

Tuesday Topics May 3, 2022

Summary

President Carole Jordan opened the meeting with announcements. Since the library has a number of summer reading programs, summer Tuesday Topics (June, July and August) will be held on Zoom and return to hybrid in September. Following her announcements, President Jordan introduced Dr. Tom Prasch, Professor and Chair of History and Geography at Washburn University, and Dr. Kara Kendall-Morwick, Associate Professor of English at Washburn University to present a highly informative program entitled "The Truth About Critical Race Theory."

The name Critical Race Theory (CRT) was coined by Kimberle' Crenshaw, professor at UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School, in 1989. It is also informed by the Frankfurt School in Germany in 1930 when CRT sought to understand the rise of Nazi power. CRT was politicized by Christopher Rufo, a conservative activist and senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. Rufo has appeared on Fox News talking about CRT.

CRT is a theory, a framework, to help us understand issues facing different people such as household wealth, college education rates, home ownership, poverty rates, health outcomes, COVID deaths, longevity, incarceration and political representation. CRT is a legal theory that asks "why are there disparities?" Prasch explained race is a social construct not a biological fact. Race shapes our lived experiences. Liberal race reform failed and Brown v. Board has had limited results. In the 1970s-80s CRT emerged to understand the way in which the Civil Rights movement had stalled.

CRT does NOT say one race is better than another. Bills and laws in numerous states are very nearly identical (ALEC?). Prasch described them as boilerplate legislative acts employing the same language and misrepresentations over and over. The idea that CRT should be banned from classrooms because students should not have to experience discomfort or guilt would make teaching history next to impossible. In 2021 the Kansas State Department of Education announced CRT is not part of Kansas academic standards.

Kendall-Morwick spoke about CRT in the humanities. It is seen in film, mass media and literature. Critical Race Theory allows us to understand how members of a group construct their identity and how might things be different. A novel like The Great Gatsby, which is filled with descriptions of privileged whites, could lead to a discussion of race. She stressed that "although CRT itself is not taught at the high school level, the language in anti-CRT legislation could suppress virtually any discussion of race and racism in the classroom." In literature, how could a novel by Toni Morrison be taught without talking about race?

Kendall-Morwick quoted a statement from the Purdue OWL: "Critical Race Theory, or CRT, is a theoretical and interpretive mode that examines the appearance of race and racism across dominant cultural modes of expression." She shared another quote from Dr. Amaarah DeCuir, "CRT allows us to explain the persistence of inequities by the persistence of racism and gives us a language to make that explanation visible for our students." According to Kendall-Morwick, "Because racism is an embedded part of American and other societies, we seek to better understand all aspects of society by applying CRT."

Prasch and Kendall-Morwick provided a thorough overview of Critical Race Theory, the truth about what it intends to explain and what it does not contain. The recording of their presentation is available on the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library website.