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## Kimberlé W. Crenshaw

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First and foremost, I would like to thank the Academy for this incredible honor. I am simply awed to be in the company of so many of our country’s most brilliant academic, creative, and scientific minds. And because of this, I am exceptionally proud and incredibly nervous to have been tapped to speak on behalf of Class III: the Social and Behavioral Sciences.

As delighted as I am to be standing here today, celebrating the gifts that the sciences and the arts have given to the world, I cannot shake off the worry that the attacks on knowledge and on our very democracy have reached unimaginable heights in part because of the unfinished work of grappling with our nation’s racial history and our profound discomfort in talking about it.

This discomfort, of course, knows no political ideology. Yes, it is being weaponized by those who stand against societal progress and who wax nostalgic for a time when freedom was enjoyed by only a privileged few. But it is also shared by all too many who are truly horrified by our past, who are discomforted by its long shadow, and who choose to deal with our nation’s ugliness by ignoring it.

It is thus that colorblindness has become a sweet spot between a radicalized faction that seeks to return to the past by making racism and its continuing legacies literally *unspeakable*, and those who sincerely hope we can create a better future by circumnavigating that past.

Of course, the resort to being silent about endangering conditions would make little sense in the context of, say, the toxic consequences of substances built into our physical infrastructure, like asbestos or lead. It would make no sense at all to refuse to identify the presence of such toxins, to preclude the skills necessary for their removal, or to condemn the knowledge necessary to do so as divisive. And it makes no more sense to suppress vital knowledge about the toxic dimensions of our history that are similarly embedded in our economy, politics, and the law – stories that begin but do not end with the appropriation of land, of labor, and of the wombs of Black women to build the United States.

We are at a point where the colorblind sweet spot has created a bitter harvest. Racism has been a route through which anti-democratic politics have become mainstream. But in the same way that the overthrow of Reconstruction was not simply a product of the Confederate factions regaining power, but of the permissions granted by Unionists who sought reconciliation at the cost of our democracy, today's crisis is also abetted by those who cannot see or refuse to name how White supremacy is again facilitating our descent into tyranny. The Confederate flag that entered the U.S. Capitol for the first time in history on January 6 was no accident; the men and women who sought to retake a nation they believed to be stolen from them were far from colorblind in their grievance about what they were losing and to whom. And yet, despite the clear and present danger that finds our democracy teetering on the edge of implosion, we have witnessed a discomfort in grappling with the White supremacist conditions of this possibility, a condition that disables the nation's ability to sound the alarms that are now overdue.

In the face of insurrection, political violence, and a nearly successful political coup, we hear refrains that “this is not who we are,” despite the fact that violent coups, vicious repression, and utter tyranny are clearly part of who we have been. When I hear that “it” can't happen here, despite the fact that it already has, I wonder what it is about racism that makes what is done under its hood unrecognizable as the denial of democracy that it truly is.

These are the questions that critical race thinking takes up. And it is perhaps why the manufactured moral panic over Critical Race Theory has

been used to justify some of the most dramatic assaults on ideas, education, and democratic participation since the McCarthy era. Racial grievance is the Trojan Horse that has brought authoritarianism to the center of American politics; liberal discomfort is its enabler.

Want to ban books, discredit and defund public education, undermine democratic participation, and gain a greater toehold in the terrain of higher education? Create a racial boogeyman, load it up with the kind of frights that send your disgruntled base screaming into local school boards, and then count on the mainstream press to launder your disinformation by applying its “both sides” reporting to this newly minted “controversy.” Meanwhile, others simply wait to see whether the mob will come for them. Of course, they will, and they have. But as Pastor Martin Niemöller famously wrote, by the time they do, there will be no one left to speak out for them.

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The damage that anti-democratic forces have been able to inflict is not because they are particularly stealth. They have been clear about their objectives to return to a mythic past, to dismantle public institutions that stand in the way, to change the rules so that they can win, and to generate alternative facts when the real ones don't work for them. Majorities in this country oppose all of these moves. But our collective avoidance of uncomfortable conversations about race – and the negligence in teaching our children about it – allows this agenda to fly under the radar. When fewer than 10 percent of high school seniors can correctly identify that slavery was the cause of the Civil War, the clear and present threat isn't too much education about our history, but too little.

If all of this sounds personal, I confess, these past few years have not been a walk in the park. To watch a community of ideas and scholarship that many of us in this room have contributed to for over three decades become recoded, appropriated,

and burned, seemingly effortlessly, is sobering, to say the least.

Too many times well-meaning witnesses to this arson – pundits, colleagues, and allies – have paused before picking up a bucket or a hose to put out the fire, waiting to understand what the building actually holds before contributing to the effort to contain the burn. Well, what exactly is Critical Race Theory (CRT) they will ask while the arsonists slip away from behind their gaze. I tell them what I know – that CRT is knowledge from and about lives lived in the twilight of an aborted racial reckoning, in a nation that has yet to meet Dr. King’s demand to fund the promissory note. CRT is subaltern knowledge, elder wisdom, mother wit, survival literacy, description, prism, and practice. CRT is the reason some of us place our hands at the 10 o’clock and 2 o’clock positions when we see the flashing lights in our rearview mirror. It is the talk many of us must give our children to improve their odds of survival. It is the mirror we hold up to our whole society. It is the recognition that if people are unaware of the policies, politics, and practices that created segregated housing markets, the criminal injustice system, gaping wealth, health disparities, and more, they will default to understanding these conditions as natural, neutral, just there, leaving efforts to redress them to appear to be preferential. It is the knowledge brought into universities by generations of students who upon our arrival, set about to interrogate how our disciplines historically shored up an unjust status quo. If racism is the asbestos that is packed into our institutions, then Critical Race Theory is the blueprint that endeavors to reveal where it is, how it endangers us all, and what practices we all can learn to diminish its toxicity.

But here’s the problem: thinking that the issue is really about defining Critical Race Theory allows this racial panic to function as the Trojan Horse for anti-democrats to eviscerate the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement, to reboot the last seventy years, and to destroy the democratic routes that brought us this far. While pundits scour European history for the “signs” of democratic collapse, they seem to overlook what is in plain sight: faculty being barred from testifying in lawsuits in Florida, teachers being made to take loyalty oaths in New Hampshire, monitors being placed in classrooms, and bounties being placed on teachers for exposing students to divisive subjects like the history of genocide and segregation. When we see the banning of more than one thousand books nationwide, including those by Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison and civil rights pioneer Ruby

Bridges, when we see foreign nations exploiting our racist tendencies to execute disinformation campaigns to drive us apart, we can see that it is because of the unfinished business with our discomforting legacies.

I am grateful that the American Academy demonstrates how to put difficult history into context better than even the current majority of the Supreme Court, who consult the founding fathers not to correct their failings but to tie the possibility of what we can become to their cramped view of who deserves to be included. Imagine consulting the founders’ vision on whether someone like me would be voted into a community like this. Actually, most of us would be gone in a rapturous heartbeat.

What we celebrate here is not being forever bound to the practice, myths, and beliefs of the past. But we can and should do more to protect the legacy of the last seventy years by defending academic freedom in our faculty senates, real reporting in our editorial desks, real accountability in our boardrooms, real history in our classrooms, and sustained actions to diversify our institutions. If we blink in the face of what we are confronting, give into the ambivalence grounded in discomfort, we will leave it for another generation to solve our unfinished business, with fewer tools to do so.

When my students ask me where in the midst of this unfolding crisis I find room to hope, I remind them that the founding mothers and fathers of the nation had no concrete reason to be hopeful for a better America. But Frederick Douglass, Charles Hamilton Houston, Fannie Lou Hamer, Pauli Murray, and others knew that the very possibility of a future that reflects our highest aspirations turns on sustaining our belief that such a future is right and worth fighting for.

The pursuit of knowledge, like freedom and democracy, is a constant struggle. It is not a one-and-done scenario; we don’t get to keep what was won in one generation without struggling to name it, retain it, institutionalize it, and protect it. I for one do not want to be that generation that failed to pass the baton to the next in a better position than the one I received it in. I hope we will not be the generation that the future will judge as a failure because we could not muster the wherewithal to lance the boil that has disfigured our nation. Du Bois said that the challenge of the twentieth century was the color line; its descendent that we must come to terms with in the twenty-first century is the distortions of the color-blind.