesigned to be more expansive, flexible, and intersectional?
15. What is your reaction to the author’s assertion that “America’s history is disturbing, and a healthy society should be disturbed”? Were you disturbed by any stories in the book? How can a deeper understanding of critical race theory help you think differently about how history influences current policy?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. “Racism Is Like a Cadillac”

Share the Malcolm X quote from the beginning of chapter 2: “Racism is like a Cadillac, they bring out a new model every year.” Utilizing this simile, how would you describe this year’s model of racism? How is it different from five years ago? How is it different from 50 years ago? Participants can respond to this quote in writing, engage in peer-to-peer conversation, or in a group discussion. This activity can be replicated with the other 17 quotes found at the beginning of each chapter.

2. Race and Organizations

Ask students to make a list of five local or national organizations that they have interacted with. Compile the results and select two or three organizations that were shared by the group. Ask students to research the racial makeup of the staff and board of these organizations. Are the organizations transparent about this composition? How does transparency (or lack of it) impact how these organizations may be perceived, funded, supported, or otherwise included in their communities? How do these organizations address or ignore structural racism?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES (CONTINUED)

3. What's on the Ballot?

Take a close look at what's on the ballot for your next local election. Are any of the candidates talking about critical race theory in schools? How might ballot proposals have different impacts on white communities and communities of color? You can find information about your local ballot, voter registration, and voting checklists at www.vote411.org. Consider also researching how critical race theory has been discussed in local elections over the past several years. How have candidates discussed critical race theory in relation to their platforms? Has it shaped debates or town halls? When did this discourse begin and how has it changed over time?

4. The Racial Wealth Gap and Your Community

Learn more about the racial wealth gap in your community. What are some of the economic and racial disparities that exist where you live? What do you notice when you examine property values and the cost of rent in different neighborhoods? How did social policies such as the New Deal and the GI Bill impact your community and region? How has whiteness or proximity to whiteness helped or hindered the ability to own property and accumulate wealth in your community?

5. Freedom Dreams

Who are some of the freedom dreamers shared in the text that inspire you or that you would like to learn more about? What does it mean to visualize and cultivate freedom dreams? How do freedom dreams threaten structural racism? Consider sharing your reflections on freedom dreams at Freedom Dreaming: A Call to Imagine: freedomdreaming.commons.gc.cuny.edu.

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

1. Disregarding Race

Learn more about France's ban on the state collection of data. Does ignoring racial categories impact racial inequality? Are there any benefits to adopting an official state policy that disregards race?

2. Genetic Testing

Learn more about how genetic testing companies address racial categories. Is it possible for genetic tests to identify racial identity? Why or why not? How can preexisting beliefs about racial identity influence genetic test results?

3. Racist Destruction of Wealth and Property

How have white Americans historically targeted economically successful Black people? Learn more about the 1921 attacks on Black communities in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Knoxville, Tennessee. How did these acts of violence immediately

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES (CONTINUED)

impact Black residents? What longterm impact did they have on Black residents? How do acts of violence prevent people of color from acquiring and preserving wealth and property over the long term?

4. The Space Traders

Read Derrick Bell's short story, "The Space Traders" at tinyurl.com/TheSpaceTraders. How does this parable illustrate the theory of interest divergence, which asserts that "the interest of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites"? What were some of the public reactions to Bell's story?

5. The 1619 Project

Explore the interactive initiative from *The New York Times Magazine* about the beginning of American slavery at tinyurl.com/The1619Project. What did you learn from this tool? What have been some of the public reactions to this project? How is The 1619 Project often misrepresented? Do you notice similar reactions or misrepresentations of critical race theory? In what ways are The 1619 Project and critical race theory intertwined in political discourse and public perception?

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

These projects are designed to connect students' learning experiences with the larger community.

1. Voter Registration

Research the history of voter disenfranchisement in your state, including past and present laws that have prevented people from voting. How can people register to vote in your region? Does your state have automatic or same-day voter registration? Can residents vote by mail or do they have to vote at the polls? Survey a group of people in your community about your local election laws. Do all or most know how to register to vote? Identify a local organization and volunteer your time to help distribute accurate and timely information about voter registration in your area.

2. Join a Solidarity Campaign

Find a multiracial coalition or organization in your local or regional community. What issues does this group focus on? How do organizers approach differences in race and class? Join a call, webinar, or event to learn more about the organization's work and volunteer your time to phone bank, collect signatures, or distribute resources.

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS (CONTINUED)

3. Racial Justice in the Classroom

Learn more about how PreK–12 schools in your local community are talking about race and racism. Attend a school board meeting livestream or join in person. Does your local school board discuss inequality and structural racism? How do presenters and attendees discuss testing, tracking, and punishment? Consider volunteering directly with a school or through a local mentoring or tutoring organization.

4. Host a Teach-in

How is your campus community talking about critical race theory? When and how have you noticed critical race theory inaccurately described by media, political figures, or neighbors? Identify a group of your peers and host a community teach-in on campus or in your wider community. Outline the key tenets of critical race theory and plan a discussion that explores common misunderstandings. Consider distributing a handout that highlights your key points.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Read “School is for Making Citizens” by Heather McGhee and Victor Ray in *The New York Times*: tinyurl.com/SchoolsForMakingCitizens
- Read “Critical Race Theory’s Merchants of Doubt” in *Time*: tinyurl.com/TimeMerchantsOfDoubt
- Read “Racism isn’t about ignorance. Some highly educated people have upheld systemic inequality.” by Victor Ray and Alan Aja in *The Washington Post*: tinyurl.com/WPSystemicInequality
- Read “Critical Race Theory: A Brief History” by Jacey Fortin in *The New York Times*: tinyurl.com/CRTABriefHistory
- Listen to the podcast episode “The Debate Over Critical Race Theory” in *The Daily*: tinyurl.com/TheDailyCRT
- Learn more about Franz Boas in NPR Throughline’s “The Invention of Race”: tinyurl.com/NPRIventionOfRace
- Read “Why saying ‘I don’t see race at all’ just makes racism worse” by Heather McGhee at Ideas.Ted.com: tinyurl.com/TEDIDontSeeRace
- Learn more about the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* on *History*: tinyurl.com/HistoryPlessyVFerguson
- Read “We Want Black Students, Just Not You: How White Admissions Counselors Screen Black Prospective Students” by Ted Thornhill in *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*: tinyurl.com/RaceAndAdmissions
- Read “The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Racism” by Charles R. Lawrence III: tinyurl.com/ReckoningWithUnconsciousRacism

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES (CONTINUED)

- Read the interview, “Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later” from Columbia Law School: tinyurl.com/ColumbiaLawIntersectionality
- Learn more about Kimberlé Crenshaw and *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* in “The intersectionality wars” in Vox: tinyurl.com/VoxIntersectionalityWars
- Learn more about the Combahee River Collective in “Until Black Women Are Free, None of Us Will Be Free” by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor: tinyurl.com/TNYCombaheeRiverCollective
- Read “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh: tinyurl.com/UnpackingWhitePrivilege

ABOUT THIS GUIDE'S WRITER

Rachael Zafer is a writer, educator, and social change consultant and provides creative and technical consulting to nonprofits and institutions across the country. Rachael is the author of discussion guides for 30 texts, including *The Sum of Us* by Heather McGhee, *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson, and *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi. You can view her discussion guides at www.rachaelzafer.com.



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