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Criminalizing Existence: Apartheid, Identity, and Resilience in Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*

Abstract

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The apartheid regime was established in 1948 by the Afrikaner-led government in South Africa. Under this regime, racial discrimination in South Africa was systemized, strict racial segregation was enforced, and non-white citizens were deprived of their core rights solely because of race. Personal narratives, such as Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood* (2016), capture the lived experiences of systemic racism, offering insights into the resilience of oppressed groups. This article analyzes the memoir's exploration of how identity is built and debated within systems of power through the lenses of critical race theory (CRT) and the Nigrescence model (NM) of Black identity formation. CRT demonstrates how apartheid's legal and social systems, such as the Immorality Act, outlawed Trevor Noah's mixed-race existence; the NM provides a framework for understanding Noah's journey of struggling with his mixed-race identity under apartheid, navigating societal rejection, and ultimately embracing his blackness as a source of resilience. This analysis sheds light on the lasting impacts of apartheid while celebrating the resilience and creativity of cultural hybridity, affirming storytelling's power to dismantle oppressive systems.

Keywords: Critical Race Theory, Cross's Nigrescence Model, Oppression, Resistance, Racism, South Africa



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تجريم الوجود: الفصل العنصري والهوية والضمود في حكايات "جريمة ميلادي" لتريفور نوح

المستخلص باللغة العربية

تأسس نظام الفصل العنصري في جنوب إفريقيا عام ١٩٤٨ على يد الحكومة ذات القيادة الأفريقانية، وفي ظل ذلك النظام تم منهجة التمييز العنصري في جنوب إفريقيا حيث فرض الفصل العنصري الصارم وحُرم المواطنون غير البيض من حقوقهم الأساسية فقط بسبب العرق. تُصور السرديات الشخصية - مثل "جريمة ميلادي: قصص من طفولة جنوب إفريقيا" لتريفور نوح (٢٠١٦) - التجارب الحية للعنصرية الممنهجة، وتُلقي الضوء على صمود الجماعات المضطهدة. تحلل هذه المقالة طريقة استكشاف المذكرات لبناء الهوية ومناقشتها داخل أنظمة السلطة في ضوء نظرية العرق النقدية ونموذج نيجريسينس لتتشكل الهوية السوداء. توضح نظرية العرق النقدية كيف أن الأنظمة القانونية والاجتماعية في نظام الفصل العنصري - مثل قانون الأفعال اللاأخلاقية - حظرت وجود تريفور نوح كشخص مُختلط العرق، في حين يوفر نموذج نيجريسينس إطاراً لفهم رحلة نوح في النضال مع هويته المختلطة في ظل الفصل العنصري بدايةً من الرفض المجتمعي ووصولاً في النهاية لاحتضانه لهويته السوداء كمصدر لضموده. يسلط هذا التحليل الضوء على التأثيرات طويلة الأمد لنظام الفصل العنصري مع الثناء على الضمود والإبداع الذي تميزت به الهجانة الثقافية، مؤكداً على الدور القوي للفن القصصي في تفكيك الأنظمة القمعية.

الكلمات الرئيسية: نظرية العرق النقدية، نموذج نيجريسينس لتشكيل الهوية، الضمود،

الجماعات المضطهدة، جنوب أفريقيا

Criminalizing Existence: Apartheid, Identity, and Resilience in Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime*

Introduction

Despite post-apartheid efforts to dismantle systemic racism, South Africa is struggling to align its legal framework with justice and equity, revealing the lasting scars of its past. The apartheid system was created by Afrikaners who are descendants of the Dutch settlers who arrived in South Africa in the mid-1600s. The Afrikaner-led government's institutionalized racial discrimination through apartheid, a system that enforced rigid segregation, stripped non-white citizens of fundamental rights, and entrenched white dominance through oppressive legislation until it was dismantled in the early 1990s. To examine systemic racism in society, critical race theory (CRT) was introduced in the 1970s by "a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism and power" (Delgado and Stefancic 3) and thus giving "emancipatory hope that can serve liberation rather than domination" (West xii).

Critical race theorists created an academic legal framework "as a result of shortcomings and critical legal status and the waning strength of the Civil Rights Movement" (Cueto and Rios 50) to investigate "institutionalized racism and the legal and racist power structures that have perpetuated the marginalization of Black Americans and other people of color" (Farmer xix). The creators of CRT supported the idea that "race and racism were European modernity's weapons of choice in its efforts to establish global capitalism" (Rabaka 24); thus they, for the first time, have "examined the entire edifice of contemporary legal thoughts and doctrine from the viewpoint of law's role in the construction and maintenance of social domination and subordination" (West xi). After becoming a successful movement in law, CRT has "spread to various academic disciplines, including humanities" (Panlay 5) since it is "part of the resistance to retrenchment" (Lawrence xv). It can be concluded that "critical race theorists demand not

only simple legal reform, but also actual social transformation; the prize has become social, economic and political equity, not formal equality” (Valdes et al 4). Clearly, critical race theorists aim to expose systemic racism, highlight intersectionality, and empower marginalized voices for racial justice.

Critical race theorists have introduced their own tenets to explain these goals. Such tenets “provide a strong foundation and theoretical footing for CRT and a common set of understandings for the various groups using CRT” (Russell 216). Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic modified the five basic tenets of CRT to improve our understanding. The first tenet is that **racism is common**. It argues that racism is naturalized in oppressed societies and is therefore difficult to address. The second tenet, **intersectional convergence**, suggests that racism has a direct connection with the group in power. The third tenet is that **race is socially constructed**. It argues that race is not inherited but is created by oppressors. The fourth tenet is **differential racialization** that measures how a society marginalizes different groups in distinct ways. The fifth tenet, **voices of color**, emphasizes the importance of the lived experiences of oppressed individuals (Delgado and Stefancic 8–9). *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood* (2016) by Trevor Noah (henceforth *Born a Crime*) serves as a powerful voice of color within the CRT framework, as it vividly illustrates the intersections of race and systemic oppression in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa.

In *Born a Crime*, Trevor Noah, the South African comedian, author, and host of *The Daily Show*, powerfully dismantles apartheid through poignant humor and deeply personal stories of growing up as a mixed-race child in a system designed to deny his existence, highlighting his resilience and unique perspective as a famous figure. To understand how race and racism are embedded in law and societal structure, Noah’s stories can be understood through the lens of CRT; however, it does not explain how Noah’s identity was constructed. To

understand Noah's journey in building his identity, Cross's Nigrescence model (NM) was applied.

The NM was introduced by William E. Cross, Jr., "one of the first researchers to conceptualize racial identity" (Decuir-Gunby and Taliaferro 141). Evans and George described the NM as "the process of becoming black" (164). This psychological model "is perhaps the most influential and well documented model" (Sue et al 115). Cross borrowed the French-originated term "Nigrescence" from Léopold Senghor, who later became the president of Senegal. Senghor coined the term during the mid-twentieth century to describe the journey of identity of Black people under French colonization (Strauss and Cross 69). Cross's model aims to investigate "the stages of individual black consciousness" (Cross and Vandiver 371) and explain "the process by which a person 'becomes black' in the sense that he develops thinking that positively evaluates him and his reference group belonging. It is about the development of a self-concept with regard to race" (Monk et al 285). Thus, Cross "was very interested in how the social turbulence of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement impacted black people" (Cokley and Vandiver 294).

Cross's model is divided into five stages. The first stage is called **Pre-encounter**; during this stage, the person is unaware of racism and its role in society. The second stage, **Encounter**, involves a significant event (or events) that forces the person to face racism. In the third stage, **Immersion-Emersion**, the person immerses himself in Black culture as he discovers its positives. The fourth stage, **Internalization**, is marked by a more balanced sense of self; in this stage, the person integrates their Black identity with other aspects of their lives. The fifth and final stage, **Internalization-Commitment**, involves a sustained commitment to social justice and advocacy for the Black community (Andrews 161).

Both CRT and NM are used in this study to explain racism and identity development under oppression in *Born a Crime*. Noah was born on February 20, 1984, in South Africa, under

a racist authoritarian regime. His family was very poor. As an adult, he became a successful stand-up comedian in South Africa and hosted several television shows. He went on to host shows in the United States and became a universal icon (Hurt 8–9). In his memoir, Noah recounts, in a nonlinear narrative, blending humor, resilience, and poignancy, some of his childhood stories in which he describes the apartheid period and its aftermath. This style is clear from the beginning of the novel, for example, when he writes that because of his mother’s old “Volkswagen that didn’t work, we never would have looked for the mechanic who became the husband, who became the stepfather, who became the man who tortured us for years and put a bullet in the back of my mother’s head—I’ll take the new car with the warranty every time” (9) and “I was nine years old when my mother threw me out of a moving car. It happened on Sunday, I know it was on a Sunday because we were coming home from church, and every Sunday in my childhood meant church. We never missed church” (5).

This study critically investigates Trevor Noah’s *Born a Crime* to navigate the systemic racism analyzed through CRT while reflecting on his personal journey of racial identity development as outlined in Cross’s NM. Thus, it addresses a gap in the literature by examining how systemic racism and racial hierarchies persist in South Africa and how they intersect with individual identity formation.

Racism is Common / Pre-encounter

The history of South Africa must be examined to understand its racism. In 1652, white Dutch colonizers settled in South Africa and with time they became known as Afrikaners. In 1795, British colonizers seized the country and Britain stayed in power until 1931, when South Africa became a self-governing dominion. Over this long period, Britain established many projects in South Africa which is “over five times the size of Great Britain” (Dugard 3). In 1948, the Afrikaner National Party came to power and established the apartheid regime; thus,

racial segregation started in South Africa in 1948 and “officially ended in 1994, when the African National Congress took a majority of parliamentary seats in South Africa’s first democratic elections” (Peffer xiv). The Afrikaner-led government “was concerned with the white race only; it wasn’t interested in the other racially constructed communities” (Gunkel 30). In his narration, Noah gives his readers a good understanding of apartheid in South Africa when he states, “Apartheid was perfect racism. It took centuries to develop, starting all the way back in 1652 when the Dutch East India Company landed at the Cape of Good Hope and established a trading colony ... to impose white rule, the Dutch colonists went to war with the natives.” He adds, “As the British Empire fell, the Afrikaner rose up to claim South Africa as their rightful inheritance” (19). As Stanley B. Greenberg concludes, “Perhaps more than any other state and social order, South Africa stands illegitimate and repressive before its own people” (1) because “the African majority” are “formally outside the dominant political arrangements and the subjects of such repressive policies” (2). At the heart of the apartheid system was the idea that “Whites, as the civilized race, were entitled to have absolute control over the state” and “white interests should prevail over black interests” (Thompson 190).

It is apparent that the Afrikaner-led government tried to normalize racism, which agrees with the first CRT tenet. According to Delgado and Stefancic, the first tenet of CRT “tells us that racism is ordinary, normal, and embedded in society, and moreover, that the changes in relationship among the races (which include both improvement and turns for the worse) reflect the interest of dominant groups, rather than idealism, or the rule of law” (16). Noah confirms this when he states, “Apartheid was a police state, a system of surveillance and laws designed to keep black people under total control” (19). To prove his point of view he narrates, “My grandmother balanced her Christian faith with the traditional Xhosa beliefs she’d grown up with, communicating with the spirits of our ancestors”; he adds, “If you’re Native American and you pray to the wolves, you’re a savage. If you’re African and you pray to your ancestors,

you're a primitive" (6). These words show how systemic racism was embedded and normalized under apartheid in South Africa.

If adult Noah has a full understanding of racism during apartheid, young Noah did not because racism was normalized. This is consistent with the first stage of Cross's NM: pre-encounter. Cross argues that this stage "captures a person's possible denial of race oppression" (xvii). This means that "Race is deemphasized in order for the black person to assimilate into white society and to compete on 'equal' terms with whites" (Monk et al 285). That is why young Trevor and his mother, Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah, go to three different churches every Sunday; "Jubilant church was mixed church. Analytical church was white church. And passionate, cathartic church, that was black church" (6). He adds that both he and his mother loved the white church' (7) and that one reason why he hated Black church is that it took a long time: "Is it possible for time to actually stop? If so, why does it stop at black church and not at white church? I eventually decided black people needed more time with Jesus because we suffered more" (8). This means that during this stage people of color are "consciously or unconsciously devaluing their own blackness and concurrently valuing white values and ways" (Sue et al 116). Moreover, such quotations prove that during the pre-encounter stage, "attitudes consist of treating the racial dimension of one's life as insignificant" (Evans and George 164). Thus, up till this moment, Noah had distanced himself from his Black identity.

A key factor in Noah's pre-encounter stage is his relationship with his mother. He describes this relationship as follows: "We have a very Tom and Jerry relationship, me and my mom. She was a strict disciplinarian; I was naughty as shit. She would send me out to buy groceries, and I wouldn't come right home because I'd be using the change from the milk and bread to play arcade games at the supermarket" (11). Their relationship was sufficiently close to allow Patricia to become the only source of information for her young child. She never mentioned race or racism in front of him. Noah writes, "I didn't know what race was. My

mother never referred to my dad as white or to me as mixed. So, when the other kids in Soweto called me ‘white,’ even though I was light brown, I just thought they had their colors mixed up” (54).

To distance him from thinking about race, Patricia did not allow young Trevor to see movies or to listen to songs, “so the Bible was my action movie” (7). Moreover, his mother “made sure English was the first language I spoke. If you’re black in South Africa ... English is the language of money” (54). She also made him learn many native South African languages. Thus, he says, “I was a chameleon. My color didn’t change, but I could change your perception of my color. If you spoke to me in Zulu, I replied to you in Zulu. If you spoke to me in Tswana, I replied to you in Tswana. Maybe I didn’t look like you, but if I spoke like you, I was you” (54). It is obvious that in *Born a Crime*, Trevor Noah’s early experiences reflect the pre-encounter stage, in which racism was normalized under apartheid, leading him to internalize societal divisions and struggle with his mixed-race identity.

Intersectional Convergence / Encounter

The second CRT tenet, intersectional convergence, as Delgado and Stefancic define it, adds a further dimension. Because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class whites (psychologically), large segments of society have little incentive to eradicate it” (9). This tenet highlights how overlapping systems of oppression such as race, class, and gender intersect to shape marginalized experiences, as seen in *Born a Crime*, in which race, class, and colonialism converge to define his identity and struggles. This is clear in many of Noah’s quotes, for example, “The white man was rich, the Indian man was poor, the Colored man worked for the white man, and the black man was outside, looking in” (53). This quotation reflects the convergence of race, class, and colonial hierarchies in South Africa. In many other quotes Noah shows how apartheid dehumanized people of color, intersecting

race with class, for example, “In society, we do horrible things to one another because we don’t see the personhood of the other person. We don’t see them as people. That’s what apartheid was: a manifestation of the failure to love” (69). Cross’s second stage, encounter, further explains this intersection.

Cross argues that “Encounter not only marks an awakening to racial oppression but also to immense possibilities of becoming more culturally centered” (xvii). This means that “This stage is characterized by an event in the life of a black person where they are faced with racism or exclusion from the society or firmly assigned an inferior status. Such an event is so powerful that it can no longer be denied and it touches the core of their racial identity” (Monk et al 286). During this stage, the first thing young Noah encountered was how hard his mother worked to support him. He writes, “We were poor in every way, but my mom made sure we never lived poor. She cleaned other people’s houses, but she always made sure our house was spotless” (72). He gives the reader a deeper understanding of the racial discrimination in his country when he says, “Colored people, black people, white people, and Indian people were forced to register their race with the government. Based on those classifications, millions of people were uprooted and relocated” (22). Commenting on this fact, John Dugard states, “In South Africa, a person’s political, civil, economic and social rights are determined by the race or ethnic group to which he belongs” (59). Furthermore, Timothy Sisk concludes the following:

South Africa is the only society in which every member has been legally registered by race and ethnicity. Apartheid organized the state and society around rigidly imposed identities. Systematic *de jure* racial classification, the exclusion of black South Africans from political, social and economic power based on that classification, lies at the heart of the South African conflict. (8)

Owing to racial discrimination, Black women either worked in factories or as maids. However, Noah’s mother took a typing class and wanted to be a secretary, which was a

revolutionary act. Noah writes, “At the time, a black woman learning how to type was like a blind person learning how to drive. ... by law, white-collar jobs and skilled-labor jobs were reserved for whites ... my mom, however, was a rebel” (23). In the 1980s, some changes were made, and she was able to work. Thus, she went to the city and lived there for a while. As Noah narrates, she was lonely, and “not being trusted and not being able to trust, my mother’s starting spending more and more times with the company of someone with whom she felt safe: the tall Swiss man. ... He was forty-six. She was twenty-four. He was quiet and reserved; she was wild and free” (25). However, in spite of his anecdote on his mother making it work in face of hardship, Noah focuses on illustrating how Black people in South Africa have been systematically oppressed under apartheid, denied basic rights, and treated as inferiors as a whole.

The major event that shocked Trevor as a child was when he discovered that his existence was criminalized by law. Trevor Noah is a mixed-race child whose mother is a Black South African woman and father, Robert, is a Swiss German. The Immorality Act of 1927 criminalized sexual relations between white and colored persons (Dugard 60). George Kreis argues that the white government used to enforce such rigid rules as a way of protection: “The government reacted to the increasing resistance to apartheid with a massive expansion of security regulations, and, linked that with the curtailing and defiance of basic constitutional laws” (69). As the Committee of Foreign Affairs declared, the issue was not “who may date whom and who may marry whom in South Africa” but whether “the majority of South Africans can vote in the national elections” (6).

Adult Noah shows great understanding for such facts, for example, “During apartheid, one of the worst crimes you could commit was having sexual relations with a person of another race. Needless to say, my parents committed that crime” and “In any society built on

institutionalized racism, race-mixing doesn't merely challenge the system as unjust, it revealed the system as unsustainable and incoherent. Race-mixing proves that race can mix—and in a lot of cases, *want* to mix” (21). Thus, Trevor Noah learned that morality often conflicted with laws under apartheid, as he sees how unjust laws criminalize his existence.

Noah's story as a mixed-race child can be understood through the encounter stage as a two-step process: “First, the black person encounters a profound crisis or event that challenges their previous mode of thinking and behaving; second, the black person begins to reinterpret the world, resulting in a shift in world views” (Sue et al 116). Thus, Noah begins to understand the bitterness of his life when he finds out about his mixed race: “My father isn't on my birth certificate. Officially, he has never been my father” and “where most children are proof of their parents' love, I was the proof of their criminality. The one time I could be with my father was indoors. If we left the house, he had to walk across the street from us” (27). He adds, “I've never called my dad ‘Dad.’ I never addressed him as ‘Daddy’ or ‘father,’ either. I couldn't. I was instructed not to. If we were out in public or anywhere people might overhear us and I called him ‘Dad,’ some might have asked questions or called the police” (104). Thus, in *Born a Crime*, Trevor Noah's journey reflects the intersection and convergence of race, class, and gender as he moves from the pre-encounter stage of internalized racial confusion to a deeper encounter with his identity, embracing his mixed heritage and challenging societal norms.

Socially Constructed / Immersion-Emersion

CRT argues that race is socially constructed. As Delgado and Stefancic declare, “Race and races are products of social thought and relations: Not objective, inherent, or fixed, they correspond to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or relatives when convenient” (9). On some occasions, Noah describes the poor conditions under which his community suffers, as the white government intentionally gave

them no care. For example, he writes, “Sadly, no matter how fancy you made your house, there was one thing you could never aspire to improve: your toilet. There was no indoor running water, just one, communal outdoor tap and one outdoor toilet shared by six or seven houses” (42). Thus, Noah reveals how poor conditions were socially constructed through apartheid’s systemic racism, which deliberately marginalized Black communities by denying them education, jobs, and resources.

As seen in the memoir, Trevor Noah, a mixed-race child in the apartheid system, reveals how racial categories are created and enforced by society, and not biology. The most powerful proof that racism in South Africa was socially constructed was the Immorality Act, which criminalized Noah’s own existence. After being shocked by this fact, Noah tried to accept his own reality; thus, he undergoes the third stage of Cross’s Black identity theory, the immersion-emersion stage which Cross defines as “an ‘über’ awareness of racial oppression, but it also depicts a person’s immersion into black culture” (xvii). This means that a Black person immerses themselves more in Black culture and identity and then emerges with a greater understanding of the self. As Monk states:

As the name implies, this stage has two modes of expression. Immersion refers to the mode in which it appears and withdraws into a black world and judges others on the basis of whether they conform to so-called authentic racial standards. He may adopt white stereotypes of black people and act them out in the belief that these are features of true black identity. (Monk et al 286)

During this stage, Trevor Noah begins to embrace his mixed-race heritage and challenges societal norms. For example, he takes pride in Nelson Mandela. Noah writes, “The Xhosa ... pride themselves on being thinkers. My mother is Xhosa, Nelson Mandela was Xhosa” (3) and “I was five years old, nearly six, when Nelson Mandela was released from prison. I remember seeing it on TV and everyone being happy. I didn’t know why we were

happy, just that we were” (11). He then adds, “I was aware of the fact that there was a thing called apartheid and it was ending and that was a big deal; what I didn’t understand was the intricacies of it” (11–12). Later, young Noah understands that “The triumph of democracy over apartheid is sometime called the Bloodless Revolution. This was because very little white blood had been spilled. Black blood ran on the streets” because Black people were fighting each other for power. Noah says, “Instead of uniting for peace they turned it on one another, committing acts of unbelievable savagery. Massive riots broke out. Thousands of people were killed” (12). Thus, he became aware of the negative aspects of Black culture.

Further evidence of Noah’s immersion in Black culture is that he learned some of South Africa’s languages of the Black communities. He said, “Living with my mom, I saw how she used language to cross boundaries, handle situations, navigate the world” (54) and “I learned to use language as a tool, to change my identity as the situation demanded. I could be Xhosa, I could be Zulu, I could be Tswana. I could be whatever I needed to be” (56). He clarifies:

Language brings with it an identity and a culture, or at least the perception of it. A shared language says, “We’re the same,” language barriers say, “We’re different.” The architects of apartheid understood this. ... Part of the effort to divide black people was to make sure we were separated not just physically but by language as well. (49)

It is obvious that in *Born a Crime*, language serves as a means of immersion in culture, as Trevor Noah uses his ability to speak multiple languages—Xhosa, Zulu, Afrikaans, and English—to connect with different racial and cultural groups, allowing him to navigate and blend into diverse communities while embracing his identity in apartheid South Africa.

Moreover, when he was a child, he begged his grandmother to allow him to play outside the house. She used to refuse, saying, “They’re going to take you.” For a long time, he thought “she meant the other kids were going to steal me, but she was talking about the police. Children could be taken. Children were taken. The wrong colored kids and the wrong color area” (29).

Based on this understanding, Noah “withdraws from the dominant culture and becomes immersed in African American or other (Afro) ethnic culture. Black pride begins to develop. ... In the emersion phase, feelings of guilt and anger began to dissipate with an increasing sense of pride” (Sue et al. 116). Thus, he accepts staying alone most of the time: “I wasn’t a lonely kid—I was good at being alone. I’d read books, play with the toy that I had, make up imaginary worlds. I lived inside my head” (30). He also accepted the advanced treatment that he received from his family. This is clear in his sense of humor when he describes how his grandmother loved his prayers: “My grandmother always told me that she loved my prayers. She believed my prayers were more powerful, because I prayed in English ... the Bible is in English. Yes, the Bible was not written in English, but the Bible came to South Africa in English so to us it’s in English” (40). His grandfather also treated him differently: “He was more extreme. ... In the car, he insisted on driving me as if he were my chauffeur” (52). Therefore, realizing that race is socially constructed enforces Noah’s understanding of his position as a mixed-race child and allows him to engage with his South African culture, moving from confusion about his mixed-race identity to a stronger and more empowered sense of self.

Differential Racialization / Internalization

The fourth tenet is differential racialization. Delgado and Stefancic define differential racialization as “the way the dominant society rationalizes different minority groups at different times, in response to shifting needs such as the labor market” (10). Thus, this tenet refers to the varying ways in which racism manifests across different groups. Noah is sufficiently smart to document this as a major aspect of South African society. For example, he mentions, “Japanese people were labeled as white. The reason for this was that South African governments wanted to establish good relations with the Japanese in order to import their fancy cars and electronics” (75). He also reflects on how people of color were treated differently from Black people under apartheid when he says, “Colored people were seen as more civilized than Black people, but

less civilized than white people. It was a weird in-between space” (54). He also highlights how economic opportunities were distributed along racial lines, with the Black people facing the most severe restrictions: “The system was designed to keep black people poor and white people rich. It was that simple” (72).

Noah explores this concept through the apartheid system, which enforced racial categories and treated groups differently based on their perceived racial status. Because of this understanding of oppression and racism, Noah becomes fully absorbed in his Black culture, which is referred to as the internalization stage according to the NM. Internalization occurs when “the person develops a positive, more internalized black identity. This identity is also more nuanced and less stereotyped. It may also include unique aspects drawn not so much from stereotypes of black culture than from the particular life experiences of the person” (Monk et al 287). The first noticeable aspect regarding Noah is his full understanding of the apartheid system, “The genius of apartheid was convincing people who were the overwhelming majority to turn on each other. Apartheid is what it was. You separate people into groups and make them hate one another so you can run them all” (3). Thus, “the relationships with white people that were terminated and the anger of the previous stage of development may be reestablished at this point” (Monk et al 287). In *Born a Crime*, internalization during apartheid is reflected in how Trevor Noah and others absorb the racial hierarchies and stereotypes imposed by the system.

In addition, Noah becomes fully aware of his Black culture during the internalization stage. He writes, “The Zulu went to war with the white man. The Xhosa played chess with the white man. For a long time neither was particularly successful, and each blamed the other for a problem neither had created” (4). He adds:

At the time, black South Africans outnumbered white South Africans nearly five to one, yet we were divided into different tribes with different languages: Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana,

Sotho, Venda, Ndebele, Tsonga, Pedi, and more. Long before apartheid existed these tribal factions clashed and warred with one another. (3)

By understanding the oppressor and the oppressed, Noah ends up understanding himself. He understands, for example, how he reacts when his mother throws him then herself from a moving minibus to protect them, saying, “Had I lived a different life, getting thrown out of a speeding minibus might have fazed me. I’d have stood there like an idiot, going, ‘What’s happening, Mom? Why are my legs so sore?’ But there was none of that. Mum said ‘run,’ and I ran. Like the gazelle runs from the lion, I ran” (16). In addition, the confusion regarding the previous state has disappeared. Now, instead of saying, “Then recess came. We went out on the playground. ... The white kids I met that morning, they went in one direction, the black kids went in another direction, and I was left standing in the middle totally confused” (57), he says, “I moved to the black classes with the black kids. I decided I’d rather be held back with people I’d like than move ahead with people I didn’t know” (59). In *Born a Crime*, different racializations under apartheid assigned distinct roles to Black, Colored, Indian, and white groups, leading to the internalization of these hierarchies. Trevor Noah’s mixed-race experience highlights the impact and eventual rejection of these categories.

Voices of Color / Internalization-Commitment

Many critical race theorists believe that “minority writers and thinkers are generally in a better position than white writers to write and speak about race and racism because they experience racism directly” (Tyson 377). This is called the voices of color. In *Born a Crime*, voices of color are central to the narrative as Trevor Noah amplifies the experiences of marginalized communities under apartheid. For example, he conveys the history of South Africa by clarifying that when the Dutch came to South Africa, they encountered the Khoisan

people. The Dutch mixed with them, then they brought slaves from all over their empire, such as from the East Indies, West Africa, and Madagascar. These slaves also mixed with the Khoisan people. He writes, “The history of Colored people in South Africa is, in this respect, worse than the history of black people in South Africa. For all that black people have suffered, they know who they are. Colored people don’t” (116). He also states that “the only way to make apartheid work, therefore, is to cripple the black mind” (61). Moreover, he explained the difference between Afrikaner and British racism:

The difference between British and Afrikaner racism was that at least the British gave the native something to aspire to. If they could learn to speak correct English and dress in proper clothes, if they could Anglicize and civilize themselves, one day they might be welcome and society. The Afrikaners never gave us that option. (62)

Thus, Caskey Rusell concludes “marginalized and oppressed groups can work against stereotypes and taken-for-granted truths by using their unique voices and narratives (broadly defined) to challenge mainstream society’s master narratives about their identity, behavior, and position in society” (216). David Gillborn also comments on the same fact, stating, “A particularly striking aspect of some CRTs is the use of storytelling and counter-storytelling. Here, myths, assumptions and the received wisdom can be questioned by shifting the ground of debate or presenting analysis in ways that turn dominant assumptions on their head” (102).

Such a narration by Trevor Noah is proof that he has reached the internalization-commitment stage of the NM, where he fully embraces his racial identity and commits to actively supporting and advocating for his community. Noah concludes that he must write his story to tell the world about the oppression his country suffered, because “in South Africa, the atrocities of apartheid have never been taught” (184). He wanted the whole world to know that

when apartheid came, Colored people defied easy categorization, so the system used them—quite brilliantly—to sow confusion, hatred, and mistrust. For the purposes of

the state, Colored people become the almost-whites. They were second-class citizens, denied the rights of the white people but given special privileges that black people didn't have. (118)

He also wanted the world to know that “even after apartheid, most black people still lived in the townships and the areas formally designed as homelands” (137). Thus, he reached a point at which he “view[ed] Blackness as an awakening process in which people become increasingly clear about the realities and joys of being black” (Sue et al 115). This enabled him to focus on his talents and use his sense of humor and deep analytical gifts to become a famous figure, first in his own country and then in the United States. Avery Elizabeth Hurt comments, “His nature quickly won over viewers, and his ‘outsider’ status give him the ability to see the America that lives behind the political divide. Trevor Noah has taken his place in the long history of political satire” (9). As seen in *Born a Crime*, Trevor Noah not only accepts his mixed-race identity, but also uses his platform to challenge racial injustice and celebrate the resilience of marginalized voices.

Conclusion

Trevor Noah's *Born a Crime* is more than a memoir. It is a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of systemic oppression. Through the lens of CRT, the memoir exposes the brutal realities of apartheid, where laws like the Immorality Act sought to erase identities like Trevor Noah's, rendering his existence a crime. However, Noah's story is not one of victimhood but of resistance and reclamation. His narrative, infused with humor and wit, becomes a tool for dismantling the dehumanizing structures of apartheid, offering a counter narrative that celebrates the complexity and fluidity of identity. The CRT's intersectional

approach further reveals how Noah's experiences are shaped by the convergence of race, class, and gender, particularly through the figure of his mother, whose unwavering strength and defiance embody the resilience of marginalized communities.

Applying CRT tenets to *Born a Crime* gives a deep realization of Trevor Noah's journey, as reflected in the stages of the NM, particularly the transition from pre-encounter to internalization-commitment. Initially, Noah struggles with his mixed-race identity under apartheid, internalizing the societal norms that criminalize his existence, as seen when he describes being "born a crime" as a result of his parents' interracial relationship. This pre-encounter stage is marked by confusion and a sense of not belonging as Noah navigates a world in which his identity is illegal. However, as he ages and matures, he moves toward embracing his heritage, ultimately using his story to challenge racial injustice and celebrate the resilience of marginalized communities. This progression mirrors the NM and highlights the process of developing a positive racial identity in the face of systemic oppression.

Ultimately, *Born a Crime* is a call to action urging readers to confront the legacies of systemic oppression while embracing the possibilities of cultural renewal. Noah's narrative is not just a reflection of the past but also a blueprint for the future, demonstrating how storytelling can dismantle oppressive structures and affirm the dignity of marginalized voices. By combining CRT and NM, this analysis underscores the transformative potential of narrative in shaping our understanding of race, identity, and belonging. Noah's memoir reminds us that identity is not a crime but a celebration—a testament to the enduring power of resilience, creativity, and hope in the face of adversity.

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