Critical race theory meets posthumanism: lessons from a study of racial resegregation in public schools

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Critical race theory meets posthumanism: lessons from a study of racial resegregation in public schools

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ABSTRACT
Critical race theory (CRT) was used to frame a study of the impact of racial resegregation on students in a public school district. Racism operated in the district at multiple ontological levels – such as interpersonal microaggressions, structural economic arrangements, and discursive processes. CRT provided a rationale for the interdisciplinary approach required to track these different manifestations of racism, while maintaining an emphasis on the material reality of racism. Having its origins in the field of law, however, CRT provided limited guidance for methodological decisions often required in a social scientific study. The author found posthumanist philosophy of science offered guidance for these decisions in a manner that complemented the philosophical and political commitments of CRT. This essay reflects on the advantages this combination of theories offers for the analysis of institutionalized racism. Illustrations are drawn from the study on school resegregation.

… modern racism seeks to deny the agency, cognitive capacity, and intellectual histories of black peoples.
– Paul Gilroy, 1993, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, 6

The New Racism wants the accused to not only forget history, disregard experience, discount psychology, and ignore custom, but to interpret racism as ONLY conscious, exceptional, individual, intentional, and overt.
– Son of Baldwin, Tumblr Post, June 19, 2012

This essay is a reflection on the methodological challenges encountered while conducting a 10-year study of a school district undergoing a process of racial resegregation. In the book based on this study, Resegregation as Curriculum: The Meaning of the New Segregation in U.S. Public Schools (Rosiek and Kinslow 2016), my coauthor and I interviewed hundreds of students, parents, and educators, seeking to provide an insider’s perspective on the effects of deliberate racial segregation in a U.S. public school. Although there have been many large database statistical studies that document the corrosive impact of racial segregation on students of color (e.g. Clotfelter 2004; Coleman 1966; Lutz 2005; Orfield, Kucsera, and Siegel-Hawley 2012; Reardon et al. 2012), there has been a scarcity of studies on the impact
of this trend from the personal perspective of the students living through the resegregation of U.S. schools (Wells 2000). Our study was an effort to contribute to filling this gap.

Our approach to the study of school resegregation was informed by critical race theory (CRT). CRT emphasizes the importance of listening to the experiences and stories of persons on the receiving end of structural racial oppression as a means of gaining leverage against hegemonic white supremacist ideologies. The study documented how students in a district interpreted an abrupt shift towards greater racial resegregation of the schools they attended. It asked, in other words, what this institutional dynamic was teaching them.

As we conducted our study, however, we found there were some methodological challenges for which CRT did not provide ready assistance. The challenge we faced was an emanation of a more general struggle in the social sciences – a search for an inquiry practice that acknowledges the obdurate material reality of various forms of institutionalized social violence and simultaneously critiques the role our representational practices often play in constituting that social violence. These two imperatives are often interpreted as being in tension with one another, with realist claims placing limits on social constructivist claims and strong social constructionism undermining claims about the reality of things like racial oppression. Some new conceptual resources are emerging, however, for thinking through this tension.

A constellation of philosophy of science and methodological theory organized under a variety of labels, such as new materialism, new feminist materialism, the ontological turn, and (the term used in this essay) posthumanism, is offering promising ways to think about the relation between realism and social constructionism in social analysis. In writing the book, it became apparent that posthumanism and CRT have complementary features that can aid in the application of both to social science research. Posthumanism offers an onto-epistemic framework that supports one of CRT’s most appealing features – its disciplinary flexibility – without compromising CRT’s racial realism. CRT in turn provides a developed model for how to refuse ontologically rigid conceptions of an object of analysis – like racism – while sustaining a literature with a coherent critical focus.

The encounter between these two theoretical traditions leads to a provocative supposition – that it may make methodological sense to frame racism not as a passive byproduct of dysfunctional psychological or sociological processes, but instead as a protean ontological phenomenon with an agency of its own. Although regarding a social formation as agential may seem surprising, it fits within what we have long known about institutionalized racism – that it is flexible and evolves in response to our collective efforts to resist it. In what follows, I examine the path that lead to considering this possibility and the analytic advantages it offers.

**CRT’s transition from law to the social sciences and education**

CRT originally emerged in the field of law as a response to narrow modes of argumentation in the study of legal decisions (Bell 1992; Ladson-Billings 1998). Its incisive critique of the way ideals of objectivity and neutrality inhibit analysis of institutionalized racism was quickly picked up by like-minded social scientists. CRT’s transition from law to the social sciences and education, however, has not been without attendant complications (Carbado and Roithmayr 2014; Cole 2009; Ladson-Billings 2005; Ledesma and Calderón 2015). One
of the challenges faced by social science scholars seeking to use critical race theory in their empirical research is the lack of methodological specificity in the CRT literature.

Counter-storytelling is the methodological practice most commonly associated with CRT. A closer look at this practice reveals, however, that it is not one single practice. In his famous essay, 'Story-Telling for Oppositionists', Richard Delgado (1989) describes CRT counter-storytelling as having multiple purposes, including, but not limited to: (1) documenting the realities of oppression obscured by prevailing mindsets (2414); (2) protecting and healing the psyche of oppressed groups by refuting messages that they are to blame for their own oppression (2437); (3) helping members of oppressed groups see they are not alone thus opening up the possibility for in-group political and social solidarity (2437); (4) undermining prevailing mindsets that enable racist social formations (2438); and (5) altering the mindsets of individual members of the oppressor group by humanizing excluded others, thus making possible new forms of political collectivity (2438).

All of these rationales are compelling. However, they represent five very different ways for thinking about the ontology and purpose of narratives about the experience of oppression. For example, documenting realities obscured by entrenched ideologies, involves an appeal to a reality that is independent of our interpretations of it. The idea partakes of a traditional enlightenment distinction between appearance and reality. Contrast this to the developing of stories that serve a therapeutic purpose. Narratives that seek to heal or salve the psychic wounds of racism would focus on the reality of oppression as it is subjectively and emotionally experienced. Contrast this in turn to stories intended to challenge oppressive mindsets among privileged groups. Such stories would attend to subjective experiences as well, but in this case those of the oppressor. They would not be meant validate that experience, but to destabilize it. This would involve developing stories that serve a deconstructive function by exposing contradictions or ethical bankruptcy lurking within taken-for-granted social views. Counter-stories might even be fictional, such as Derrick Bell’s fictional short story *Space Traders* (Bell 1992). In short, the concept of counter-story is not methodologically unified.

In his book, *Race Frameworks*, Zeus Leonardo (2013) offers that this conceptual and methodological eclecticism, rather than being a problem, is in fact one of CRT’s central strengths. It permits flexibility in the analysis of racism and the pursuit of effective anti-racist action. He offers that:

As resourceful as it is trenchant in its critique, CRT leaves no intellectual stone unturned. Because racism in education and society is multifaceted, so must its analysis attest to the complexity of the problem, and CRT recruits allies from across the aisle as well as across university departments (12).

Eclecticism can be a virtue of a broad literature. However, as any PhD thesis adviser can attest, specificity and precision of focus are helpful in research design. When one is conducting interviews and subsequently analyzing transcripts, or sifting through archival records and policy documents, the practice of analysis is editorial. Some things must be foregrounded while others are left in the background. Stylistic choices such as writing in first person or third person, fiction or non-fiction, have to be made within the confines of a particular study. The multiple analytical approaches made available by CRT cannot all be enacted at once.

It is in the application to specific social science research projects that CRT becomes subject to the pull of default conceptions of evidence and argumentation in these disciplines. Most often this means responding to the expectation that empirical claims must precede
and underwrite normative claims. The presumption that empirical standards of evidence are somehow free of normative content, thus putting them out of the reach of critique, puts the transgressive nature of CRT in danger of domestication. As Carbado and Roithmayr (2014) observe:

Social science research has much to offer critical race theorists, including empirical data and theoretical frameworks that support core CRT ideas. At the same time, we acknowledge that such a collaboration can potentially undermine CRT’s core intellectual commitments. Collaborating with social science risks limiting CRT’s critique of objectivity and neutrality and potentially hinders the theory’s ability to expose and challenge structural forms of racial inequality. (150)

We can see this risk in CRT research that uses empirical methods to raise awareness about the effects of racist policies and behaviors (e.g. Gillborn 2013, 2014; Yosso et al. 2009). Such scholarship can and does substantively contribute to anti-racist work. The problem lies in the way CRT social science gets drawn into language that frames scholarship as revelation. In this view the scholars’ job is to make the hidden nature of oppression apparent. Once it is exposed, it is assumed that pre-existing normative commitments will see justice done.

The problem, of course, is that history has shown this assumption to be empirically false and dangerously naïve. CRT scholars in the social sciences have wrestled with this undertow of apolitical neoliberal objectivism in a variety of ways. Most commonly there are explicit affirmations of CRT analysis as a political praxis. Scholars state up front that despite their adoption of modes of description associated with more apolitical modes of social analysis, there is nonetheless a critical race ideology guiding the choice of topics and analysis. For example, in their application of GIS mapping technology to CRT analysis Velez and Solorzano (2017) assert:

Critical race spatial analysis (CRSA) is an explanatory framework and methodological approach using GIS that accounts for the role of race and racism in examining geographic and social spaces, and that works toward identifying and challenging racism within these spaces as part of a larger goal of identifying and challenging all forms of subordination. CRSA goes beyond description to spatially examine how structural and institutional factors influence and shape racial dynamics and the power associated with those dynamics over time. (20)

This work of explicitly distancing CRT social science is often most visible in scholarship applying quantitative methods of research to CRT projects, an application where we most often expect to see apolitical forms of objectivism driving analysis. In their article ‘QuantCrit: Education, Policy, “Big Data” and Principles for a Critical Race Theory of Statistics,’ Gillborn, Warmington, and Demack (2017) offer the following caveat about their use of statistical analysis.

QuantCrit recognizes that racism is a complex, fluid and changing characteristic of a society that is neither automatically nor obviously amenable to statistical inquiry. In the absence of a critical race-conscious perspective, quantitative analyses will tend to remake and legitimate existing race inequities.

At the heart of our approach is an understanding that ‘race’ is ‘more than just a variable’ (Dixson and Lynn 2013, 3). This is more than a methodological statement, it is also a political statement that is integral to CRT’s model of the social. (12–13)

numbers mean little without their framing narrative. Often numbers are framed by people who use them in such a way as to protect those in power, or the constructions that maintain their privilege, like whiteness, masculinity, and loyalty and submission to the nation-state. CRQI argues that quantitative analysis must be contextualized by a critical theoretical framework that is able to deconstruct their traditional use and claims of neutrality and objectivity. (278)

Such cautions when applying social scientific methods to Critical Race Theory scholarship are both necessary and common. These earnest efforts to resist the pretensions of neutral objectivity found in the social sciences, however, remains ad hoc in critical race theory social science. Lacking an alternative epistemological and ontological framework for the project of inquiry, this work of fending off objectivism has the feeling of precarity. What follows is an effort to imagine a different ontological framework for CRT scholarship in the social sciences that can better support the normative character of this work.

**Subject producing effects of scholarship**

The assimilative pressures built into the social science disciplines go beyond simply constraining the topics that CRT scholars address. Equally, if not more, significant is the way processes of inquiry construct the subject of the inquirer and the audience for which the research is intended. These subject producing effects of inquiry are where the ideological and ethical consequences of research arguably come into highest relief. As Gayatri Spivak (1979) observed in her essay 'Explanation and Culture: Marginalia,'

... the will to explain is a symptom of a desire to have a self and a world. In other words, on the general level, the possibility of explanation carries the supposition of an explainable (even if not fully) universe and an explaining (even if imperfectly) subject ... every explanation must secure and assure a certain kind of being-in-the-world, which might as well be called our politics. (32)

How does inquiry produce political subjects? Consider inquiry which seeks to produce objective descriptions of psychological or social phenomena. This would include positivist and a great deal of interpretivist social science research. Such inquiry positions the reader as a spectator subject, a dispassionate observer surveying the world of practical objects and affairs.

Alternatively, studies informed by Marxist or critical theory presume the existence of hegemonic ideologies which distort our perception of reality. This would include scholarship that presumes heteronormative, white supremacist, or settler society ideologies inhibit our ability to see clearly the causes of human suffering. Such inquiry invites the scholar and their audience into a subversive subject position, one that possesses a privileged ability to see past these hegemonic distortions of understanding and that seeks collaborators in an effort to remake society.

Social inquiry informed by poststructuralist theory contributes to the production of a yet another form of subjectivity. Foucaultian genealogical methods or Derridean deconstruction critique the possibility of descriptive certainty (Derrida 1998; Foucault 1995). Amelioration comes not through providing redescriptions to shore up new forms of inclusion, but through critiquing the possibility of social certainty altogether, thereby undermining the means through which exclusions are established. This kind of analysis produces an ironic cosmopolitan subject that is suspicious of all forms of epistemic certainty and its problematic relationship with state authority.
All of these forms of subjectivity are, as Spivak (1979) suggests, modes of being in the world with implications for our political practice. CRT scholarship at various times has adopted versions of each of these frames for inquiry, providing objective evidence of suffering caused by racism, generating counterstories designed to challenge hegemonic racist ideologies, and generating counterstories designed to create uncertainty about race, racism, and liberal conceptions of reform and social hope.

CRT social science literature, however, does not provide a vocabulary for tracking the shifts between these subject producing effects in our descriptive work. The absence of such a vocabulary leaves us more vulnerable to the assimilative pressures of social science disciplines, a vulnerability I have experienced firsthand. In our book *Resegregation as Curriculum*, my coauthor and I sought to clearly describe the material and psychological effects of resegregation on the experiences of students. We also wanted to deconstruct and denaturalize the white supremacist assumptions driving the school restructuring. Additionally, we wanted to offer a performative representation that humanized the students and fostered solidarity with their effort to push back against the denigrating messages they were receiving. Despite these intentions, the conventions of social science prose and analysis constantly put us at risk of being drawn back into producing what Eve Tuck (2009) calls ‘damage centered’ narratives, research that positions the researcher and the audience as emotionally distant spectators of harm done to oppressed communities – representations that makes a spectacle of systemic social harm. We found ourselves looking for theories that would enable a reflexive analysis of our writing while also supporting a CRT emphasis on racial realism.

**Posthumanism, realism, and responsibility**

Over the last 10 years, during a time in which education scholars have increasingly employed CRT to analyze the material reality of racism while also acknowledging that racism is in part constituted by mindsets and social processes, the posthumanist movement within the philosophy of science literature has been wrestling with related realism/constructionism questions (e.g. Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Barad 2007; Bennett 2010; Braidotti 2013; Coole and Frost 2010). Since it is beyond the scope of this essay to comprehensively review this rapidly growing body of literature, I will focus on the work of one of the most widely cited posthumanist figures, Karen Barad.

Barad’s writing focuses specifically on a growing frustration with the linguistic constructivism found in poststructuralist social analysis. In her essay ‘Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,’ Barad (2003) calls for a greater respect for the obdurate materiality of the phenomena we study.

Language has been granted too much power. The linguistic turn, the semiotic turn, the interpretative turn, the cultural turn: it seems that at every turn lately every ‘thing’ – even materiality – is turned into a matter of language or some other form of cultural representation. The ubiquitous puns on ‘matter’ do not, alas, mark a rethinking of the key concepts (materiality and signification) and the relationship between them. Rather, it seems to be symptomatic of the extent to which matters of ‘fact’ (so to speak) have been replaced with matters of signification (no scare quotes here). Language matters. Discourse matters. Culture matters. There is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter. (801)

Posthumanist philosophy attributes this inattention to materiality to the way epistemology and ontology are treated as analytically and ethically separable. Whether it is a pursuit
of empirically valid ways of knowing the world, or it is a critique of the impossibility of authoritative knowledge, both realist and constructivist approaches to social inquiry remain focused on questions of knowledge and representation. An ethics of analysis is located in avoiding mistaken representations. Barad, alternatively, speaks of onto-epistemic relations – how modes of knowing establish modes of being, the consequences for which we are partially, but not exclusively, responsible.

What is provocative and promising about posthumanist philosophies is the way they theorize the resistance of non-human things. It is not enough, they argue, to conceive of non-human things as passive objects awaiting our discovery of the one best representation of them, nor to posit them as always already out of reach behind a veil of human interpretation. Instead, they offer it makes more sense to think of the objects of our inquiry as active relational agents that come to meet us halfway in our inquiries (Barad 2007). Inquiry, for the posthumanist, is not primarily a means of discovering the nature of objects, but is a process of entanglement in which two agents are mutually co-constituted. This includes the widely circulated and often loosely conceived idea that the objects of social inquiry are constituted by our representations of them. It also includes a conception of the inquirer being constituted by their involvement in inquiry. The objects of our inquiries resist and shape us as we seek to know them. In other words, they perform like agents.

Karen Barad, a PhD physicist as well as a philosopher, turns to classic experiments of modern quantum mechanics to leverage and illustrate this counterintuitive conception of inquiry. Early twentieth-century physicists experimenting with light found themselves faced with apparently paradoxical experimental results. When shining light from a uniform energy source through two microscopically thin slits in a sheet of foil, they could reasonably expect one of two results. If the light were composed of particles, it would scatter coming through the slits and cast a uniform dispersion pattern – brighter near the center, fading toward the edges – on the far screen. If light were a wave in a continuous medium of some sort, it would emerge from each slit as expanding concentric waves. The overlapping crests and wells of the waves would alternately reinforce and cancel one another out, creating alternating strips of light and dark when they reached the screen. It turns out the latter happened, confirming the wave-nature of electromagnetic radiation.

However, when follow-up experiments measured the light as it moved through the slits, it registered as coming through in concentrated bursts of a regular size and only through one slit or the other – in other words, as particles. Moreover, when the light coming through the slits was measured as particles, the resulting diffraction pattern changed to what would be expected of light if it were of a particle nature. Somehow measuring the light as a particle coming through the slit caused it to behave like a particle. Setting up the experiment to measure it as a wave resulted in the light behaving as a wave phenomenon. Seventy-five years of subsequent experiments have repeatedly confirmed this principle of interactive ontological exclusion (e.g. Jacques et al. 2007; Manning et al. 2015).

Barad (2007) goes to considerable effort to make clear exactly how these experimental results unsettle our taken-for-granted views of the relationship between representation and reality. Not only does it violate the expectation of a one-to-one correspondence between our images of the world and its material manifestation, it also contravenes constructivist claims that our interpretations are the exclusive source of the meaning of phenomena. Light cannot be anything we interpret it to be. It really does take a wave form and requires us to interact with it as such. It really does take on particle form, when we interact with it in a
different way. However, the form it takes depends on the way we set up the apparatus of our inquiry. The implication is that reality is protean; it moves in response to the way we seek to know it. We in turn respond and accommodate that movement.

This is what is meant when posthumanists write about non-human agency. It is not a claim that things have consciousness or make plans. It is instead a claim that reality of phenomena lies in the relations established through a process of intra-action. Barad appropriates the physics term ‘entanglement’ to refer to this ontological interdependence. Our inquiries ontologically entangle us with the phenomena we study. Those entanglements are in part determined by our practices of inquiry and in part by the way that which we study shapes us.

**A CRT appropriation of posthumanism: racism as an agent**

So how might this posthumanist conception of agential realism be useful to CRT projects? As remarked previously, CRT’s scholarship has been characterized by an intentional interdisciplinarity. Its coherence is organized not around a particular method, but around the goals of promoting anti-racist policies and practices. Consequently, CRT moves between units of analysis and methods of representation in pursuit of these goals. CRT also focuses on the need to describe not just what is, but also what is possible, through the use of counter-stories, sometimes even fictional counter-stories (Bell 1992; Rousseau and Dixson 2006).

In the context of traditional academic conceptions of objectivity and replicability, these flexible commitments can be framed as a lack of rigor and an abandonment of basic standards of rationality. Legal scholar Richard Posner (1997) gave voice to this critique over two decades ago.

What is most arresting about critical race theory is that … it turns its back on the Western tradition of rational inquiry, forswearing analysis for narrative. Rather than marshal logical arguments and empirical data, critical race theorists tell stories – fictional, science-fictional, quasi-fictional, autobiographical, anecdotal – designed to expose the pervasive and debilitating racism of America today. By repudiating reasoned argumentation, the storytellers reinforce stereotypes about the intellectual capacities of nonwhites. (42.)

It is not our purpose here to respond to such critiques, which are grounded in an inability or willful refusal to entertain questions regarding whether our inherited standards of rationality are themselves part of a structure of silence that reproduces oppression. Others have raised those question effectively and repeatedly over the last century (Bell 1992; Foucault 1994; Horkheimer 1982; McKenna and Pratt 2014). Our purpose, instead, is to point to what is left in the wake of these debates.

What is left is a kind of epistemic and methodological stand-off. On the one side are scholars whose conception of social change requires the identification of the truth about things like institutionalized racial oppression as a necessary precursor to liberation from oppression. On the other side are those who regard such foundational truth claims as self-deceived traps that co-opt scholars into reproducing the very oppression they purport to resist. But we need more than a stand-off.

Posthumanism offers a reconfiguration of these debates, one that it appears to remarkably well-suited to interdisciplinary fields of study organized around particular political commitments – fields like CRT. Posthumanism refuses the focus on the viability of epistemic foundations, in favor of discussions about the interdependence of epistemology, ontology, and ethics – what Barad calls onto-epistemology. Rather than argue about who has the truth
about racism right, posthumanism would ask what sort of onto-epistemological entangle-
ments do various interpretations of racism make available? Also, it requires us to ask: how
does racism responds to those interpretive frameworks? And: What are the consequences
of those entanglements and responses?

That may sounds strange, to ask how racism would respond to our inquiries. But if we
think about it, we can see evidence of racism’s adaptive responses to efforts to identify and
resist it. For example, after the abolition of slavery in the United States, racist oppression
remerged in the form of Jim Crow laws and tenant farmer wage slavery across the south. It
took decades to develop a mainstream discourse that named the new forms of racism and
provide a framework for political resistance. Once Jim Crow laws were effectively elimi-
nated by the Civil Rights movement, institutionalized racism transformed again into the
mass incarceration of Black citizens, as criminal convictions stripped citizens of basic civil
rights and protections from discrimination (Alexander 2010). Again, it has taken decades to
develop a discourse that identifies this phenomena and helps organize resistance to it. More
recently, where once calls for color-blind standards of justice inspired the desegregation of
schools, in 2007 the ideal of color-blind jurisprudence was used to strike down a district’s
effort at voluntary desegregation (Parents v. Seattle School District 2007). The examples of
white supremacy shifting its form in response to resistance are myriad. Michelle Alexander
(2010) observes:

Any candid observer of American racial history must acknowledge that racism is highly adapt-
able. The rules and reasons the political system employs to enforce status relations of any
kind, including racial hierarchy, evolve and change as they are challenged. The valiant efforts
to abolish slavery and Jim Crow and to achieve greater racial equality have brought about
significant changes in the legal framework of American society – new ‘rules of the game,’ so
to speak. These new rules have been justified by new rhetoric, new language, and a new social
consensus, while producing many of the same results. This dynamic, which legal scholar Reva
Siegel has dubbed ‘preservation through transformation,’ is the process through which white
privilege is maintained, though the rules and rhetoric change. (21)

Similar observations about the reform and retrenchment cycle of racist policy in the U.S.
have been made by Kimberlee Crenshaw (1988), Devon Carbado (2011), and Ibram Xendi
(2016), among others.

We can also see racism as an adaptive non-human agent in the way the possibility of
reproducing racism infiltrates even our most rigorous methods of social analysis and cri-
tique. Positivism has provided important analytic tools for anti-racist activism. Scholarship
that documents increasing school segregation and its correlation with negative education
and economic outcomes (Orfield, Kucsera, and Siegel-Hawley 2012; Reardon et al. 2012),
for example, have been used to make visible the structural injustice built into public institu-
tions. However, in the current data-driven ethos in U.S. policy-making circles, the insistence
that policy proposals be supported by empirical evidence defined in a narrow fashion have
been used to silence advocacy for racial justice as often as it is used to support it. The No
Child Left Behind (2003) legislation and its recent update, the Every Students Succeeds
Act (2015), requires that federally funded education programs be funded only if they can
provide measurable evidence of impact. However, we lack the ability to create quantitative
indexes of many of the injuries of racism (Rosiek and Kinslow 2016; Wells 2000). In this
kind of policy context, such injuries are ignored, and the ideal of empirical objectivity can
end up serving the ends of racism.
Marxist and critical theory analysis that tracks the linkages between economic stratification and racism have likewise proved useful. They have been used to make visible the way institutionalized racism is both a cause and effect of maldistribution of wealth in capitalist cultures and economies – from the economic underpinnings of racially segregated schools (Marable 2015), to the way market reforms of education end up reproducing class and race stratification of educational opportunity (Lipman 2013; Marsh 2011). That being said, Marxist analysis has also been deployed to invalidate research that makes racism a central category of analysis, framing a focus on racism as a distraction from the real economic causes of social suffering and a way to divide the proletariat (Bakan and Dua 2014; Ledesma and Calderón 2015). In such circumstances, an emphasis on the political economy of oppression serves to silence voices that seek to describe aspects of racialized oppression that are not reducible to economic dynamics.

Similarly, poststructuralism has provided thorough deconstructions of various forms of racial essentialism that are often cited as justifications for explicitly and implicitly racist policies (Appiah 2006; Gilroy 2001; Mazzei 2007). Such scholarship has contributed to a greater sophistication in our understanding of the complexity of racial identities and racialized subjugation as well as its intersection with subjugation organized around gender, sexuality, and national identities. On the other hand, poststructuralist critiques of racial essentialism have been deployed in ways that function to invalidate the warrant of experiential reports about the material effects of racism (Hames-Garcia 2011; Moya 2000). In this way, poststructuralist social analysis can end up silencing voices speaking back against white supremacy.

In each case we see how racism, despite our best efforts, can get behind and co-opt even our most rigorous efforts at analysis and turn categories of thought developed for anti-oppressive purposes to the purpose of reproducing racism. To claim that this is simply the result of a flawed application of these frames of analysis seems more like insular wishful thinking than a conclusion justified by logic and accumulated evidence. Instead, these moments of co-optation suggest that racism operates on a register beyond the reach of the conceptual frameworks we use to understand it. It works at times through the ways our frames of analysis contingently shape researchers as political subjects.

Seen in this way it is no surprise that, despite the best efforts of adherents of each of these views to claim totalizing authority for their preferred form of political subjectivity, none have been able to (or is likely to) achieve exclusive authority to represent the reality of racist inequality in schools and beyond. Instead, the irreducible multiplicity of racial oppression appears less like a social phenomenon passively awaiting our achievement of a correct description of it and more like a Baradian agent with which we become entangled through different modes of analysis. The following Table 1 sketches the different kinds of entanglement just outlined.

The similarity to Karen Barad’s (2007) analysis of quantum mechanical phenomena is, I hope, clear. Light is a real phenomenon. Depending on how we set up our inquiries, it manifests as a wave form or in particle form. Both manifestations are real, despite seeming mutually exclusive. No single representation can capture its substance entirely. Yet, its substance puts limits on who we can be in relation to it, even while it shifts in response to our inquiries. Similarly, a posthumanist analysis of racism would affirm the substantive reality of racism. Depending on the circumstances, racisms manifests as an individual psychological condition, as a structural economic phenomena, and as a discursive phenomenon. All of
### Table 1. Entanglement with racism as an agent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theoretical frame</th>
<th>Intended object of inquiry</th>
<th>Construction of the inquiring subject</th>
<th>Ameliorative consequences</th>
<th>Problematic consequences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positivism/post-positivism</td>
<td>Measurable effects of racial oppression</td>
<td>Dispassionate spectator</td>
<td>Identifies patterns of racial inequality that can illuminate hidden structures of oppression and suggest means of intervention</td>
<td>Places narrow limits on the effects of racism for which we can collectively take responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marxist/critical inquiry</td>
<td>The way ideology deflects attention from the linkages between class and race oppression</td>
<td>Subversive subject with privileged knowledge about the mechanisms of oppression</td>
<td>Forces attention to the structural economic features of racial inequality</td>
<td>Sometimes used to silence critique of racial oppression by framing racial oppression as entirely derivative of class oppression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-structuralism</td>
<td>The discursive processes that produce race as a ‘reality’ with which we contend</td>
<td>Ironic cosmopolitan suspicious of any epistemic authority</td>
<td>Directs attention to socially constructed nature of things like race, gender, sexuality, etc. and helps us imagine alternative modes of social amelioration</td>
<td>Sometimes used to silence critique of racial oppression by refusing any analysis that reifies the category of race as ontologically substantive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
these manifestations are real, despite seeming mutually exclusive at times. No single mode of inquiry is able to capture the substance of racism in its entirety. Yet that substance puts limits on our ways of being in the world, even while it shifts in response to our inquiries.

**Writing against agential racism**

It is unnerving to think of social phenomena like racism as an agent. At least there is some promise of release when we think of institutionalized racism as the product of ideologies or discourses working mechanically. Once we understand the mechanics, we can establish a reliable praxis of resistance. We can get free of it. But the idea that racism is a shape-shifting material-semiotic agent circulating around and through us and we are at times its objects, whether we know it or not, offers no such promise of release.

And yet, this view makes sense of my recent experience of writing a book about the racial resegregation of public schools. As someone who teaches and writes about qualitative methodology, I often admonish students to be clear about their conception of the phenomenon they are studying and to choose a single unit of analysis and stick with it. As my coauthor and I began writing up our study of the resegregation of the Riverton public school district, however, we found that the racism operating there was no respecter of clean methodological units of analysis. It manifested at one moment in individual racial microaggressions – such as students belittling other students because of the school they attended. At another moment it manifested as an economic issue, such as city leaders explicitly arguing that they needed to create an all-black school in order to make the remaining schools more white, so as to be able to attract the investment of a major manufacturing plant to the city. It manifested in other moments as a discursive phenomenon, such as when the location or name of the all-Black school – Union High – became synonymous with disciplinary problems, despite the fact that disciplinary infractions were lower at the racially segregated school (Rosiek and Kinslow 2016).

These multiple manifestations of racism did not lend themselves to separate sectional analyses, such as including a chapter using each relevant theoretical framework. The multifaceted nature of the racism operating in the resegregation of Riverton schools was both dynamic and reached down into the finest grains of the social life of Riverton students. Separating the analysis of these influences oversimplified the phenomenon and risked misrepresenting it. For example, the district built two new schools for the school zones that included white students, but placed the Union High students in a 60 year old building without the modern instructional technology featured in the newer buildings. This was an obvious material disparity. It was not, however, only a material disparity. The architectural inequality rapidly became a discursive deficit as the degraded state of the building became a symbol to students that the district did not consider them worthy of investment. The very bricks and mortar of the building in which they attended school became a symbol of the lower status they were accorded in the district.

Similarly, the all-black school had lower enrollment numbers by design. The lower enrollment meant there would be less electives course offerings and that it would be more difficult to fill academically accelerated courses (e.g. International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, and honors classes). This constituted a material form of deprivation. This material disparity, however, also was rapidly transformed into a discursive phenomenon. Interviews with community members revealed that many interpreted the inability to offer a
full array of advanced academic classes to be a reflection of the lack of desire for advanced learning among the all-Black students and their families. This reputation, in turn, ensured that fewer families with school age children moved into the area and that more students in the zone sought to enroll in other public or private schools. Thus the discursive difference precipitated further material inequality. These capillaries of institutionalized racism were mutually reinforcing and constantly in motion.

Each time I described these different manifestations of racism I felt the pull of the underlying ontology of racism upon which it rested and its demand to be the exclusive frame of the study. Paying attention to the economic drivers of the resegregation seemed at times the most important aspect of this slow moving socio-political catastrophe. Alternatively, attending to the way the arbitrary signifier of race was the hinge upon which the resegregation of the district turned also seemed at times the most important feature of the school restructuring to document. At other times, bearing witness to how this impacted the experience of individual Union High students felt like the most morally imperative part of this research project.

Considered in isolation, however, I could see the how each of these totalizing analyses would lead to the erasure of significant aspects of the impact of the segregation on students in the district. For example, focusing on the symbolic impact of the unequal investments in the segregated schools in the school district risked displacing analysis of the material consequences of the segregation and visa versa. Or focusing on the harmful effects of the message the resegregation of the district conveyed to students risked framing the Black students in the district in a damage-centered narrative (Tuck 2009), thereby overlooking the considerable agency they demonstrated in resisting those corrosive messages (Rosiek and Kinslow 2016). Even advocating for a renewed commitment to racial desegregation of schooling involved the risk of overlooking all the limitations and costs of the first desegregation movement (Dumas 2014). Each effort to affirm some part of the reality of racist social dynamics seemed to come at the expense or risk of losing track of another part of that reality.

An agentially realist view of racism provides a frame for thinking about this experience of struggle with writing about institutionalized racism. At times it felt there were hidden aspects of white supremacy stalking us behind the language and data available to us, waiting for an opportunity to co-opt our efforts to name and critique its operation. Settling into any one frame seemed like surrender to this co-optation. Writing against racism required us to be as flexible and adaptable as racism itself.

**Implications for CRT informed educational research**

Before considering the implications of an agentially realist view of racism, let us state for the record that Critical Race Theory is not in need of supplementation. It has informed and inspired a conceptually innovative literature across a number of fields of study including educational research. It is, in its current form, sovereign and self-sufficient. Our purpose in exploring the connections between CRT and posthumanism is not to remedy some critical lack in CRT that undermines the validity of its claims. The deficit, if there is one, lies in the broader white-supremacist settler society context in which CRT is received and the prevalent use of simplistic ontological assumptions to deflect the unsettling implications of CRT scholarship. CRT will continue to defy those dismissals and go on producing important generative anti-racist scholarship with or without posthumanism.
However, for those inclined to wrestle with epistemic imperialism, or for those who see the promise of methodological refinement in working through the philosophical challenges in a program of research, a posthumanist framing of racism as an agential phenomenon may be of some use. It can lend precision and amplification to the application of three key tenets of critical race theory to social science inquiry: (1) CRT’s racial realism – the idea that racism is a permanent feature of U.S. and global culture; (2) CRT’s opportunistic interdisciplinarity that is guided by more than the ideal of triangulation; and (3) CRT’s use of narratives representations. In what follows I will elaborate on each of these in turn.

**CRT’s racial realism**

Derrick Bell’s (1992) book, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* was an extended meditation on what he called racial realism. In it, he argued that liberal jurisprudence and most civil rights activism made a common error. They presumed racism was a condition that could be remediated – that with the right policy and education it could be fixed. Usually this meant presuming racism was at its root an individual psychological phenomena.

Racial realism rejects this diagnosis as a dangerous delusion on the grounds that it doesn’t square with the historical record and risks misdirecting the struggle against racism. Bell argued, instead, that racism exists not only, or even primarily, in individual attitudes. It exists as an essential feature of liberal democracies in their formal structures and material institutions. Bell’s pessimism about the permanence of racism is not fatalism. He speaks of racial realism as necessary for more effective resistance and struggle. Bell (1992) asserts:

… we and those whites who stand with us can at least view racial oppression in its many contemporary forms without underestimating its critical importance and likely permanent status in this country. Only in this way can we prevent ourselves from being dragged down by society’s racial hostility. (12)

This seemingly direct thesis – that much anti-racist scholarship and activism is undermined by a kind of wishful thinking – turns out to pose a profound challenge to the application of CRT to the social sciences. The premise of Western social science since its professionalization in the early twentieth century has been that providing better knowledge would help solve social problems. If, however, problems cannot be solved, then the question arises, what purpose does social science inquiry serve in that struggle?

A view of racism as an agent that adapts to our efforts to resist it is consistent with CRT’s racial realism. It provides an account of why the challenge of racism is unlikely to be solved in any final fashion. This view is also consistent with maintaining a resolve to defy and resist racism in all its manifestations. Although agential racism may not be remediable in a final sense, its reach and scope may be limited by an unrelenting, multifaceted, and equally adaptable collective resistance. This work would have no end point and it would have no single, best or correct form. However, depending on the way racism manifested in particular circumstances, there would be a need for case by case discussions of more or less effective forms of situated response.

Finally, the view of racism as an agent positions CRT’s racial realism as the most comprehensive view of the reality of racism. Any other conception of racism that insists on interpreting racism in terms of a single causal mechanism, be it psychological, economic, or discursive, are not just alternative theoretical framings. They are dangerous underestimations
of the agency of racism. In their mono-ontological stance they miss many real aspects of racism and the way racism operates across different ontological registers. They are, in other words, unrealistic – or, at the very least, underrealistic.

**CRT’s interdisciplinarity**

CRT’s racial realism is related to its opportunistic interdisciplinarity. If no single understanding of racism and no single program of activism is likely to solve the problem of racism, then we are left with the option of generating understanding by any methodological means necessary. As Gloria Ladson-Billings writes of CRT research in education ‘… the strategy becomes one of unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations,’ (12).

A posthumanist conception of racism as an agent helps make clear why this methodological opportunism is necessary. If racism is not just multifaceted, but is ontologically protean, then in principle no single totalizing understanding of racism will be possible. Like light, which manifests as a wave or as a particle in response to our engagement with it, racism likewise evades capture in a single representation. In fact, our commitment to struggling over who has the one right representation of racism and summarily invalidating other modes of analytic intervention are potentially part of racism’s operation.

This theoretical framing has methodological implications. An agentially realist interdisciplinarity is different than an embrace of interdisciplinary study in the name of triangulation. The purpose of triangulation is to analyze a phenomena from as many different material and conceptual angles as possible in order to achieve a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of a phenomena. It retains the goal of a unified understanding of phenomena like racism which could then inform a comprehensive response to such social ills. A posthumanist interdisciplinarity, by contrast, is embraced in the interest of hitting a constantly moving target. It recommends practices of inquiry focused not on any single causal mechanism of racism, but on its consistent reemergence in and through various substances – individual attitudes, economic materiality, formal and informal institutional practices, cultural and linguistic discourses, etc. This means the coherence of inquiry is provided, not by a fantasy of an epistemic arrival point, but instead by normative commitments. In the case of CRT research in education, this would be resisting the suffering caused by racist social hierarchies wherever and however they manifest.

**CRT’s use of narrative representations**

A conception of racism as an ontologically protean agent also provides an additional rationale for the use of narrative forms of representation that have been so compelling to CRT scholars in education. If racism is a being in motion that cannot be located in any particular substance or form, but instead changes its form depending on circumstance, then documenting that movement will require a mode of representation that unfolds in time. Narratives are the most fundamental means humans use to represent transformation of persons and communities through time.

The practice of counter-storytelling is often framed as presenting evidence that is counterfactual to hegemonic white supremacist views of the world. However, most CRT counter-storytelling scholarship does more than this. The stories are frequently designed to complicate our understanding of racism, to make clear its constantly evolving reach into
the capillaries of society and the permanent need for creative improvisational response. An agentially realist view of racism makes clear why the need for narrative documentation of this evolution is both necessary and will never end.

CRT counterstories move beyond the ideal of accurate description in other ways as well. They are frequently performative – designed to influence both our conceptual and emotional relation with racism. Their purpose is not just to describe, but to intervene in our experience and transform our response to institutionalized racism. CRT scholars at times use fictional stories to accomplish this purpose. Fiction is often considered the opposite of empirical description, but this is a self-congratulatory delusion of naïve empiricists. Fiction is better understood in the context of the struggle with racism as enabling the portrayal of possible social relations – both auspicious ones and potentially disastrous ones. Fictional narratives are a means of describing real alternative possibilities. They are also a way of making clear we are responsible for contributing to the viability of these futurities, not just for retrospection on damage in the present and past.

This performative use of narrative representations is consistent with a posthumanist understanding of reality as the outcome of our entanglement with human and non-human agents. A key feature of posthumanism is that reality is plural, but not infinitely plastic. It is bounded by agency of non-human things and our ways of knowing are tied up with the modes of being that emerge in any particular circumstance. This implies that navigating the onto-epistemic terrain of institutionalized racism requires not just good information and critique, but also the ability to shift between different empirical and critical frames in a responsible manner. These shifts involve alterations in concept and affect, object and subject, description and evocation.

By centering the constantly evolving nature of racism, posthumanism amplifies the CRT practice of counterstory telling; it provides a frame in which these stories have not just epistemic significance, but also ontological and ethical significance. This points to criteria of assessment better suited to CRT scholarship than traditional standards of empirical validity. It suggests the merits of CRT counterstories might be gaged in at least three dimensions: (1) Empirical warrant – how accurately they represent antecedent realities; (2) Ontological generativity – the degree to which they foster, provoke, or enable new subject positions and relational entanglements with racism; (3) Ethical consequences – a consideration of who these entanglements materially and psychologically effect, the futurities they make possible, and the possibilities they pass over in silence. We would not expect all of these criteria be well met in every piece of scholarship, but we would expect them all to be critically and explicitly considered. For example, a counterstory might be supported by empirical evidence, but also risk inviting readers into a patronizing spectator view of educational inequity. The value of the former could be asserted, while critically tracking the way racism threatens to co-opt the latter. Or a fictional counterstory may depart from the available empirical evidence, but offer a representation of a racial futurity that transforms our social ambitions. The value of the latter would need to be weighed against the risks involved in the former.

Summary reflections

Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate announced the arrival of CRT in the field of education in their widely cited article ‘Toward a critical race theory of education.’ (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). They offered CRT as a more ambitious alternative to the liberal
multiculturalism fashionable among educators at the time. Posthumanist philosophy is a more recent arrival in the education research literature. It has also proven attractive to education scholars who find the contemporary forms of empirical and critical scholarship to be insufficient to the challenges our schools currently face.

So far there has been little articulation between these two conceptual frameworks – either in the educational research literature or in the social sciences writ large. Even in my own scholarship and thinking they had been compartmentalized. It was the process of writing *Resegregation as Curriculum* (Rosiek and Kinslow 2016) that forced me to bring the two together. The racial segregation of the district’s schools resisted my efforts to identify a single unit of analysis for the purpose of producing a coherent study. The racism driving school zoning policy was simultaneously a consequence of aggregate individual biases, material economic processes such as property value manipulation and inequality of school facilities, and discursive processes by which each of the newly created schools took on different social identities and status. Choosing any one level of analysis seemed to miss important aspects of the resegregation. Worse, it seemed complicit with broader processes of reproducing the institutionalized racism that we were seeking to resist by writing the book.

CRT was an obvious choice for theorizing this study. Not only did it provide a background literature that informed all aspects of the study, it also provided permission to flexibly shift between levels of analysis. Posthumanism provided a rationale for why this opportunistic pivoting between analytic levels was necessary, why it was ultimately more realistic, and why this was more than mere triangulation. Bringing these two theoretical frameworks together led to the idea that racism could reasonably be regarded, not as a psychological or social mechanism, but instead as an agential being. The more I reflected upon this, the more this idea made sense of both the macrosocial dynamics we were documenting and our own subjective experience of writing within and against the mind-bending currents of white supremacy.

This essay has offered that understanding racism as an agent is consistent with CRT’s racial realism and is arguably more realistic than more mechanistic views of racism. It is consistent with what we know about the history of institutional racism – that it evolves and adapts to efforts to resist it. It also gives a vocabulary for talking about the way racism reaches into the subjectivity of scholars turning even the most rigorous programs of research to its purposes.

Perhaps most importantly, an agentially realist understanding of racism explains the futility of debates between totalizing theories of racism and underscores the need for creative ethically-driven interdisciplinary scholarship on the entanglements of racism. Certainly, there are more questions to be asked and more implications of this cross-theory dialog to be worked out. Nonetheless, this intersection of ideas, I offer, holds some promise for anti-racist work. And in these trying times, when the politics made possible by our inherited modes of analysis seem unable to leverage the kind of change we need, pursuit of promising leads is important.

**Disclosure statement**

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References


