The Handbook of Critical Theoretical Research Methods in Education

Cheryl E. Matias

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Ricky Lee Allen

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A theoretical method for researching the unconscious of white supremacy in education

Ricky Lee Allen

Introduction

All human communication requires interpretation (Habermas, 1985). A person initiating a linguistic exchange uses mechanical processes, mainly sounds or movements, in an attempt to convey a particular message, with a certain imagined meaning. Yet, they have no control over how the audience makes meaning of the message. Individuals on the other side of a communicative relationship receive sensory stimuli that their brain makes sense of through language, which, as a symbolic representation of the world, may hide as much as it reveals to the interpreter. Moreover, both parties have their own socially and psychologically constructed desires, investments, and motives, which may or not be apparent to one another, or even to themselves.

The same applies to academic research and those who engage in its discursive construction. As a venue for human communication, all educational research is interpretive. Researchers endeavor to convey the meaning they make of surveys, interviews, and bodies of research literature. They also engage in conflicts over interpretation through their studies of social and education phenomena, conflicts that drive subsequent research paradigms along with the politics of research funding and publishing. Tensions over the racial meaning of things are ever-present in the production of educational research, which takes place in academic institutions that are organizationally divided not just along racial identity lines but moreover into ideological camps that wage interpretive battles over race.

For those in the educational research community, none of this is breaking news. Rather, it is the stuff of normal, everyday talk in the hallways and offices of the academy. Thus, it is quite perplexing that educational researchers, who are clearly self-aware that they are immersed in daily struggles over racial interpretation, do not place central importance on hermeneutics, which is the study of the theories and methodologies of interpretation (Morrow & Brown, 1994), in debates about research methodology. Broadly, hermeneutical scholars seek to reveal the presuppositions that guide interpretive processes (Gallagher, 1992). Importantly, the field of hermeneutics, particularly in more critical approaches, instructs us that interpreters are typically not conscious of their hermeneutical presuppositions (Habermas, 1989), meaning that many
tend to see interpretation as little more than “common sense” or “differences of opinion.” Why is the avoidance of hermeneutics so pervasive, even among those who might benefit from a critical study of it, such as those doing work in critical studies of race? What are the consequences of avoiding the study of hermeneutics in educational research, particularly as it relates to racial power? Who benefits from the avoidance of a critical approach to the interpretation of race in a white supremacist social system? Is this part of a white supremacist academic desire to constrain racial interpretations for fear that a focus on a critical version of a racial hermeneutics might let the proverbial “cat out of the bag” in the production of educational research?

This chapter traces the intellectual lineage of hermeneutics, offers critical race hermeneutics (CRH) as theory and methodology, and applies CRH to education in ways that pedagogically models how researchers can engage in educational research anew.

**Background: hermeneutics and education**

Generally speaking, the present-absence of the field of hermeneutics in educational research, a situation where hermeneutics is implicitly practiced by everyone but explicitly addressed by almost no one, is concerning since the field studies schooling, an institution predicated, consciously or not, on hermeneutical theories and activities. In other words, hermeneutics in educational research is out of sight, and out of mind, whether the research focuses on race or not. Shaun Gallagher’s (1992) *Hermeneutics and Education* is one of the few book-length theoretical studies of hermeneutics in educational theory and practice. As Gallagher argues, schooling is fundamentally hermeneutical (see also Leonardo, 2003). The everyday activities of schooling are largely based on learning to interpret texts discursively, which can include making meaning of written passages, mathematical equations, historical narratives, classroom dialogues, or everyday social interactions. Teachers act in ways to guide, or even control, how students learn not only to interpret texts but also what counts as “proper” meanings and “correct” interpretive approaches. Although race and structural white supremacy are not Gallagher’s focus, it is easy to see how educational control over interpretation is chained to white racial power. From a critical lens, domination necessarily employs a hermeneutical imposition that regulates the interpretive process, ensuring that meanings that support the interests of the dominant group are legitimated over others (Leonardo, 2003; Leonardo & Allen, 2008; Roseboro, 2008).

Gallagher’s discussion of the politics of hermeneutics in the classroom is instructive, even if constrained by an inattention to structural white supremacy. For example, Gallagher argues that conservative and moderate hermeneutics are the two most common approaches used in schools. In conservative hermeneutics, the educator teaches that the meaning-making process should be focused on “accurately” arriving at the “original intent” of the author, thus ascertaining the correct or commonly accepted interpretation (e.g., the
intent of the “Founding Fathers” when interpreting the U.S. Constitution through an ideology of whiteness). Conservative hermeneutics often work to persuade students to think of authors’ alleged intentions as the (racialized) “natural order of things,” thus it often supports long-standing rationalizations of social inequalities as just (e.g., rationalizing racial hierarchies). Or, educators very often employ a moderate hermeneutics rooted in a phenomenological approach that emphasizes the relative nature of interpretation. In this mode, students are taught that interpretation is perspectival, that people have different cultures and experiences that shape how they understand texts, and that the goal of interpretation is to come to a consensus understanding, or a “fusing of horizons,” for making sense of and, moreover, evaluating current social interactions and group relations.

However, Gallagher fails to problematize how conservative and moderate hermeneutics operate dialectically as the interpretive norm in schools, both working together hegemonically to exclude and occlude critical approaches to hermeneutics in the curriculum. In addition to an inattention to white supremacy, Gallagher problematically supports a moderate hermeneutical approach, one that leaves students without a sophisticated interpretation of how oppressive social structures, such as white supremacy, work through the nexus of discourse, ideology, and the unconscious in classroom and social dialogues. In fact, seemingly “open” dialogues rooted in moderate hermeneutics often become sites of further repression and injury due to an intentional pursuit of “consensus” (i.e., social stability due to alleged “slow-but-steady progress”) over the more revolutionary desire to profoundly interrogate the racial ideologies that constitute racial hierarchies, whether the dominant consent or not (see Leonardo & Porter, 2010).

K-12 schools are not the only ones engaged in hermeneutical politics; so are the colleges of education that research them. In the post-Civil Rights Era, students and faculty of color have challenged research interpretations mired in an ideology of whiteness, thus increasing hermeneutical conflicts over racial meaning in the ivory tower (Collins, 1998). Sometimes those caught up in interpretations driven by structural white supremacy attempt to negate those making critical racial interpretations. Other times, those who are uncomfortable with critical racial interpretations become passive aggressive by becoming an “enforcer” of the normative rules of research methodology. For example, rather than more directly discussing their disagreement with the researcher’s critical racial interpretations, they instead resort to pedantic attempts to discredit the work by questioning the implementation of methods, such as sample sizes, search schemes for literature reviews, interview protocol questions, etc. (see Matias, 2019). While a critical race researcher’s work could benefit at times from improved process details, the enforcer’s intense preoccupation with methods is not proportionally in step with the overall level of the detail’s importance relative to other crucial aspects of the work, such as the racial insights that are made. Also, a critical race scholar may be told by a qualitative researcher, for example, that their critical race analyses are an “imposition on the data,” and
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thus on their participants, and not consistent with the subjectivist orientation of qualitative methodology. In this scenario, the rhetorical move of invoking the norms of methodology is an act that conceals the deeper problem around theories of interpretation and the important role they play in maintaining white supremacy through methodological silencing. Armed with a critical race approach to hermeneutics in educational research, critical race scholars would be more empowered to engage directly and meaningfully in methodological conflicts that are fundamentally hermeneutical.

Moreover, much work is needed to develop a critical hermeneutical approach to race studies. The established field of critical hermeneutics provides many insights upon which to draw (Leonardo, 2004). Critical hermeneutics developed out of the larger field of critical theory, an insightful paradigm that developed in the 1930s (mainly to understand the rise of Nazism) that synthesizes Marx’s approach to social structures, Freud’s notion of the unconscious, and Weber’s insights into the rationalization of status hierarchies (Jay, 1996). Critical hermeneutics seeks to intervene by exposing the problematic historical (and geographical) imaginaries often deployed to mystify interpretation (Thompson, 1981). However, it suffers from an inattention to structural white supremacy (see Allen, 2001; Leonardo, 2013; Mills, 1997). Conversely, while critical race theory clearly makes structural white supremacy its focus, it has not paid explicit attention to the field of hermeneutics, even though CRT often works implicitly to systematically reinterpret the word and the world through processes similar to critical hermeneutics. So, in this chapter I introduce critical race hermeneutics (CRH), which uses critical race theory (CRT) to revise the best aspects of critical hermeneutics, creating a methodology for the theoretical study of race and white supremacy in education. In short, CRH is a study of how communication is distorted by a white supremacist social structure, turning discursive exchanges into everyday forms of racialized material, psychic, and symbolic violence. It seeks to show how language and communication is a site of conflict and domination, a place where white supremacy not only operates ideologically but also where the structure of white supremacy is, itself, reproduced. CRH works to interpret, more so, reveal the unconscious of the objective reality of white supremacy in subjective forms.

Introducing critical race hermeneutics as a theoretical methodology

In 2010, I created a graduate course called “Theoretical Research” to address two main issues. First, the American Educational Research Association (AERA) had begun to demand a methodology statement in conference proposals for theoretical scholarship. Second, the absence of a course on theoretical research methodology was implicitly teaching graduate students in my department that the only legitimate methodologies were the traditional empirical paradigms (i.e., quantitative and qualitative), a common practice in most colleges of education. Students wishing to do philosophical or theoretical dissertations had
no research methodology courses that aligned with their interests, effectively
diminishing the production of critical theoretical scholarship. I felt embold-
ened by AERA’s 2009 statement that outlines the legitimacy of theoretical
scholarship, so I decided to teach a course that would show how critical theory
can be practiced as a research methodology. I had been reluctant to teach criti-
cal theory as a methodology because I knew that it paid little, if any, attention
to structural white supremacy and colonization (see Leonardo, 2013). Yet,
I also knew that my approach to doing theoretical scholarship on race was
greatly informed by critical theory, which I learned during my doctoral stud-
ties. As I taught the course, I quickly realized how central critical hermeneutics
was to students’ understanding of critical theoretical methodology. Many said
that it felt awakening and empowering, but I felt conflicted because I knew
that critical hermeneutics, despite its benefits, is racially problematic. Since I
am a scholar of CRT and critical whiteness studies, I could readily share with
students my race critiques of the readings and revised possibilities for applica-
tion to critical race studies. I wanted to have students read published literature
on hermeneutics and CRT, but CRT, as a field, had (and has) not developed
an explicit CRH body of literature. This chapter helps to fill this void. Due to
space constraints, it is more of a snapshot than a full treatment. Also, to main-
tain academic honesty, I will move back and forth between critical hermeneu-
tics and CRH to show the sources of my thinking.

Jürgen Habermas is the scholar most associated with critical hermeneutics.
His take on it links to the field of communication studies. He presupposes that
a theory of interpretation must recognize the centrality of communication to
the human experience. Rather than thinking of humanity as merely a collection
of people, it can be meaningfully understood as a “dialogue,” one that
is, and has been, constructed time and again through countless communicative
actions (Habermas, 1985). Power and domination have tragically ruled
the quality of communicative actions of “humanity” in ways that dehumanize
Emphasizing the historical role of race in human dialogue, CRH sees how
human experience is shaped by the power dynamics of communication in
global white supremacy, a regime where racialized anti-dialogical actions work
to reproduce the structure of racial hierarchies. CRH seeks to unveil racially
normative meaning making in dialogues controlled primarily by whiteness,
and secondarily by those with more relative power in racial status hierarchies.
Borrowing from Geuss’s (1981) description of critical hermeneutics, CRH is
about not only the alleged “proper” interpretation of racialized texts but also
the critical interrogation of the underlying presuppositions, theories, and onto-
logical claims that contextualize the politics of interpretive racial domination.

In critical hermeneutics, the primary belief is that interpretation is derived,
consciously or not, through how one theorizes history, that is, through the way
one imagines how social and political history is made (Geuss, 1981; Habermas,
refers to as conflict theory, rather than functionalist theory (see Feinberg &
Soltis, 1998). Like critical hermeneutics, CRH believes that textual interpretation is best understood through conflict theory, though one that sees white supremacy as the historical (and geographical) context. Meaning making in a white supremacist context is driven by how interpreters theorize the history of racial hierarchy, how it came into being, how it changes or persists, and how it creates dehumanizing conditions. But before discussing CRH’s conflict theory composition, it is important to describe functionalism’s problematic approach to racial history. From a functionalist lens, one akin to Gadamer’s (1989) popular approach to hermeneutics, society has had, or even has, racial problems, but nevertheless it is essentially good and imagined to always be moving toward racial progress. For example, a liberal functionalist interpreter may concede that, yes, some bad things happened at the start of U.S. society, such as slavery and genocide, but then rationalize that those things are in the past, and history is about making slow but steady racial progress through tweaking institutions, policies, and laws (Bell, 1992). In fact, many may claim to still be on board with “racial justice.” This functionalist view of racial history, although seemingly antiracist to some, is actually consistent with colorblind and uncritical post-racial interpretations of social and educational texts in that it implies that past racial oppression happened because whites did not know any better, but now they do (see Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Mills, 1997). Or, they may even think that current racial problems are due to a small subgroup of “deplorable” whites, or maybe “just a few bad apples.” Allegedly, progress has happened, or is happening, even though racial groups still occupy the same status locations in the racial hierarchy (Bell, 1992).

Conversely, CRH embraces a racial conflict theory, which imagines that society was, and continues to be, formed out of continual racial group conflict, in particular, the attempts of those racialized as white to actively dominate others and re/produce an unjust racial hierarchy (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). In this sense, the larger structure of white supremacy is the “context,” not actions, ideas, or spaces (e.g., schools, neighborhoods, or states), which are “texts.” Although liberal interpretations theorize social institutions as the structure of a society, a critical interpretation sees these institutions as only a part of a larger social arrangement (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). In a white supremacist social system, it is the racial hierarchy, that is, how races are organized relative to their status and social power, that is the main feature of the structure, the context, and institutions are interpreted for how they work to reproduce races and their hierarchical status relations (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). In this view, whites are invested in maintaining their status. As Derrick Bell (1980) argues in his formulation of the interest convergence principle (itself an example of conflict theory), we need to reinterpret white actions and motives during periods of alleged racial progress. What we see in those periods, such as during the abolition of slavery then Jim Crow, is less about whites having a baseline moral awakening and more about whites acting to preserve their dominant racial status . . . while faking justice. Historical work by Dudziak (2009) on the connection between the Cold War and white support for civil rights in the 1950s shows
that whites feared losing their racial status largely due to the perceived threats of communism, and thus they modified some of their legal expressions of racial superiority only to the extent that it did not threaten their overall power. The maneuver of giving justice with one hand while taking it away with the other has served white domination well, and little or nothing has changed about the arrangement of the racial status hierarchy, with whites on top, over the long haul of U.S. colonization.

What this means for educational research is that CRH does not see racism and structural white supremacy as aberrations of an otherwise fundamentally good institution, as a functionalist approach would have us believe. Instead, schools are institutions whose real function is to legitimate and reproduce white structural power and the racial hierarchy, even though commonsense discourse problematically promotes public schooling as the primary mechanism through which racial justice is actualized. Instead, the truer aberrations are those rare occasions when schools work to actively subvert the racial hierarchy.

In other words, CRH and liberal racial hermeneutics are mainly oppositional in how they approach the “intelligibility” (which is how clearly and insightfully something can be understood) of everyday racial texts in schools. Habermas (1989) argues that normative (i.e., functionalist) hermeneutics see most of the mundane events of everyday life as intelligible, that is, as readily understandable and without need of specialized interpretive discourses. However, agents of normative hermeneutics act to develop specialized discourses for that which they see as abnormal. Think, for example, how much of liberal, or even progressive, educational discourse poses urban students of color as a problem to be solved, a group for whom specialized pedagogical, curricular, and policy discourses must be created. Meanwhile, those depicted as normal (e.g., whites) are not seen as in need of specialized interpretive discourses; they are already interpreted as being fully human, passing as the image of humanity itself (Allen, 2004). Flipping the script, critical hermeneutics approaches the norms of everyday life as “unintelligible,” its meaning distorted discursively and in need of critical interpretive discourses to be understood clearly and insightfully. The so-called outliers are those who see through the facade, who possess specialized interpretive discourses that understand how the mundane hides the workings of oppressive social structures. For example, CRT is an interpretive tradition that empowers educational researchers to make intelligible how normative discourses about schooling function to reproduce structural white supremacy. It also poses the racial norm, that is, whiteness, as a problem in need of critical interpretation, including not only whiteness in educational research but also how whites are taught to misinterpret themselves and the world.

Understanding the presence of white supremacy in the mundane, or the allegedly unintelligible, school discourses and practices is ultimately an ontological struggle over what is real. It is an ontological fight over being able to name what some clearly see as existing, which may also be what others likely see, at least partially, but they fear knowing it more completely. And, while a language may be a worldview, as the saying goes, it is also true that a worldview,
and thus the language that represents it, can be systematically distorted and disconnected from what is real (Habermas, 1989; Thompson, 1981). In critical hermeneutics, interpretation of the unintelligible subjective forms that reproduce oppression is based on a critical approach to objectivity (Gallagher, 1992). Many are often surprised by this since they have been taught that objectivity is a false, oppressive endeavor and only subjectivity has real meaning. It is true that objectivity, when defined as the uncovering of universal laws that were already naturally there, do not apply to understanding how people subjectively experience and represent social structures. Yet, this is not the full picture of objectivity. Critical hermeneutics believes in a critical objectivity where oppressed social collectives work to systematically understand social structures, which are ontologically real not because of universal, natural laws, as commonly believed in the natural sciences, but because they are socially constructed by human beings (Harding, 1991). In other words, social constructions are no less real for humans than natural forces. Like gravity, an oppressive social structure’s effect on you does not require that you have the language to describe it; it affects you nonetheless. In this way, structures are “extra-discursive,” meaning they lie both inside and outside of language (Gallagher, 1992). They work through language, and language works to reproduce them, but language is not all that they are because they are materially real.

Likewise, CRH believes in a version of critical objectivity, although one that is more race oriented. Through lists of tenets, CRT scholars repeatedly assert that white supremacy is ontologically real, and that its various mechanisms, like the racial realism of the interest convergence principle (Bell, 1992), actually do exist. White supremacy is therefore a socially constructed object. As such, it affects people in a myriad of ways, whether they are conscious of it or not, or whether they have critical interpretive discourses to describe it. The struggle, then, is to be conscious of the presence of the object, structural white supremacy, in subjective forms. White supremacy, as an object, is created in large part through discursive means. CRH approaches the interpretation of subjective forms through a critical objectivity of the ontological presence of white supremacy. Consider how the hermeneutics of whiteness interprets texts in ways that instrumentally rationalize the unjust racial order. It engages in an ideological form of dialogue that masks, often even to whites themselves, the presence of the object in their subjective forms. To riff on Adorno’s (1969/1982) classic turn of phrase, it is not just that white subjects act on and recreate the objective structure, that is, white supremacy, but also that white supremacy, as the object, constructs white subjectivities at the level of the unconscious. In other words, whites act to make white supremacy, but what may be less obvious is that white supremacy is also what makes them a white person, and all that goes with that, since race is after all a social construction and not a natural, biological reality (Allen, 2009; Leonardo, 2009; Thandeka, 1999).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, CRH works to reveal how white supremacist ideology shapes the unconscious. Borrowing from critical psychoanalysis, the unconscious, residing in the psyche, is a site of potential meaning.
that is socially and politically constructed. On one hand, there is the racialized “conscious” self, the one we believe ourselves to be, which we interpret and represent through racial discourses. On the other hand, racial discourses are ideological, including those we use to interpret our racial selves. Distortions in problematic racial ideologies act to make what Lacan termed our othered, more hidden “self,” that is, the unconscious self, that is present and active, many times driving us in ways we may not be aware (Roseboro, 2008), including how we choose to interpret texts and participate in racialized regimes of truth and myth. The ideologies that we have available to interpret white supremacist realities and imaginaries are most often normative, functionalist ones that distort. They are theoretical mismatches for what is racially real, and thus they can cause us to be contradictory in our talk and thinking. The self often does not know what to do with racial experiences and memories that are at odds with the narrative of white supremacist ideologies, so the mind, for lack of a better meaning, represses them. This repression of racial knowledge, or what Stuart Hall (1982) calls racial ideology, is housed at the psychic level of the unconscious, just as language resides not out in the air but within us, and represents the symbolic internalization of the white supremacist social system, the object in racialized subjectivities. This is why not all stories that People of Color tell run counter to ideologies of colorblindness, colorism, or anti-Blackness, for example, and thus are not counterstories (Cabrera, 2018). CRT is therefore a therapeutic discourse, a counter ideology, that employs CRH to re-symbolize repressed concepts, emotions, and memories, forming a more insightful consciousness about racial realities. As one learns CRT and undergoes the re-symbolization process, old memories take on new racial meaning, or experiences that were once barely memorable suddenly come to the forefront.

Application of CRH: revisiting the methodology of “whiteness and critical pedagogy”

CRT theoretical research using CRH is conducted mainly as a textual exegesis, meaning an ideological critique using interpretive structuralism to reveal the distorted lens of white supremacy that is at work, combined with a reimagining of how to see a topic through a CRT lens. The focus could be on a single key text, a genre of research literature, a public policy debate, or maybe institutional discourses and practices. For example, consider important theoretical works of CRT literature. Cheryl Harris (1995) critiqued the discursive practices of normative legal doctrine to reveal how courts protect whiteness as a form of property. Charles Mills (2003) critiqued Marxist literature to argue how it masked the reality of global white supremacy as an interpretive structural context. Derrick Bell (1980) showed how liberal public policy discourse hides the reality of the interest convergence principle though a strategic discursive attachment to the functionalist myth of racial progress. In education, David Gillborn (2005) excavated educational public policy to expose how whites openly conspire to elevate their status over People of Color, while Cheryl Matias (2016) revealed
how the unconscious of white supremacy operates in the emotionalities of faculty and students in teacher education programs. As a form of hermeneutical study of society, CRH is more focused on interpretation than explanation, which is more associated with the “objectivity” of natural sciences (Leonardo, 2003). In addition to possessing a passion for interpretive activities, to be in a good interpretive position CRH scholars need to immerse themselves in the literature of the field they wish to interpret, noting any contradictions or problematic patterns in the discourse that may reveal the underlying ideology. It can also be very important to experience how the discourses are used in particular social spaces, such as teacher education classrooms, courtrooms, school board meetings, dissertation hearings, etc. A research question for a CRH study will emphasize making meaning of racial texts through the context of structural white supremacy rather than “proving” the causes of structural white supremacy. To be sure, one must have a critical understanding of the connection between racial texts and structural white supremacy, how they construct one another, but the CRH researcher uses interpretation as persuasion. One either believes that structural white supremacy exists or they do not. And, a focus on “proving” it exists to them may lead to research that oversimplifies or over-mechanizes the problem. There is also the question of the form the research takes. CRH in theoretical research can take the form of either a counterstory (see Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) or, more commonly, an essay, which is an established scholarly form that “can provide integrative, imaginative, and speculative leaps of interpretation” (Schubert, 1991, p. 62). Derrick Bell, for example, used both forms to produce his foundational CRT scholarship (e.g., 1980, 1992).

In hindsight, I can see how my own theoretical scholarship has used CRH, though I have not always had a language to describe it. In 2002, I completed my theoretical dissertation study called *Whiteness as Territoriality*, which was a series of essays exposing white identity politics in critical theorizing. The most difficult part to write was the methodology section. My dissertation committee asked me to include one, even though the work was not empirical and most of the members were mainly established theoretical scholars. While I wrote about some of the concepts I have included in this chapter, such as white supremacy as an interpretive context and the role of discourse and ideology in constructing the problem of whiteness in established interpretive traditions like critical theory, I did not take up a discussion of critical hermeneutics, let alone CRH. That said, my focus was on combining ideas from CRT and critical whiteness studies with the best aspects of various critical theoretical discourses to produce an enhanced critical race synthesis. My approach was to show readers how a particular critical theory discourse (e.g., social reproduction theory) failed to take up white supremacy as a historical and spatial context and was therefore an example of white supremacist discourse. Then, I interpreted the presence of structural white supremacy by using a critical race approach built on some of the ideas and language found in that critical theory discourse. Now, I better understand how CRH was my methodology, that I was conducting textual exegeses of various critical theory discourses, seeking to reveal the object,
white supremacy, in these subjective forms to create improved race-oriented, self-reflective interpretive discourses that help others to re-symbolize their un/conscious and, thus, transform how they interpret schools and society.

To briefly demonstrate how I apply CRH, I will revisit an older piece called “Whiteness and Critical Pedagogy” (2004), which was a substantial revision of a chapter in my dissertation. My goal was to make two main arguments. First, I wanted to better use some ideas already found in critical pedagogy to interpret how whites function as oppressors in a white supremacist social system. While the then emerging field of CRT in education was offering more sustained and insightful analyses of race, critical pedagogy was mired in a white Marxist discourse that contextualized everything within capitalism, avoided prolonged discussions of white people as oppressors, and addressed race with little more than the phrase “race, class, and gender” tacked onto the end of a sentence. Rather than focus on critical pedagogy literature as a whole, I decided to focus on what was considered the most influential and loved text of the field, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970/1993). In my CRH textual exegesis of it, I keyed in on Freire’s critique of the oppressor and the possibilities for their transformation. Freire did not talk specifically about white people as the oppressor, opting instead for an allegedly more “universal” (i.e., vague) representation that did not specify a group, so I used his own language to show the characteristics of whites as the oppressor that sustained a system of racial domination. My experience with reading this text with other whites was that they would often not identify with “the oppressor” being theorized in the book. I attributed this to Freire’s lack of racial specificity about the oppressor, as well as whites’ tendency to deny their participation in whiteness. By focusing specifically on whites and structural white supremacy, I was directly asking white readers to see themselves as “the oppressor,” or at least see how others may see them as such. Absent this, whites will tend to distance themselves from a potentially transformative experience of critical self-reflection on their own whiteness. Worse, they may even be left to imagine themselves as the Freire’s “oppressed,” avoiding any attention by others to their problematic expressions of whiteness. As such, looking back now, implicitly using CRH as a method provided the structure I needed to excavate the embedded white supremacist ideology in discourses that are, in essence, colorblind. Not using CRH then would render research void of any critical racial analysis that exposes how structural white supremacy embeds itself in seemingly invisible ways.

The second goal of my article was to consider the unconscious of white supremacy in Freire’s choices as an author, and thus of those who do not see his text as racially problematic (see also hooks, 1994). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* draws heavily from Albert Memmi’s *The Colonizer and Colonized* (1957/1991) and Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961/2004), both deeply immersed in critical racial analyses. In fact, Freire stated that after reading Fanon he made major revisions to his draft of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1994). This means that Freire, through active omission, discursively stripped away the racial context, meaning the conflict theory of a colonial history that
produced structural white supremacy, of these momentous works (Allen, 2004). Freire often responded to this type of criticism, that he did not emphasize race enough, by suggesting that he was from a Brazilian context and that his ideas could be “reinvented” by people in other places for their own contextual specificities (see Freire, 1994, Freire & Macedo, 1987). But, the problem is that Brazil is a country immersed in the racial conflict of structural white supremacy (Winant, 2002). Portuguese colonizers killed Indigenous people and enslaved Africans in numbers even greater than most other countries. Most Brazilians have African ancestry and are racialized as People of Color, and darker-skinned people are much more likely to be in poverty than white or lighter-skinned Brazilians (Winant, 2002). The study of hermeneutics teaches us that historical context matters. Writing theory in an a-contextual way is always fraught with problems. Freire would have benefited People of Color in Brazil and other places had he utilized CRH, from seeing white supremacy as a context in colonialism. That said, it is important to not throw away Freire’s ideas. Not only are many of the ideas insightful, but sometimes, like with Pedagogy of the Oppressed, some of the ideas originated with authors of color (Allen, 2004).

CRH brings to theoretical research a more explicit, realistic understanding of how language is used as a form of white supremacist social practice, revealing the unconscious of white supremacy, the lies whiteness tells about Others, and itself, that are all around us. It seeks to systematize an implicit hermeneutics already at work in CRT while showing that a more explicit focus on the presence of white supremacy as an object, an ideological presence, in educational discourses and practices can add methodological power and weight to an established, yet still marginalized, interpretive tradition. CRH creates a theoretical discourse that emphasizes ideological clarity and structural insights for truth-telling, rather than just relying on concepts like experience and identity, as if these, too, are not also interpretive representational forms (see Soja, 1996). Absent CRH, theoretical research in education runs the risk of contributing to an academic research industry that mainly functions to legitimate whiteness as smartness (Leonardo & Broderick, 2011), thus bolstering a racial arrangement scholars claim they are against.

Conclusion: obstacles facing CRH in the current methodological landscape

CRH discourse should be a powerful addition to the CRT researcher’s methodological repertoire, an explicit methodology for conducting theoretical research. Yet, CRT researchers are faced with an educational research landscape controlled by problematic normative notions of methodology. For example, how does one deal with being asked, “Yeah, you’re doing CRT, but what’s your methodology?” What obstacles does one need to consider in making spaces for CRH in theoretical research?

In The Sociological Imagination, C. Wright Mills (1959/2000) demonstrates how U.S. colleges and universities in the mid-20th century function to legitimate
research methodologies that align with dominant political and economic interests. Academic agents work to marginalize methodologies that run counter to those interests. Although the players may have changed since then, the song remains the same. Today, academic institutions are neoliberal knowledge-industry research parks that advertise for professors who, as “intellectual” entrepreneurs, “must be able to procure external funding.” By and large, the vast majority of external funding goes to empirical, not theoretical, research. And little, if any, money is going to theoretical research rooted in a CRH interpretation of structural white supremacy. Academic institutions provide much more support for empirical research, even for empirical research that may seem more critical than normative. The effect is that professors develop bureaucratic power based on how much research money they bring to the institution.

There is no question that quantitative researchers, particularly those in STEM, bring in the most research dollars. They are also the least likely researchers to associate with CRH. However, most CRT scholars doing theoretical work in education find themselves without funding, and thus without bureaucratic backing, working in departments dominated by qualitative researchers, who often display their suspicion of theoretical scholarship. Like quantitative researchers, qualitative researchers in education have yet to take up a significant study of hermeneutics, let alone CRH, despite attention they may pay to other common philosophical concepts like epistemology and phenomenology. Rather than including a thorough hermeneutical statement, qualitative researchers more often simply state that they did a thematic coding of data, as if by interpretive magic, leaving unanalyzed the researcher’s hermeneutical theory that shaped the creation of their insight. It is as if, like those in natural sciences, they believe they are in the business of offering explanations rather than interpretations. Researchers from this limited view of the interpretive process may act to dismiss theoretical scholarship that openly and directly interprets the object of white supremacy in subjective forms, especially if they are already insecure about their racial selves.

Scholars doing mainly theoretical work may also make themselves an obstacle for CRH-based theorizing. The institutional privileging of empirical educational research may have led many theoretical scholars to reject methodology as nothing more than a positivistic, constraining discourse, and they would therefore not impose on themselves a need to articulate their own methodology. That is, they see methodology as something odious that someone else has, but not themselves. This blanket, non-dialectical approach to methodology has led to many more not fully understanding the hermeneutical theories at work in their scholarship. And, it is also possible that their investments in ideologies like colorblindness, whiteness, colorism, and anti-Blackness might be psychological blocks to accepting CRH.

So, theoretical scholars using CRH should expect to face resistance because academic institutions function to reproduce racial hierarchies, even in the research process. And, it should be expected that many whites (and even some People of Color) do not really want People of Color to theorize in this way. Instead,
they voyeuristically prefer that People of Color produce qualitative narratives about racial strife so they can have an “aha!” moment about the racial Other. What they seem to fear are insightful structural interpretations of their favored subjective forms of representations, ones that falsify paradigms they find ideologically pleasurable, and constitute what they imagine to be their white selves.

References


