

Chapter I

Historical Perspectives on Analog and Digital Equity: A Critical Race Theory Approach

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author uses the philosophical lens of critical race theory (CRT) to shed light upon the vast inequalities in access to information technologies that exist among racial, ethnic, and socio-economic groups; a phenomenon that has come to be known as the digital divide. The primary focus is on how the digital divide has played out for African Americans and the use of CRT to explain the history of inequalities and why significant differences in educational opportunities have persisted into the 21st century. The author adopts the term “analog divide” to refer to all the non-computer/telecommunications-based educational inequities that African Americans have experienced for decades and even centuries. She further purports that one cannot understand or begin to rectify the digital divide unless one is willing to fully confront and attack the problem of the analog divide that preceded it and continues to persist.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I use the philosophical lens of critical race theory (CRT) to shed light upon the vast inequalities in access to information technologies that exists among racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups; a phenomenon that has come to be known as the digital divide. I focus primarily on

how the digital divide has played out for African Americans, and use CRT to explain the history of inequalities and why significant differences in educational opportunities have persisted into the 21st century. I adopt the term “analog divide” to refer to all the non-computer/telecommunications-based educational inequities that African Americans have experienced for decades and

even centuries. I further purport that one cannot understand or begin to rectify the digital divide unless one is willing to fully confront and attack the problem of the analog divide that preceded it and continues to persist. Furthermore, the analog divide, with its resultant structural inequalities, demonstrates not only how social and cultural factors shape technology, but also illuminates the nature of technology and human interaction and how this interaction is shaped by these same factors.

The major tenets of CRT used to examine these divides are the claims that: a) racism is ingrained in the fabric of American society to the extent that it is invisible to most, and racist behaviors and attitudes therefore seem normal to the average citizen and b) the perspectives and stances of marginalized groups are many times best represented in the form of narratives, storytelling, and counter-storytelling. (Delgado, 1995)

In this chapter, I utilize counter-storytelling by presenting the reader with an original allegory entitled, “Crossing the Great Divide: A Tale of Analog and Digital Inequity.” In this tale one finds two groups of troll-like beings, with one group dominating and enslaving the other. As the story unfolds, the reader sees how the oppressed become caught in a cycle of poverty and stuck in a land that weakens them and deprives them of the energy to cross over the great divide into more fertile fields. The dominant group, having given up their brutally overt oppressive ways after crossing the divide into lands where slave labor is no longer needed, soon forget why they had the energy and fortitude to cross the divide whereas the enslaved group did not. In fact, because of the hybrid food crop (knowledge) that the oppressed have been forced to ingest, they too have forgotten why they have been left behind and stuck in a cycle of backbreaking work and struggle. The tale ends with a group of concerned amnesiac leaders holding council concerning ways and means to bring more of the weakened

and impoverished across the divide into the rich soil of the northern region.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES

Critical race theory maintains that racism is endemic and pervasive in American society to the extent that all but the most blatant, egregious racist behaviors and attitudes are considered normal. Thus, critical race theorists, most notably Derrick Bell (1987) and Richard Delgado (1995), have used storytelling to bring into focus issues of race and racism in American society. The use of allegory allows the reader to view all too familiar issues and situations from new angles and perspectives. In “Crossing the Great Divide” I use allegorical storytelling to illuminate issues of racial inequality in the United States and to explain why the gaps in educational opportunities, including access to information technology, persist into this century. In this story, the oppressed are faced with these insurmountable gaps in the form of a vast and expansive chasm. This chasm represents the enormous inequalities in access to information technologies that exist between racial, ethnic, and social-economic groups; a phenomenon that has come to be known as the digital divide. “[T]he digital divide is conceived as,” in van Dijk’s (2005) work, “a social and political problem, not a technical one. Physical access is portrayed as only one kind of (material) access among at least four: motivational, material, skills, and usage” (p. 3). Moreover, the chasm or Great Divide in the tale is also a symbol of the many inequities that began and were nurtured long before the information or digital age. This immense chasm represents an “analog divide” wherein historically disadvantaged racial groups, specifically Black Americans, have been denied equal access to economic and educational opportunities. The analog divide simply refers to differential accesses

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