Critical Race Theory (1970s-present)

Summary:

This resource will help you begin the process of understanding literary theory and schools of criticism and how they are used in the academy.

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Introduction

Critical Race Theory, or CRT, is a theoretical and interpretive mode that examines the appearance of race and racism across dominant cultural modes of expression. In adopting this approach, CRT scholars attempt to understand how victims of systemic racism are affected by cultural perceptions of race and how they are able to represent themselves to counter prejudice.

Closely connected to such fields as philosophy, history, sociology, and law, CRT scholarship traces racism in America through the nation’s legacy of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and recent events. In doing so, it draws from work by writers like Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others studying law, feminism, and post-structuralism. CRT developed into its current form during the mid-1970s with scholars like Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado, who responded to what they identified as dangerously slow progress following Civil Rights in the 1960s.

Prominent CRT scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams share an interest in recognizing racism as a quotidian component of American life (manifested in textual sources like literature, film, law, etc). In doing so, they attempt to confront the beliefs and practices that enable racism to persist while also challenging these practices in order to seek liberation from systemic racism.

As such, CRT scholarship also emphasizes the importance of finding a way for diverse individuals to share their experiences. However, CRT scholars do not only locate an individual’s identity and experience of the world in his or her racial identifications, but also their membership to a specific class, gender, nation, sexual orientation, etc. They read these diverse cultural texts as proof of the institutionalized inequalities racialized groups and individuals experience every day.

As Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic explain in their introduction to the third edition of Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge, “Our social world, with its rules, practices, and assignments of prestige and power, is not fixed; rather, we construct with it words, stories and silence. But we need not acquiesce in arrangements that are unfair and one-sided. By writing and speaking against them, we may hope to contribute to a better, fairer world” (3). In this sense, CRT scholars seek tangible, real-world ends through the intellectual work they perform. This contributes to many CRT scholars’ emphasis on social activism and transforming everyday notions of race, racism, and power.

More recently, CRT has contributed to splinter groups focused on Asian American, Latino, and Indian racial experiences.
Common Questions

- What is the significance of race in contemporary American society?
- Where, in what ways, and to what ends does race appear in dominant American culture and shape the ways we interact with one another?
- What types of texts and other cultural artifacts reflect dominant culture’s perceptions of race?
- How can scholars convey that racism is a concern that affects all members of society?
- How does racism continue to function as a persistent force in American society?
- How can we combat racism to ensure that all members of American society experience equal representation and access to fundamental rights?
- How can we accurately reflect the experiences of victims of racism?

Why Use This Approach?

As we can see, adopting a CRT approach to literature or other modes of cultural expression includes much more than simply identifying race, racism, and racialized characters in fictional works. Rather, it (broadly) emphasizes the importance of examining and attempting to understand the socio-cultural forces that shape how we and others perceive, experience, and respond to racism. These scholars treat literature, legal documents, and other cultural works as evidence of American culture’s collective values and beliefs. In doing so, they trace racism as a dually theoretical and historical experience that affects all members of a community regardless of their racial affiliations or identifications.

Most CRT scholarship attempts to demonstrate not only how racism continues to be a pervasive component throughout dominant society, but also why this persistent racism problematically denies individuals many of the constitutional freedoms they are otherwise promised in the United States’ governing documents. This enables scholars to locate how texts develop in and through the cultural contexts that produced them, further demonstrating how pervasive systemic racism truly is. CRT scholars typically focus on both the evidence and the origins of racism in American culture, seeking to eradicate it at its roots.

Additionally, because CRT advocates attending to the various components that shape individual identity, it offers a way for scholars to understand how race interacts with other identities like gender and class. As scholars like Crenshaw and Williams have shown, CRT scholarship can and should be amenable to adopting and adapting theories from related fields like women’s studies, feminism, and history. In doing so, CRT has evolved over the last decades to address the various concerns facing individuals affected by racism.

Interestingly, CRT scholarship does not only draw attention to and address the concerns of individual affected by racism, but also those who perpetrate and are seemingly unaffected by racial prejudice. Scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois, Peggy McIntosh, Cheryl Harris, and George Lipsitz discuss white privilege and notions of whiteness throughout history to better understand how American culture conceptualizes race (or the seeming absence of race).

Important Terms

- **White privilege**: Discussed by Lipsitz, Lee, Harris, McIntosh, and other CRT scholars, white privilege refers to the various social, political, and economic advantages white individuals experience in contrast to non-white citizens based on their racial membership. These advantages can include both obvious and subtle differences in access to power, social status, experiences of prejudice, educational opportunities, and much more. For CRT scholars, the notion of white privilege offers a way to discuss dominant culture’s tendency to normalize white individuals’ experiences and ignore the
experiences of non-whites. Fields such as CRT and whiteness studies have focused explicitly on the concept of white privilege to understand how racism influences white people.

- **Microaggressions**: Microaggressions refer to the seemingly minute, often unconscious, quotidian instances of prejudice that collectively contribute to racism and the subordination of racialized individuals by dominant culture. Peggy Davis discusses how legal discourse participates in and can counteract the effects of microaggressions.

- **Institutionalized Racism**: This concept, discussed extensively by Camara Phyllis Jones, refers to the systemic ways dominant society restricts a racialized individual or group’s access to opportunities. These inequalities, which include an individual’s access to material conditions and power, are not only deeply imbedded in legal institutions, but have been absorbed into American culture to such a degree that they are often invisible or easily overlooked.

- **Social construction**: In the context of CRT, “social construction” refers to the notion that race is a product of social thought and relations. It suggests that race is a product of neither biology nor genetics, but is rather a social invention.

- **Intersectionality and anti-essentialism**: These terms refer to the notion that one aspect of an individual’s identity does not necessarily determine other categories of membership. As Delgado and Stefancic explain, “Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances” (*CRT: An Introduction* 10). In other words, we cannot predict an individual’s identity, beliefs, or values based on categories like race, gender, sexuality, religion, nationality, etc; instead, we must recognize that individuals are capable of claiming membership to a variety of different (and oftentimes seemingly contradictory) categories and belief systems regardless of the identities outsiders attempt to impose upon them.

### Works Cited


### Recommended Sources for Additional Research


