

# **"COUNTING BLACK AND WHITE BEANS"**

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# **"COUNTING BLACK AND WHITE BEANS": CRITICAL RACE THEORY IN ACCOUNTING**

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## Foreword

Tuesday January 20, 2009, was the coldest day I have experienced in my life. It was the day that Barack Obama was inaugurated as the 44th President of the United States of America. Like many, I was mesmerized by the Senator from Chicago who had emerged from relative obscurity to become the leader of the most powerful nation in the world.

I bought into the message of hope and change for the future; I was looking for the inspiration to make a change in my own life and I found it in the last place I would ever look: Accountancy.

As a member of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, I received a monthly edition of *Accountancy* magazine. I rarely opened the packaging; however, this month was different. Inside there was photograph of Barack Obama and an article called “It does matter if you’re Black or White.” The article explained how the UK Accounting Profession struggled to develop senior Black leaders and featured a PhD student called Anton Lewis who was conducting research related to the apparent lack of Black accountants. What fascinated me was Anton’s lived experience: after 10 years of working in the profession, he realized that he had met only one other Black accountant.

I was staggered; this compelled me to examine my own experience as a Black accountant. I realized that over the same length of time I had met only a handful of Black accountants: only one was fully qualified. I contacted Anton to learn more, and this became a milestone event in my life.

Anton interviewed me as part of his project. I explained my personal journey, my understanding that accountants were faithful stewards to society, how the “numbers never lie” and how accountancy was a meritocracy; our work was objective. It didn’t matter who you were or what you looked like as long as you could do the job. I was inspired by the work he was doing and I was encouraged to explore the issues for myself. He suggested that I should consider a PhD. At the time this seemed like an outlandish suggestion; however, it’s not an understatement to say that meeting Anton changed the trajectory of my life. Anton walked the careful line between being a friend, mentor, and role model for my own research. His proactive support has constantly challenged me to perform to the best of my ability.

Through his work, I learned that my beliefs were the result of a carefully constructed narrative based on meritocratic values in order to gain the trust of the general public.

This book contributes to a growing body of work that challenges notions of color blindness in accounting, revealing that accounting is not a race neutral environment; the accounting profession actively excluded blacks from participation for most of the twentieth century through its restrictive practices and has found more sophisticated vehicles

for doing so in the twenty-first century. My own experience supports his findings that the myth of meritocracy is so internalized and racism so commonplace that it must be denied even by Black accountants.

This work represents an ongoing commitment to presenting a counternarrative that reveals how the myth of meritocracy obscures the racialized reality of inequality experienced by Black accountants. Accounting is a form of social and organizational control; the importance of this book is matched by the growing importance of accounting as an important actor in shaping the global economy.

Dr Jonathan Ashong-Lamptey



## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I would like to thank my wife, Dr Katherine Helm-Lewis for her unwavering support and academic contribution to this book. She is the light of my life and always will be. It should be noted that my wonderful children Abigail, Maxwell, and Matthew have been a source of inspiration and joy during times of deep reflection of what and where this text should go. Their positive distraction and love helped me see beyond the pages, grounding me in a life best lived and experienced in the moment. My mother-in-law Beverly Helm, who is dearly missed, was and still is a font of deep wisdom in my life and those of friends and family. She taught me to see that fighting for what is right is a lifelong mission, to never waver, to never give up, but to always learn from the tribulations of life, and be better, and work harder. To my mother – Joy Lewis, I cannot express enough thanks for her sagacity, teaching me early what is possible in life, and what life can always be. I would like to thank my “old man” – in the English vernacular – Tony Grimston, for always being there and for teaching me the most valuable lessons while I wasn’t always looking. Thanks is given to my dear friend Dr Lawrence James whose biting critique made me think time and time again about Blackness and professionalism, challenging me each and every time to think out of the box and occasionally throw it out. Pushing me relentlessly to pursue knowledge no matter where it may lead. To my comrade in arms Dr Torry Wilson, whose wit is only matched by his cleverness, charm, and waggishness, I attribute special thanks, always reminding me to keep it racially real continually in all situations. Special gratitude is also reserved for one who put me on a path that changed my life, who saw potential sometimes against the odds – Dr Hilary Sommerlad who to this day is still my mentor and my guide, teaching and admonishing in equal measure, challenging me again to continually do more and to be better. To Dr Jonathan Ashong-Lampsey, the author of the foreword of this book, I cannot thank enough. Without his candor, critique, and brilliance it would have been difficult to organize much of my thinking around race and accounting professionalism into a coherent form. To my old and dear friend Richard Wilson, who many years ago facilitated data collection and supported me – many thanks. Lastly, to all my respective colleagues at Valparaiso University, I thank you. In particular, the unwavering support of Dean James Brodzinsky of my research agenda and thoughts in general about the topic of race and accounting. Lastly, much gratitude is reserved for my dear colleague Professor Elizabeth Gingerich, her clear and concise revisions, editing, and encouragement was vital in bringing this book into being. Her dedication to social justice again fueled thoughts and passion about this subject – thank you.

In conclusion, this book is dedicated to all those seeking justice, fairness, and equality in the profession of accounting and far beyond in all its forms. Always push forward no matter what the obstacle, speak from the heart and never give up.

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# Introduction

## Pencil Pushing in Modernity – Why This Book?

Society has a stereotypical view of accountants overall. I suggest that the public view is that of a boring pale and male, middle-class bureaucratic pencil-pusher, dull but safe. While this view is undoubtedly derogatory, society conversely does not expect accountants to be Black or female, perhaps dangerously interesting and therefore untrustworthy, an issue that will be explored in detail later. Supposedly, post-modernity has done much to move us away from reified ways of seeing both the Other and ourselves. Ethnocentrism is an anathema to our sensibilities. We choose in this space, in this time, to take a progressive path. Or at least that is what we wish. Much of the discussion in this book takes issue with what seems to be and what is. That is to say that the truth(s) we hide from, the denial(s) we seek is the reality we live. Our geography is paradoxical and racialized, “our land, our home” is contradictory space where meritocracy exists but does not, where race and racism flourish in raceless times, where femininity colonizes much of the professional world in lock step with gender inequality. This is but to name just a couple inequities among many. This is the world that is, not that which we wish it to be, not our own but something else. It is within this context, I wish to explore the particularities of the accounting world within a raced and gendered frame – critiquing known “truths” to seek that which is beneath.

But one may equally beg the question: is it needed? Is a Critical Race Theory (CRT) of Accounting a must? Surely by now accounting the world over has addressed the core issue of racial underrepresentation with a range of policies. Black faces are common in the financial accounting and business press. In America, organizations exist dedicated to minority advancement such as the National Association of Black Accountants (NABA) that has a history of Black advancement in the United States and has recently formed a chapter with the same aim in the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, the Association of Latino Professionals in Finance and Accounting (ALFA) does much the same for Latino/a finance professionals. While we might not be there yet, we are well on our way.

At its core, this text challenges the validity of this commonsense assertion using CRT as a framework, explicitly placing ideas of race and racism at the core of conversation, noting that it is important. Why? Because mentioning racism in polite society – let alone accounting – is frowned upon in almost every context. Those in accounting, academia, and industry face sanctions for naming the unnamable, for exploring that which is taboo. Punishment is metered out in the form of an inability to publish on the topic of racism in accounting and a collective silence on the possibility of the subject by the establishment. Although racism is an apt descriptor of past and current injustice, modern society urges us to push past it, ignore it, and

willfully erase its presence from our lives. But who does this benefit and what is the cost? Today, the Sisyphean task of removing racial practice from the accounting realm is undertaken without recourse to its fundamental cause. Accounting fails to address the underpinnings of race because it chooses not to see it. This leads to the murky question of exactly how does one see race in a raceless society, let alone in the financial services? CRT is needed because it forces us to perceive why the topic of race and racism in both the accounting industry and traditional research is taboo – why it feels better to believe that we are eternally getting there rather than to see our eventual arrival upon the horizon. Accounting must ask difficult but honest questions of itself both in current and past practice to be recast without fear, welcoming those darker Others who seek acceptance within it.

Just as academics Richard Delgado, Kimberley Crenshaw, and Derrick Bell saw the need to critique the Law and its disparate treatment of Blacks under its supposed neutral rule, must not the disparate treatment of Blacks under the auspice of an unbiased accounting profession also be examined? Yet we are at an impasse. However, companies are more aware than ever of the importance of diversity on a societal and business basis yet the dearth of data on the progress toward this aim points to decades-old intransigence toward improving the lot of the Black accountant. Accounting as an institution fails to reconcile the aim of diversity and inclusion (D&I) with its actual attainment despite the large amount of resources levied at the problem in terms of money, manpower, and the time dedicated to deal with the issue. The paucity of evidence that can be publicly garnered in the United States and the United Kingdom indicates a parlous state of affairs indeed. I suggest that this situation has been exasperated through a lack of a racial lens through which to view accounting life. Assumptions are made and policies dictated from above without recourse to those who live and breathe racial gendered practice. Truly, Blacks have become Derrick Bell's face at the bottom of accounting's well, acted upon rather than being able to act out what is best for them, denied self-determination in this space because a voice is not a voice unless it is heard.

Arguably, this might make the task of current D&I policy all but impossible because it lacks critical inquiry into the recesses of accounting's relationship with concepts of race and racism. It cannot explain why despite much money and effort over years Black representation is minimal. It cannot explain why retention of Blacks in the field is difficult, nor provide detailed publicly available empirical data on the subject. It puzzles over why all this should be so in a sensible, lucrative, and fair field. This leads to a stymied strategy, where attempts to paint policy as a broad-brush solution to the perceived problem of identity politics forces D&I to become all things to all people. Diluted and performative, that is to say policy becomes the proof of diversity success, as opposed to actually facilitating increases in minority participation as Ahmed<sup>1</sup> so adroitly notes. Dilution of the aim of increased Black representation in the field becomes the result with white women being the main beneficiary of D&I initiatives and affirmative action, the irony of which is not to be underestimated. Hence, explaining why gender diversity has increased substantially in accounting. This also sits behind much of the lauded progress of increased diversity in the field. But questions remain even here about the lack of white femininity in boardrooms of the Big 4 and mid-tier accounting firms or at the CEO and CFO levels of large multinationals, the denizens of which have long been their white male equivalents. Does a similar gendering of accounting areas occur like the feminization of UK Family Law? Perhaps this sexist narrative, in fact, suggests

that women and home go together explaining the high amount of female lawyers in family law and the lower pay as opposed to the traditional masculine and more lucrative world of mergers and acquisitions work. Freely available data have not yet been collected to suggest that this occurs in accounting, worse still as a profession it has yet to ask the question. Where does Blackness fit into this?

While this book is an academic text that I wish to be the start of the conversation of CRT and accounting, I also hope that it will help provide a guide of sorts for those Black professionals navigating the world of accounting. Few texts exist that explicitly refer to the Black accounting experience and how to form strategies to succeed. This book cites a number of such strategies from academic research of Black accountants who have succeeded and failed within the profession in both the United States and the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> While these are not empirically tested suggestions, they do point to differing tactics with which Black professionals may wish to examine their own careers. During the research, many respondents suggested that they had wished they had the benefit of guidelines delineating what should and should not be done in differing accounting spaces.

Research that I have tentatively conducted comparing the British Black and African American accounting experience points to the existence of the game of accounting that is a core theme of this book. Research respondents noted that succeeding in accounting in either locale was very much a function of knowing that the game exists and knowing how to play to win. Although many rules differed for the Black accountant in the United Kingdom and United States, a number were similar. The CRT in accounting lens is then a vital tool to explore UK-flavored racial practice compared to its US equivalent. How does race and class cohere in the United Kingdom to hamper or help the Black accountant? Does the relative “classlessness” in the United States give African American accountants a better chance relative to their UK peers, or in fact is race and class compounded in the United States meaning African American accountants are doomed on the whole to liminal positions within their firms regardless of effort?

This introduction suggests that we ought to care more about the fate of Black accounting in dominant majority white settings and Chapter 1 outlines this importance. Scholars in the area point to the number of Black CPAs being below 1% as far back as 2012,<sup>3</sup> while others note that partnership and senior manager positions are also less populated by Black and Brown faces. This is a worrying trend seen in both the United States and the United Kingdom as well as in post-colonial countries<sup>4</sup> where predominantly white accounting bodies of the Global North still dominate indigenous darker accounting in the Global South.<sup>5</sup> The current state of Black accounting in the United States and the United Kingdom is poor, presenting an image to young would-be Black accountants that the industry is not for them. They are neither wanted nor welcome. Although the profession points to a concerted effort to remedy the situation, it has been fighting the good fight for more than three decades and Black representation in the industry as a whole, and at the highest levels in particular, remains anemic despite their best efforts.

Much past folly surrounding racial representation revolves around the absence of a framework that specifically addresses racial practice. Accounting must be required to account for the unaccountable and see the “unseeable.” In Chapter 2, fundamental tenets of a CRT of Accounting are laid out to do such work. A brief history is given of the formation of CRT from its antecedence in Critical Legal Studies in the mid-1980s

to when critical legal scholars of race found it imperative to add a darker perspective to analysis, making race and racism a central feature of discourse. CRT’s natural progression to other variants is discussed as well as its migration to other professions such as education, social studies, and sport, all leading to a discussion about the possibility of accounting as another transformative paradigm within the CRT canon.

In Chapter 3, I suggest that part of the problem stems from industry’s misrecognition of its own history concerning racism and subjugation of darker races. Again, scholars have long pointed out that accounting technology sat hand in hand with the colonial project as a valuation tool used to mark the Black body as property, an asset used to generate wealth in distant conquered lands. Accounting practice is well versed as a tool of subjugation and is still so today. Eighteenth-century wealth obscured the great human harm caused from those very same men who advocated for freedom and liberty enshrined in the Enlightenment ideal, yet paradoxically – if not shrewdly – calculated the pragmatic necessity of protection of property where slaves were most valued according to accounting practice of the day. Then, venal self-interest fostered blindness to acts of inhumanity that similarly today drive a misrecognition of accounting’s ability to continue to subjugate in our more progressive age. Ahistoricism, in this regard, continues to blind accounting to neocolonial practice taking place now, privileging the interests of the richer Global North ahead of those of the darker poorer Global South molding international accounting standards to a normatively white criterion,<sup>6</sup> whose subtext is by us for us.

Racism is taboo in accounting like much of society. It is a nameless foe, denied but ever present. Chapter 4 discusses the fear of Blackness and the narratives of race and racism that accompany it as the Black Ledger of Accounting. Fear of naming racism stifles any conversation on race in society at present, a reality that is applied twofold to accounting. Why do we fear discussions of race in the profession? Unfortunately, denial removes the ability of accounting to address even the most basic problems of entry and retention of Black professionals within its ranks. Racism is all but taboo in traditional academic accounting circles and industry. Scant are the articles citing either terms of race or racism within their pages. Conversations of D&I carefully avoid the trap of racial dialogue but instead creatively utilize euphemism after euphemism to avoid mention of that which cannot be mentioned. This removes a key tool with which to challenge and change racial practice. Another question is posed: what is it like to be Black in such a white space as accounting? The visage of the monster from Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* is evoked to compare Blackness in the normatively white accounting sphere as inherently unpalatable, a form to be pushed to the boundary where possible and expelled where feasible. Why accounting is so very white is unpacked, while also posing the question, “can a space be made for the monstrous Blacks professional?” Can this WhiteWorld of accounting be darkened in any meaningful way?

The white bean counter is the benchmark to be reached in the accounting game against which all others are measured. This is framed as the White Ledger of Accounting, and Chapter 5 explores why this is the case, why Whiteness saturates the profession, and why white masculinity is the unwritten bi-word for trust, a necessity for the accountant. Trust is representative of neutrality that is a given in the profession, where accounting prides itself as the unbiased arbiter of financial truth. To challenge the notion of meritocracy is to engage in an act of harm against the profession that is a step too far. Yet if this premise is true and accounting is genuinely committed to

change, then it is “moribund” to act if the profession is to achieve what is a radical alteration in its approach in this regard. Only then will old shibboleths be slain and a new future be forged – representative of all.

The concept of White Fragility around the topic of race is also introduced as the intolerance of whites to any discussion of race or racism that overwhelms attempts to reform the racialized status quo. Using this framework, we begin to explore why accounting, a profession adept at applying valuation analysis techniques to financial products, cannot do the same where the concept of race is concerned. This paralysis around racial practice speaks to a system of institutional racism which purposely removes the ability of whites as a whole to conceptualize race as applying to themselves. Race is always applied to others. This hobbles any conversation around redemptive examination or understanding that white society as a whole, and accounting in particular, possess an acute lack of awareness on this issue – a situation that is structural in nature, obscuring Whiteness from the majority of white people as an acceptable and meaningful topic, successfully hiding its all-pervasive hegemony and its salience to racialized Others in the accounting profession.

Yet an answer to many of the questions posed above can be found in the named reality of Black professionalism. Chapter 6 shows that Blacks have their own story to tell from below – an antidote to Black pathos, a counter narrative to tropes of Black inability. Important tales of resistance have always appeared questioning the uncomfortable silence that exists around the subject of race. But as previously mentioned, its taboo status still means in a discursive sense that it is untouchable – but why? As a remedy of sorts Chapter 7 delves into fresh research undertaken in the United Kingdom and the United States that compares Black accounting life across the Atlantic as a new saga with which to unpack life at accounting’s margin. How does the entry of Black British accountants differ from that of their African American counterparts? Do both progress through their careers at the same rate or do they differ? Diaspora questions such as these must be answered for accounting to examine race and place in diverse locales. After all, the transatlantic accounting firms have offices all over the world with differentiated Black minorities in dominant majority settings. So can we truly say racial practice is exercised in the same way in each space? Before challenging racism in such a manner, one must understand its difference in each place before setting policy.

A main theme emerging from the transatlantic study is the importance of the “game.” This chapter continues to unpack this concept utilizing CRT’s multidisciplinary aspect to center race in Pierre Bourdieu’s “game of work” to explore how best Black professionalism can play the game of accounting to win in different places in differing spaces. The deployment of human capital is key when credentialing occurs; how networking is undertaken and who can sponsor the Black professional is a vital process that must be adhered to in differing ways in differing spaces to gain access to partnership or the C-Suite. Interestingly, agency of whether one plays the game or not does not exist – only how well the game is played matters.

The final chapter asks the poignant question: where do we go from here? If we accept the CRT perspective of a game of accounting that is structurally raced and gendered, what steps should and can the profession make? A number of academics ranging from critical accounting theorists to Howard University’s Center of Accounting Education have suggested concrete policies directed at helping minority Blacks with the aim of increasing participation. Retention strategies are advised to reduce the attrition rate of

Black accountants in the industry. Yet without a CRT viewpoint that sees the accounting game as a whitened FUBU,<sup>7</sup> polices will continue to falter and true change within the profession will not be sustained as so often has been the case with past diversity and inclusivity initiatives. The inability to name racial practice in the accounting profession perpetually undermines effective strategies to increase Black participation and hinders Black success at the boardroom level. The taboo nature of race and racism in accounting prevents a critical evaluation of a profession that is trying, but demonstrably failing, to succeed in this arena.

## Notes

1. Ahmed (2006).
2. Lewis (2012) and Stewart, Wells, and Ross (2011).
3. Hammond (2002).
4. Bakre (2006b).
5. Winant (2001).
6. Bakre (2008).
7. For Us By Us references the once popular fashion African American clothing brand primarily for Black people.



## Chapter 1

# The Black Bean Counter

### Separating Beans

Theresa Hammond's seminal work, *A White-Collar Profession*, succinctly highlights the historic lack of African American Certified Public Accountants (CPAs) and the reality of racial discrimination that has always structured the Black<sup>1</sup> experience in accounting, a topic we will explore in greater detail in Chapter 3. One of the more salient points she makes is that unlike other professions, accounting is dependent upon the state of, and access to, business activity structuring a given economy. And it is here where American racism has habitually and most effectively constrained the growth of Black commerce, exemplar being the annihilation of Black Wall Street in Tulsa by white<sup>2</sup> mobs,<sup>3</sup> the redlining of Blacks into low-income neighborhoods with the cheapest housing,<sup>4</sup> or the unending neglect of Black Banking (and its ability to lend) on a national level.<sup>5</sup> This, in turn, hobbled individual and small business access to capital, thereby severely restricting the size of the Black economy, stunting the need for services of African American CPAs by default. In this manner, organically if you will, accounting steadily developed to be among the least diversified of professions.<sup>6</sup>

So, given the past, any current discussion of Black accounting must, in my opinion, begin with an overview of the situation as it currently exists. Unfortunately, I submit that this has traditionally not always been an easy feat. But data, in the form of academic and industry research, are still very much required, less anecdotes and allegations become "fact." We must actively seek to problematize all too easily made assertions of what the profession is as opposed to what we may wish it would be. For instance, the following diversity pronouncement made Mr Ken L. Bishop, President and CEO of NASBA, stands as a case in point<sup>7</sup>:

[...] across rural America there are thousands of small towns and cities where the local CPAs play a critically important role in their communities' financial stability. I have visited many such firms and have rarely seen a person of color on the professional staff. I am certain that the void that I have witnessed was not because of prejudice or racism, but because there were virtually no CPAs of color available.<sup>8</sup>

In many ways, the purpose of this book is to critically evaluate this very notion and ask why this is the case, but in doing so not leap straight to "common sense" conclusions regarding the de facto nonexistence of racism in the profession. Yet, as it stands

now, we still cannot comprehensively test the validity of Mr Bishop’s proclamation because we do not have the empirical nor qualitative data to reach a meaningful and uniform conclusion either way. As Theresa Hammond bemoans of the profession:

It is impossible to get firm-specific employment data on race from the Big Four firms, and currently there is no meaningful pressure for them to provide this information.<sup>9</sup>

Given the paucity of data, the argument that I and others make, as already mentioned in the Introduction, is that racism does exist in accounting and that low participation of CPAs of color is a function of racial practice. But equally, if not frustratingly so, it is just as difficult to verify the counterclaim I have just made, because of the difficulty of finding reliable race metrics in and about the profession. Given this, what follows then is a collation of available public data on Black accounting in the United States compared to that of data from the United Kingdom for comparison’s sake. It is worth saying at this juncture that I would also like to present more evidence of the state of minority Black accountants in other dominant majority white countries, but for now it is beyond the scope of this text. However, it does leave the possibility of further analysis as a comparative topic, in another work that, again, I believe would be a much-needed contribution to knowledge that does not currently exist.

## **The State of US Accounting**

Let us begin our inquiry by looking at the US labor force statistics to see what is being reported to the nation. Recent 2018 data recording the annual averages of employed persons by occupation, sex, race, and ethnicity reported that out of 1,424,000 US accountants and auditors,<sup>10</sup> in aggregate, 75.8% were white compared with 9.3% who were classified as Black or African American.<sup>11</sup> Here we should note that these figures do not delineate between those who are qualified as CPAs or Certified Management Accountant’s (CMA), for example, and most likely includes those on their way to such qualifications, not forgetting that in recent years, the number of qualified African American CPAs has been below 1%.<sup>12</sup> In any event, clearly, the overall supply of African American accountants is seemingly low, a fact borne out in detail by recent American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA)<sup>13</sup> figures from their 2019 trends in the supply of accounting graduates and the demand for public accounting recruits report. Over 2017–2018, accounting degree enrollees classified as Black or African American were found to be 10% for a bachelor’s and 7% for a master’s program, contrasting significantly with white enrollment at 56% for a bachelor’s and 53% for a master’s. Attrition exists for Black undergrads by graduation day as the AICPA results further show that for a bachelor’s 6% of Blacks/African Americans graduate compared to 59% of whites and at the master’s level, 6% of Blacks/African Americans graduate compared to 54% of whites.

For a moment, let us switch to 2018 AICPA data reporting the trends in the demand for public accounting recruits. Worryingly, it too shows that of new bachelor’s and master’s of accounting graduate hires, a mere 4% of Blacks/African Americans were appointed to accounting/finance functions in US CPA firms. This disparity becomes even more stark when compared against the 70% hiring of whites during the same period. This, perhaps, goes some way toward