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# Critical Race Theory in Higher Education: 20 Years of Theoretical and Research Innovations

DORIAN L. McCOY, DIRK J. RODRICKS

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*ASHE Higher Education Report: Volume 41, Number 3*  
*Kelly Ward, Lisa E. Wolf-Wendel, Series Editors*

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# Executive Summary

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Emerging from critical legal studies, critical race theory (CRT) was established by a group of legal scholars who sought to place race and racism at the center of legal analysis. Recognizing that civil rights advancements had stalled, these legal scholars sought a theoretical approach that emphasized race and racism's role in the United States' political, economic, and social landscapes. A decade after its beginning, critical race theory was introduced into education. During the past 20 years, the theory has emerged as a powerful theoretical framework and research methodology to explore and examine People of Color's<sup>1</sup> lived experiences in higher education.

## The Contributions of This Monograph

The purpose of this monograph is to illuminate critical race theory as a theoretical framework and analytical tool for interrupting and dismantling inequality and inequity in U.S. higher education. We seek to underscore how the theory can be used to promote social justice and inclusivity in academia. In the late 1990s, Gloria Ladson-Billings surmised "CRT in education is likely to become the 'darling' of the radical left, continue to generate scholarly papers and debate, and never penetrate the classrooms and daily experiences of [S]tudents of [C]olor" (1998, p. 22). Since then, critical race has grown in its usage as a theoretical framework, research, and analytical tool in higher education; however, there remains a large audience that is unfamiliar with the theory.

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In this monograph we focus on the following seven tenets of critical race theory:

- **Permanence of Racism**—the concept that racism is not random and isolated but is an endemic and permanent aspect of People of Color’s experiences in the United States; the ideology that racism influences all aspects (political, economic, social, and educational) of U.S. society.
- **Interest Convergence**—the theory that historically oppressed people (People of Color) advance socially and politically when their interests converge with the interests of those in power (typically White, heterosexual, Christian males).
- **Experiential Knowledge**—the knowledge that People of Color possess based on their lived experiences; considered valued, legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination in education; contests traditional methods of scholarship; shared through storytelling, family histories, biographies, chronicles, and narratives.
- **Intersectionality**—the theoretical concept that race intersects with other subordinated identities (such as gender, class, religion, ability/disability, sexual orientation, etc.) and forms of oppression (sexism, homophobia, ableism, etc.) to influence People of Color’s lived experiences.
- **Whiteness as Property**—the premise that the assumptions, privileges, and benefits of identifying as White are valuable assets that White people seek to protect; includes the rights of possession, use, transfer, disposition, and exclusion.
- **Critique of Liberalism**—the challenge of concepts of objectivity, meritocracy, color blindness, race neutrality, objectivity, equal opportunity, and incremental change.
- **Commitment to Social Justice**—the ideology that all people should be safe and secure in society and education with equal participation and access to equitable resources.

We also include a glossary of key terminology related to critical race theory, its descendent theories, and other critical theories. Though it is not an

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exhaustive list, we nevertheless believe it serves as a starting point by providing an accessible venue for terminology relevant to the theory and related discourse on power, privilege, and oppression.

## **Twenty Years of Theoretical and Research Innovations**

During the past 20 years, critical race theory has served as a powerful tool for examining race and racism's role in U.S. higher education. As a theoretical framework and analytical tool, critical race theory has been used to examine numerous issues affecting People of Color's lived experiences in higher education, such as access, transition, aspiration, and achievement. However, we believe the theory has yet to reach its full potential. We believe several key tenets are underused in educational research. Opportunities exist for scholars to further examine educational issues using the interest convergence theory and Whiteness as property, such as conducting scholarship that examines how the diversification of particular disciplinary fields, such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), could be considered a matter of interest convergence.

# Foreword

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Dorian L. McCoy and Dirk J. Rodricks's monograph, *Critical Race Theory in Higher Education: 20 Years of Theoretical and Research Innovations*, provides an in-depth description and analysis of a frequently used but often misunderstood theoretical construct—critical race theory. As discussed in the monograph, critical race theory is one of those essential theories that researchers and practitioners often cite but sometimes don't thoroughly understand. This monograph offers a critical look at this theory, helping readers, researchers, and practitioners to conceptualize the theory and truly understand its uses and potential misuses. It addresses important questions about what critical race theory is (and is not), the origins of the theory, how it differs from related concepts, how it is used in higher education research, and the various contexts that it can illuminate. The glossary included in the text is particularly useful for those new to the concepts.

I found this monograph particularly compelling for a number of reasons. First, as an advocate of social justice, I cannot help but think about how critical race theory informs contemporary issues facing our society in general and higher education more specifically. The Black Lives Matter movement that flowed from events in Ferguson, Missouri, has rightly made its way to many college campuses—including my own. Here at the University of Kansas, Students of Color turned to social media to tweet about their invisibility #Rockchalkinvisiblejayhawk and their experiences of racism on our campus. Our institution, not unlike other predominantly White research universities, wants a diverse student body—but also doesn't fully understand how its existing structures serve to silence its members who are not members of the

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majority group. The experiences of these students are not an isolated problem; critical race theory shows us that this is a product of deeply ingrained structural inequities and a reflection of issues of power and privilege. Critical race theory, as explained in this monograph, has the potential to allow both researchers and practitioners to see these issues in their complexity and to help us find paths to move forward. Administrators and faculty members stand to benefit from this monograph because the theories it illuminates have the potential to help them make changes that are focused on changing power structures as opposed to reinforcing them.

Wearing my professor hat, I see the value in this monograph as well. I frequently teach the concept of critical race theory in my doctoral level courses. My graduate students find the theory fascinating and see its potential uses in both practice and research. All too often, however, they don't fully understand how it is more than just a theoretical framework to be used passively—perhaps in a dissertation or in a research project. This monograph helps to illuminate the rich potential of critical race theory to help people in higher education in “interrupting and dismantling inequality and inequity” (p. vii). At its core, critical race theory embodies a commitment to social justice and offers explanations for issues such as intersectionality, privilege, and power. I anticipate assigning this monograph as a text for my graduate students as I believe it serves as an excellent primer on the topic. It also clearly explains how theoretical frameworks can inform research and practice.

As the monograph focuses on explaining a theoretical construct and its use in research, this monograph is particularly useful to researchers, faculty members, and graduate students. It is also useful to those in the field and on the frontlines of higher education reform. Indeed, this monograph is written for anyone interested in social justice, interested in critiquing liberalism, and interested in understanding the complexity of these issues. In summing up the contribution of this work, I would say that it explains critical race theory in a way that allows researchers to make research more rigorous and administrators to make practice more critical and more useful. It does all of this in a way that is clear and comprehensive, suggesting ways that the theory can be expanded and utilized in multiple contexts.

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The ASHE Higher Education Report Series is committed to exploring diversity in all of its complexity. In particular, this monograph is an excellent companion piece to our recent monographs on *Black Male Collegians* by Palmer, Wood, Dancy and Strayhorn (2014); on *Latinos in Higher Education* by Nunez, Hoover, Pickett, Stuart-Carruthers, and Vazquez (2013); on *Postsecondary Education for American Indian and Alaskan Natives* by Brayboy, Fann, Castagno, and Solyom (2012); and our monograph on *Disability and Equity* by Myers, Lindburg, and Nied (2013). These are only a select few titles that draw on critical race theory in their descriptions of particular groups within higher education. I also call your attention to Rachelle Winkle-Wagner's (2010) monograph on *Cultural Capital* as it similarly takes a frequently used theoretical construct and examines it in depth. Anyone who found these monographs relevant to their interests and work will find much to learn from the present monograph. I am pleased to present this monograph as part of our series and believe it makes an important contribution to the field.

**Lisa E. Wolf-Wendel**  
**Kelly Ward**  
Series Editors