

Critical Race Theory

Learning Goals and Objectives

- To have a historical and contemporary perspectives on race and ethnicity.
- To have an intersectional understanding of race and ethnicity.
- To be familiar with different disciplinary methods applied to race and ethnicity.
- Facility with theoretical approaches to studying race and ethnicity.
- Familiarity with social and cultural movements.

As many Americans of all colors know, racism has not disappeared: it's just gone "underground." That is, racial injustice in the United States is still a major and pressing problem; it's simply become less visible than it used to be. Racial injustice is practiced on the sly, so to speak, to avoid legal prosecution, and it has flourished in ways that, in many cases, only its victims really know well.

Clearly, many African Americans are still routinely deprived of their civil rights despite the civil rights laws intended to guarantee these rights. Perhaps, then, one useful way to think of critical race theory is as a new approach to civil rights. Initiated by the work of Derrick A. Bell Jr. and others in the 1970s, critical race theory began at a time when the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s ceased to be a political or social force. And though critical race theory started out as a critique of constitutional law—that is, federal law, which is based on the Constitution and which the laws of individual states are not supposed to violate—it has spread to almost every discipline, including the humanities.

Critical race theory concerns itself with every topic that is relevant to race. It examines the ways in which details of our everyday lives are related to race, though we may not realize it, and studies the complex beliefs that underlie what seem to be our simple, commonplace assumptions about race in order to show us where and how racism still thrives in its "undercover" existence.

Let's start by examining what Delgado and Stefancic identify as the basic tenets of critical race theory.

Basic tenets

1. *Everyday racism* is a common, ordinary experience for people of color in the United States.

- 2 . Racism is largely the result of *interest convergence*, sometimes referred to as *material determinism*.
- 3 . Race is *socially constructed*.
- 4 . Racism often takes the form of *differential racialization*.
- 5 . Everyone's identity is a product of *intersectionality*.
- 6 . The experiences of racial minorities have given them what might be called a unique *voice of color*.

1. *Everyday Racism*—Many white Americans still think that the word *racism* applies only to very visible forms of racism, for example, physical or verbal attacks against people of color; the activities of white supremacist groups; the deliberate and overt exclusion of racial minorities from particular housing, restaurants, and social organizations open to the public; and the like. Perhaps one of the most distressing forms of everyday racism is white people's denial that racism exists or has occurred in a particular instance. Persons of color are accused of being oversensitive "about discrimination, . . . ethnic jokes, . . . etc

2. *Interest Convergence*—Derrick Bell uses this term to explain that racism is common in America because it often converges, or overlaps, with the interest—with something needed or desired—of a white individual or group. For example, racism is in the financial interest of upper-class whites who exploit black laborers by paying them less than their white counterparts, and it's in the psychological interest of working-class whites whose own experience of being underpaid and exploited by wealthy whites makes them need to feel superior to someone else. In other words, racism has many pay-offs for whites. This is why interest convergence is sometimes referred to as *material determinism*.

3. *The Social Construction of Race*—How can we define race as a matter of physical features when the physical differences between light-skinned blacks and dark-skinned whites, to cite just one example, are much fewer than the physical differences we often see among members of each group?

A look at the racial categories used by the U.S. Census Bureau between 1790 and 1920 (the census is taken every ten years) should show us rather clearly that racial categorization doesn't reflect biological reality but rather the current beliefs about race at different times. For example, from 1790 to 1810, the Census Bureau designated the following populations as different races: (1) free whites, (2) all other free persons except Indians not taxed, and (3) slaves. From 1820 to 1840 racial categories were as follows: (1) free whites, (2) unnaturalized foreigners (foreigners who were not U.S. citizens), (3) free colored, and (4) slaves. In 1850 and 1860 we had (1) whites, (2)

blacks, (3) mulattos (half-white, half-black), (4) mulatto slaves, and (5) black slaves. From 1870 to 1920 we had (1) whites, (2) blacks, (3) mulattos, (4) quadroons (one-quarter black), (5) octoroons (one-eighth black), (6) Chinese, (7) Japanese, and (8) Indians. In short, our definitions of race change as economic and social pressures change.

4. *Differential Racialization*—Differential racialization refers to the fact that “the dominant society racializes [defines the racial characteristics of] different minority groups [in different ways] at different times, in response to [its] shifting needs” . For example, it suited the needs of white plantation owners before the Civil War to depict Africans as simple-minded, in need of white supervision lest they revert to their “heathen” ways, and as happy to serve white people. This mythical stereotype helped justify, the plantation owners believed, their enslavement of Africans. Similarly, Native Americans have been considered friendly and noble, lazy drunkards or bloodthirsty savages. Chicanos/as have been stereotyped as devoutly religious and extremely family oriented, superstitious and gullible, or lazy, good-for-nothing freeloaders, depending on white society’s need to see them one way or the other.

5. *Intersectionality*—No one has a simple, uncomplicated identity based on race alone. Race *intersects* with class, sex, sexual orientation, political orientation, and personal history in forming each person’s complex identity. For example, an individual may be a black, underemployed, working-class male or a Mexican American lesbian. Such persons will suffer oppression from more than one source and often have difficulty knowing the reason they are encountering discrimination in any given instance.

6. *Voice of Color*—Many critical race theorists believe that minority writers and thinkers are generally in a better position than white writers and thinkers to write and speak about race and racism because they experience racism directly. This positionality is called the *voice of color*. Indeed, “black, Indian, Asian, and Latino/a writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know.”

African American Criticism and Literature :

Generally speaking, critics agree that African American literature has focused on a number of recurring historical and sociological themes, all of which reflect the politics—the realities of political, social, and economic power—of black American experience. Among these themes are the following: reclaiming the African past; surviving the horrors of the Middle Passage; surviving the ordeal of slavery; the quest for freedom from slavery and from other forms of oppression; the quest for literacy; the experience of African Americans during the Civil War and Reconstruction;

surviving life in the South under segregation; the problems and conflicts of mulattoes in a racist society; the difficulties of economic survival; the migration North and the related themes of urbanization, alienation, and the quest to reconcile double consciousness; the role of religion in personal and collective survival; the importance of cultural heritage; and the importance of family and community. Of course, surviving the combined oppression of racism, classism, and sexism is also a recurring theme, but until the mid-twentieth century, black writers had to treat this and other racially charged subjects carefully or encode them in their writing (indicate their intended meaning through subtle references that black readers and sympathetic white readers would catch but that unsympathetic white readers wouldn't readily notice) in order to be published by white editors and read by white audiences.

As these themes suggest, the political content of African American literature includes correcting stereotypes of African Americans; correcting the misrepresentation of African Americans in American history and the omission of African Americans from American history; celebrating African American culture, experience, and achievement; and exploring racial issues, including institutionalized racism, internalized racism, intra-racial racism, and the combined oppression of racism, classism, and sexism.

In terms of its poetics, the African American literary tradition is distinguished by, among other characteristics, two prominent features: orality and folk motifs. *Orality* gives a literary work a sense of immediacy, of human presence, by giving readers the feeling they are hearing a human voice. In African American literature, orality is usually achieved by using Black Vernacular English and by copying the rhythms of black speech, including, for example, the repetition of important phrases and alternating voices, devices associated with church sermons and with blues, jazz, and rap music.

The use of folk motifs includes a wide range of character types and folk practices and creates a sense of continuity with the African and African American past. These character types include, for example, the local healer, the conjurer, the matriarch, the local storyteller, the trickster, the religious leader, and the folk hero. Folk practices include, for example, singing worksongs, hymns, and the blues; engaging in folk and religious rituals as a way of maintaining community and continuity with the past; storytelling as a way of relating personal and group history and passing down traditional wisdom.

Among the best-known attempts to analyze the African American literary tradition are *The Signifying Monkey*, by Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Houston A. Baker Jr.'s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*. Gates attempts to chart African American literary history as a history of relationships among literary texts. He argues that black

texts “talk” about one another—for example, by copying, altering, or parodying one another’s literary devices—the same way that black people talk about one another when they engage in the African American folk practice called *signifying*. For example, Gates explains, Wright’s titles, *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, suggest a concrete, visible, racial presence. Ellison signifies on these titles by calling his novel *Invisible Man*. While *man* “suggests a more mature and stronger status than either *son* or *boy*”. Ellison’s *man* is “invisible,” an absence rather than a presence, which is how black people historically have been treated by white America: as if they were invisible. Ellison also signifies on Wright’s protagonist, Bigger Thomas. Bigger is “voiceless”: he never speaks up for himself and, indeed, rarely speaks at all. He doesn’t act so much as react to the circumstances around him. Ellison responds with a protagonist who “is nothing *but* voice”: we are never told his name, but “it is he who shapes, edits, and narrates his own tale”.

Houston Baker also attempts to relate the African American literary tradition to an African American folk art: the blues. Baker argues that the blues are a form of African American cultural self-expression that both influences and is influenced by, that both affects and reflects, all other forms of African American expressive culture.

Throughout African American literary history, Baker observes, we find texts with a thematic structure akin to that of the blues. Blues songs, he notes, generally have a double theme: a spiritual theme, usually about loss and desire, and a material theme, usually about the exigencies of economic necessity. Baker sees this same doubleness in African American literary texts, in which the material theme is the subtext that drives the work’s overt spiritual theme. For example, *The Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* (1789), Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) share a common spiritual theme: the journey to spiritual awakening, to finding oneself, which is an important dimension of their journey to freedom. Their common subtext is the economic realities on which the protagonists’ spiritual quests depend. Equiano, Douglass, and Jacobs’ Linda Brent must all find ways to get the money they need in order to achieve their freedom.

There has also been a good deal of work done to define the contours of a literary tradition specific to the writing of African American women, who were excluded from or marginalized by the African American literary canon as defined both by black male writers and by the white literary establishment. Furthermore, in literary works by white authors and black male authors alike, the representations of African American women generally were restricted to minor or stereotyped characters. As a result, black women

writers have been concerned, throughout their literary history, to portray black women as real people with all the complexity and depth that black women have.

Mary Helen Washington describes three salient types, which frequently have been used by black women writers to represent black women from different historical periods. The first is the “suspended woman,” the victim of men and of society as a whole, with few or no options, “suspended” because she can’t do anything about her situation. This type is often found in works set in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Examples include Nannie in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and Pauline Breedlove in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The second type is the “assimilated woman,” who is not victimized by physical violence and has much more control of her life, but who is victimized by psychological violence in that she is cut off from her African American roots by her desire to be accepted by white society.

This type is often found in works set in the 1940s and 1950s. Examples include Mrs. Turner in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*. Finally, the third character type is the “emergent woman,” who is coming to an awareness of her own psychological and political oppression and becoming capable of creating a new life and new choices for herself, usually through a harsh experience of initiation that makes her ready for the change. This type is often found in works set in the 1960s. Examples include Meridian in Alice Walker’s *Meridian* (1976). Some critics might argue that we should add a fourth character type to this useful list: that of the “liberated woman,” who has discovered her abilities, knows what she needs, and goes about getting it. We might say, in short, that the “liberated woman” has already found herself and likes what she has found.

Of course, the unique perspectives of African American criticism can also offer us insights into literary works by white American writers. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison offers us a very productive approach to reading white mainstream literature from an African American perspective that reveals the ways in which white texts construct, for their own purposes, what she calls the *Africanist* presence in American history. Morrison uses the word *Africanist* as “a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people”. In short, *Africanism*, in Morrison’s sense of the word, is a white conception (or more accurately, misconception) of African and African American people on which white authors have projected their own fears, needs, desires, and conflicts.

In white mainstream literature, an Africanist presence can take the form of black characters, stories about black people, representations of black speech, and images associated with Africa or with blackness.

Among the many ways in which white writers have employed the Africanist presence, Morrison notes, is the use of black characters as a sign of and “vehicle for,” among other things, “illegal sexuality, fear of madness, expulsion, [and] self-loathing” as well as “to define the goals and enhance the qualities of white characters”

Some questions African American critics ask about literary texts

The following questions are offered to summarize African American approaches to literature.

1. What can the work teach us about the specifics of African heritage, African American culture and experience, and/or African American history (including but not limited to the history of marginalization)
2. What are the racial politics (ideological agendas related to racial oppression or liberation) of specific African American works? For example, does the work correct stereotypes of African Americans; correct historical misrepresentations of African Americans; celebrate African American culture, experience, and achievement; or explore racial issues, including, among others, the economic, social, or psychological effects of racism? Or as can be seen in the literary production of many white authors, does the work reinforce racist ideologies?
3. What are the poetics (literary devices and strategies) of specific African American works? For example, does the work use black vernacular or standard white English? Does the work draw on African myths or African American folktales or folk motifs? Does the work provide imagery that resonates with African American women’s domestic space, African American cultural practices, history, or heritage? What are the effects of these literary devices and how do they relate to the theme, or meaning, of the work?
4. How does the work participate in the African American literary tradition? To what group of African American texts might we say it belongs in terms of its politics and poetics? How does it conform to those texts? How does it break with them, perhaps seeking to redefine literary aesthetics by experimenting with new forms? In short, what place does it occupy in African American literary history or in African American women’s literary history?

5. How does the work illustrate interest convergences, the social construction of race, white privilege, or any other concept from critical race theory? How can an understanding of these concepts deepen our interpretation of the work?

6. How is an Africanist presence—black characters, stories about black people, representations of black speech, images associated with Africa or with blackness—used in works by white writers to construct positive portrayals of white characters?