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REVIEW ESSAY

Navigating history and paradox

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Abstract

This essay assesses Susan Sturm's *What Might Be: Confronting Racism to Transform Our Institutions* as a major contribution to Critical Race Theory, socio-legal theory, and the practice of institutional anti-racism. It argues that Sturm's central achievement is to reframe anti-racism not as a discrete legal remedy or diversity initiative, but as a sustained institutional practice of navigating paradox. Drawing on Sturm's earlier work on complex discrimination, the essay shows how her critique of formal adjudication and liability-centered antidiscrimination law develops into a broader theory of organizational transformation. Institutions, Sturm argues, are not race-neutral arenas; they reproduce racial hierarchy through norms, routines, role structures, and patterns of interaction that often appear ordinary or neutral. The essay emphasizes three linked dimensions of Sturm's intervention. First, anti-racism requires working through contradictions rather than resolving them: race must be acknowledged because it is materially consequential, yet racial categories must also be destabilized because they help reproduce hierarchy. Second, institutions often become trapped in cycles of reform and retrenchment, producing what Sturm calls "Groundhog Day" dynamics in which diversity initiatives generate temporary movement but fail to alter underlying structures. Third, meaningful transformation depends on trust, linked fate, stretch collaboration, and organizational catalysts that can create durable forms of shared inquiry and collective action.

Keywords: complex discrimination; critical race theory; demosprudence; legal formalism; linked fate; organizational catalysts; paradox; reform and retrenchment; structural racism

Introduction

What would an anti-racism project look like in today's social and legal climate? Depending on where you stand on the contemporary political spectrum, the answer to that question is likely to range from incredulity about the need for such a project to a rueful recognition that there is still a long way to go. Professor Susan Sturm never looks away from the reality of the role race plays in our social life, and she acknowledges that the instruments and logic of law also play an important role (Sturm 2005: 35). Despite the importance of legal tools, she is critical of both the romantic notions about what law is capable of and the belief that process is at the heart of what we can hope for.

Before she gave us WHAT MIGHT BE, Professor Sturm used the tools of critical legal studies and critical race theory (CRT) in an important essay that is a window into what

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would become the project of her book. She dismantles formalism and shows that traditional antidiscrimination law relies too heavily on formal adjudication and liability rules, which are ill-suited to addressing systemic or structural discrimination. "The overarching insistence on judicial imposition of the 'right' legal rule places considerable strain on both the law and the courts" (Sturm 2005: 38). This pressure arises from conceptions of how law and the courts must necessarily function. Instead, she wants to examine the "unarticulated yet foundational conceptions of the law and the judiciary" (Sturm 2005: 38), and demonstrate how problems of complex discrimination often operate beyond the reach of conventional doctrine. As she notes, "the complex problems revealed by institutional and behavioral analysis of discrimination resist resolution by either generally applicable rules or private, decentralized norms" (Sturm 2005: 38). What she endeavors to do is to construct a new understanding of the remedial reach of courts. Her critique is particularly strong because she grounds it in socio-legal scholarship and, through that, explains how legal categories obscure institutional and cultural practices. Confusing the tensions between these social practices often produces a mismatch between individualized adjudication and systemic discrimination.

Her focus on organizational norms and institutional dynamics is particularly powerful because it enables a sophisticated reframing of the problem of discrimination and shows that conventional doctrine assigning liability cannot easily capture the full scope of the problem. Her original and compelling contribution is the reconceptualization of law as a catalyst for norm development rather than merely an enforcement mechanism. She argues that this should be reflected in an

> equality norm [requiring] inquiry, analysis, reflection, and remediation. The law imposes an obligation to inquire upon a showing of an unexplained pattern of bias. The legal consequence of exposing a discrimination problem through this normative inquiry is not the imposition of a sanction; it is instead the imposition of a legally enforceable obligation to correct the problem. (Sturm 2005: 47)

This shift is critical because what she aims to achieve is institutional problem-solving that bridges formal and informal norms, connects law to organizational learning, and preserves accountability by expanding law's functional role. Professor Sturm shows how legal processes can structure participation, transparency, and reason-giving without relying solely on rigid liability determinations.

I started this review of WHAT MIGHT BE: CONFRONTING RACISM TO TRANSFORM OUR INSTITUTIONS by discussing Professor Sturm's previous book chapter on complex discrimination to make a simple point. That essay demonstrates that she has been working on this problem for a long time. Moreover, even close to 20 years ago, she was sensitive to the need to make arguments legible to a technical legal audience. Still, she knew that the task of sweating the vestiges of racism from our civic life would not be the job of lawyers alone. It would require lawyers, judges, and other members of the legal profession, but they would not necessarily be the central players. WHAT MIGHT BE undertakes to provide a conceptual roadmap for building potentially transformative collaborations.

The reference to Robert Cover in the title of her book is instructive. By attempting to bridge the distance between the *is* and the *ought*, Professor Sturm, with Professor

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Cover, asks, "What might be?" I was reminded of a book of stories by fellow law professor Yxta Maya Murray: THE WORLD DOESN'T WORK THAT WAY, BUT IT COULD: STORIES, in which the limitation of norms or rules could be confronted, and the false necessity of things as they are could be challenged (Murray 2020). Professor Sturm confronts the givenness of institutional norms and shows that they did not reflect what we claimed to value, even when they conformed to existing rules. Consistent with Robert Cover, Professor Sturm does not view law as a purely positivist artifact. The state's power to enforce liability rules is always there, but it is never just the product of the state. Law is created and interpreted through the narratives that communities construct. It is always a process of meaning creation. And it is always a form of social negotiation within and across institutions, even if power imbalances disguise the limits of acceptable change. Importantly, though, Professor Sturm understands the dynamic quality of this process and illustrates how confronting injustice, even if it is not fully understood as such, nonetheless transforms the scope of what is possible. Thus, WHAT MIGHT BE describes a space, not a wish.

Anti-racism as a practice of paradox

WHAT MIGHT BE is a sustained argument about how anti-racism work unfolds inside organizations. Across the chapters, Professor Sturm develops a theory of change grounded in paradox, collaboration, and a commitment to long-term institutional transformation. The book blends narrative case studies, conceptual tools, and practitioner insight to explain why organizations struggle to advance racial equity and how they might move beyond cycles of reform and retrenchment.

One of the book's central contributions is its claim that anti-racism requires learning to work with rather than to resolve contradictions. This form of practice is something I suspect many of us learn in the doing but are not commonly called to theorize. In fact, recognizing the contradictions is an ongoing struggle. Professor Sturm begins by framing the project with the recognition that "anti-racism work ... requires the capacity to straddle contradictory yet interdependent realities that seem irreconcilable but must and can both be navigated" (Sturm 2025: 10). This formulation provides the conceptual backbone for the book.

Race itself is described as paradoxical: it is both socially constructed and materially consequential. I am reminded of a comment by anthropologist Renato Rosaldo, "witches may not exist, but that means very little to the woman who is being burned at the stake" (Rosaldo).[1] It has other consequences, too. As Professor Sturm explains, "Failing to take race into account perpetuates the conditions reproducing racial hierarchy, while acknowledging racial difference can also reinforce those hierarchies" (Sturm 2025: 11). The implication is that anti-racism must simultaneously recognize and destabilize racial categories.

This framing is powerful because it explains why organizations repeatedly fail when they attempt simple solutions. "[O]rganizations are not race neutral and ... anti-racism requires understanding racialization processes that both reproduce and challenge racism – how social systems, norms, routines, hierarchies, and practices

[1]This quotation is from the author's recollection of a conversation with Renato Rosaldo; the exact published source has not yet been located.

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reproduce racial stratification and how internal organizing can alter those patterns of racialization and produce greater equality" (Sturm 2025: 33). Anti-racism is not a problem of mere technical change; it is a long-term practice of navigating tensions and constantly challenging the norms and ethical structures that seem "eternal and inevitable" (Sturm 2025: 33).

As I read this introductory chapter and noted the structure of the argument that is played out over the course of the book, I was reminded that the process of meaning creation by courts, which are themselves afloat on the justificatory norms of the status quo, is tied to the social reality being constructed all around them. Lani Guinier and I termed this process "demosprudence" (Guinier and Torres 2014). We linked the process of acceptable meaning creation to the power of social movements. But there are other pressures, some of which confound the idea of progress. Martha Menchaca, in her essay The Anti-Miscegenation History of the American Southwest, 1837–1970, explained how Texas courts evaded enforcement of the prohibition on miscegenation when doing so would have destabilized land titles. California enacted similar exceptions to miscegenation for the same reason (Menchaca 2008). In those situations, the domestic courts had to confront and integrate legal practices predating federal or state jurisdiction. What Menchaca demonstrates is that the forces that drive institutional and normative transformation are often exogenous to the institutions and have yielded positive results, albeit for less than noble reasons. No doubt similar "progress" is what led Professor Sturm to believe that "overt racism, I had sanguinely characterized in a 2001 article [was] 'largely a thing of the past,'" (Sturm 2001, 2025). While these changes were often characterized as mere "interest convergence," Professor Sturm shows how they also reveal a deeper truth of how fates are linked and how that knowledge can itself lead to transformative change (Bell 1980).

Traversing the rugged terrain of anti-racism in our current moment is difficult, but Professor Sturm uses case studies and examples to show that there is no single path; rather, they may all lead to the same destination. It is possible to reach a place that vindicates Professor Sturm's earlier optimism, and she wants to show us how to get there.

Reform and retrenchment

The chapter titled *Stuck in Groundhog Day* vividly captures the recurring failures of institutional reform. Professor Sturm observes that organizations frequently try new initiatives only to find themselves "right back where [they] started – or even a few steps back" (Sturm 2025: 36). This metaphor becomes a central explanatory device for describing the pattern she seeks to avoid: short-term reforms generate temporary enthusiasm but ultimately give way to backlash and stagnation.

This chapter contains many powerful themes essential to the book's argument and structure. I want to focus, at least initially, on two and then integrate others. The first is the feeling of "no exit," but rather than WAITING FOR GODOT, I thought of THE UNNAMABLE. The famous last words, "... you must go on. I can't go on. I'll go on [.]." (Beckett 1954, 1958) and the resilience it expresses in the face of despair and absurdity, despite the feeling that it is impossible to continue, you must.

In the case studies of such efforts, "those trying to initiate change were caught in a quandary that left them feeling both compelled to act and doomed to fail" (Sturm

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2025: 37). "Stuck in Groundhog Day" argues that anti-racism efforts fail not because reformers lack commitment, but because they underestimate the paradoxical dynamics embedded in institutions structured by racial hierarchy. Because the actors do not recognize the paradoxes within which they function, they oscillate between symbolic and reactive measures, which frequently trigger backlash, exhaust trust, and, almost beneath notice, restore the status quo. The strength of this diagnosis is that, by carefully examining the cases, stagnation is shown to be diagnosable and therefore transformable. The key is learning how to navigate a paradox rather than being trapped by it. Yet the burden is not only practical but psychological; reformers must repeatedly absorb frustration when efforts collapse. What Professor Sturm demonstrates is that a failure to understand institutional dynamics contributes to the inertia and frustration that make conditions seem intractable. Thus, exposing how the functions of the institution you are part of shape your understanding of the resistance you encounter.

Backlash from those who do not understand the efforts to transform institutions or who may not even believe that racism plays a part in how their institutions function contributes to the feeling that change is impossible. The discussion of Judge Fein's efforts to address racism in his court exemplifies this pattern. Despite conferences, diversity training, and implicit bias initiatives, "there was little change in people's experience of racism, and the criticism from both sides had continued unabated" (Sturm 2025: 38). This narrative demonstrates the limits of one-off interventions and supports the diagnosis that meaningful change requires sustained engagement. What the discussion of efforts to combat racism in Judge Fein's court also shows is that perceptions of what counts as racism differ based on where you sit in the racial hierarchy. Charles Tilly's concept of "durable inequality" captures how nonspecifically racialized social conditions produce effects that we might characterize as racist. However, if you define racism as purely the residue of a bad heart or intentional discrimination, then you will not see how the ordinary functioning of institutions, whether schools, housing, or transportation, produces racially disparate results. Her work with Judge Fein helped him understand this, and she uses it to explore the central concepts in the chapter that explain the obdurate nature of systemic racism: experiential segregation, scripted stuckness, status quo bias, and role rigidity. Confronting racism in the courts highlights the impact of each of those aspects of systemic racism and helps explain why it is so resistant to conventional attack.

The feeling of "no-exit" can be debilitating and lead to a justified feeling that there is nothing to be done. But there is another component of the work that is crucial and, in many ways, is the solvent for the feeling of stuckness or no-exit. Building trust among those who are attempting in good faith to identify and resolve the problem of institutional racism is critical. Without it, there really may be no exit. But trust is hard to build and fragile to hold on to.

In each case study in this chapter, trust among and between the actors is essential. It may be only a slight overstatement to suggest that trust (and its fragility) is at the heart of the discussion of the dynamic of reform and retrenchment that characterizes Groundhog Day. Institutional distrust by people of color is, in many cases, the default position. But it is precisely this posture that leads those who feel themselves accused to retreat into abstraction or to accuse those who are conscious of race of being racists.

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What qualifies as just desserts in an unjust system may seem plain to those who are disadvantaged, but deviations from existing patterns of distribution will, in some cases (say, on a law review), be viewed as a retreat from objective standards of fairness.

Yet it is not necessarily true that failure will lead to deeper retrenchment. In fact, Professor Sturm demonstrates that recognizing failure can be the first step toward rebuilding trust in a different way. It may lead to a recognition that the ways power is deployed within institutions lead those without power to question the good faith of some actors. Understanding why anti-racism efforts fail is key to rebuilding trust and building foundations for real transformation.

Practical wisdom comes from understanding some kinds of failure as reflective of recurring institutional dynamics. One example is the lack of attention to the unequal burden of both racism and anti-racism work. In the example of Jean, a Black professor of English who took on the job as a dean for diversity, Professor Sturm notes this phenomenon when she writes that Jean "got pushback for letting white faculty members off the hook for failing to take responsibility for addressing racism themselves while increasing the burden to do so on those most affected by it" (Sturm 2025: 38). One recurrent institutional dynamic is that initiatives intended to empower marginalized groups can inadvertently increase their workload while shielding dominant groups from responsibility. Trust will wither in those circumstances.

Linked fate and repurposing power

In discussions of reform and retrenchment, the need to build trust among institutional actors gives rise to the concept of linked fate. Trust is best grounded in a commitment to good faith. Good faith requires an assurance of authenticity. Stepping outside the roles we are playing enables us to discover where our fates are linked. Sartre, for example, characterized racism as emblematic of bad faith (Sartre 1948). Transformative anti-racism work depends on cultivating a sense of "linked fate" across racial lines that breaks down what Professor Sturm might call institutionalized bad faith. It is only through good-faith work that a clear understanding of how the well-being of different groups is interconnected can emerge. Even when groups occupy different historical positions and social power, their futures are cocreated, whether through cooperation or opposition.

Let me give you one example. When affirmative action was outlawed in Texas, the Texas legislature enacted a plan to guarantee automatic admission to the top 10% of all high school graduates. Although Texas was under a court-ordered plan to equalize public school funding, significant disparities remained between the best- and worst-funded schools. Administrators at the University of Texas (UT) were concerned that some students would be unprepared for university-level work. Nonetheless, they were determined to make the best of it. A study indicated that the strongest predictor of whether students would remain enrolled or drop out was a small-group experience in their first year. This finding led the leadership to redesign the first-year curriculum to ensure that every student would have a small-group class. Thus, the pressures to maintain a diverse class at UT improved the learning experience for all students. The fate of all the students would be linked, and UT would benefit from a higher graduation rate. Perhaps an even better example that arose during the same period. When the 10% plan was proposed, it was opposed by the beneficiaries of the existing admission plan.

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However, when white rural conservative West Texas legislators were told how their constituents had been systematically excluded from attending UT, they joined with the black and Latino legislators to support the bill and guaranteed its passing. They have been among the most consistent defenders of the 10% plan against the repeated repeal efforts (Guinier and Torres 2002).

The capacity to recognize linked fate does not emerge automatically. It requires individual and collective reflective practice, action tied to reflection, and institutional mechanisms for sustained work. Drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, she captures his concept of praxis as "reflection and action on the world to change it" (Sturm 2025: 100). Trust, that essential ingredient, develops only when reflection is coupled with institutional change, even if the change is incomplete.

Anti-racism as institutional transformation: collaboration, leadership, and collective change

Professor Sturm deploys three conceptual tools that are crucial to forging linked fate. First, recognizing that racial disparities serve as early warning indicators of systemic dysfunction affecting everyone is summarized in the idea of the Miner's Canary (Guinier and Torres 2002). Second, and closely related, is the idea of the Solidarity Dividend (McGhee 2021). That is the idea that anti-racism produces shared institutional gains, not just benefits for marginalized groups. I have tried to illustrate how this works in the earlier discussion of higher education admission reform. Finally, and in many ways, critical to the success of any effort at transformative institutional change is the idea that stretch collaboration enables working across divides with both skepticism and commitment. Stretch collaboration enables groups with conflicting experiences and power differentials to remain engaged rather than retreating into distrust or zero-sum struggle (Kahane 2017). Stretch collaboration spans "opposing sides of the anti-racism paradoxes," even when participants "see the world differently" and "hold different kinds of power" (Sturm 2025: 113). As she describes it, this involves situations of profound, entrenched disagreement without clearly identified shared values or a clear definition of the problem, yet with the recognition that the status quo is unacceptable (Sturm 2025: 110). When circumstances are close to intolerable, some remedies become plausible.

Efforts to address racial inequality are often framed as moral appeals aimed at correcting historical injustices faced by marginalized communities. While this moral framing is important, it can inadvertently reinforce the misconception that anti-racism primarily benefits only those who experience discrimination. Professor Sturm challenges this narrow perspective by presenting anti-racism as a broader institutional project, one that improves organizational functioning, strengthens collaboration, and promotes collective flourishing. By introducing conceptual tools such as the solidarity dividend and stretch collaboration, and by highlighting the role of organizational catalysts in sustaining change, she demonstrates how anti-racism can and must operate as a process of institutional transformation rather than a purely ethical mandate.

What Might Be offers the idea of full participation as a way to reframe anti-racism as an endeavor that benefits entire institutions rather than a select group of individuals, emphasizing that addressing racial inequities often reveals deeper structural problems that negatively affect many members of an organization. Exposing

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and confronting structural problems can simultaneously improve institutional performance and increase equity. In this sense, anti-racism functions as a diagnostic tool that exposes inefficiencies, exclusions, and outdated practices embedded within organizational systems, independent of the racial implications (Guinier and Torres 2002). By addressing these issues, institutions become more effective, adaptable, and inclusive. Put bluntly, they get better at what they were designed to do even as they shed the unconscious reproduction of racial roles.

Reframing anti-racism as a project that promotes full participation challenges the dominant narrative that equity initiatives require losses for those who hold social or institutional power. Instead of viewing anti-racism as a redistribution of opportunity from one group to another, this framework suggests that dismantling racial inequities strengthens the entire institutional environment. For example, policies that expand access to leadership opportunities or decision-making processes often improve organizational creativity and innovation (Page 2017). Similarly, initiatives that increase transparency and accountability tend to benefit all participants, not just those previously marginalized. By reframing anti-racism as a shared institutional interest, the solidarity dividend helps shift conversations away from zero-sum thinking toward mutual benefit.

What Might Be offers some concrete strategies for linking anti-racism to institutional transformation. Institutional mindfulness, for example, enables participants to come together through a shared recognition that the status quo is unacceptable. Participants commit to a process of inquiry, experimentation, and learning rather than attempting to resolve all disagreements at the outset. This approach allows institutions to move forward even when ideological divides remain unresolved. By focusing on experimentation and iterative problem-solving, institutional mindfulness lays the groundwork for groups to test potential solutions and adjust their strategies over time. Such an approach is particularly valuable in addressing systemic problems, where rigid ideological positions often impede progress.

Organizational catalysts – bridge builders and connectors who can bring people together to engage in institutional change – provide a vehicle for shifting to a broader "both/and" framework for institutional change. Rather than treating anti-racism as a separate initiative that competes with other organizational priorities, this framework integrates racial equity into broader institutional goals. Race remains central to the analysis, but it is connected to questions of effectiveness, innovation, and institutional health. This integrated approach allows organizations to pursue racial justice while strengthening their overall capacity to fulfill their missions.

The theoretical foundations of these ideas align with several influential strands of sociological thought and explicitly build on them. For instance, the emphasis on discovering shared grievances across social groups resonates with collective identity theory, particularly the work of Roger Gould, which demonstrates how individuals can form alliances across class boundaries even as they identify other sources of solidarity. Her discussion of coalition-building and strategic framing draws on insights from social movement theory, particularly work on resource mobilization and public narratives. Marshall Ganz's work on Leading Change is helpful here (Ganz 2026).

What Might Be draws on CRT as the source of the idea that racial inequality often functions as a diagnostic indicator of broader systemic dysfunction. My work with Lani Guinier, for example, deploys the metaphor of race as the "miner's canary," a

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warning signal revealing deeper institutional problems. Additionally, the emphasis on dialogue and cross-group engagement reflects traditions in deliberative democracy and intergroup dialogue, which emphasize the role of structured communication in transforming conflict and fostering mutual understanding. Professor Sturm has translated these theoretical insights into practical tools for organizational reform. Organizational catalysts play a crucial role in bridging divides and facilitating long-term engagement across racial and institutional boundaries. They create spaces for participants to engage in inquiry, experimentation, and collaborative learning. They help groups move beyond entrenched positions by reframing conflicts to highlight overlapping interests and shared goals, thereby contributing to a sense of institutional safety.

These catalysts, or "dream weavers," build collaborative networks rather than exercise traditional hierarchical leadership. WHAT MIGHT BE offers stories of people in a variety of roles, for example, Judge Fein (a state court judge) and Jeanine Tesori (a Tony Award-winning composer), who show how they could use their institutional positions to cultivate durable alliances across racial and professional divides. They did not rely solely on authority or formal power; instead, they focused on facilitating dialogue, encouraging experimentation, and creating opportunities for collective problem-solving. Moreover, by aligning anti-racism with institutional excellence, they help participants view equity initiatives not as external demands but as integral to organizational success.

One of WHAT MIGHT BE's most compelling arguments is that meaningful institutional change often requires role reconfiguration. People must expand or redefine their professional roles to effectively address systemic inequities. Traditional job descriptions and organizational hierarchies may limit a person's ability to engage with issues that cross departmental or disciplinary boundaries. By reimagining their roles, institutional actors can create new forms of collaboration and innovation. Anti-racism cannot be a specialized responsibility assigned to diversity offices; instead, it must be a shared institutional project involving participants at multiple levels of the organization.

It is here that Professor Sturm reconceptualizes trust as a part of the institutional infrastructure rather than merely an interpersonal sentiment. Trust does not emerge automatically from goodwill or rhetorical commitments to inclusion; it develops through sustained collaboration, shared experimentation, and the visible implementation of institutional change. When participants observe that dialogue leads to concrete reforms, they become more willing to invest in the collaborative process. Over time, this cycle of inquiry and action builds the relational foundation necessary for long-term institutional transformation.

Living in and with paradox can be taxing. Efforts to address systemic racism often generate tension, resistance, and fatigue. Participants may become discouraged when progress appears slow or when conflicts intensify. It is in these moments that organizational catalysts play a critical role. Rather than attempting to eliminate conflict, they create spaces in which competing perspectives can coexist and be explored productively. By maintaining engagement through periods of uncertainty and disagreement, catalysts ensure that the collaborative process continues even when it becomes difficult.

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Anti-racism is an ongoing process of institutional transformation. The solidarity dividend reframes equity as a shared institutional benefit, while stretch collaboration provides practical strategies for working across entrenched divides. Organizational catalysts, bridge builders, and dream weavers sustain these processes by fostering inquiry, experimentation, and trust-building within institutions. Through these combined mechanisms, anti-racism becomes a dynamic practice that reshapes how institutions function and how individuals collaborate within them. It moves people beyond the limiting constraints of viewing anti-racism as merely a moral or ethical obligation. Anti-racism requires sustained engagement, collective experimentation, and leadership that prioritizes relational collaboration over individual authority. By integrating theoretical insights with practical tools and leadership strategies, Professor Sturm advances a powerful model for institutions seeking to address systemic inequality while strengthening their overall capacity for innovation and collective flourishing. That they can and must do both is a critical insight.

Conclusion: the long haul of anti-racism

I have read WHAT MIGHT BE as part of the intellectual and political tradition of CRT. I think it is appropriately considered as part of that analytic framework and tradition. As the book demonstrates, racism is not simply a matter of individual prejudice, but a structural feature embedded within the architecture of institutions and the distribution of power. Anti-racism, therefore, requires more than moral recognition or policy reform; it demands sustained engagement with the institutional arrangements that normalize inequality and shape participation. This recognition is essential to the practical approach Professor Sturm demands and models.

Viewed through the lens of CRT, contemporary political polarization appears not merely as ideological disagreement but as a struggle over how institutions distribute power, recognition, and belonging in a multiracial democracy. By centering the historical and institutional foundations of racial hierarchy, CRT explains why contemporary conflicts, whether over voting rights, policing, immigration, education, and diversity initiatives, have become such potent flashpoints. These disputes are not isolated policy disagreements; they are contests over the meaning of equality, the legitimacy of institutions, and the boundaries of democratic participation. The case studies featured in this book identify the institutional obstacles that impede confronting the ongoing expression of racism and the need for sustained work to identify and uproot it.

At the same time, WHAT MIGHT BE also illustrates that the persistence of racial inequality is reproduced through everyday institutional practices, professional norms, and patterns of interaction that appear neutral but systematically advantage some groups while marginalizing others. Although Professor Sturm does not reference his work, these dynamics resonate strongly with Pierre Bourdieu's sociology. His concepts of field, habitus, and symbolic power illuminate how divisions become embedded in institutional structures and internalized in social dispositions. Racism is socially reproduced through the cultural and institutional environments in which individuals learn to perceive the world. One way this work sits comfortably within this framework, while being more clearly linked to the methods and analysis of CRT, is its emphasis on reflexivity. As I noted in a recent essay, "reflexive scholarship is a form of qualitative

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research that explores wider cultural, political, and social meanings by expressing those meanings in the author's lived experience" (Torres 2023).

While Gould helps expand the locus of identity formation, and Freire is useful to the application of the idea of praxis, Bourdieu helps explain the durability of polarization. His account of habitus and symbolic boundaries shows how divisions become embodied and normalized, making them resistant to correction even when formal policies change. CRT clarifies the drivers of racialized political content, its connection to demographic change, and its entanglement with legal institutions that structure access to power. Recognizing this distinction helps situate the contribution of WHAT MIGHT BE. The book emphasizes that confronting racism inevitably involves navigating paradox: institutions that reproduce inequality are also the sites where transformation must occur; actors with privilege must participate in dismantling the very structures that benefit them; and efforts to acknowledge race may simultaneously challenge and reinforce racial categories. These tensions mirror the theoretical divide between CRT, which foregrounds the political struggle over racial hierarchy, and Bourdieu, who explains the institutional and cultural mechanisms that sustain it. Both analytic devices are on display in this book, and understanding the cultural mechanisms that disguise ongoing racism is essential to the narrative's task of dismantling it.

The central conflicts shaping the current political moment are explicitly racialized struggles over democratic power. Bourdieu's framework is powerful, and it enables us to understand the nature of conflicts within social fields. Professor Sturm, consistent with the analytic focus of CRT, forces us to see the institutional struggles she documents as historically specific, rooted in racial domination, both independent of yet intimately connected to larger anti-racism efforts. One reason Bourdieu seemed important is that legal reforms and policy interventions alone cannot undo the deeply embedded dispositions and institutional practices that reproduce racial division. Of course, sociological explanations of symbolic power are insufficient without confronting the racial hierarchies that structure political conflict in the first place.

Professor Sturm demonstrates that struggles over the institutional expression of racial division are historically grounded and structured contests over power, identity, and institutional legitimacy. CRT reveals the racialized stakes of that struggle, and Bourdieu helps explain why it is so difficult to escape. The challenge identified in WHAT MIGHT BE is both analytic and practical. Addressing racial injustice requires confronting the institutional architectures that sustain inequality while simultaneously cultivating collaboration and institutional imagination capable of transforming them. The work of anti-racism is therefore neither linear nor purely oppositional. Instead, it is an ongoing process of navigating paradox, linking structural critique with institutional change and collective action over the long haul. It is doing the hard work (Payne 1995; Polletta 2002).[2]

[2]I was reminded of the concept of "slow and respectful work," which Charles M. Payne develops in *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). Payne describes the patient, bottom-up, relationship-based work of civil rights organizers in Mississippi. Their work required the same qualities that Professor Sturm emphasizes: trust, deep, long-term engagement, and the ability to dream the future. Sociologist Francesca Polletta captures a similar sense of the commitment required in *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting: Democracy in American Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

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