GET THE POINT CRITICAL RACE THEORY: WORKING OFF THE PAST

What is Critical Race Theory and why is it under attack from the political right? Why did POTUS Trump, in the midst of a pandemic, a climate emergency and economic crisis, take it upon himself to attack Critical Race Theory? Some think that he or, more likely, some around him, may have appreciated the power of this groundbreaking intellectual movement to change the world. Dr. Kimberle Crenshaw, editor of the book Critical Race Theory, told Time magazine, "It's an approach to grappling with a history of white supremacy that rejects the belief that what's in the past is in the past, and that the laws and systems that grow from the past are detached from it." Or, in the words of William Faulkner, "The past is not dead, it's not even past." Above all, Critical Race Theory seeks to counter the obtuse notion of colorblindness in America's legal, social, and cultural discourse. Either the sky is blue or it is not: the leaves are green or red or they are not. Unfortunately, perhaps, even shamefully wrapped up in the myth of white supremacy and black inferiority is the myth of white altruism and benevolence: the idea that Europeans enslaved Africans for their own good- they were doing Africans a favor, they were Civilizing them; otherwise, they would be eating their aunts and uncles for lunch. This same attitude and thinking applies to genocide against Native Americas: European colonial settlers were killing them and stealing their land for their own good, to Christianize them. Today, the descendants, of these same Europeans, in Europe and America, are bombing Muslims in the Middle East and stealing the resources of Latin America, whenever possible, to help them, to teach them about Democracy and Capitalism. This is the perspective today from which much of American education is predominantly taught and political policy derives. It is also a cause of the cognitive 2 dissonance and inability of white American society to repent or display any sense of shame or need of atonement, for that enslavement and genocide: two of the most heinous crimes in human history. I don't mention the Holocaust here because Germany is a special case, I'll discuss soon. Or the nuclear bombing of civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Still, at the outset, it is important to note, that along with antisemitism as an essential tenet of the Nazi worldview, the "centrality of anticommunism to the Nazi program" (Susan Neiman, Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil, p.102). This, to me, sounds uneasily like America's racist worldview and rabid antisocialism. Repentance is a revolutionary sentiment. It is good for relationships between individuals and relationship between peoples and nations. The Germans have a word for it, Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung – working off the past. Neiman states: "Working off Germany's criminal past was not an academic exercise; it was too intimate for that. It meant confronting parents and teachers and calling their authority rotten" (Neiman, 7-8). She reminds us that, "In Germany,

condemnation of anti-Semitism was swift, sharp, and serious. It came from the top of the government and was echoed by most voices outside it. In Charlottesville, Nazis were excused" (13). In summary form here, Neiman offers what she considers "critical facets of any successful attempt to work off a nation's criminal past" – facets that strikingly resemble Critical Race Theory and the anti-Racism work of Ibram X. Kendi How to Be An Antiracist: Isabel Wilkeson Caste: Michele Alexander The New Jim Crow: Cornel West Race Matters: Heather Mcghee The Sum of Us and others. Dr. Neiman identifies five critical facets: 1. The nation must achieve a coherent and widely accepted national narrative. Was the Civil War about slavery or states' rights? 3 2. Narratives start with words and are reenforced by symbols, and many symbols involve remembering the dead. Which heroes do we valorize, which victims do we mourn? The United States has hundreds of monuments depicting a noble-looking Robert E. Lee commander of the Confederate Army. Where are the national monuments to the freedom fighter John Brown or to Harriet Tubman? There are no monuments to the Nazis in Germany, East or West. After reunification West Germany did build significant monuments to the victims…including memorials to places where synagogues once stood, to Jews and other opponents of the regime who were murdered by Nazis…monuments dedicated to Christian leaders who fell victim to the Nazis, a monument that honors gay victims who often go uncounted. (There should be no monuments to Confederates in America; and the Confederate flag, like the Nazi swastika must be illegal to display – my note.) 3. Narratives are transported through education. What are children taught to remember, and what are they meant to forget? American textbooks want to leave out the genocide of Native Americans entirely, and gloss over the horrors of slavery, and never mention Jim Crow. [Today, in the U.S. Texas Republicans, and Republican Lawmakers around America, want to ban public schools teaching history of white supremacy – my note]. East German history textbooks were resolutely antifascist from the beginning…Today Nazism is not merely covered in history classes; it has a central place in subjects like literature and art. 4. Words are even more powerful when set to music. So can we sing "Dixie"? The GDR (German Democratic Republic) wrote new music 4 as well as lyrics for its own national anthem. A national anthem, done properly, expresses its people's best hopes. Done properly. It may be time for the United States to rewrite our national anthem, with its unsingable tune and its references to a war no one remembers. 5. What about things that are less symbolic: hard, cold things like prison cells and cash? Are perpetrators brought to justice and placed behind bars? Is restitution made to victims of injustice? What happened to those who murdered Medgar Evers, Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner, Emmett Till. The man who shot Trevon Martin is free; Tamir Rice's killer was never indicted, though he was fired from the Cleveland police force then hired by the police in another Ohio town…As of this writing, the United

States has refused to consider a congressional resolution to discuss the possibility of reparations for slavery (Neiman, Learning From the Germans, 85-86). In 1945 following the end of WWII, Germany embarked on a rigorous "denazification and antifascist" campaign. If you've ever had the misfortune to learn an awful truth about your parents, you can put yourself in German shoes, and Southern shoes following the Civil War. However, rather than repent or seek atonement, Southern whites chose to build monuments to traitors and create caricatures of African Americans, to suggest their undeserved freedom: they were just big-lipped clowns and buffoons. According to Texas State Representative, Erin Zwiener: "This (Texas) bill is not about 'critical race theory.' What they are describing is not critical race theory. 'Critical race theory' is this Boogeyman they have identified. What this is about is whitewashing history. Whitewashing our English (and History) classes. And folks trying to avoid the uncomfortable elements of our history…it's important that we 5 learn that slavery was the main driver of the Civil War." He concludes, "A fair number of Republicans want us to stay in that place of ignorance. There's this fallacy that if everyone is ignorant of racism and sexism, it will just evaporate…Pretending they're not there makes us more vulnerable to their sting" (Carrie N. Baker, Ms., 8/2/2021). Dr. Susan Neiman points out that there were many Germans, like Konrad Adenauer, who "spoke of silent forgetting…who hoped that if [they] never spoke of the Nazi period, it would be forgotten" (99). And, just like there's a tendency among many Germans to try to forget the Nazi period all together, there's a similar tendency in the United States to try to forget the genocide of Native Americans and the enslavement of Africans. Instead, the Germans engaged in Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung – working off the past. The way of honesty, of Truth and Reconciliation. Texas Representative Zwiener concludes this way: "We need to tell students the full history. If we don't, history repeats itself. We don't need to be scared of telling the full truth. We should be confident that we can tell that story and hold that complexity, instead of needing to deliver a sanitized narrative and pretend that our country and our state are faultless. It's about knowing our full story, and knowing the progress that has been made so that we can protect it … Fragility really gets in the way of our ability to have full conversations" (Ms. 8/2/2021). Again, the Earth Constitution provides illumination and direction in this area of Education. Article 4.35 states: "Develop a world university system. Obtain the correction of prejudicial communicative materials which cause misunderstandings or conflicts due to differences of race, religion, sex, national origin or affiliation" (34-35). Everybody should learn as much as they can from everybody they can, about everybody they can, and for everybody they can.