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Where is the Racial Theory in Critical Race Theory?: A constructive criticism of the Crits

Nolan L. Cabrera

Abstract: Critical Race Theory (CRT) from its inception was not intended to be a theoretical framework, but rather a theorizing counterspace for scholars of color to challenge and transform racial oppression. Despite this context, the author demonstrates through a critical literature review that CRT is generally applied as a theoretical framework in higher education scholarship. As a constructive criticism, the author offers a critical theory of racism, hegemonic Whiteness, as an additional tenet of CRT. The author then applies hegemonic

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Whiteness to CRT, demonstrating how this theory of racism helps CRT work through several of its conceptual tensions.

What is Critical Race Theory (CRT)? It developed as a critique of color blindness within Critical Legal Studies (Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, 2012), was adapted to education research (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), and is increasingly applied by higher education scholars (e.g., Harper, Patton, & Wooden, 2009; Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, & Han, 2009; Patton, McEwen, Rendón, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007). While CRT is not a dominant paradigm in social science research as some of its critics argue (e.g., Horowitz, 2006), it is emerging as a frequent method of framing higher education scholarship (Harper, 2012). Those who engage in this anti-racist, oppositional form of research are sometimes referred to as Crits,¹ and they intentionally blur the line between activism and scholarship because they believe social science should be conducted at the service of radically challenging and transforming systemic racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 27).

The name CRT implies that this scholar/activist line of inquiry would include a critical theory of racism as a central component, but this is not a safe assumption as I will later demonstrate. I am aware that CRT has several detractors who are ideologically opposed to the critical study of race and racism (e.g., Horowitz, 2006; McWhorter, 2000), and it would be easy for them to use my thesis as a means of reinforcing their myopic viewpoints (e.g., “See, CRT is not even theory”). Additionally, CRT can be extremely controversial in the public discourse. In 2012, Breitbart.com published a video of then law student Barack Obama introducing and hugging CRT founding father Derrick Bell at a rally. The subsequently coverage of the video promised to expose the “extremist and destructive” nature of CRT, and how “the clear footprint of CRT [is] all over the Obama Administration” (Shapiro, 2012, March 11).

Additionally, I am aware of the controversy surrounding Kennedy’s (1989) critique of CRT in the *Harvard Law Review*. He took issue with CRT’s focus on finding truth within voices of color because he, as a Black man, did not agree with many of CRT’s premises and analyses. In the colloquy rebuttal in the *Harvard Law Review*, Brewer (1990) posed a provocative question, “[I]s the social and political circumstance in which Kennedy wrote his article so

¹I understand there are many who conduct CRT analyses and do not label themselves “Crits.” Some use the term *Critical Race Theorist*, others *CRTTheorist*, and some do not have a self-ascribed label. Within the articles, I could not determine how each scholar self-identified. Therefore, I am using Crit throughout to describe the group of scholar/activists who apply and develop CRT in higher education. This should not be meant to imply it is an identity the authors ascribe to themselves.

threatening to the interests of minorities that a respectful, albeit challenging response such as he advanced was too risky to air?" (p. 1852). In Brewer's estimation, "yes" it was too risky. I am aware of the inherent dangers of offering constructive criticism of CRT in a high-profile outlet such as the *Review of Higher Education*, but think this critique differs in two key ways. In contrast to the critiques lodged by Kennedy (1989), my intention is to highlight a limitation of CRT scholarship and then to fill that void. I also think that CRT in higher education is sufficiently established, can withstand critique, and hopefully will be more developed as a result. Conversely, CRT was still in its infancy when Kennedy (1989) wrote his critique.

Within this context, the current analysis is a deconstruction and reconstruction of CRT in five parts that is centrally concerned with one core question: Where is the racial theory in CRT? First, I review the conceptual tenets of CRT in both education and law, highlighting that while insightful, these tenets do not contain the "intellectual architecture" to be considered social theory (Treviño, Harris, & Wallace, 2008). Second, I argue that despite note being theory, CRT needs a theory of racism embedded within it, leading to the following question: Is CRT applied as a standalone theoretical perspective? Third, I conduct a content analysis of CRT scholarship in higher education where I demonstrate that it tends to be treated as a standalone theoretical framework. Fourth, and to fill the racial theory void, I offer hegemonic Whiteness as a critical theory of racism meant to supplement the existing tenets of CRT. Finally, I examine how this theoretical perspective can help work through some of the current limitations of, and tensions within, CRT. There are likely components of my argument that apply to CRT in education (K-20 inclusive) and CRT outside of education (e.g., sociology and law); however, I will concentrate my analysis on CRT in higher education to maintain analytical focus.

Background: CRT's Tenets and Key Concepts

When defining CRT, Delgado and Stefancic (2001) offered, "The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationships among race, racism, and power" (p. 2). There are some mutually reinforcing tenets consistently applied in CRT scholarship, and they tend to be rooted in either law or education (see Table 1). Beginning with law, the first tenet (*racism as normal*) states racism is a structured part of everyday life in the U.S. as opposed to an aberration or a function of a few racist individuals (e.g., Neo-Nazis). The second tenet (*interest convergence*) argues that the interests of People of Color will only be advanced to the extent that they also advance White interests. The third tenet (*social construction*) argues that race is socially constructed and therefore should not be essentialized (i.e., that there are no inherent characteristics of any racial group). The fourth (*differential racial-*

TABLE 1.
TENETS OF CRT FROM DIFFERENT DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES

<i>CRT Legal Tenets</i>	<i>CRT Educational Tenets</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racism is normal • Interest convergence • Social construction of race • Differential racialization • Intersectionality • Unique voices of color • Permanence of racism • Whiteness as property <p>(sometimes) (sometimes)</p> <p style="text-align: center;">(Delgado & Stefancic, 2012)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intercentricity of race and racism • Challenge to the dominant ideology • Commitment to social justice • Centrality of experiential knowledge • Interdisciplinary perspective <p style="text-align: center;">(Yosso et al., 2009)</p>

ization) and fifth (*intersectionality*) tenets relate to the anti-essentialism of the third. Differential racialization examines the unique patterns of racial marginalization across racial groups (e.g., between Blacks and Asians) while intersectionality examines multiple, mutually-reinforcing forms of oppression that contextualize lived experiences (e.g., being Latina/o, poor, and gay). The final tenet (*unique voices of color*) argues that due to experiences with racism, minorities have a perspective that is markedly different than Whites and racial truth emanates from this standpoint. There are two other tenets that are sometimes included in CRT legal analyses. The *permanence of racism* tenet argues that racism is an endemic, permanent feature of society. Additionally, *Whiteness as property*, is a two-fold thesis. First, the U.S. legal system is founded upon property rights. Second, Whiteness has historically, and continues to, function as a form of property.

There is substantial overlap with the legal tenets and the educational ones. With respect to education, the *intercentricity of race and racism* frames racism as endemic to society while giving credence to multiple forms of social oppression operating concurrently (i.e., intersectionality). The second tenant, *challenge to the dominant ideology*, focuses on how social science claims of objectivity, meritocracy, and neutrality represent the interests of power and serve to recreate systems of oppression. The third, *commitment to social justice*, highlights the activist nature of CRT and how it is not satisfied with liberalism's incremental approach to racial inequality, instead advocating for radical structural change. The fourth, *centrality of experiential knowledge*, is essentially the legal tenet *unique voices of color*. The final tenet, *interdis-*

ciplinary perspective, means that Crits are not bound to the discipline of education. Instead, they draw from a variety of scholarly approaches such as law, sociology, and psychology to holistically address racial inequality in educational environments.

These tenets function as epistemological and ontological premises, which inform the ways that CRT scholarship is conducted, especially as it relates to its activist orientation. However, they do not provide an overarching framework for how racism operates, and therefore cannot be considered racial theory. As Treviño, Harris, and Wallace (2008) argue, “CRT has many rigorous concepts and methods, but these have not been coherently integrated in a way that would give CRT the systemic structure – the intellectual architecture – that is representative, and in fact, required, of most social theory” (p. 9). This is not a controversial premise because CRT scholars tend to frame it as a theorizing counter-space as opposed to a theory in-and-of-itself (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009). Within this context, the question becomes: Does CRT need to incorporate racial theory?

Does CRT Need Racial Theory?

CRT is a relatively unique form of scholarship in that Crits reject objective truth. There have been several critiques of CRT for not offering testable hypotheses or measurable outcomes, while treating narrative as a form of data (e.g., Farber, & Sherry, 1997; Kennedy, 1989). These critiques have been rebutted by Crits as representing the dominant social science paradigm, which only served to marginalize People of Color (e.g., Ball, 1990; Barnes, 1990; Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado, 1990; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Espinoza, 1990). As Delgado and Stefancic (2012) argue:

CRT’s adversaries are perhaps most concerned with what they perceive to be critical race theorists’ nonchalance about objective truth. For the critical race theorist, objective truth, like merit, does not exist, at least in social science and politics. In these realms, truth is a social construct created to suit the purposes of the dominant group. (p. 104)

Instead of arguing that CRT needs a theory of racism to create knowledge in the paradigm rejected by the Crits, I will engage CRT in its own terms and still argue that an explicit theory of racism is needed.

While critical approaches to research differ substantially from traditional, positivistic or post-positivistic paradigms, the need for theory remains consistent. It helps clarify the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the research (Babbie, 2007; Carpecken & Apple, 1992; Creswell, 2003). CRT, in some respects, has accomplished this through the tenets outlined in Table 1. Additionally, theory helps create mental models regarding human behavior and social structures, and these models contextualize data interpretation

while allowing analysis to challenge the underlying theory. As Carpecken and Apple (1992) argue:

In critical social research, a theoretical model of society (e.g., a neo-Marxist model, a theory of patriarchy) is usually used to interpret the field findings (in which specific processes discovered in the field are cited as *instances* of general processes) and to alter the model itself (in which certain features of the model are refined or reconceptualized). (pp. 541–542)

Thus, theory in critical inquiry provides a beginning point to conduct research, and the process of research can become a reflective one that interrogates understandings of how oppression is both recreated and challenged. Critics frequently refer to systemic racism/White supremacy as the cause of race-based educational inequality, but offer little in terms of the nature of this oppressive social force within their central tenets. That is, there is not a “mental model of racism” embedded in CRT.

The lack of explicitly articulated racial theory becomes problematic because in its absence, Critics are only left with the core tenets of CRT for their analyses. Strictly following these leads to some problems if logically pushed far enough as I will illustrate by juxtaposing a CRT piece of scholarship with a non-CRT one. Danny Solórzano and Tara Yosso are both Professors of Color whose work is grounded in CRT. Ward Connerly is Black businessman and former UC Regent who continues to be instrumental in dismantling affirmative action throughout the country. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) wrote a CRT counternarrative that critiqued the legal color-blindness in the Michigan affirmative action case – instead arguing that racism against Students of Color should be at the center of rationales supporting affirmative action. Conversely, Connerly (2000) argued that the U.S. has made great strides in race relations over the past 50 years, racial discrimination is largely a relic of the past, and within this context, affirmative action needs to be abolished.

If one strictly applies the tenets of CRT, there is interestingly no difference between the two pieces. Both are analyses of affirmative action written by People of Color and frequently rely on narrative to support their central theses (i.e., the unique voices tenet). Both are rooted in the discourse of Civil Rights. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) use CRT’s social justice tenet, while Connerly (2000) defines his fight against affirmative action as “creating equal,” arguing that affirmative action is largely “reverse discrimination” (i.e., racism against White people). Both are framed as opposition to the dominant ideology, but they disagree what that dominant ideology is. For Solórzano and Yosso (2002), the dominant ideology is color-blindness which that serves to mask the realities of White supremacy. For Connerly (2000), the dominant ideology is rampant political correctness and reverse discrimination. Both analyses focus on race and racism (intercentricity of race and racism

tenet) but differ in their location of the problem. For Solórzano and Yosso (2002), racism systemically marginalizes People of Color to which affirmative action represents a modest policy to address this persistent inequality. In Connerly's (2000) analysis, affirmative action is one of the last vestiges of institutionalized racial discrimination. Thus, both pieces apply the tenets of CRT (although Connerly's use was accidental), but they disagree on the nature of contemporary racism. A critical theory of racism would clarify that one analysis represents the dominant paradigm (Connerly, 2000) and the other a challenge to it (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This could be viewed as a straw person argument since more Critics would not make the logical error of equating Connerly with Solórzano and Yosso. Rather the point is to highlight an internal logical tension within CRT that arises when this paradigm is applied to an extreme example.

As CRT is not theory, I was curious to explore whether or not Critics use it as standalone theory. Anecdotally, I suspected this to be the case, but I wanted to empirically understand the trends in the field (i.e., whether or not CRT is generally applied as a standalone theory). Additionally, I explore if CRT analyses are supplemented by racial theory (e.g., "Racial Formation," Omi & Winant, 1994) that would represent the "intellectual architecture" of social theory (Treviño, Harris, & Wallace, 2008). This was equally important because supplementing CRT could also be a mechanism for incorporating racial theory into CRT. I am interested in this issue because CRT is consistently interested in challenging the dominant paradigm (Yosso et al., 2009). Therefore, the importance of racial theory is that it provides context of what the dominant paradigm is, how it is continually recreated, and also how it can be transformed. Thus, this is an unusual review of literature in that a large portion of it is examining the absence of racial theory.

Content analysis: Where is the racial theory in CRT?

I began the content analysis asking the following question: Within the field of higher education, is CRT applied as a standalone theory? I subsequently added: What type of CRT is applied (law, education, or something else)? Was the application of CRT supplemented with a theory of racism? All of these are juxtaposed against the tension that CRT does not, by itself, represent racial theory, but it needs to (or at least incorporate racial theory). To methodologically address these questions, I conducted a content analysis of CRT scholarship within the field of higher education. Krippendorff (1980) argues there are six questions that must be addressed to systematically conduct a content analysis:

1. Which data are being analyzed?
2. How are they defined?
3. What is the population from which they are drawn?

4. What is the context relative to which the data are analyzed?
5. What are the boundaries of the analysis?
6. What is the target of the inferences?

Questions 1–3 set the parameters of the content analysis, while 4–6 describe the analysis itself. I will offer each of these in turn.

The parameters of the content analysis. For the purposes of this research, the data derive from searches of peer-reviewed education journals (see Table 2) using the terms “Critical Race Theory” and “CRT.” When the search results emerged, I used the following criteria for inclusion in this research: Is CRT applied as opposed to mentioned? For example, if a scholar discussed CRT but did not use it (e.g., Harper, 2012), I excluded it from the analysis. Instead, I searched for articles where CRT was central to the author(s)’ approach to their scholarship. Additionally, I took a conservative approach to inclusion criteria because I wanted to examine CRT in its own terms and not its derivations. Thus, I only included intersectionality analyses when they explicitly stated that they were applying CRT even though many trace its intellectual lineage to Crenshaw’s (1994) CRT-based study. I included analyses using Critical Race Feminism, Black Feminist Thought, Community Cultural Wealth, *testimonio*, LatCrit, and Chicana Feminism, only if the authors stated they were taking a CRT approach to their research.

After I identified these articles, I asked: Was the study focused on issues in higher education? This included explorations of undergraduate and graduate student experiences, faculty, and education policy. Some consider pre-service teacher education a K-12 issue, but I included these studies because they occur within the context of higher education. Additionally, I excluded “Introductions” to special issues from consideration as well as law journals, even though there is some higher education CRT scholarship contained within these outlets (e.g., Pérez Huber & Malagón, 2007). Finally, I did not include books or book chapters but did include *New Directions for Student Services* and *New Directions for Institutional Research* as these have very high readerships throughout the field of higher education. I included articles between 1998 through 2012 (n=87, see Table 2 and Appendix A) as these dates represent the time that CRT emerged in higher education scholarship (1998) to the time that this analysis began (2012).

There were three primary outlets for CRT scholarship in higher education: *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* (n=17), *Equity & Excellence in Education* (n=10), and *Race Ethnicity and Education* (n=9), which collectively represent 41.4 percent of the sample. Interestingly, CRT as an oppositional form of scholarship has been published in some of the highest impact education journals (e.g., *AERJ* and *Harvard Educational Review*) as well as higher education journals (e.g., *The Journal of Higher Education* and *Review of Higher Education*).

TABLE 2.
JOURNALS SEARCHED AND NUMBER OF ARTICLES USED IN ANALYSIS,
LISTED ALPHABETICALLY

• <i>American Educational Research Journal</i>	5	• <i>Journal of Negro Education</i>	3
• <i>Educational Foundations</i>	2	• <i>NASPA Journal/Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice</i>	4
• <i>Educational Researcher</i>	0	• <i>New Directions for Institutional Research</i>	3
• <i>Educational Policy</i>	1	• <i>New Directions for Student Services</i>	3
• <i>Equity & Excellence in Education</i>	10	• <i>Peabody Journal of Education</i>	0
• <i>Harvard Educational Review</i>	3	• <i>Qualitative Inquiry</i>	2
• <i>Higher Education</i>	0	• <i>Race Ethnicity and Education</i>	9
• <i>Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences</i>	0	• <i>Research in Higher Education</i>	0
• <i>International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education</i>	17	• <i>Review of Research in Education</i>	2
• <i>Journal of Black Studies</i>	3	• <i>The Review of Higher Education</i>	1
• <i>Journal of College Student Development</i>	4	• <i>Sociology of Education</i>	0
• <i>Journal of Diversity in Higher Education</i>	1	• <i>Teachers College Record</i>	5
• <i>The Journal of Higher Education</i>	4	• <i>The Urban Review</i>	1
• <i>Journal of Hispanic Higher Education</i>	4		

Analysis of the CRT scholarship. Turning to Krippendorff's questions 4–6, I wanted to know how CRT is applied in higher education scholarship. While I read each article in its entirety, I primarily focused coding on the Theoretical Framework. I first coded whether or not CRT was applied as a theoretical framework for the manuscript. I then coded the type of CRT analysis applied based upon the tenets offered (law or education). Finally, I coded for whether or not CRT was supplemented by a racial theory (e.g., “color-blind racism,” Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

Content analysis, like many forms of qualitative analysis, requires a form of inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff, 2013). I am the sole author and am responsible for coding all of the articles, but I did enlist outside help to increase the validity of the findings. One of my colleagues who is an expert on higher education diversity scholarship and teaches CRT coded a random sample of 11.5% (n=10) articles to ensure that I was properly employing my coding schema. I could not reasonably ask any of colleagues to code all of the 87 articles, so this was the next best option for ensuring the validity of the coding scheme. After comparing my colleague's coding with my own, I found we were had an inter-coder agreement of 84% where 70% is acceptable (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Some argue that Krippendorff's α is a more appropriate reliability measure for content analysis (Krippendorff, 2012), however, the simplicity of my coding system did not warrant or necessitate the use of this advanced approach.

Findings from the content analysis. Overall, the review revealed two important trends. First, the strong majority of the time, CRT was used as a standalone theoretical framework in higher education scholarship. Second, there was a general lack of racial theory either explicitly or implicitly applied within CRT analyses (see Table 3).

TABLE 3.
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM CONTENT ANALYSIS

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
CRT applied as theory	79	90.8
Applied Educational Tenets	65	74.7
Applied Legal Tenets	26	29.9
Explicitly Supplemented CRT With Racial Theory	5	5.7
Implicitly Supplemented CRT With Racial Theory	3	3.4

Note: Applications of CRT (legal or education) do not add to 100% because 8 used hybrid of education/law while 4 used neither but stated they were rooting their analysis in CRT (e.g., Grant & Simmons, 2008).

The analysis was relatively easy because authors tended to be upfront about how they used CRT. For example:

- “In this study, I will use critical race theory (CRT) as the theoretical foundation to explore the pedagogical interaction between Black graduate students and Black professors at a PWI” (Tuit, 2012, p. 189).²
- “Critical race theory is the theoretical perspective for this study” (Hernandez, 2012 p. 685).

There were several times that CRT was still applied as a theory, but referred to as a *conceptual framework* (e.g., Johnson-Bailey, Valentine, Cervero, & Bowles, 2008), a *vantage point* (e.g., Nebeker, 1998), a *lens* (e.g., Garcia, Johnston, Garibay, Herrera, & Giraldo, 2011), an *analytical tool* (e.g., Irizarry, 2012), or an *analytical framework* (e.g., Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, 2011). Additionally, these analyses were not supplemented with other theoretical

²When Harper (2012) conducted his analysis of the race-based scholarship in higher education, there was a minor controversy because he did not identify authors he critiqued. While I have no interest in arguing whether or not he was correct in this choice, I am taking a different approach. I have chosen to identify the authors reviewed in this study because a simple Google™ search can identify whose work I am referencing. Therefore, my intention with identifying authors is to make it easier for readers to assess the validity of my argument.

perspectives. There were some exceptions (e.g., Pérez Huber, 2010); however, articles that also incorporated some type of racial theory were in the extreme minority (n=5; 5.7%). Therefore, the vast majority of the time CRT is employed as a standalone theoretical framework without a description of the nature of contemporary racism.

There were a few studies which offered a working definition of racism, such as the combination of Lorde's (1992), "[T]he belief in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance" (p. 496) coupled with Marable's (1992), "[A] system of ignorance, exploitation, and power to oppress African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, and American Indians and other people on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color" (cited in Solórzano, 1998, p. 124). These definitions offer a more thorough and nuanced exploration of racism than those that equate it with individual prejudice (e.g., Sniderman & Carmines, 1997). They focus on racism as a structure of oppression; however, they are limited in understanding its contemporary nature. The belief in racial superiority is largely a pre-Civil Rights attitude and is not as relevant to understanding contemporary racial stratification (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994). Additionally, they leave several important questions unanswered. For example: How does racism persist in the general absence of overt racists? How does Whiteness remain socially dominant after the challenges it experienced during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s? I will return to these issues in the *Hegemony and Hegemonic Whiteness* section, but I first explore why racial theory is missing from CRT in higher education.

Why is Racial Theory Missing?

During the development of CRT, there are three key issues that help explain the lack of explicitly articulated racial theory. First is the prominence of Bell's *permanence of racism* thesis (1992) within the CRT cannon. Bell (1992) criticized liberalism's approach to promoting racial equality while rejecting utopian visions offered by the Civil Right Movement ("We shall overcome"). In Bell's argument, these approaches limit the potential of social movements because activists engage racism only to move beyond it. Bell further argued that the modest gains of the Civil Rights Movement have slowly eroded because the incrementalism of liberalism did not sufficiently restructure the oppressive relationship between Whites and non-Whites. Rather, he argued, racial activists need to treat racism not as something to be overcome, but as a permanent, oppressive social force that must be battled constantly (Bell, 1992, pp. 198–199). Thus, the permanence of racism thesis holds a specific purpose in CRT's activist orientation while also creating an uninterrogated tension with CRT's social construction tenet.³ Regardless, there has been a

³If race is a social construct, by definition, it cannot also be permanent in the literal sense.

strong reliance on Bell's thesis at the expense of exploring how the nature of White supremacy has evolved over the past 50 years (Omi & Winant, 1994).

Second, Crenshaw (2002) offered a lineage of the first decade of CRT. Her analysis was particularly illuminating when discussing the naming of CRT and the rationale behind it. She offered, "We would signify the political and intellectual location of the project through 'critical,' the substantive focus through 'race,' and the desire to develop a coherent account of race and law through the term 'theory'" (Crenshaw, 2002, p. 1361). Thus, the incorporation of the term "theory" was aspirational. This promise of a coherent account of race had not yet come to fruition; however, higher education scholars are applying CRT as if it has (see *Where is the racial theory in CRT?* section).

Third, and most importantly, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) made the first leap from CRT in law to CRT in education. They were dissatisfied with the paradigm of multiculturalism that marked the 1990s, for it was "mired in liberal ideology that offers no radical change in the current order" (p. 62). Instead, they found more potential for social transformation within CRT. They offered three central propositions for a CRT of education (later modified and expanded to 5, see Table 1), which included:

1. Race continues to be significant in the United States.
2. U.S. society is based on property rights rather than human rights.
3. The intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool for understanding inequality. (p. 48)

The incorporation of property rights was important as it highlighted a structural way racism is continually reproduced. At their core, however, the three propositions leave the following question unanswered: What is racism?

Ladson-Billings and Tate did briefly define racism using Wellman's (1977), "culturally sanctioned beliefs which, regardless of the intentions involved, defend the advantages Whites have because of the subordinated positions of racial minorities" (quoted in Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 55). This definition begins to address the systemic nature of racism because it focuses on collective, as opposed to individual, racial beliefs. It leaves several important issues unaddressed. For example, it does not engage the issues of racial ideology (Hall, 1986; Omi & Winant, 1994), racial structure (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2010; Omi & Winant, 1994), or unconscious racial bias (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Sears, 1988). The authors did engage Omi and Winant's (1994) theory of racial formation (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 50), but critiqued it for insufficiently addressing issues of education. Instead, they turned to the work of W.E.B. DuBois, especially his *double consciousness*⁴ con-

⁴By "double consciousness," DuBois (1903/1989) meant that Black people, "ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (p. 5).

cept, as his scholarship was central to the authors' intellectual development (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 50).

The DuBois concepts applied by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) offered some important insights about race, but they did not articulate a racial theory. For example, systemic racism creates the conditions that produce double consciousness. There is little insight into the structure of racism, instead focusing on its outcome. This is a critical distinction because the nature of White supremacy is substantially different contemporarily than in the time of DuBois. One hundred years ago, Blackness was associated with inherent, frequently biologically-based, inferiority. Conversely, Whiteness was a symbol of inherent superiority, which is why DuBois argued that even poor White people received the *public and psychological wages of Whiteness* (DuBois, 1935). This totalitarian regime of White supremacy changed during the 1960s due to the challenges of the Civil Rights Movement (Omi & Winant, 1994; see *Hegemony and Hegemonic Whiteness* section). Thus, some of DuBois' thinking will be relevant to contemporary racial analysis, but it cannot be transferred wholesale.

Currently, the lack of racial theory in CRT in higher education scholarship is problematic because the framework allows for a description what is (racial inequality, double consciousness, or microaggressions), but with a limited understanding of the means by which these phenomena are structured (aside from property rights). For some, this lack of racial theory is not problematic. Treviño, Harris, and Wallace (2008) argue the use of the term *theory* in CRT is primarily a political assessment, "because theory, whenever practiced in the natural sciences, the social sciences, or, more recently, the humanities, is held in high regard in the academy, referring to the crits' scholarly work as theory gives CRT scholarship a certain prestige" (p. 9). From its inception, CRT had no coherent theory embedded in it, and several scholars have argued that it is more aptly described as a theorizing space (e.g., Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). A tension arises because, as the content analysis in this paper demonstrates, the higher education Crits tend to utilize CRT as a standalone theory (see *Where is the racial theory in CRT?* section). Essentially the Crits are applying Critical Race Theory in the absence of a critical theory of racism.

Within this context, I focus on supplementing CRT with a racial theory to partially address this tension. I begin by asking: Is there an implicit form of racial theory the Crits utilize? A terminology frequently mentioned in CRT analyses is hegemony in relation to the normalization of power relations that privilege ostensibly White behavior, curricula, and standards of scholarly inquiry (e.g., Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Therefore, I offer hegemonic Whiteness as a theoretical perspective on the contemporary nature of systemic racism. Please take heed, there are many theories of racism, and the point here is not to close off debate in this area of CRT. Rather, given the previous critique

in this paper, I also feel a responsibility to fill the void created in hopes of engaging future CRT dialogues about racial theory.

Hegemony and Hegemonic Whiteness

Mills (2003) argued that White supremacy continues to function as a system of racial domination embedded within the juridico-political, economic, cultural, cognitive-evaluative, somatic, and metaphysical spheres of contemporary life (pp. 186–194). Mills (2003) was aware that the colloquial use of White supremacy differs from how he applied it, and he addressed this concern stating, “So the argument would be that American white supremacy has not vanished; rather, it has changed from a *de jure* to a *de facto* form” (p. 179). *De facto* White supremacy maintains power because the inner workings of this system of domination are masked by the hegemony of Whiteness, and it especially relevant since the 1960s where Whiteness was destabilized and then reconstructed (Omi & Winant, 1994). During the days of Jim Crow, explicit segregation was justified through an ideology that Whites were an inherently superior race of people (Omi & Winant, 1994). The *de jure* form of racial stratification was challenged via the Civil Rights Movement, as was the ideology of inherent White superiority (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Subsequently, Whiteness evolved from being explicitly superior to normal (Omi & Winant, 1994). It is the normality, within the theory of hegemony, which helps Whiteness maintain its privileged standing by being an unmarked, invisible, yet socially dominant category (Cabrera, 2009, 2017, 2018).

Hegemony is frequently attributed to Antonio Gramsci⁵ (1971), who argued social domination and stratification are continually recreated through a combination of coercion and consent. Within this formulation, the state maintains its power because it can force its citizens to comply (coercion). It could also utilize cultural, ideological, and discursive means of making inequality seem naturally occurring and pacifying the masses through the *manufacture of consent* (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Key to Gramsci’s (1971) theorizing was the concept of common sense, which in his understanding masks the realities of oppression. A common sense approach to economic inequality claims that poor people are poor because they lack the proper work ethic to succeed in the U.S. A meaningful interrogation of how Capitalism creates poverty is generally removed from the conversation, and thus, power relations become naturalized. Common sense is further entrenched because hegemonic structuring affords marginalized groups token incorporation into the systems of power (Gramsci, 1971; Morton, 2007), and their advancement

⁵While Gramsci was not the first to develop and apply the term hegemony, a thorough description of the term’s genealogy is beyond the scope of this paper. For this analysis, refer to the first chapter in Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and the Socialist Strategy* (1985).

is used to symbolically reinforce the myth of society's inclusiveness (Omi & Winant, 1994).

There is a tension in applying Gramscian hegemony to the study of issues of racism because he did not study race. As Hall (1986) argues, "in relation specifically to *racism*, [Gramsci's] original contribution cannot be simply transferred wholesale from the existing context of his work [italics original]" (p. 8). However, Hall did find analytic applicability of hegemony to the study of racism. For example, Gramsci questioned class solidarity, and Hall (1986) argued this was particularly relevant:

[Gramsci] altogether refuses any idea of a pre-given unified ideological subject – for example, the proletariat with its 'correct' revolutionary thoughts or blacks with their already guaranteed current anti-racist consciousness. He recognizes the 'plurality' of selves or identities of which the so-called 'subject' of thought and ideas is composed. (p. 22)

Within this theorizing, racial minorities may suffer the ill effects of racism, but there is no guarantee they will have an anti-racist, critical awareness.

Additionally, Hall (1986) appreciated Gramsci's focus on specific moments in time as opposed to a universal meta-narrative regarding structured oppression, "In the analysis of particular historical forms of racism, we would do well to operate at a more concrete, historical level of abstraction" (p. 23). In Hall's understanding, Gramsci helps interrogate what is specific about an historical moment of hegemonic racial formation while also understanding systemic racism as continually being challenged and recreated. Thus, emerges the concept of *hegemonic Whiteness* that highlights both the systemic and cultural means by which White supremacy is continually reproduced (Omi & Winant, 1994). Figure 1 is a visual heuristic regarding the adaptation of Gramscian hegemony to racial theory.

Within the superstructure of White supremacy, Whiteness is attributed value as a privileged, dominant, and frequently invisible social identity. Cultural and discursive practices (hegemonic Whiteness) serve to naturalize unequal social relations along the color line. Within civil society, this results in White privilege, racial inequality, and anti-minority affect. Each one of these three levels is mutually reinforcing as the cultural sphere normalizes inequality and racist practices that, in turn, serves to leave systemic White supremacy uninterrogated and unchallenged.

The Relevance of Hegemonic Whiteness to CRT

Crits have articulated the need for race to come to the center of social science analyses as a methodology of promoting social change. As Patton et al. (2007) argued, "It is important for educators and administrators on college and university campuses to understand how race produces inequalities" (p. 40). Within the theory of hegemonic Whiteness, race does not produce in-

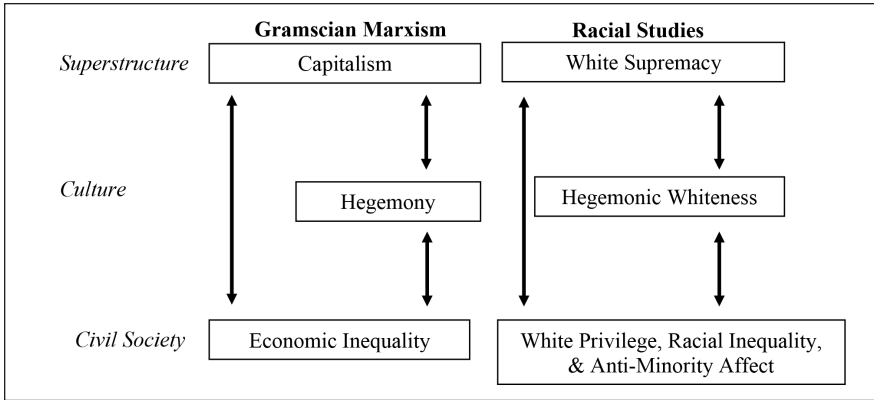


Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the application of hegemony, from Capitalism to White supremacy

equalities. Rather, race is a marker of difference that, when mediated through a system of racial domination (i.e., White supremacy), attributes differential value to specific racial backgrounds (e.g., Whiteness as property; Harris, 1993), which creates and reproduces racial inequality (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Cabrera, 2009, 2017; Omi & Winant, 1994). This is akin to, in the absence of Capitalism, a dollar bill is just a piece of paper. In the absence of White supremacy, Whiteness loses its societal value. Thus, I offer a reconstruction of CRT in higher education research:

- The intercentricity of race and racism
- The challenge to the dominant ideology
- The commitment to social justice
- The centrality of experiential knowledge
- The interdisciplinary perspective (Yosso et al., 2009, pp. 662–663)
- Hegemony of Whiteness

Explicitly incorporating the hegemony of Whiteness into CRT can help address some of the current limitations of this approach to higher education scholarship while also working through some of the tensions among CRT's tenets.

First, and most importantly, having a critical theory of racism within CRT helps differentiate between instances of racism versus a Person of Color's negative experience. Consistently operationalizing what constitutes racism is not only a requirement of traditional forms of educational research (e.g., Babbie, 2007), but it is also a pragmatic concern for the Critics. Ladson-Billings' chapter in the *Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education* (2013) specifically addressed what CRT is *not*. She called on CRT to increase methodologi-

cal rigor and was particularly critical of counternarratives that have recently moved from an analysis of systemic racism to being venues to “vent or rant” (p. 42). Ladson-Billings then offered a counter-counternarrative where she explored the experiences of a female faculty member of color who disregarded her mentor’s advice, submitted manuscripts without sharing it with senior scholars, never turned her conference papers into publications, took on too much service, was denied tenure, and then blamed her cumulative failures on racism. Ladson-Billings offered this narrative to highlight specifically what CRT is not – complaining – while highlighting the need for methodologically strong racial analyses. Having hegemonic Whiteness embedded in CRT allows scholars to more consistently identify and analyze racism because it offers an explicit understanding of what it is (and implicitly, what it is not). I do not argue there is a causal relationship between the lack of racial theory in higher education CRT and the issue Ladson-Billings (2013) highlighted. However, incorporating hegemonic Whiteness creates a methodological checkpoint that can help address this issue as CRT analyses in higher education continue to develop.

Additionally, hegemonic Whiteness frames racism as probabilistic as opposed to deterministic. Within this paradigm, there is a high likelihood that People of Color will have increased levels of racial awareness, but this is not assumed. This moves CRT away from the pitfall of racial essentialism, for which it has also been previously critiqued (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). As Delgado and Stefancic acknowledge, “[Unique voice of color c]o-exists in somewhat uneasy tension with anti-essentialism” (2012, p. 10). Hegemonic Whiteness complicates CRT’s focus on experiential knowledge, which posits that due to experiences with racism, People of Color have a unique and valid racial perspective (Yosso et al., 2009). This tenet becomes problematic, however, when extended to right-wing commentators who are also People of Color. For example, Asian American Michelle Malkin (2004) argued that the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII was both justifiable and necessary. Linda Chavez (1992), a Latina, argued that the primary barrier to Latina/o success is an unwillingness to assimilate into mainstream society. Shelby Steele (1990), a Black man who is also the twin brother of Claude Steele (“stereotype threat”), decontextualized and co-opted Dr. King’s message (“content of our character”) to argue that the true barriers to racial equality are race-conscious programs such as affirmative action.

Each of these authors is a person of color, and CRT’s commitment to anti-essentialism means their “authentic Asianess/Latineness/Blackness” would not be questioned. However, their arguments are racist in that they deny the power of contemporary racism and hold Communities of Color primarily responsible for their marginalized status (i.e., “blaming the victim” analysis, Ryan, 1976). As Leonardo (2004) argued, “Just as Ebert (1996) makes

it possible to call Camille Paglia a ‘patriarchal feminist’, it is also possible to say that the *actions* of People of Color are racist when they participate in the maintenance of a racist system [italics original]” (p. 489). The application of hegemonic Whiteness and its break with the assumption of racial solidarity, allows for People of Color to support systemic racism while providing a more heterogeneous view of minority perspectives on the subject.

Thus, hegemonic Whiteness within CRT pushes on the frequently accepted notion that, due to power differentials, People of Color cannot be racist. Within this context, not only can the actions of People of Color be racist, but their individual success can also serve as hegemonic examples of society’s openness (Cabrera, 2009, 2017; Omi & Winant, 1994). There was one reviewed study that explored the internalized racism of People of Color (Pérez Huber, 2010), but this scholarship was in the extreme minority. Instead, the articles tended to avoid the heterogeneity of voices within Communities of Color, especially as it pertained to internalized racism (e.g., Park, 2008; Shealey, 2009; Turner, Gonzalez, & Wong, 2011).

Returning to the Freirian roots of CRT in education (Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002), while maintaining a focus on hegemonic Whiteness, can additionally help balance between the unique voices of color and anti-essentialism. Freire (2000) argued that the oppressed are initially blinded to the realities of their own marginalization via hegemonic structuring, and it is through the process of *conscientização* that they learn to both see themselves as oppressed while also exploring the potential for collective action to transform their material conditions. Freire (2000) did argue that the oppressed, in this case racial minorities, are in the best social position to understand oppression because they receive the adverse treatment of these social structures. However, he did not assume truth emanates from the oppressed as they can be blinded to the realities of their own oppression. Instead of treating People of Color as a uniform, oppressed group with a collective, critical consciousness, the hegemony of Whiteness highlights two critical issues. First, there is an increased likelihood that they will be aware of their oppressed condition relative to their White peers, but this cannot be a foundational assumption. Second, there is the possibility (although not the probability) that White people can also become aware of their complicity in the oppression of People of Color and join the struggle as well (Applebaum, 2010).

This, in turn poses some methodological issues within CRT. If the nature of hegemonic structuring is to blind people to the realities of power and domination (Cabrera, 2009, 2017; Gramsci, 1971), Critics cannot entirely rely upon the voices of marginalized communities for truth. It requires a balanced approach to research whereby the analyst has to weigh the relative truth in participant narratives in relation to the realities of systemic racism, while concurrently allowing participant narratives to sometimes challenge exist-

ing paradigms of racial stratification. Essentially, it requires CRT researchers to take a more critical view of their research participants who come from Communities of Color while allowing for a greater heterogeneity of voices to emerge.

This is also a scholarly issue for higher education as Harper (2012) illustrated. While the field engages issues of race on a regular basis, there are very few analyses of racism. One of the few areas that consistently examines the consequences of systemic racism in higher education is CRT (Harper, 2012). Therefore, as a growing leader in the field of higher education regarding racial analysis, it becomes increasingly important that Critics be explicit about what they mean by race/racism, and hegemonic Whiteness helps clarify this issue. The Lorde (1992) and Marable (1992) definitions previously discussed (cited in Solórzano, 1998, p. 124) either rely on an antiquated definition, in the case of Lorde, or are insufficiently specific in the case of Marable. They are good starting points, but they are also inadequate, and hegemonic Whiteness helps to further clarify what constitutes racism versus what does not.

Hegemonic Whiteness as a theoretical orientation helps complexify practice, in particular how it relates to CRT-based Student Affairs. Patton et al. (2007) argue both strongly and effectively that traditional student development theories neglected issues of race and racism, and they call for a merging of CRT with Student Affairs practice. Essentially, this entails centering issues of race and racism in practitioner/student interactions while critically interrogating how racism is embedded in the fabric of higher education institutions (Gusa, 2010). Hegemonic Whiteness adds nuance to this situation because of the probabilistic nature of the theory. While I absolutely agree that Student Affairs professionals should center issues of racism in their practice, they will encounter both anti-racist Students of Color as well as ones who espouse the dominant racial paradigm. Hegemonic Whiteness can help mentally prepare them for these multifaceted realities of campus racism where Students of Color can be both the targets of racism and the source of the problem.

In terms of higher education policy, hegemonic Whiteness adds a layer of complexity and focus. For example, the interest convergence principle (Bell, 1979) has been at the core of many CRT-based critiques of social policy. A prominent example is affirmative action, and many have argued that the "diversity rationale" represents an example of interest convergence (Park & Liu, 2014). That is, the only legally-justifiable mechanism for defending affirmative action is showing that all students, Whites included, benefit from diverse learning environment (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012; Hurtado, Dey, Gurin, & Gurin, 2003). This sends a troubling signal to Communities of Color because it says that increasing higher education access for racially oppressed students is only allowable to

the extent that it benefits Whites (Taylor, 2000). At the same time, CRT is critiqued for being structurally deterministic, where interest convergence is an assumed policy outcome due to the realities of contemporary systemic racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Hegemonic Whiteness pushes against this structural determinism because it is a malleable form of social control (Gramsci, 1970; Lukes, 2005). The range of policy options may be limited by hegemonic Whiteness, but this does not mean it always has to be this way. Social change from this theoretical perspective, however, entails working in the cultural sphere to open up the realm of possibility. That is, instead of starting with politics to change the national culture, hegemony requires a change in culture to create new policy alternatives (Gramsci, 1970; Lukes, 2005).

CONCLUSION

After the election of a Black (technically bi-racial) President, there has been a paradigm shift from race being minimally important (color-blind ideology) to race not mattering (post-racialism) (Cabrera, Watson, & Franklin, 2016; Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2017). There is, however, one important caveat. Racism matters when the perceived targets are White people (Cabrera, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d). White people now believe that reverse racism is more rampant than racial discrimination against Black people (Norton & Sommers, 2011). This makes racial analysis even more critically important because the popular discourse focuses on an imagined problem (reverse racism) while ignoring contemporary, systemic White supremacy (Feagin, 2010). Thus, it becomes even more important that CRT clarifies what constitutes racism, and incorporating hegemonic Whiteness is one step in that direction. Being explicit about the incorporation of racial theory in CRT helps more clearly identify the process of racial stratification, which in turn helps inform educational methods of resistance and transformation.

CRT has lodged a number of strong critiques against racism within institutions of higher education (e.g., Yosso et al., 2009). I produced the current analysis in the hopes of turning that critical eye inward, and this includes the author whose work is contained within the literature review. Self-reflection requires a great deal of courage because it requires engaging in the struggle for racial equality while concurrently understanding that the scholar/activist *might* be misguided (or at least require redirection). When faced with constant ideologically driven criticism for engaging the subject of racism (e.g., Farber & Sherry, 1997; Horowitz, 2006; McWhorter, 2000; Shapiro, 2012, March 11) it is difficult to entertain this possibility. Ultimately, this self-reflection is vital because a critical approach to scholarship that is insufficiently self-reflective becomes dogmatic. If a critical approach becomes dogmatic, it ceases to be critical.

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