

1  
00:00:05,240 --> 00:00:07,040  
My name's Robert Craig.

2  
00:00:07,040 --> 00:00:07,960  
I'm a lecturer in

3  
00:00:07,960 --> 00:00:09,200  
English and American literature

4  
00:00:09,200 --> 00:00:12,600  
and culture at the University of Bamberg.

5  
00:00:12,600 --> 00:00:13,880  
And in this video, I want

6  
00:00:13,880 --> 00:00:15,840  
to introduce you to an idea

7  
00:00:15,840 --> 00:00:18,240  
which in recent decades has come to play

8  
00:00:18,240 --> 00:00:19,360  
a really important

9  
00:00:19,360 --> 00:00:21,160  
role in helping us think

10  
00:00:21,160 --> 00:00:23,120  
about cultural, ethnic

11  
00:00:23,120 --> 00:00:25,440  
and racial diversity.

12  
00:00:25,440 --> 00:00:26,280  
I'm gonna be talking

13  
00:00:26,280 --> 00:00:28,800  
about intersectionality

14  
00:00:28,800 --> 00:00:31,480

and its origins in something called

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00:00:31,480 --> 00:00:33,800  
critical race theory.

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00:00:33,800 --> 00:00:34,600  
And I'm also gonna be

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00:00:34,600 --> 00:00:36,960  
showing how we might understand

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00:00:36,960 --> 00:00:38,480  
and illustrate some of the

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00:00:38,480 --> 00:00:40,680  
ideas behind these concepts

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00:00:40,680 --> 00:00:41,880  
with the help of a

21

00:00:41,880 --> 00:00:44,880  
very famous short story.

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00:00:44,880 --> 00:00:47,080  
Let me start with an example.

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00:00:47,080 --> 00:00:49,480  
So imagine there's a very well-qualified

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00:00:49,480 --> 00:00:51,880  
female Syrian migrant,

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00:00:51,880 --> 00:00:53,240  
originally from a poor

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00:00:53,240 --> 00:00:55,080  
working class background

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00:00:55,080 --> 00:00:56,040  
who's recently learned

28

00:00:56,040 --> 00:00:57,560  
to speak very good German

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00:00:57,560 --> 00:00:59,480  
before coming to Germany,

30

00:00:59,480 --> 00:01:01,240  
but increasingly finds

31

00:01:01,240 --> 00:01:03,640  
herself more and more disadvantaged

32

00:01:03,640 --> 00:01:06,520  
in her workplace in Munich.

33

00:01:06,520 --> 00:01:08,560  
She's repeatedly overlooked

34

00:01:08,560 --> 00:01:10,200  
and given consistently

35

00:01:10,200 --> 00:01:12,520  
low level repetitive work

36

00:01:12,520 --> 00:01:13,400  
well beneath her

37

00:01:13,400 --> 00:01:15,640  
qualification and skill level

38

00:01:15,640 --> 00:01:18,440  
by her white German male boss,

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00:01:18,440 --> 00:01:20,280  
a man who is very friendly

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00:01:20,280 --> 00:01:23,560  
and not otherwise unpleasant to her.

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00:01:23,560 --> 00:01:24,880

It's clearly become a case

42

00:01:24,880 --> 00:01:28,320  
of bias, even of prejudice,

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00:01:28,320 --> 00:01:31,520  
even if that's unconscious bias.

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00:01:31,520 --> 00:01:32,760  
But how are we supposed to

45

00:01:32,760 --> 00:01:34,680  
tackle this problem of bias

46

00:01:34,680 --> 00:01:37,160  
when the boss can claim, for example,

47

00:01:37,160 --> 00:01:39,760  
that he's not racist because he's friends

48

00:01:39,760 --> 00:01:42,120  
with male colleagues and employees

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00:01:42,120 --> 00:01:45,040  
of Turkish German background,

50

00:01:45,040 --> 00:01:46,960  
that he's not sexist

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00:01:46,960 --> 00:01:48,200  
because he doesn't discriminate

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00:01:48,200 --> 00:01:49,960  
against German female colleagues,

53

00:01:49,960 --> 00:01:51,240  
or for example, an

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00:01:51,240 --> 00:01:53,520  
Italian female colleague,

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00:01:53,520 --> 00:01:55,680  
or that he's not classist

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00:01:55,680 --> 00:01:56,720  
because he himself comes

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00:01:56,720 --> 00:01:59,560  
from a working class background?

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00:01:59,560 --> 00:02:00,440  
Now, none of these

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00:02:00,440 --> 00:02:02,520  
issues has an easy answer.

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00:02:02,520 --> 00:02:04,840  
And clearly this case of bias

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00:02:04,840 --> 00:02:06,000  
isn't just a social

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00:02:06,000 --> 00:02:07,560  
and political problem,

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00:02:07,560 --> 00:02:11,280  
but perhaps a legal problem as well.

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00:02:11,280 --> 00:02:13,880  
Now, what intersectionality does

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00:02:13,880 --> 00:02:16,040  
is to provide us with some of the tools

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00:02:16,040 --> 00:02:16,840  
for starting to

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00:02:16,840 --> 00:02:19,360  
analyze this kind of scenario

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00:02:19,360 --> 00:02:21,000

and perhaps starting to

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00:02:21,000 --> 00:02:24,640  
find ways of resolving it.

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00:02:24,640 --> 00:02:25,880  
Now, I want to say a little bit

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00:02:25,880 --> 00:02:28,240  
about the origins of this idea.

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00:02:28,240 --> 00:02:30,720  
So intersectionality has its roots

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00:02:30,720 --> 00:02:32,080  
in so-called critical

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00:02:32,080 --> 00:02:35,520  
race theory, or CRT.

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00:02:35,520 --> 00:02:37,520  
And this first emerged in the United

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00:02:37,520 --> 00:02:39,600  
States in the 1970s,

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00:02:39,600 --> 00:02:40,520  
as the civil rights

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00:02:40,520 --> 00:02:42,800  
movement of the 50s and 60s

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00:02:42,800 --> 00:02:44,400  
was beginning to stall, was

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00:02:44,400 --> 00:02:47,320  
beginning to draw to a halt.

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00:02:47,320 --> 00:02:51,040  
It was driven forward, CRT, among others,

82  
00:02:51,040 --> 00:02:52,960  
by the progressive legal scholars,

83  
00:02:52,960 --> 00:02:55,840  
Derrick Bell and Richard Delgado.

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00:02:55,840 --> 00:02:57,080  
And it was a new

85  
00:02:57,080 --> 00:02:58,960  
politically radical way of thinking

86  
00:02:58,960 --> 00:03:00,760  
about race and class

87  
00:03:00,760 --> 00:03:02,160  
that was strongly shaped

88  
00:03:02,160 --> 00:03:05,560  
by the radical feminist, the black power,

89  
00:03:05,560 --> 00:03:07,600  
and the Chicano movements,

90  
00:03:07,600 --> 00:03:08,720  
as well as by Martin

91  
00:03:08,720 --> 00:03:10,160  
Luther King's movement

92  
00:03:10,160 --> 00:03:13,400  
of nonviolent resistance.

93  
00:03:13,400 --> 00:03:15,480  
And from the civil rights movement,

94  
00:03:15,480 --> 00:03:18,240  
CRT took its focus on

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00:03:18,240 --> 00:03:21,280

practical political applications.

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00:03:21,280 --> 00:03:23,080

From second wave feminism,

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00:03:23,080 --> 00:03:25,880

it drew insights into the relationships

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00:03:25,880 --> 00:03:28,600

between socially constructed gender roles

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00:03:28,600 --> 00:03:30,440

and power imbalances in

100

00:03:30,440 --> 00:03:32,800

society more generally.

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00:03:32,800 --> 00:03:35,000

And critical race theory was a movement

102

00:03:35,000 --> 00:03:37,360

of political and social activism,

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00:03:37,360 --> 00:03:38,680

but it was also a movement

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00:03:38,680 --> 00:03:43,560

of practical legal activism as well.

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00:03:43,560 --> 00:03:45,000

And CRT is built

106

00:03:45,000 --> 00:03:46,680

around a number of radical

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00:03:46,680 --> 00:03:49,920

and still quite controversial ideas.

108

00:03:49,920 --> 00:03:51,400

First of all, it



109  
00:03:51,400 --> 00:03:54,000  
recognizes racism to be an ordinary

110  
00:03:54,000 --> 00:03:56,800  
and everyday phenomenon that is deeply

111  
00:03:56,800 --> 00:03:57,760  
and structurally

112  
00:03:57,760 --> 00:04:00,200  
rooted in Western societies.

113  
00:04:00,200 --> 00:04:01,560  
And racism is so

114  
00:04:01,560 --> 00:04:03,640  
difficult to completely eradicate

115  
00:04:03,640 --> 00:04:04,520  
because it can never

116  
00:04:04,520 --> 00:04:06,880  
be fully acknowledged.

117  
00:04:06,880 --> 00:04:08,320  
And the interests of

118  
00:04:08,320 --> 00:04:09,880  
different class groups

119  
00:04:09,880 --> 00:04:12,040  
within the white majority

120  
00:04:12,040 --> 00:04:13,960  
converge and come together

121  
00:04:13,960 --> 00:04:15,840  
and form alliances in

122  
00:04:15,840 --> 00:04:17,960

effect to keep racist discourses

123

00:04:17,960 --> 00:04:20,640  
and policies in place.

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00:04:20,640 --> 00:04:23,440  
A second key idea is the so-called

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00:04:23,440 --> 00:04:25,960  
social construction thesis.

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00:04:25,960 --> 00:04:28,120  
And that's the idea that race itself

127

00:04:28,120 --> 00:04:31,200  
is a constructed social reality,

128

00:04:31,200 --> 00:04:32,320  
rather than a set of

129

00:04:32,320 --> 00:04:34,840  
biological and genetic facts.

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00:04:34,840 --> 00:04:35,720  
And in fact, it's worth

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00:04:35,720 --> 00:04:38,720  
remembering that over 85%

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00:04:38,720 --> 00:04:40,400  
of genetic diversity

133

00:04:40,400 --> 00:04:42,640  
among human beings occurs

134

00:04:42,640 --> 00:04:44,840  
within particular populations

135

00:04:44,840 --> 00:04:48,240  
rather than between those populations.

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00:04:48,240 --> 00:04:49,560

But powerful white

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00:04:49,560 --> 00:04:52,960

majorities, so CRT claims,

138

00:04:52,960 --> 00:04:53,800

have historically

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00:04:53,800 --> 00:04:56,400

constructed and reinforced the idea

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00:04:56,400 --> 00:04:59,320

of discrete racial identities.

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00:04:59,320 --> 00:05:00,320

And in connection to

142

00:05:00,320 --> 00:05:02,120

that, different minorities

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00:05:02,120 --> 00:05:04,080

have served different economic and

144

00:05:04,080 --> 00:05:06,000

ideological purposes

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00:05:06,000 --> 00:05:07,920

in different Western

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00:05:07,920 --> 00:05:11,160

societies, white majority societies,

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00:05:11,160 --> 00:05:13,920

at different times in history.

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00:05:13,920 --> 00:05:16,040

And the fourth big idea,

149

00:05:16,040 --> 00:05:17,200

and an idea that's

150

00:05:17,200 --> 00:05:19,320  
related to the first three,

151

00:05:19,320 --> 00:05:21,360  
is the recent concept,

152

00:05:21,360 --> 00:05:22,680  
or the relatively recent

153

00:05:22,680 --> 00:05:24,840  
concept of intersectionality,

154

00:05:24,840 --> 00:05:25,720  
which I'm going to explain

155

00:05:25,720 --> 00:05:28,520  
in more detail in a minute.

156

00:05:28,520 --> 00:05:30,080  
Now, I think it's important to remember

157

00:05:30,080 --> 00:05:31,440  
that critical race theory

158

00:05:31,440 --> 00:05:33,520  
is still a much debated,

159

00:05:33,520 --> 00:05:36,640  
even controversial set of ideas.

160

00:05:36,640 --> 00:05:37,680  
And it's become a bit of

161

00:05:37,680 --> 00:05:40,280  
a bogeyman, as it were,

162

00:05:40,280 --> 00:05:42,840  
of right-wing politicians and parties,

163  
00:05:42,840 --> 00:05:46,040  
especially both in Europe and America.

164  
00:05:46,040 --> 00:05:47,800  
It's become a bit of a caricature

165  
00:05:47,800 --> 00:05:51,480  
of so-called woke politics.

166  
00:05:51,480 --> 00:05:54,520  
But CRT is also a set of ideas which,

167  
00:05:54,520 --> 00:05:56,640  
when it's handled simplistically

168  
00:05:56,640 --> 00:05:59,320  
or not handled carefully enough,

169  
00:05:59,320 --> 00:06:01,200  
can sometimes give people the impression

170  
00:06:01,200 --> 00:06:03,960  
that there are unbridgeable differences

171  
00:06:03,960 --> 00:06:05,080  
and even distances

172  
00:06:05,080 --> 00:06:07,160  
between different social groups,

173  
00:06:07,160 --> 00:06:09,720  
different social and ethnic groups.

174  
00:06:09,720 --> 00:06:11,080  
In short, these are

175  
00:06:11,080 --> 00:06:12,320  
ideas that can be very,

176  
00:06:12,320 --> 00:06:13,440

that it can be very

177

00:06:13,440 --> 00:06:15,640  
difficult to talk about accurately

178

00:06:15,640 --> 00:06:18,160  
and sensitively, particularly with young

179

00:06:18,160 --> 00:06:20,480  
adults and students.

180

00:06:20,480 --> 00:06:22,320  
And what I want to do is

181

00:06:22,320 --> 00:06:24,240  
illustrate some of the usefulness

182

00:06:24,240 --> 00:06:25,720  
of critical race theory

183

00:06:25,720 --> 00:06:27,480  
by taking a closer look

184

00:06:27,480 --> 00:06:28,560  
at one of its most

185

00:06:28,560 --> 00:06:33,400  
interesting ideas, intersectionality.

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00:06:33,400 --> 00:06:35,920  
So intersectionality was a concept

187

00:06:35,920 --> 00:06:38,720  
that was first explicitly named

188

00:06:38,720 --> 00:06:41,120  
by the African-American legal scholar

189

00:06:41,120 --> 00:06:42,520  
and critical theorist,

190

00:06:42,520 --> 00:06:43,240  
a woman called

191

00:06:43,240 --> 00:06:45,080  
Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw,

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00:06:45,080 --> 00:06:47,840  
who is a professor of law

193

00:06:47,840 --> 00:06:48,800  
at the University of

194

00:06:48,800 --> 00:06:51,640  
California in Los Angeles.

195

00:06:51,640 --> 00:06:52,560  
Now, the concept had

196

00:06:52,560 --> 00:06:54,800  
existed before the 1980s.

197

00:06:54,800 --> 00:06:55,920  
And in fact, important

198

00:06:55,920 --> 00:06:57,760  
elements of this concept

199

00:06:57,760 --> 00:07:00,520  
had been developing really in the context

200

00:07:00,520 --> 00:07:01,480  
of the civil rights

201

00:07:01,480 --> 00:07:04,760  
movement ever since the 1960s.

202

00:07:04,760 --> 00:07:05,680  
But the concept was

203

00:07:05,680 --> 00:07:07,600

first given its specific name

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00:07:07,600 --> 00:07:10,840  
by Crenshaw in an essay of 1989

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00:07:10,840 --> 00:07:14,040  
where she used it as a tool to analyze

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00:07:14,040 --> 00:07:16,240  
intersecting forms of oppression,

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00:07:16,240 --> 00:07:17,760  
faced particularly by

208

00:07:17,760 --> 00:07:21,040  
black American women.

209

00:07:21,040 --> 00:07:22,240  
And intersectionality

210

00:07:22,240 --> 00:07:24,400  
refers to an examination

211

00:07:24,400 --> 00:07:27,680  
of categories of identity like race,

212

00:07:27,680 --> 00:07:30,840  
ethnicity, class, sex,

213

00:07:30,840 --> 00:07:32,320  
gender, national

214

00:07:32,320 --> 00:07:35,000  
origin, sexual orientation,

215

00:07:35,000 --> 00:07:37,480  
and physical and mental ability and

216

00:07:37,480 --> 00:07:39,760  
disability, and so on.



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00:07:39,760 --> 00:07:41,080

And it considers the ways in

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00:07:41,080 --> 00:07:42,320

which these different facets

219

00:07:42,320 --> 00:07:45,600

of identity interact, intersect,

220

00:07:45,600 --> 00:07:47,560

and play out against one another

221

00:07:47,560 --> 00:07:50,360

in different social contexts.

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00:07:50,360 --> 00:07:52,280

Intersectionality asks

223

00:07:52,280 --> 00:07:53,920

how those interactions

224

00:07:53,920 --> 00:07:55,720

shape specific forms

225

00:07:55,720 --> 00:07:57,600

of personal disadvantage

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00:07:57,600 --> 00:07:59,480

or perhaps particular

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00:07:59,480 --> 00:08:03,840

forms of advantage in society.

228

00:08:03,840 --> 00:08:05,320

And it's a concept that confronts us

229

00:08:05,320 --> 00:08:06,560

with lots of really

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00:08:06,560 --> 00:08:08,680

difficult real world questions.

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00:08:08,680 --> 00:08:10,280

And given both the legal and the

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00:08:10,280 --> 00:08:13,000

political background of CRT,

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00:08:13,000 --> 00:08:13,880

it addresses those

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00:08:13,880 --> 00:08:16,600

questions from social, political,

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00:08:16,600 --> 00:08:20,160

and also legal perspectives.

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00:08:20,160 --> 00:08:22,000

It asks questions like,

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00:08:22,000 --> 00:08:23,080

how do we analyze the

238

00:08:23,080 --> 00:08:25,200

lived experience of individuals

239

00:08:25,200 --> 00:08:27,040

who occupy several of these

240

00:08:27,040 --> 00:08:29,640

categories at the same time?

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00:08:29,640 --> 00:08:30,840

And in what ways do

242

00:08:30,840 --> 00:08:33,840

forms of disadvantage shape,

243

00:08:33,840 --> 00:08:36,320

intensify, and modify

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00:08:36,320 --> 00:08:39,280  
each other's effects?

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00:08:39,280 --> 00:08:40,960  
Now, as the name suggests,

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00:08:40,960 --> 00:08:43,520  
intersectionality draws on the metaphor

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00:08:43,520 --> 00:08:47,200  
of a crossroads, of an intersection.

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00:08:47,200 --> 00:08:50,480  
Imagine, Kimberlé Crenshaw suggests,

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00:08:50,480 --> 00:08:53,520  
the various axes of power of race,

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00:08:53,520 --> 00:08:55,880  
ethnicity, gender, or class,

251

00:08:55,880 --> 00:08:56,840  
as constituting

252

00:08:56,840 --> 00:08:58,720  
thoroughfares, in other words,

253

00:08:58,720 --> 00:09:01,640  
roads that structure our political,

254

00:09:01,640 --> 00:09:05,000  
social, and economic terrain.

255

00:09:05,000 --> 00:09:06,600  
Just as vehicles

256

00:09:06,600 --> 00:09:08,560  
travel along these roads,

257

00:09:08,560 --> 00:09:10,080

in the metaphor,

258

00:09:10,080 --> 00:09:12,800  
disempowering forces and dynamics

259

00:09:12,800 --> 00:09:15,280  
travel along these roads.

260

00:09:15,280 --> 00:09:17,480  
And it's women of colour in particular

261

00:09:17,480 --> 00:09:18,440  
who find themselves

262

00:09:18,440 --> 00:09:20,040  
caught at the intersection,

263

00:09:20,040 --> 00:09:21,720  
at the crossroads of a

264

00:09:21,720 --> 00:09:24,560  
number of different roads.

265

00:09:24,560 --> 00:09:26,560  
Injuries can be caused and

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00:09:26,560 --> 00:09:28,760  
then made worse by traffic

267

00:09:28,760 --> 00:09:31,360  
from one, two, three, or

268

00:09:31,360 --> 00:09:35,160  
any combination of directions.

269

00:09:35,160 --> 00:09:36,400  
And if there's traffic

270

00:09:36,400 --> 00:09:38,040  
coming from all directions,

271

00:09:38,040 --> 00:09:39,160  
converging from all

272

00:09:39,160 --> 00:09:41,200  
directions on the intersection,

273

00:09:41,200 --> 00:09:43,040  
on the crossroads, it can

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00:09:43,040 --> 00:09:44,840  
be very difficult to tell

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00:09:44,840 --> 00:09:46,920  
exactly where the first hit, where the

276

00:09:46,920 --> 00:09:49,440  
first injury happens.

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00:09:49,440 --> 00:09:52,280  
In short, different forms of disadvantage

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00:09:52,280 --> 00:09:54,440  
overlap and intensify

279

00:09:54,440 --> 00:09:57,360  
one another's effects.

280

00:09:57,360 --> 00:09:59,520  
Now, that's a pretty dramatic image

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00:09:59,520 --> 00:10:00,520  
and one that it might be

282

00:10:00,520 --> 00:10:02,800  
quite hard to relate to.

283

00:10:02,800 --> 00:10:03,760  
But in a sense, that's

284

00:10:03,760 --> 00:10:05,080

what intersectionality

285

00:10:05,080 --> 00:10:06,640

is interested in.

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00:10:06,640 --> 00:10:08,640

Those other personal situations,

287

00:10:08,640 --> 00:10:11,880

those other different lived experiences

288

00:10:11,880 --> 00:10:13,800

that we can find it hard to relate to

289

00:10:13,800 --> 00:10:14,760

because they're so far

290

00:10:14,760 --> 00:10:17,240

removed from our own.

291

00:10:17,240 --> 00:10:17,960

But of course, just

292

00:10:17,960 --> 00:10:19,120

because someone's situation

293

00:10:19,120 --> 00:10:21,040

can be hard to imagine

294

00:10:21,040 --> 00:10:23,160

doesn't make it any less real

295

00:10:23,160 --> 00:10:27,520

or any less important to imagine.

296

00:10:27,520 --> 00:10:30,880

And precisely because it's uniquely good

297

00:10:30,880 --> 00:10:33,960

at helping us step inside other lives,

298

00:10:33,960 --> 00:10:35,880  
other lived experiences,

299

00:10:35,880 --> 00:10:37,880  
if only for a little while,

300

00:10:37,880 --> 00:10:39,520  
I want to suggest that

301

00:10:39,520 --> 00:10:41,680  
literature can help illustrate

302

00:10:41,680 --> 00:10:43,160  
and understand some of

303

00:10:43,160 --> 00:10:46,960  
these difficult ideas.

304

00:10:46,960 --> 00:10:48,080  
I want to turn now to

305

00:10:48,080 --> 00:10:49,760  
talk about a short story

306

00:10:49,760 --> 00:10:51,800  
called "Recitatif" by the

307

00:10:51,800 --> 00:10:54,080  
late, great African-American

308

00:10:54,080 --> 00:10:57,720  
female author, Toni Morrison.

309

00:10:57,720 --> 00:11:01,280  
She was born in 1931 in Lorain, Ohio

310

00:11:01,280 --> 00:11:03,280  
to black working-class parents

311

00:11:03,280 --> 00:11:06,080

who had migrated from the American South,

312

00:11:06,080 --> 00:11:09,760  
from Alabama and Georgia respectively.

313

00:11:09,760 --> 00:11:12,080  
In a career as a writer, editor,

314

00:11:12,080 --> 00:11:14,520  
and sometime university professor,

315

00:11:14,520 --> 00:11:17,240  
she published 11 celebrated novels

316

00:11:17,240 --> 00:11:20,000  
and astonishingly only one short story

317

00:11:20,000 --> 00:11:21,640  
during her lifetime,

318

00:11:21,640 --> 00:11:24,200  
namely "Recitatif."

319

00:11:24,200 --> 00:11:25,200  
She won the Pulitzer

320

00:11:25,200 --> 00:11:27,560  
Prize for fiction in 1988

321

00:11:27,560 --> 00:11:28,600  
and then the Nobel Prize

322

00:11:28,600 --> 00:11:30,920  
for literature in the 1990s.

323

00:11:30,920 --> 00:11:31,800  
And she was the first

324

00:11:31,800 --> 00:11:35,160  
woman of colour to do that.



325

00:11:35,160 --> 00:11:36,760  
Throughout her literary career,

326

00:11:36,760 --> 00:11:37,760  
Morrison made it her

327

00:11:37,760 --> 00:11:39,280  
mission in her fiction

328

00:11:39,280 --> 00:11:41,560  
to bring repressed and silenced

329

00:11:41,560 --> 00:11:44,840  
and very often female voices to the fore.

330

00:11:44,840 --> 00:11:47,240  
She was brilliant at exploring

331

00:11:47,240 --> 00:11:49,680  
intersectional identities.

332

00:11:49,680 --> 00:11:52,280  
And "Recitatif" is one of the works

333

00:11:52,280 --> 00:11:56,120  
where she does that most brilliantly.

334

00:11:56,120 --> 00:11:57,120  
So it's very much worth

335

00:11:57,120 --> 00:11:58,760  
reading the story for yourself

336

00:11:58,760 --> 00:12:00,760  
and I'd encourage you to do so,

337

00:12:00,760 --> 00:12:01,440  
but for those of you

338

00:12:01,440 --> 00:12:02,520

who don't know it already,

339

00:12:02,520 --> 00:12:05,200

I'm going to give a brief summary.

340

00:12:05,200 --> 00:12:07,440

So the story's slightly strange name

341

00:12:07,440 --> 00:12:09,520

evokes the "Recitativ"

342

00:12:09,520 --> 00:12:12,400

or "Resitative" of opera.

343

00:12:12,400 --> 00:12:14,920

In other words, a musical declamation

344

00:12:14,920 --> 00:12:16,040

of a kind that is

345

00:12:16,040 --> 00:12:18,080

typical during the narrative

346

00:12:18,080 --> 00:12:19,400

or the dialogue parts of

347

00:12:19,400 --> 00:12:22,640

an opera or an oratorio.

348

00:12:22,640 --> 00:12:23,600

And there's a second

349

00:12:23,600 --> 00:12:25,160

obsolete meaning of the word

350

00:12:25,160 --> 00:12:27,600

which refers to the rhythm or to the tone

351

00:12:27,600 --> 00:12:28,720

that is particular to

352

00:12:28,720 --> 00:12:31,720  
a particular language.

353

00:12:31,720 --> 00:12:32,800  
This is a story which

354

00:12:32,800 --> 00:12:36,080  
stretches from the 1950s to the 1980s

355

00:12:36,080 --> 00:12:38,600  
encompassing five separate episodes

356

00:12:38,600 --> 00:12:41,360  
in the lives of the female protagonists,

357

00:12:41,360 --> 00:12:43,640  
Twyla, who's also the first person

358

00:12:43,640 --> 00:12:46,920  
narrator, and Roberta.

359

00:12:46,920 --> 00:12:48,240  
We first meet them as

360

00:12:48,240 --> 00:12:49,640  
two eight-year-old girls

361

00:12:49,640 --> 00:12:52,240  
in an orphanage for children.

362

00:12:52,240 --> 00:12:53,840  
They aren't really orphans,

363

00:12:53,840 --> 00:12:54,840  
but they've been removed

364

00:12:54,840 --> 00:12:56,960  
from the care of their mothers.

365

00:12:56,960 --> 00:12:59,240

Roberta's mother is ill,

366

00:12:59,240 --> 00:13:00,400

whereas we're told that

367

00:13:00,400 --> 00:13:02,960

Twyla's mother has neglected her

368

00:13:02,960 --> 00:13:06,360

because in part, quote unquote,

369

00:13:06,360 --> 00:13:09,000

"She just likes to dance all night."

370

00:13:09,000 --> 00:13:09,920

The suggestion is that

371

00:13:09,920 --> 00:13:11,400

she might be a stripper.

372

00:13:11,400 --> 00:13:14,680

She might be working as a stripper.

373

00:13:14,680 --> 00:13:16,000

Twyla also remarks

374

00:13:16,000 --> 00:13:17,800

very early on in the story

375

00:13:17,800 --> 00:13:19,320

that quote unquote,

376

00:13:19,320 --> 00:13:20,360

"We looked like salt

377

00:13:20,360 --> 00:13:22,520

and pepper standing there,

378

00:13:22,520 --> 00:13:23,680

and that's what the other

379

00:13:23,680 --> 00:13:27,120  
kids called us sometimes."

380

00:13:27,120 --> 00:13:28,760  
So we know for sure

381

00:13:28,760 --> 00:13:30,240  
that one of them is black

382

00:13:30,240 --> 00:13:32,600  
and one of them is white.

383

00:13:32,600 --> 00:13:34,640  
They're both very lonely in the home.

384

00:13:34,640 --> 00:13:36,000  
They're drawn towards each other

385

00:13:36,000 --> 00:13:39,040  
and they strike up a kind of friendship.

386

00:13:39,040 --> 00:13:40,200  
They also share a

387

00:13:40,200 --> 00:13:42,160  
sense of both fascination

388

00:13:42,160 --> 00:13:44,640  
and slight disgust at a

389

00:13:44,640 --> 00:13:46,440  
character called Maggie,

390

00:13:46,440 --> 00:13:48,560  
who we're told is old,

391

00:13:48,560 --> 00:13:51,040  
bowlegged, a bowlegged woman,

392

00:13:51,040 --> 00:13:52,440

that is a woman who might

393

00:13:52,440 --> 00:13:54,440  
have a physical disability,

394

00:13:54,440 --> 00:13:55,640  
that she's sandy-coloured,

395

00:13:55,640 --> 00:13:56,480  
in other words, she

396

00:13:56,480 --> 00:13:58,200  
might be a woman of colour,

397

00:13:58,200 --> 00:13:59,200  
and she works in the

398

00:13:59,200 --> 00:14:02,000  
kitchen at the school.

399

00:14:02,000 --> 00:14:03,040  
So she has a physical

400

00:14:03,040 --> 00:14:06,560  
disability and she, it seems, is mute,

401

00:14:06,560 --> 00:14:09,160  
that is, she seems to be unable to speak.

402

00:14:09,160 --> 00:14:10,400  
The girls guess that

403

00:14:10,400 --> 00:14:13,840  
she's probably deaf as well.

404

00:14:13,840 --> 00:14:14,600  
Soon after this,

405

00:14:14,600 --> 00:14:16,040  
Roberta leaves the orphanage

406

00:14:16,040 --> 00:14:17,080  
and the girls are forced

407

00:14:17,080 --> 00:14:19,800  
to go their separate ways.

408

00:14:19,800 --> 00:14:22,720  
Their next four chance meetings stretch

409

00:14:22,720 --> 00:14:24,600  
over several decades

410

00:14:24,600 --> 00:14:26,200  
and these meetings

411

00:14:26,200 --> 00:14:27,920  
offer us brief snapshots

412

00:14:27,920 --> 00:14:30,400  
of these women's lives, which are

413

00:14:30,400 --> 00:14:32,280  
themselves snapshots

414

00:14:32,280 --> 00:14:34,320  
of the tensions and the battles

415

00:14:34,320 --> 00:14:37,880  
within American society and politics.

416

00:14:37,880 --> 00:14:39,200  
Twyla never really leaves her

417

00:14:39,200 --> 00:14:40,320  
working-class origins

418

00:14:40,320 --> 00:14:41,360  
behind her and she

419

00:14:41,360 --> 00:14:43,200

ends up marrying a fireman

420

00:14:43,200 --> 00:14:44,120  
and settling in a

421

00:14:44,120 --> 00:14:46,160  
relatively working-class city

422

00:14:46,160 --> 00:14:48,400  
in New York State.

423

00:14:48,400 --> 00:14:50,240  
By contrast, Roberta's

424

00:14:50,240 --> 00:14:52,520  
social status rises and rises.

425

00:14:52,520 --> 00:14:53,640  
She ends up marrying a

426

00:14:53,640 --> 00:14:56,200  
wealthy IBM executive

427

00:14:56,200 --> 00:14:57,880  
and she enjoys the services of an

428

00:14:57,880 --> 00:15:01,240  
Asian-American chauffeur.

429

00:15:01,240 --> 00:15:01,840  
A particular

430

00:15:01,840 --> 00:15:03,480  
flashpoint in the story occurs

431

00:15:03,480 --> 00:15:06,680  
in the late 1970s when both women find

432

00:15:06,680 --> 00:15:08,040  
themselves protesting



433  
00:15:08,040 --> 00:15:10,080  
over the controversial policy of

434  
00:15:10,080 --> 00:15:12,280  
desegregation busing.

435  
00:15:12,280 --> 00:15:14,240  
And what this was, was an

436  
00:15:14,240 --> 00:15:16,360  
ultimately abandoned policy

437  
00:15:16,360 --> 00:15:19,400  
which was aimed at desegregating schools

438  
00:15:19,400 --> 00:15:21,280  
in otherwise racially and

439  
00:15:21,280 --> 00:15:25,240  
ethnically segregated areas.

440  
00:15:25,240 --> 00:15:26,040  
But against the

441  
00:15:26,040 --> 00:15:28,040  
backdrop throughout the story

442  
00:15:28,040 --> 00:15:31,480  
of changing personal fortunes and

443  
00:15:31,480 --> 00:15:33,440  
political disagreements,

444  
00:15:33,440 --> 00:15:35,040  
the unanswered question

445  
00:15:35,040 --> 00:15:36,560  
that both Twyla and Roberta

446  
00:15:36,560 --> 00:15:40,960

keep returning to is the fate of Maggie.

447

00:15:40,960 --> 00:15:42,560

Did they bully her in the orphanage

448

00:15:42,560 --> 00:15:45,080

with the other girls all those years ago?

449

00:15:45,080 --> 00:15:46,400

Did they push her over?

450

00:15:46,400 --> 00:15:48,840

Did they show violence towards her?

451

00:15:48,840 --> 00:15:52,000

Was she black or was she white?

452

00:15:52,000 --> 00:15:54,600

And what became of her?

453

00:15:54,600 --> 00:15:58,280

In fact, the story's closing words are,

454

00:15:58,280 --> 00:16:01,320

"Shit, shit, shit.

455

00:16:01,320 --> 00:16:05,280

What the hell happened to Maggie?"

456

00:16:05,280 --> 00:16:06,600

So this summary might

457

00:16:06,600 --> 00:16:08,040

make the plot of the story

458

00:16:08,040 --> 00:16:09,040

sound slightly

459

00:16:09,040 --> 00:16:11,200

pedestrian, slightly ordinary,

460  
00:16:11,200 --> 00:16:13,800  
but that's before we consider the twist.

461  
00:16:13,800 --> 00:16:15,680  
You'll remember that Twyla told us

462  
00:16:15,680 --> 00:16:16,880  
that she and Roberta

463  
00:16:16,880 --> 00:16:19,280  
looked like salt and pepper.

464  
00:16:19,280 --> 00:16:20,880  
And the hook of the story

465  
00:16:20,880 --> 00:16:22,480  
is that we are never told

466  
00:16:22,480 --> 00:16:25,440  
who is white and who is black.

467  
00:16:25,440 --> 00:16:27,560  
Morrison herself said she wrote the

468  
00:16:27,560 --> 00:16:29,280  
story, quote unquote,

469  
00:16:29,280 --> 00:16:31,160  
as, "An experiment in the

470  
00:16:31,160 --> 00:16:33,760  
removal of all racial codes

471  
00:16:33,760 --> 00:16:35,440  
from a narrative about two

472  
00:16:35,440 --> 00:16:37,560  
characters of different races

473  
00:16:37,560 --> 00:16:41,520

for whom racial identity is crucial."

474

00:16:41,520 --> 00:16:43,960

And what Morrison does is to invite us

475

00:16:43,960 --> 00:16:46,040

to play a guessing game,

476

00:16:46,040 --> 00:16:48,040

to figure out who is who

477

00:16:48,040 --> 00:16:49,520

on the basis of the many

478

00:16:49,520 --> 00:16:53,000

ambiguous clues that she provides.

479

00:16:53,000 --> 00:16:54,320

As the celebrated black

480

00:16:54,320 --> 00:16:56,720

British author Zadie Smith argues,

481

00:16:56,720 --> 00:16:58,480

the subject of Morrison's little

482

00:16:58,480 --> 00:17:02,840

experiment is us, her readers.

483

00:17:02,840 --> 00:17:03,840

At every stage in the

484

00:17:03,840 --> 00:17:05,880

story, both protagonists,

485

00:17:05,880 --> 00:17:07,040

along with their mothers

486

00:17:07,040 --> 00:17:08,720

and later their families,

487

00:17:08,720 --> 00:17:11,040  
are given certain characteristics

488

00:17:11,040 --> 00:17:13,720  
and associated with certain behaviours,

489

00:17:13,720 --> 00:17:16,400  
certain modes of self-presentation,

490

00:17:16,400 --> 00:17:18,080  
which we might traditionally or

491

00:17:18,080 --> 00:17:20,360  
stereotypically associate

492

00:17:20,360 --> 00:17:22,880  
with white Americans on the one hand,

493

00:17:22,880 --> 00:17:24,960  
or black or African Americans

494

00:17:24,960 --> 00:17:28,560  
or Americans of colour on the other.

495

00:17:28,560 --> 00:17:29,920  
Twyla had been told by

496

00:17:29,920 --> 00:17:32,000  
her mother that they,

497

00:17:32,000 --> 00:17:34,560  
and Twyla clearly includes Roberta in

498

00:17:34,560 --> 00:17:36,880  
this, quote unquote,

499

00:17:36,880 --> 00:17:38,160  
"Never washed their hair

500

00:17:38,160 --> 00:17:41,040

and they smelled funny."

501

00:17:41,040 --> 00:17:41,960

But is that the kind of

502

00:17:41,960 --> 00:17:43,880

thing that a racist white mother

503

00:17:43,880 --> 00:17:46,240

would tell her daughter?

504

00:17:46,240 --> 00:17:47,720

Or perhaps a defensive

505

00:17:47,720 --> 00:17:49,560

and proud black mother

506

00:17:49,560 --> 00:17:51,680

would tell her daughter?

507

00:17:51,680 --> 00:17:52,880

And there are so many of these

508

00:17:52,880 --> 00:17:55,200

ambiguous clues lying around.

509

00:17:55,200 --> 00:17:56,480

And this particular clue

510

00:17:56,480 --> 00:17:57,920

gives you a sense of the game

511

00:17:57,920 --> 00:17:58,840

that Morrison is playing.

512

00:18:00,320 --> 00:18:01,960

At every point, as we try

513

00:18:01,960 --> 00:18:04,000

to identify the protagonists,

514

00:18:04,000 --> 00:18:05,440  
as we try to solve

515

00:18:05,440 --> 00:18:07,280  
the case, you might say,

516

00:18:07,280 --> 00:18:08,400  
we're confronted with the

517

00:18:08,400 --> 00:18:10,880  
reality of the stereotyping,

518

00:18:10,880 --> 00:18:13,000  
of the pigeonholing that we've been

519

00:18:13,000 --> 00:18:15,520  
socialised to engage in,

520

00:18:15,520 --> 00:18:18,200  
if only unconsciously.

521

00:18:18,200 --> 00:18:19,400  
And when I teach this

522

00:18:20,000 --> 00:18:21,200  
short story and discuss it

523

00:18:21,200 --> 00:18:23,360  
in my introduction to cultural studies,

524

00:18:23,360 --> 00:18:24,400  
I encourage my own

525

00:18:24,400 --> 00:18:26,280  
students to play Morrison's game,

526

00:18:26,280 --> 00:18:28,280  
to guess along.

527

00:18:28,280 --> 00:18:29,160

And sometimes as they

528

00:18:29,160 --> 00:18:30,360  
explain how they've arrived

529

00:18:30,360 --> 00:18:32,120  
at a particular conclusion,

530

00:18:32,120 --> 00:18:32,920  
they often feel the

531

00:18:32,920 --> 00:18:34,760  
need to justify themselves

532

00:18:34,760 --> 00:18:37,240  
by insisting that they're not racist

533

00:18:37,240 --> 00:18:38,920  
and they want to distance themselves

534

00:18:38,920 --> 00:18:41,520  
from some of their socialised assumptions

535

00:18:41,520 --> 00:18:44,880  
about who is white and who is black.

536

00:18:44,880 --> 00:18:45,840  
But the main point of the

537

00:18:45,840 --> 00:18:48,480  
game is not to shame the reader.

538

00:18:48,480 --> 00:18:49,080  
And it certainly

539

00:18:49,080 --> 00:18:50,320  
isn't to find out for sure

540

00:18:50,320 --> 00:18:53,360  
who is white and who is black.



541

00:18:53,360 --> 00:18:54,840  
This seemingly colourblind

542

00:18:54,840 --> 00:18:57,040  
story invites us to reflect

543

00:18:57,040 --> 00:18:58,480  
on how our judgements are

544

00:18:58,480 --> 00:19:01,080  
shaped by our socialised,

545

00:19:01,080 --> 00:19:02,840  
our society influenced

546

00:19:02,840 --> 00:19:04,520  
and our media influenced

547

00:19:04,520 --> 00:19:08,120  
preconceptions, even prejudices.

548

00:19:08,120 --> 00:19:09,760  
It's a story which reminds us

549

00:19:09,760 --> 00:19:12,480  
of the social constructedness of race.

550

00:19:12,480 --> 00:19:13,560  
And it also draws our

551

00:19:13,560 --> 00:19:15,400  
attention to the complexity

552

00:19:15,400 --> 00:19:17,440  
of identities and lives

553

00:19:17,440 --> 00:19:19,520  
lived out at the intersection

554

00:19:19,520 --> 00:19:21,320

of different forms of privilege

555

00:19:21,320 --> 00:19:24,320  
and different forms of disadvantage.

556

00:19:24,320 --> 00:19:27,000  
Recitatif is, I argue,

557

00:19:27,000 --> 00:19:28,360  
a story which brilliantly

558

00:19:28,360 --> 00:19:31,080  
illustrates intersectionality.

559

00:19:31,080 --> 00:19:33,800  
But of course, I'll let you read it

560

00:19:33,800 --> 00:19:37,480  
and decide for yourselves.

561

00:19:37,480 --> 00:19:41,360  
Finally though, what about Maggie?

562

00:19:41,360 --> 00:19:43,880  
What the hell happened to her?

563

00:19:43,880 --> 00:19:46,320  
Well, we never find out.

564

00:19:46,320 --> 00:19:48,760  
It's clear that she's a woman of colour

565

00:19:48,760 --> 00:19:51,840  
who has physical and maybe

566

00:19:51,840 --> 00:19:54,320  
some mental disabilities.

567

00:19:54,320 --> 00:19:56,400  
She's disempowered.

568  
00:19:56,400 --> 00:19:58,640  
She has no words to tell her own story.

569  
00:20:00,320 --> 00:20:01,840  
Of all the characters,

570  
00:20:01,840 --> 00:20:04,200  
she most clearly embodies the story's

571  
00:20:04,200 --> 00:20:06,680  
intersectional dynamics.

572  
00:20:06,680 --> 00:20:08,800  
And the terrible, in some cases,

573  
00:20:08,800 --> 00:20:10,920  
violent bullying that she faces

574  
00:20:10,920 --> 00:20:13,200  
recalls many of the darkest moments

575  
00:20:13,200 --> 00:20:17,360  
in America's interracial history.

576  
00:20:17,360 --> 00:20:20,200  
But Maggie is also a reminder, finally,

577  
00:20:20,200 --> 00:20:22,720  
that the lives that are the strangest

578  
00:20:22,720 --> 00:20:24,960  
and the most distant from us,

579  
00:20:24,960 --> 00:20:26,480  
the lives that are lived out

580  
00:20:26,480 --> 00:20:28,640  
at the largest number of intersections

581  
00:20:29,400 --> 00:20:31,640

are also the lives we need

582

00:20:31,640 --> 00:20:47,960

to try hardest to understand.