Original Article

Critical Race Theory, Methodology, and Semiotics: The Analytical Utility of a "Race" Conscious Approach for Visual Qualitative Research

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Abstract

Over the last 30 years, Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been applied successfully as an analytical framework, through which, to explore matters of "race," racialization, and subordination in numerous fields. For CRT to continue to be relevant, there is a need to reorient it as a guiding analytical framework, to account for the ubiquity of digital technologies across liberal Western democracies and the ways in which they have radically changed social and cultural production. During this article, we wish to extend this argument further and encourage the development of critical race methodologies (CRMs) fit for the (hyper)digital moment, so we are equipped better to challenge the persistence of racialized hierarchies and the emerging cultural circumstances in which they operate. It identifies the philosophical principles that underpin CRMs and concludes by outlining critical race semiotics (CRS) as an analytical tool dedicated to human emancipation, particular to our highly visual culture.

Keywords

critical race theory, ethnicity and race, semiotics, qualitative research, methodologies, digital media

Introduction

Critical race theory (CRT) has transitioned recently from university campuses to the popular consciousness of the United States, the United Kingdom, and beyond, by way of mention in mainstream media as well as the highest political offices in the world. CRT is an academic field of inquiry, a movement and/or framework—rather than a theory (Hylton, 2010, 2012)—which has sought to examine the racialized experiences, structures, and outcomes of contemporary Western social democracies. It is a movement of activist scholars that emerged in the United States in response to the obfuscation toward race of critical theory in Legal Studies. Significant inconsistencies in the consideration of the place of "race" in legal circles impacts life chances, freedoms, and everyday experiences in social structures. The movement, which began in the mid-1970s, consisted of scholars, lawyers, and activists, all of whom expressed disquiet that the headway made during the civil rights era had begun to stall and, in some instances, regress (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Early CRT scholars, such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado became increasingly critical of what they described as colorblind ideologies, and the inability of scholars to explicate the

complexities of racisms as systemic, unspectacular, covert, and often ambiguous. For the early pioneers of CRT, such guiding social frameworks failed to recognize the more subtle discriminatory practices that have evolved in light of liberal anti-racist policy (Bell, 1980, 1992a; Delgado & Stefancic, 1995).

Over the last 30 years or so, CRT has been successfully applied as an analytical framework to explore matters of "race," racialization and subordination in numerous fields, outside of law, such as education (Closson, 2010; G. Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Gillborn, 2005; Hiraldo, 2010; Zamudio, 2011), media (Alemán & Alemán, 2016; Baynes, 2002; Lawrence, 2016; Odartey-Wellington, 2011; T. J. Yosso, 2002), and sport and leisure (Burdsey, 2011; Hylton, 2005, 2009, 2010; Kane & Maxwell, 2011; Lawrence & Davis, 2019) in a number of different geographic contexts, from Norway to China. It has therefore continued to evolve

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as a transdisciplinary framework, from which several "off-shoots" have sprung like Critical Race Feminism (CRF), Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), and more recently, Critical Race and Digital Studies (CRDS). Rollock and Gillborn, however, (2011, pp. 2–5) state that despite its flexibility, CRT and CRT-related scholarship share a number of characteristics and common themes: (a) an acceptance racism is pervasive as opposed to occasional; (b) an understanding that White supremacy operates to privilege White people, while concurrently subordinating Black and minoritized people; (c) an assumption that Black and minoritized people and/or voices should be privileged in scholarship; (d) an understanding that gains in racial equality are often made when there is an interest convergence with those occupying dominant discourses of Whiteness; and (e) a recognition that systems of subordination are intersectional. The goal of CRT therefore is to challenge these dominant racial ideologies, catalyze social justice, and transformation and eschew disciplinary structures through transdisciplinarity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013).

Hamilton (2020) suggests for CRT to continue to be relevant there may be a need to reorient it as a guiding analytical framework, to account for the ubiquity of digital technologies across liberal Western democracies and the ways in which they have radically changed social interaction and cultural production. During this article then, we wish to extend this argument yet further and encourage the development of critical race methodologies (CRMs) fit for the (hyper)digital moment, so we are better equipped to challenge the persistence of racialized hierarchies and the emerging cultural circumstances in which they operate. We see this as essential theoretically and empirically; thus, hereafter, the article goes on to identify the philosophical principles that underpin CRMs before going on to outline critical race semiotics (CRS) as an analytical tool that is dedicated to "human liberation and resistance" and particular to our highly visual culture.

CRT as Methodological Critique

CRT began as a critique of liberalism and its myths of meritocracy that underpin ideas of race neutrality, objectivity, and colorblindness. It has acted as a critical framework through which to examine and explain the pervasiveness and character of racism(s) across and within social institutions. In this way, CRT has been especially useful in excavating the philosophical underpinnings of liberal ideologies that contend advanced capitalist societies, largely owing to the metaphysical and knowledge traditions born out of Enlightenment rationality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001: 2). In short, faith in such systems is said to have birthed equality discourses (i.e., predominately through the universalization of education, democracy and rule of law); hence, liberal societies insist on "treating all persons alike, regardless of their differing initial

positions and histories" (Delgado, 2011: 1247). CRT scholars, however, point out liberalism is also an ideology that inherently and systematically marginalizes matters of "race," rather paradoxically to an extent, because of its dogmatic adherence to a race neutral politics of equality (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). It is little wonder then that those endorsing liberal principles of equality and/or colorblindness, occasionally from the highest political offices under Western liberal democracies—such as the President of the United States, Donald Trump, and the United Kingdom's, equality minister, Olukemi Badenoch, MP—often stand obdurately against CRT, and, by design, willfully constrain themselves from exploring critically racialized relations of power, the racialized nature of human interaction, and the histories of racial oppression and subordination.

Enlightenment traditions and ways of knowing, of course, have been the dominant cogs in positivist and post-positivist methodological designs, meaning the metaphysical assumptions and axioms gleaned from such approaches derive from a bounded philosophical standpoint (Carrington, 2008; Garner, 2007; Mills, 2004). As Hylton (2012: 26), puts it, "mainstream methodologies . . . [reinforce] oppressions while subordinating the voices and values of those rendered invisible through conventional modes of thinking." In this sense, CRT actively embraces critiques of methodological neutrality and colorblindness, and promotes radically constructivist approaches to empirical research and methodological design. For CRT, social justice and social transformation are not by-products of the research process, they are inextricably linked.

Proponents of methodological objectivity have however been galvanized of late by the supposed "race" neutrality and colorblindness of algorithms, machine learning, and artificial intelligence, which "pretend to live outside of the system of racial hierarchies in which these technologies are embedded" (Hamilton, 2020, p. 295). In this way, CRT is well positioned to consider the effects of techno-libertarianism (i.e., a belief that technological progress will inevitably lead to greater human emancipation) and positivism given collaborations between the two are already producing similar racialized outcomes both online and offline. "Race" conscious scholars are already beginning to level such criticisms at tech companies, inviting serious philosophical reflections on the outcomes of supposed "race" neutrality in testing processes (see Broussard, 2018; Eubanks, 2018; O'Neil, 2016)

Guiding Philosophical Principles of CRMs

Poststructuralist critiques of Enlightenment meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1984) and geneology (Foucault, 1983) have become particularly useful for CRT's critique of liberalism, methodological neutrality and, in turn, Enlightenment

rationality. Such a convergence of ideas has helped clear intellectually legitimate spaces wherein "new" epistemological inquiries and alternate methodologies challenge canonical philosophies and notions of inevitable human progress, absolute "truth," and ahistorical knowledge. CRT has thus benefited from a synthesis with poststructuralist thought and it is in this tradition we continue below.

In the following section, our main intention is to propose three key philosophical tenets for CRMs, which both reassert their relevance and value as guiding methodological components: (a) the continued utility of "race" as an analytical concept for the digital moment; (b) anti-essentialism; and (c) social justice and activist-scholarship.

The Continued Utility of "Race" as an Analytical Concept in the Digital Moment

It is now over two decades since Miles (2000) stated that, given "race" has no scientific utility, it is a "useless" concept and therefore should be confined to the "analytical dustbin" (Miles & Brown, 2003: 90). Silverstein (2005), however, suggests that notwithstanding recurring critiques of biological "race" as analytic model, many still cling to the folklore of "race," as both a biological and social "fact." Carrington (2006: 9), too, while sympathetic to Miles' intentions, challenges what he perceives to be a dogmatic Marxist framework, which infers "that the struggles of Black peoples against racism . . . are misguided efforts which do not further the 'real' political needs of the Black population which ultimately lie within the wider class struggle." Miles' argument therefore has been interpreted as one that assumes "race" is akin to the racialization of labor and a mere "ideological effect, a phenomenal form masking real, economic relationships in a manner analogous to a mirage" (Gilroy, 1987, p. 22). Miles' position is a stance against the socio-political utility of "race" which, accordingly, grants too much authority to biological and anatomical spheres in leading ontological debates about the nature of being (Carrington, 2006).

CRT's ontological base is consistent with ideas, originally linked to historical realism, proposing realities are "shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender factors, [which are] crystallized (reified) into a series of structures that are now (inappropriately) taken as 'real'" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 165). To this end, it is precisely because it is the product of processes of racialization, Bonilla-Silva (1999) suggests the dismissal of 'race' as an analytical concept is premature:

> [R]ace is not an essential category (no social category is essential) and in fact is highly malleable and historically-bounded (as all social categories are), it is nonetheless a central principle of social organization . . . race is a "social fact" similar to class and gender and, accordingly, race is a real and

central social vessel of group affiliation and life in the modern world. (p. 899)

In this sense, although "race" has no biological basis, it remains salient because of histories and centuries of racialization (Leonardo, 2005; Warmington, 2009) as well as its continued performance and repetition (Nayak, 2005). The digitalization of late modern societies has done little to advance us further toward a digital utopia wherein "race" is no longer socially significant. On the contrary the internet and digital media have reinvigorated "old," color-based racisms and especially nasty bigoted rhetoric (Brock, 2012; Daniels, 2009), while other digital advancements such as biometric technologies have been calibrated to privilege Whiteness "or at least [skin] lightness, in its use of lighting" (Browne, 2010, p. 136). Zoom, Twitter, and other social media and cyber-marketing platforms have also been accused of similar prototypical Whiteness calibration, which is conceivably an inadvertent product of software engineers producing racially biased algorithms (Bacchini & Lorusso, 2019).

Bonilla-Silva (1999, p. 902) assertions vis-à-vis "race" as an analytical tool, which avoids criticisms of reification because its social significance is clearly observable, are still relevant for the digital moment (Kanjere, 2019). That is because the material outcomes, both online and offline, resulting from everyday racializations remain clear and poignant. African American scholar, Gates (1992), skillfully demonstrates this point:

> It's important to remember that "race" is only a sociopolitical category, nothing more. At the same time—in terms of its practical performative force—that doesn't help me when I'm trying to get a taxi on the corner of 125th and Lenox Avenue. ("Please sir, it's only a metaphor.") (pp. 37–38)

As Bonilla-Silva (1999) prefers, "races are not things but relations" (p. 902). This then is a key pivot relevant for CRMs because it shifts the ontological focus away from investigating the salience of "race" and immediately moves onto the more politically pertinent issue, which is to excavate the historical consequences of racializations, the socio-historical (and technological) conditions in which they currently exist, and the nuances associated across different geographical regions (Crenshaw, 1991). We are thus ushered away from counterproductive paradigm wars where activism is in danger of being tardy, stymied and tangential, and moved toward understanding how "race" is being reproduced in a given society or epoch.

Anti-Essentialism

One of the great achievements of the poststructuralist "tradition," and what perhaps is its defining feature, is its critique and rejection of essentialism (Newman, 2005). Influenced by

this tradition, Nayak (2005, p. 145), for instance, suggests that we should not assume racialization is "an inherently negative sign, absent of power for those subjects it is said to oppress" and that it is useful to recognize "its multidiscursive and polysemic value across a number of sites." Mac an Ghaill (1999) too encourages us to conceptualize racialization as a fluid process that can problematize the notion that people occupy "fixed hierarchical positions, such as dominant/empowered (White people) and subordinate/oppressed (Black people)" (p. 12). Central for CRT theorists and their approach to anti-essentialist research, which distinguishes them from poststructuralists, is their strategic centering of "race" and concern with the reproduction of racialized hierarchies (Hylton, 2005, 2009). It is important to address this since "the CRT emphasis on centering 'race' can be misconstrued as essentialism" (Hylton, 2012: 29). Crenshaw (1991) explains why this is erroneous:

> One version of antiessentialism, embodying what might be called the vulgarized social construction thesis, is that since all categories are socially constructed, there is no such thing as, say, Blacks or women, and thus it makes no sense to continue reproducing those categories by organizing around them . . . But to say that a category such as race or gender is socially constructed is not to say that that category has no significance in our world. On the contrary, a large and continuing project for subordinated people—and indeed, one of the projects for which postmodern theories have been very helpful—is thinking about the way power has clustered around certain categories. (p. 1297)

Crenshaw makes a distinction between CRT's use of anti-essentialist theorizing and the projects of other more hardline postmodern and poststructural theorists, whose theses on deconstruction and anti-essentialism serve only to argue for the need to move away from the notion of "race," and other social categories, completely. She does not however distance herself completely from postmodern and by association poststructuralist traditions. In this sense, intersectional approaches to anti-essentialism do not deny the possibility of simple Black/White dualisms, but neither does it deny the potential for a critical and nuanced analysis of racialized systems, subjectivities, and meanings. Accordingly, racialization can be used as a tool of deconstruction which helps understand how individual bodies are empowered and disempowered differently, in different moments and in different environments, as much as it promotes exploration of the institutionalized and structural effects of racism.

CRT scholars are indeed concerned by ontological debates about the nature of social categories and how they interact with one another to produce unequal outcomes, and a variety of experiences; however, they are not prepared to circumvent the "*most pressing problem*" [emphasis in original] (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1297), which is to understand how the intersections between certain social categories hold greater significance in structuring people's experience of their social and cultural worlds than others. Crenshaw (2012) indeed asks us to acknowledge that late modern subjects hold multiple subjectivities; however, she is prepared to recognize that some differences and social categories (male/female and White/Black/British Asian, etc.) are more significant for social inquiry, social stratification, and political mobilization than others. In simple terms, all differences matter, but some differences matter more than others. CRT's strategic centering of "race" and racism within critical methodological design, is not then a denial of the complex self nor an assumption that all White people are powerful and all Black people are powerless; rather, it is an approach that recognizes dominant liberal institutional structures have a tendency to reproduce racial processes and outcomes, even when a system is seemingly "race" neutral.

Activist-Scholarship

Critical race theorists and their overt political agendas presuppose that racism is iniquitous and thus present CRT as a moral as well as critical framework for social justice. In this sense, it takes a clear, unambiguously ethical stance. According to Dillard (2008), activist-scholarship responds to the notion of research for research's sake, "mandating research and educational practice that are concrete physical actions in service to community and beyond solely researcher theorizing" (p. 279). CRT activist-scholarship is then, not simply a rhetorical opposition to dominant Western epistemologies but, a mandate for an ethical, pragmatic, and moral approach to research design.

In being committed to social justice, and in acknowledging "all inquiry is moral and political" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008: xiii), scholarship can develop as a means to achieve greater human liberation. Ladson-Billings and Donnor (2008) note:

> scholars who take on the challenge of moral and ethical activist work cannot rely solely on others to make sense of their work and translate it into usable form . . . scholars must also engage new forms of scholarship that make translations of their work more seamless. (p. 74)

To this end, should methodological design not hold the potential for increased human freedom and equality it would be difficult for that work to be understood as a work of CRT. In the following section we begin to map out how CRMs are forms of activist-scholarship and how CRS might be an example of such work.

Critical Race Semiotics

Semiology is a methodological technique that offers the researcher means of exploring how systems of nonlinguistic and linguistic communication influence a person or group

of people's ascriptions of value to an object, person or character (Peppin and Carty, 2001). Many questions asked by critical race scholars require a critique of systems of racialized processes and practices that perpetuate racial hierarchies (Bell, 1992b; Lorde, 1979; Omi & Winant, 2002), Whiteness (hooks, 1999), microaggressions (Sue, 2010), and colorblindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Semiology can be viewed as a useful tool in dismantling these systems of oppression by first naming and then holding them accountable. As Barthes (1967) notes:

> semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not *languages*, at least systems of signification. (p. 9)

Semiotics then is a form of modern hermeneutics, which can work in tandem with a CRT framework, since such an approach allows intricate subthemes, which expose the complexity of media messages, to emerge independently. That is as opposed to filling predetermined categories decided beforehand. In other words, overly precise, fixed categories can sometimes overlook the more subtle, emergent and nuanced functioning of contemporary racisms. Yosso's (2002, p. 53) approach to critical race media literacy and her more recent reflections on it (2020), which we adapt below, is especially useful to guide a "race" conscious semiological analysis—a Critical Race Semiotics (CRS). That is, she sets out a guiding inductivist framework rather than a deductivist set of categories to populate. A CRS might be concerned by:

1. An inter-centricity of race and racism: how matters of racialized *re*presentation and discourse intersect with issues of gender, class, disability, sexuality, immigration, phenotype, accent, and generation.
2. Challenge to dominant media ideologies: this may include the naming of White supremacist discourses and imagery, challenge to media that claims to produce "race" neutral, meritocratic and objective content and/or "the intentionality of omission" (Yosso, 2020, p. 8).
3. A commitment to social justice, the societal curriculum and critical pedagogy: CRS is motivated to expose the negative effects of racialized *re*presentation and the privileging aspects for dominant groups. It does not deny the potential of racialization to produce "positive" effects; however, it is not concerned primarily by this.
4. The centrality of experiential knowledge: the decoding of imagery is dependent upon the subject positions of the semiotician/decoder (i.e., gathering readings from differently racialized groups, or by employing counter-narrative techniques when researching dominant groups, such as White men).
5. The transdisciplinary perspective: a multi-method approach to semiology recognizes the need to reject myopic approaches to "race" and racism and thus prefers to engage with less traditional methods such as (counter)storytelling, dialogic performance and mixed-method data generation. Following Alemán & Alemán (2016), methodology and analytical frameworks "disrupt majoritarian perspectives of history and policy, recognize and benefit from the positionalities of the researchers, and implement the transformative potential of CRT projects in multiple communities" (p. 289).

Moreover, while messages conveyed by images and video are important for semiologists, written text also plays an important role in directing the message attempting to be communicated. To explore more fully the complexity of media messages, the linkages between text and image must also be considered. Barthes' (1964/2003) methods of "anchorage" and "relay" thus inform an understanding of the ways in which the image and the text work with one another to create meaning(s). While the former refers to how the text offers an association between the image and its context (in other words, the text attempts to contextualize the image), the latter refers to the reciprocal relationship between text and image, whereby each contributes its own facet of the interpreted message.

Media semiotics is one area of semiology that is concerned with media signification, representation, and the systems through which meaning is expressed and "reality" represented. *Re*presentation is one particularly important system of signification through which meaning, and "reality," is signified (Bignell, 2002, p. 59). That is also to say, "reality does not precede representation but is constituted by it" (Lather, 2003, p. 258). To elaborate, Hall (1980) contends that meaning is not encoded and then decoded in an unproblematic and straightforward manner. For Hall, while reality cannot be signified through *re*presentation, meaning *is* generated when it "stops" being deferred (Procter, 2004). In other terms, meaning is not entirely free-floating, neither is it ever fixed, since people do "stop" deferring meaning elsewhere to make sense of their "reality" and surroundings. Consequently, meaning making is to be considered an activity of groups and individuals, and is shaped by "local and specific constructed realities" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, pp. 165–167), and cultural contexts, which prevents meaning from becoming altogether arbitrary and disorderly. Meaning is, or meanings are, in large part the outcomes of the constant "play" between the sender and receiver.

Perhaps more importantly, one of Hall's priorities is not with the existence of categories or the search for *the* meaning but is found in the *politics* of *re*presentation (Denzin &

Lincoln, 1998; Hall, 1997a, 1997b). Of primary interest to Hall is *how* and *why* different people and groups stop at different points, for different reasons, to *construct* various meanings for political and ideological purposes. Thus, for Hall, media representations always have an intended message; but at the same moment, he also maintains that, because this intended message is not always received in a linear, coherent fashion, meanings are constantly being remade. In other words, meanings are not firmly anchored to one spot but neither are they "entirely free-floating" (Procter, 2004: 120). We suggest CRS tread the same path for three reasons: (a) such an approach highlights the positionalities and subjectivities of the semiotician will inevitably affect their understanding of the message (text, image, audio), This means it is a vital methodological consideration to gather alternative readings of the object of inquiry, other than those deciphered by the semiotician. (b) because media imagery may produce various racialized meanings, CRS can be used as a form of counter narrative, which can "challenge, displace, or mock pernicious . . . [racialized] narratives" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 43). This then "has the advantage of righting the balance" (Hall, 1997, p. 272) when confronted by seemingly race neutral or uncritical interpretations; and (c) there will be no claim to have deciphered the meaning of imagery nor will there be bold truth claims vis-à-vis whether or not *re*presentations are ultimately either "positive" and/or "negative." Rather its merit is found in how it might document the overt and covert racialized connotations of imagery, which may be overlooked by colorblind methods and conventional objectivist approaches.

Analyzing Images and Articles

At the stage a semiotician is ready to analyze data, while CRS is an inductive approach to data analysis, five theoretical ideas according to Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996) framework for approaching visual semiotics might be mapped on to the five guiding principles (Rollock and Gilborn, 2011). Kress and van Leeuwen identify three principal dimensions to media imagery: (a) the representational dimension is divided into the *re*presentation of narrative processes (i.e., "what's happening") and conceptual processes (or [racialized] "ideas") within the frame of the image; (b) the metafunction, or in other words, the interaction between the viewer and the image (i.e., what sort of engagement is the image inviting?); (c) the layout or composition of the image (i.e., the position of bodies and their features, bodily movements, muscularity of particular muscle groups and/ or facial expression?) body positioning in relation to camera and/or props, dimensions of eye contact (if any), clothing styles, style of accompanying narratives and types of adornment (Kolbe and Albanese, 1996). In this sense, Kress and van Leeuwen's approach offers an

established method through which the following five guiding principles of CRT are considered.

First, CRT contends that racism in society is endemic. Ladson-Billings (1998), for example, asserts that racisms are not fleeting, trivial, or occasional happenings but rather they are a "permanent fixture" of contemporary societies, which act covertly and overtly to order a racialized hierarchy of peoples (p. 11). As such the potential for racist intent to be inherent within systems of signification online must never be completely discarded. However, given Back et al. (1998, p. 85) suggest that it is unhelpful to explore racism as an exclusive belief with which only a "fully paid up card carrying Nazi" will affirm, CRS is concerned with uncovering how "[contemporary racisms] can produce a racist effect while denying that this effect is the result of racism" (Solomos & Back, 1996, p. 27). CRS thus pays particularly close attention to those signs and symbols that may unintentionally or otherwise produce racist outcomes and representations of Black and other minoritized communities and people, online.

Second, CRT also argues for the importance of understanding White supremacy to tackle racial inequality. From a CRT perspective, White supremacy should not be conceptualized in narrow terms as a feature of contemporary neo-Nazi politics (Gillborn, 2005) or alt-right movements; rather it should be understood as a concept that is "a political, economic, and cultural *system* in which Whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of White superiority and entitlement" [emphasis added] (Ansley, 1997, p. 592). The supremacy of Whiteness is thus closely linked to the notion of White privilege which holds that White people take advantage of a number of daily, invisible, unearned privileges, not available to Black people, which they are not conscious of and thus are often unwilling to accept (Ignatiev, 1997; McIntosh, 1989). CRS then might be applied to analyze the representation of White people and communities and how they feed into broader narratives that serve to advantage Whiteness discourses that privilege racial hierarchies (see Lawrence, 2016).

Third, CRT wishes to privilege the voices of people racialized as Black or minoritized with the aim of providing a counter narrative to mainstream discourses about "race" and racisms (Crenshaw, 2012; Delgado, 2011), such as those advanced by mainstream media as well as memes, gifs and other visual forms of digital imagery. In turn, CRT centralizes and celebrates the importance of experiential knowledge and uses a technique known as counter storytelling: "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (Yosso, 2002, p. 26). In so doing this method challenges dominant ideas and epistemologies (Scheurich & Young, 1997) that are advanced often by those occupying and reinforcing the discourses of Whiteness. Counter-storytelling is highly relevant for CRS in that it challenges the tendency of more established

semioligical traditions and semioticians to hide behind an "objective" language of semiotics, which disguises subjective interpretations as objective representations.

CRS unapologetically values experiential knowledge and the counter-stories as alternative and valuable way of knowing about racialization and its negative implications. CRS then operates in a CRT tradition by inviting the reader to follow the logic of the analysis but also invites interpretations of the same images from other "race" conscious viewpoints, so that the ideas that emerge can be further explored, contested, and/or supported. This is especially important, when the semiologist identifies as White as outlined by Blaisdell (2006) who notes,

> I do not only use CRT to expose the Whiteness and complicity in racism of the [people] in the study but to discuss the Whiteness and complicity of all Whites, including myself, as well. By analyzing how all Whites are complicit in institutional forms of racism and including myself in that complicity, I hope to avoid merely (re)centering Whiteness and Whitening a theory that comes in large part from the perspectives and experiences of scholars of color. (pp. 166–167)

Here, Blaisdell outlines the importance of acknowledging differences in semioticians' positionality and in turn how research is a production of our own epistemological contexts. Therefore, CRS goes beyond traditional forms of semiology in that it acknowledges semiology is never "complete" unless it invites critique from critical scholars, all of whom will have different perspectives. To this end, the role of the researcher as author is another vital consideration for CRS given it calls into question the power and the subjectivities of the researcher when conducting and writing-up research. That is because, as Richardson (1990) reminds us:

> When we write social science, we use our authority and privileges to talk about other people we study. No matter how we stage the text, we—the authors—are doing the staging. As we speak about the people we study, we also speak for them. As we inscribe their lives we bestow meaning and promulgate values. (p. 12)

In this sense, CRS postulates an ethics of semiological practice that does not ignore, attempt to uncover, or celebrate a blurring of power positions between research subjects and the researcher. Equally, it does not invite reflexive vanity projects that decenter and detract from the everyday realities of racialized injustice. Rather, it invites researchers to pay close attention to the power relations inherent within the research process (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002) and the relationship between the "knower" and what can be reasonably "known." In this sense, CRS makes visible "the tremendous, if unspoken influence of the researcher" (Fontana, 2008: 140) and, in turn, very openly labels the researcher(s)

as the instrument of data generation. To this end, we suggest this is perhaps the most radical aspect of CRS in that it suggests its unique form of analysis cannot and should not happen without reflection.

Fourth, and related to the first principle, CRT contends that gains in racial equity are only authorized should they benefit those occupying and reinforcing dominate discourses of Whiteness (see Bell, 1980). This practice is known as interest convergence and holds that those invested in Whiteness discourses have little incentive to work against racism unless it serves their own ends. Hence, this is particularly relevant for CRS in that it allows for a further deconstruction of so-called problematic framings of Black communities and peoples that are appearing in mainstream media, to question the sociopolitical legitimacy of these *re*presentations.

Last, CRT recognizes racial oppression works on and through intersections between "race" and multiple subject positions (Closson, 2010; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Intersectionality is thus a key tenet of CRT and is used to investigate the intricacies of racialized experiences and relations of power. CRS might and perhaps must be prepared to consider the instrumentality of other central organizing principles of society as well as be open to the importance of anti-categorical theorizing. In this sense, CRS is primarily an analytical method that is concerned by achieving social justice through methodological design, however, that is not to say it suggests it should be sought exclusively in racial terms—though "race" often initiates our mundane, grand, and complex conversations where traditionally it has been marginalized or ignored (Crenshaw, 1991; Crenshaw, 1995). Crenshaw (1995: 358) has argued in relation to her work that focusing "on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed." Indeed, these observations make it abundantly clear that CRS is not a method that considers "race" as the only signifier through which power operates; quite conversely it is clearly the case that "race" and racism work with and through other social signs, identities and discourses (Solorzano, 2013). For Crenshaw, it is *how* and *why* categories are constructed, what (negative) values are attached to them and how they inflect one another differently.

Here, we also wish to argue that not only do racialized forms of oppression operate with and through other social identities, more radically perhaps, it is also the case that they operate *as* one another. As Mac an Ghaill and Hayword (2020) are able to demonstrate in the context of British media and state's response to some Muslim parents' opposition to the LGBTQ+ rights equalities program in Birmingham, UK schools in 2019, "the tensions between education, religion and secularism are being played out in the context of sexual politics" (p. 10). That is, elements of the British media, such as the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian*, and the state, in the form of a number of sitting MPs, exclaimed that the protests against

LGBTQ+ and liberal education are evidence of staunch opposition to the seemingly "race" neutral concept of "British Values." Of course, any suggestion that speaking out against the protests in favor of liberal education is in anyway indicative of "British values" or that it signifies a wholesale decline in homophobic views across all ethnic groups in the country, is at best fanciful. What Mac an Ghaill and Haywood are able to show, therefore, is how the discourse of progressive sexual politics becomes "the sign" through which Muslim communities were racialized as Other and Islamophobia is perpetuated. This is important for CRS because it requires semioticians to understand how racialized meanings are made and spoken through discourses and signs that are seemingly unrelated to "race."

Conclusion

The brutal murder of George Floyd in 2020 was a harrowingly tragic event that was recorded on a smartphone and shared widely across a variety of digital media platforms. It was an unquestionably distressing video—but not an extraordinary one. Not extraordinary in the sense that George Floyd was yet another Black man that died at the hands of police before he could be taken into police custardy and questioned about his alleged offenses. What was extraordinary was the lockdown conditions many of us in the West were forced into by the COVID-19 pandemic, which perhaps sharpened a collective awareness around matters of "race." With little else to occupy minds in lockdown apart from smartphones and tablets, a deeper, communal reflection on how liberal Western democracies have treated Black people seemed to occur, on social media at least. It began with #BlackOutTuesday and #BlackLivesMatter, which trended on Instagram and Twitter respectively, and then thousands upon thousands of protestors around the world took to the streets to exclaim loudly, "Black Lives Matter," which in turn prompted elite sport stars to take a knee in a show of solidarity with the cause. This chain of events shows most obviously the communicative power of digital media platforms, which owes largely to a change in consumption practices and in how the content is delivered in chunks and much smaller portions than traditional media.

We are living in an increasingly visual culture, communicating through memes, gifs, pictures, and videos, with (for some) alarming regularity and frequency. This shift toward the naturalization of digital communication, as the nominal way proximal people interact, presupposes a need for contemporary theory as well as new methods and modes of analysis too, one such approach we have outlined above. We therefore encourage a greater reflection on method by activist scholars to ensure that the tools are available for empirical investigation capable of deciphering better the imagery that now more than ever mediates our engagement and communications with each other and the broader society. It is also relevant to note

here that not only are late modern digital worlds connected and sharing like never before, consuming more and more visual media, a significant proportion of people are also able to both produce content and share it easily and widely. For this reason, we commend this article as not only as an original contribution to the methodological literature, perhaps more importantly it is an approach and critical form of pedagogy that might provide a framework through which to read and make sense of the many racialized signs that we are bombarded with every day, both online and offline, for scholars and for those interested in understanding how digital media is transforming the world.

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