

# Handbook of Writing, Literacies, and Education in Digital Cultures

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## Chapter 9

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### **Race and Racism in Digital Media**

What Can Critical Race Theory Contribute to Research on Techno-Cultures?

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# 9

## Race and Racism in Digital Media *What Can Critical Race Theory Contribute to Research on Techno-Cultures?*

Kathy A. Mills and Amanda Godley

The world has become a place of ubiquitous human engagement in digital media using an expanding array of mobile devices and other technologies. With the rapid production and circulation of digital texts new questions must be asked about the social construction of racialized identities, discourses, and interactions. While some theorists have pointed to the potential of the Internet to usher in a digital “global village” (Negroponte, 1995)—a place where visual indicators of race are concealed—others counter that race is also constructed discursively online and in the media (Glaser, Dixit, & Green, 2002; Tynes, Reynolds, & Greenfield, 2004). A central concern is the extent to which networked digital media have become a platform for transforming social action, maintaining the status quo, or reproducing racism and colonization.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the contemporary contributions of critical race theory (CRT) for interpreting representations of race and racism in multimodal and digital literacy research and practice. The term multimodal refers to texts that combine two or more modes, including words, images, audio, and other elements (Mills, 2016). Multimodal and digital literacies include the use of social media, digital film and television, video games, digital storytelling, and the sharing of music videos and podcasts. There has been a rise in the production and circulation of digital texts about race and racialized dialogue through social media and other forms of digital encoding and sharing.

Race is a highly contested concept. Following Haney-Lopez (1994), we define race in this chapter as a social construct, the ongoing and contradictory process of social grouping by phenotype, ancestry, and other historically contingent and socio-political struggles. Race is always constructed in relation to other racial groups, particularly on the basis of ethnicity, physical characteristics, culture, or mannerisms. Racialized ideologies function to naturalize the idea of the superiority of one race over another (Lorde, 1992).

We define racism as the beliefs, practices, or structural systems that function to oppress racial groups in society. Racism is endemic in most societies across the globe and in the digital spaces that youth inhabit. A recent example from Australia is a controversial and widely publicized racist attack against Adam Goodes, an elite Indigenous Australian footballer and 2014 Australian of the Year. Goodes was publicly booed by a 13-year-old girl, who shouted the derogatory term “ape” during a televised game (Crawford, 2013). Anti-racist and racist commentaries of the event became viral. Conversely, social media has been used to produce a groundswell of anti-racist counter-movements, such as the #BlackLivesMatter movement, which began in 2012 as George Zimmerman was acquitted of the murder of Trayvon Martin (Barza, Tometi, & Cullors, 2013; Timeline: The Black Lives Matter Movement, 2016).

Techno-culture is a term used in this chapter to refer to technologically mediated communication cultures that are constituted in certain epistemologies and views about the world (Brock, 2012). For example, Dinerstein (2006) argued that American techno-culture is based on beliefs about scientific progress, modernity, Whiteness, masculinity, and the future. Similarly, digitally-mediated communication is not a form of value-free information transfer, but rather mediates racial and cultural identities like the technologies that preceded it. It has been argued that the digital communications environment has enabled the extension of ideologies located in Western culture, and that the new affordances of digital media need to be evaluated critically with attention to equity and colonization (Carey, 2009). Thus, in this chapter, we examine current techno-cultures and their associated discourses, practices, and identities through the lens of three tenets of CRT: Whiteness as property, colorblind racism, and counter-stories. We first provide an overview of CRT, including the tenets above, and then describe the application of each principle to research on digital, multimodal literacies, and techno-cultures. We both review existing CRT research and also suggest places where the addition of CRT could illuminate current and future research on digital literacies.

### **CRT and Race in Digital Spaces**

CRT is a theory of race and racism that emerged from critical legal studies in the US in the 1970s. Drawing on historical and legal evidence, CRT contends that racism against African Americans and concomitant White supremacy are inextricably tied to the history of chattel slavery in the US. Racism continues to be endemic to US society, its culture, and its legal systems (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Racism is not simply an individual belief or a psychological state; rather, it is a hegemonic ideology and a system of material inequities that are ubiquitous in society (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1988; Delgado, 1990; Matsuda, 1989).

In educational research, CRT scholars such as Ladson-Billings (1998, 2013) and Tate (1997) have argued that despite prevalent views that education is “the great equalizer” and despite educational policies such as desegregation, racism against Students of Color remains endemic in US schools. Racism in schools is perpetuated by discriminatory policies such as disproportionate suspensions of Students of Color and in-school ability grouping, and by the belief that such policies are colorblind (Howard & Navarro, 2016). We use the terms “People of Color” and “Students of Color” deliberately and politically to refer to groups of people who are often positioned in opposition to the category of “White.” These terms imply that race is a social construct and that the definition of “White” is socially, historically, and culturally embedded as well as continually changing.

CRT views racism as interwoven in all aspects of society, including seemingly benign and neutral literacy policies, such as use of technology in schools and online access. Three key tenets of CRT are particularly applicable to scholarship on race and racism in digital literacies, and illuminate the ways in which racism continues to be both systematic and endemic in digital spaces and techno-cultures: Whiteness as property, colorblindness, and counter-stories.

First, Whiteness as property posits that property has historically been defined and defended only when it relates to the material, economic, cultural, and social capital enjoyed by White citizens (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). For instance, ability grouping, unequal school funding, standardized testing, banning the use of Indigenous language (e.g., Vass, 2014), and cultural norms about appropriate student talk in classrooms (e.g., Shapiro, 2014), all serve to maintain access to high-quality education as the property of White citizens, even when legal and governmental policies suggest otherwise.

Second, CRT scholars have shown how racial “colorblindness”—the belief that race is insignificant and that racism does not exist—has led to laws and policies that profess to serve all citizens, but that support racism through ignorance of White racial privilege and structural and ideological

racism (Reese, 2008; Yosso, Parker, Solorzano, & Lynn, 2004). Examples include the “stand your ground” law that was used to acquit George Zimmerman of the murder of Trayvon Martin, and calls for the end of affirmative action for historically oppressed peoples.

Third, CRT can help to critically analyze digital texts—both racialized texts, and those that provide anti-racist counter-stories. Since its founding in legal studies, CRT has argued for the use of counter-stories, or accounts that represent the perspectives and experiences of People of Color, as legitimate and valuable legal and scientific evidence (Richardson, 2009). CRT scholars have argued that in the absence of such counter-stories, dominant “master narratives,” that often ignore or disparage the perspectives of People of Color, come to be seen as factual and normative. In online spaces, master narratives about Indigenous cultures and People of Color can be seen in many online games, media, and blogs (Nakamura, 2013). Conversely, virtual worlds can create character choices that obscure race, anti-racist movements can flourish on social media sites (e.g., Twitter), and online forums open dialogue about racial issues (Byrne, 2008).

Although CRT began with a focus on racism against African Americans, CRT scholarship and theory has been extended to include Latinos, Asians, Pacific Americans, American Indians and other oppressed people, Indigenous peoples, and People of Color beyond the US (Buenavista, 2010; Hylton, 2012; Marable, 1992). For instance, LatCrit or Latino CRT, which shares many tenets and methods with CRT scholarship, focuses on issues of language, immigration, and identity that influence the oppression of Latinos. At the same time, LatCrit strongly emphasizes intersectionality as it seeks to acknowledge differences among Latinos’ experiences and to address the intersections of racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001).

### **Whiteness as Property in Digital and Online Literacies**

Given both the cost of Internet access and the control of social media and search engines by companies owned by White men, the Internet has historically been a space that has been “owned” and controlled by Whites (Daniels, 2013). The CRT tenet of Whiteness as property raises the question of who controls access to and circulation of digital texts, and how such control is protected as White property or, conversely, extended to People of Color.

Twenty years ago, research on race and digital literacy in the US focused heavily on “the digital divide”—the racial disparities between access to and use of the Internet—with White Americans twice as likely to have access to the Internet as Black Americans (Perrin & Duggan, 2015). However, in recent years, access and use of the Internet among Black and White Americans has become nearly equal, particularly among people younger than 30 (Perrin & Duggan, 2015; Tynes, Umana-Taylor, Rose, Lin, & Anderson, 2012). In a 2015 Pew Research Center survey, 97% of Asian Americans, 85% of Whites, 79% of Latinos, and 78% of Black adults over 18 reported using the Internet (Perrin & Duggan, 2015). Although racial disparities in access to Internet access are decreasing in the US, global access and use of the Internet varies widely by region, and issues of access remain among Indigenous peoples and People of Color (UNESCO, 2011). Internet use by race is also explored further by Warschauer and Tate (2017), Chapter 5 of this volume.

Some social media sites are used more by People of Color than by White Internet users. Approximately twice the proportion of Black Internet users use Twitter when compared with White Internet users, and Black and Latino Internet users are 50% more likely to use Instagram than White Internet users (Perrin & Duggan, 2015). Media consumption of television among Latino, Asian, and African American youth, ages 8 to 18 years, is high—four hours more per day than Whites (Rideout, Lauricella, & Wartella, 2011). However, characters of color are severely underrepresented in television and film (Hunt & Ramón, 2015). The rise in Internet access and use has been partially attributed to the rise in inexpensive smartphones, raising questions about differences in the quality

of Internet access across racially defined groups. Additionally, questions remain about how social media and other Internet sites are owned and controlled by White interests.

A related issue in digital spaces is the prominence of video games and the analysis of White control over the representation of race. Researchers of race beyond CRT have called for strengthened understandings of the social construction of race in video games and related fan-sites and online discussions, and implications for broader civic participation (McKernan, 2015). Many video games invite users to try on the bodies of others, and to indulge in the other, such as through avatar or character selection. Games such as *Grand Theft Auto III* and others employ virtual tourism to explore representations of inner cities communities, exotic lands, and illicit places where ethnicity is depicted as a taste of something different, offering a “virtual ethnic sampling” and “dark bodies” (Leonard, 2003, p. 5). The underside of White property and White privilege is the fascination with the “other,” with what is non-White, and its characterization of the exotic (Picart, 2013). Such games are a continuation of the Western historic project of securing pleasure through the other and as virtual relations of power and domination (Leonard, 2003).

Illustrating the potential of video games that are owned and controlled by People of Color, the Digital Songlines Project is creating software for the rapid prototyping of natural and developed Aboriginal Australian heritage in a three-dimensional, virtual environment (Leavy, 2014). The project has assisted Indigenous Australian communities to preserve and document their cultural heritage in specific geospatially defined regions of Australia, including culturally significant landforms, flora, fauna, ancestral histories, and the historically contested terrain of White colonization. It has been used to record knowledge in real time to support Indigenous language and cultural heritage management against a history of White oppression and dispossession of Aboriginal people, the traditional owners of the land. Conducted in consultation with Indigenous elders, the study utilizes the new affordances of virtual worlds for preservation of Indigenous knowledge. However, the use of technologies that ultimately reproduce White notions of high fidelity virtual prototyping has also created epistemic tensions through the White representation of Indigenous sacred places in simulations that rupture notions of sacredness. The researchers and designers of Digital Songlines have recognized inescapable design constraints that originate in Western techno-cultures, White property, and game design, leading to the White transgression of sacred places by the uninitiated designers of simulated Indigenous realities.

More research is needed within school settings to document ways that the valued knowledge, practices, and ways of communicating in Indigenous communities are embedded in digital and multimodal literacies, and the ways that Eurocentric notions of digital and multimodal literacy as White property are decolonized. One of the key issues with notions of literacy achievement, whether digitally mediated or not, is that it is defined and measured against performatively constituted identities implicated in Whiteness (Mills, Davis-Warra, Sewell, & Anderson, 2016). Reports of literacy achievement continue to position Whiteness as the measure, bringing benefits to those who possess Whiteness.

A recent study with an Indigenous school community in Australia demonstrated how Indigenous teachers developed the multimodal literacy learning of their students by embedding the valued knowledge and beliefs of their ancestral history in the English curriculum (Mills et al., 2016). Transgenerational and Indigenous ways of multimodal literacy practices emerged as the children digitally retold stories from the Elders and from the Dreamtime. Digital literacies highlighted the importance of connections and belonging to the land, and of standing together against racial oppression. Indigenous modes of knowledge sharing included traditional dance, storytelling, arts, and music which were written, filmed, and shared digitally. Collective knowledge of Indigenous people, self-determination, fighting back, and pride in their histories were vital themes woven throughout their digital practices at school.

These examples of the digital construction of race bring to light the ways in which Whiteness as property and its subordination of People of Color can be maintained or transformed. CRT has aimed to challenge and transform racial marginalization in the social order (Pane & Salmon, 2009), while online spaces produce new configurations of knowledge that evoke modified forms of Whiteness as property. CRT suggests that countering Whiteness as property and its related privileges online involves more than superficial changes to production and design of digital spaces. It requires a recognition of the enormity of the endemic nature of White control of online social orders and a belief that People's of Color ownership and circulation of online and digital texts is essential for creating more equitable and anti-racist techno-cultures

### **Colorblind Racism on the Social Web**

Critical race theorists posit that colorblindness—"the view that race does not matter"—upholds racist systems and institutions (Neville, Lilly, Lee, Duran, & Browne, 2000, p. 60). Since the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, European Whites have often been socialized to think that seeing race is wrong (Yosso et al., 2004). This may appear to be a noble ideal in terms of not excluding other racial groups, and avoiding discrimination on the basis of skin color. However, colorblindness is associated with several assumptions: (a) race is an invisible characteristic, (b) race is a taboo topic, and (c) social outcomes are based on individual circumstances, not on systems of privilege and discrimination, including White privilege and racial discrimination (Schofield, 1986).

Racism is endemic to human societies, and the Internet is not exempt from experiences of racial discrimination, including those linked to racial colorblindness. It is often assumed that the Internet is a colorblind social space where social interactions and techno-cultures transcend racism because interpersonal communication often occurs without knowledge of others' racial identities. However, in the rise of the social web, colorblindness has been shown to lead to low multicultural competence, minimization of the role of race in racist events, and resistance to discussing racial differences in order to appear to be nonbiased (Tynes & Markoe, 2010).

In a noteworthy study of colorblind racism conducted by Tynes, Giang, Williams, & Thompson (2008), the researchers studied reactions to racially themed party images on a social networking site. Racially themed parties involve the guests dressing, acting, and utilizing stereotypes of racial others. The participant responses to racial theme party images varied from "not bothered" to "bothered." A multinomial logistic regression revealed that participants differed in their reactions to the images based on their racial group and colorblind racial ideology. European Americans and participants who scored high in racial colorblindness were more likely to provide a "not bothered" response. In addition, the racial colorblind group were more likely to condone and encourage the racial theme party practice with laughter and other inappropriate suggestions. Contrastingly, the group who scored low in colorblindness vocally opposed the racist images.

Colorblind racism is also well documented in the technology industry and among massively multiplayer online game players (Daniels, 2015; McKernan, 2015). The unique modality of digital, online literacies—most notably in spaces such as multiplayer games and massive open online courses—provides opportunities for individuals to represent themselves both through image and print in various raced (and gendered) ways through avatars and other representations of the self. As Nakamura (2013) notes:

[These spaces] are also theatrical and discursive spaces where identity is performed, swapped, bought, and sold in both textual and graphic media. When users create characters to deploy in these spaces, they are electing to perform versions of themselves as raced and gendered beings.

(p. v)

The ability of White users to present themselves as non-White in online spaces has the potential to lead to the development of empathy for the racism experienced by People of Color (Behm-Morawitz, Pennell, & Speno, 2016). However, such experiences also allow White users to appropriate the culture of Indigenous and People of Color and to gain from “virtual blackface” and being temporary “tourists” into racist experiences without working to change them in their lived worlds. Furthermore, White dominance in some online social media and games has been shown to have negative effects on racial identity construction (Nishi, Matias, & Montova, 2015).

In her study of avatar-based diversity representation, Lee (2014) found that Adolescents of Color who created avatars in White-dominated virtual reality worlds were more likely than adolescents in diverse virtual reality worlds to lighten the skin tone of their avatars and to refuse to share their off-line racial identities with other users. Other studies have traced the connections between minstrelsy, film, and literature, and the projection of Whiteness embedded in the design of online personae through White avatars. For example, Nishi and colleagues (2015) describe how White avatar creation in popular virtual gaming scenarios served to reproduce the hegemonic race relations, reifying racism and racial marginalization in virtual worlds.

Some massively multiplayer online games, such as *Second Life*, offer opportunities for users to represent themselves as non-human and without representing race or gender. Mahiri (2011) describes how African American youth used the multi-user virtual environment, *Teen Second Life*, to interacted and create dialogue with avatars that depicted both human and non-human physical features, including metal robots, animals, and characters with green skin. They were able to create for themselves imagined identities and access an array of virtual (European) possessions in the game, such as art galleries, houses, cars, helicopters, and music stages. While the remixing of identities is possible in such digital spaces, Internet users are also more likely to engage in forms of discrimination online than offline because their identity is often unknown (Glaser, Dixit, & Green, 2002). Ultimately, the design and features of the game may be used to reproduce racism, to maintain the status quo, or to open up spaces for the construction of diverse representations of racial identity.

The racist environments underpinnings of colorblindness and the normalcy of White identities in games and online are robust, collectively reproduced, and widespread. Virtual worlds that include alternative bodies do not afford colorblind utopian spaces where race is invisible. Rather, research demonstrates that these spaces often reinforce colorblind racial attitudes where White privilege is not uncovered and where racial differences are not discussed (in order to appear non-racist). Together, these studies suggest that the widely held assumption that online digital literacies are “post racial” is incorrect, and that colorblindness in techno-cultures and virtual worlds reinforces racism, as it does in the physical world. Additional studies are needed to investigate the design of virtual experiences, such as those described by Behm-Morawitz, Pennell, and Speno (2016), in which experiencing social interactions as a member of another racial group leads to empathy, acknowledgment of White privilege, and anti-racist allyship.

### **Counter-Narratives of Race and Racism in Digital Literacies**

CRT defines counter-stories as historical and personal accounts of race and racism that center on the lived experiences of those who are “othered” within oppressive social structures. Texts such as narratives, poems, and oral histories are seen as central to maintaining a collective history of marginalized racial groups, as observed through the lens of the oppressed, and as a contrast to dominant narratives constructed by those in power (García, 2008). Counter-narratives powerfully and directly challenge racist assumptions and ideologies, allowing alternative or previously unobserved racial understandings to become relocated as official knowledge (Godley & Loretto, 2013). Counter-storytelling can provide vital heuristics that help to enlighten educational experiences and outcomes

of racial groups, while disrupting hegemonic conceptions of meritocracy based on White values in society (Chang, 2013).

There are many studies of CRT counter-narrative construction in non-digital spaces, which have been autobiographical (e.g., Montoya, 1994; Schroeter & James, 2015), biographical (e.g., Fernandez, 2002), and composite (e.g., Yosso, 2006). However, there are currently few examples in digital spaces. In one study of counter-narrative production through digital media, Mills and Exley (2015) studied Indigenous Australian students creating digital stories using the iPad application Tellagami to create counter-narrative historical poetry about the White colonial invaders who displaced Indigenous people from their lands. The students created avatars that were digital versions of themselves, and photographed vivid Aboriginal paintings, such as ancestral spirits in the Australian bushland, as the background. The audio recordings of their poetry decolonized White accounts of conquest and power to reframe and understand their own racial identities and ancestry. Such counter-stories have the potential to be produced and widely shared digitally through the multimodal combination of words, images, and audio (Turner, Hayes, & Way, 2013).

Online social media, such as Twitter and Facebook, can also be powerful and fast avenues of dissemination for counter-narratives. Beyond CRT, researchers have examined the wide circulation of anti-racist messages and movements on Twitter. The term “Black Twitter” has been used to describe the social network of African American users on Twitter who focus on issues important to Black Americans, including racism. Theorists have attributed the success of the Black Twittersphere to the use of Twitter’s hashtag function and domination of Twitter’s trending topics as a social public (Brock, 2012).

Other research on youth in the Netherlands suggests that social media can facilitate positive interracial and interethnic interactions, leading to the creation and dissemination of counter-narratives that reduce stereotypes and discrimination. Though such interactions were rarely deliberately sought by the youth, common interests and affinity groups facilitated positive interactions across interracial groups that rarely interacted offline (Dekker, Belabas, & Scholten, 2015). Likewise, Ito and her colleagues (2015) draw upon multiple examples of “connected civics,” that is, digitally-mediated participatory politics that develop through online “affinity groups”—groups that share activities, interests, and goals—that often cross racial, national, and gender categories. Such groups have been shown to collaboratively construct counter-narratives that support social justice causes (Ito et al., 2015).

Similarly, Mahiri (2015) has continued to argue for the growth in counter-narratives about race through affinity groups in digital spaces. He contends that digital literacies afford adolescents the opportunity to “remix” their identities and to produce complex counter-narratives of identity and affinity that challenge the reductive and essentializing racial categories, like Asian or Latino, that serve to uphold White supremacy. Mahiri, following Gee (2008), argued that digital literacies and affinity groups “honor the fluid, micro-cultural identity connections of today’s youth that are driven by affinities that subvert traditional, static associations with ethno-racial or national cultural formations” (Mahiri, 2015, p. 22). In an example of this principle, Lam (2009) studied the online communication between transnational youth of Asian descent and documented how they shared their interests in gaming, music, and socializing through a hybrid of languages, including African American English, Chinese, and Standardized English.

Hull and Stornaiuolo (2014) and Jocson (2013) demonstrated how the circulation of digital counter-narratives across geographic boundaries can lead to coalition building and new understandings of cosmopolitanism, that is, the understanding of humanity as a community that transcends national borders and local geography. Studying multimedia digital texts exchanged by adolescents in the US and India using a closed social networking space, Hull and Stornaiuolo (2014) document how youth-produced films about issues such as domestic violence and poverty led to cross-cultural conversations that provoked new understandings, agency, and collective action on social issues. In her

study, Jocson describes how US youth involved in spoken word poetry and film groups communicated and circulated their art and their critical representations of race, gender, and media through online video performances that were shown at regional film festivals and on global websites, such as YouTube.

As Jocson (2013), Hull and Stornaiuolo (2014), and other studies reviewed here demonstrate, the potential of digital counter-narratives to provoke social change lies not just in their content, but also in their circulation across traditionally isolated geographic and cultural contexts. Counter-storytelling has the potential to make voices heard on a global scale via the World Wide Web. Critical Race scholars have conventionally drawn on methods such as storytelling because it affords “subaltern” portraiture of race and racism, challenging dominant or grand meta-narratives, while grounded in the strength of experiential knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995). These studies suggest that digital, online literacies—despite being largely dictated by White interests—can provide a space to co-construct and widely circulate counter-narratives that challenge racism in the physical world.

### **Conclusion: New Challenges for Critical Race Theory in a Global Circulation of Texts**

Early scholars of online literacies often suggested that the Internet would become a space that was free of racism and in which race would no longer matter (Daniels, 2013). However, as demonstrated in this chapter, multiple studies have shown that interactions in such digital spaces often reinscribe the racist behaviors that exist in the offline world (Eastwick & Gardner, 2008; Gamberini, Chittaro, Spagnoli, & Carlesso, 2015). In the increasingly globalized and transnational context of digital literacies, we call for CRT, LatCrit, and similar critical theories of race and racism to account for the multiple forms of racism, oppression, and colonization that exist in and beyond the US. Future CRT studies of digital literacies would also benefit from increased attention to critical Indigenous studies and Indigenous sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2016).

As we wrote this chapter, the people of the UK voted to leave the European Union in the “Brexit” referendum. In the months leading up to the vote, those in favor of leaving were circulating increasingly racist and anti-immigration digital texts via the #leave hashtag and the “Breaking Point” campaign, which included images of dark-haired and olive-skinned refugees waiting in line to enter the EU (Lowe, 2016; see also Chapter 8 of this volume). Such digital and social media campaigns are a strong reminder that the defense of White property—visually and textually represented in the “Breaking Point” campaign as residing at the intersection of race, nationality, and religion—is a transnational phenomenon. The #leave and “Breaking Point” texts are also a reminder of the relevance of CRT to scholarship on digital literacies since, like our real worlds, neither digital nor virtual worlds are “post-racial.”

There is a burgeoning field of digital media research in education that attempts to take up issues of race and diversity, yet much of this work is not explicitly advanced from a CRT perspective—including many studies reviewed here. This chapter has applied CRT principles to demonstrate the potentials of CRT to formally engage in research of techno-cultures. In framing this chapter, we have demonstrated how the key principles of CRT have untapped potentials for examining race in digital cultures. As we look to the future of scholarship on race, racism, and digital literacies, we see three important ways in which CRT can uncover racism and work toward social justice in digital spaces.

First, there is an increasing need for the application of anti-racist approaches to multimodal and digital text analysis, production, and circulation within the academy in order to build socially just techno-cultures. Visual representations of race, such as avatars in online games, or the photographs of refugees in the “Breaking Point” campaign, tell us much about how race is represented. Through attending to race in digital practices using the principles of institutional racism, Whiteness as property, and racial colorblindness, researchers, educators, and students can recognize how racism operates systemically and discursively in various international contexts to construct anti-racist and unoppressive digital representations.

Second, in the current context of globalized techno-cultures and the transnational circulation of digital texts, we see that the CRT concept of intersectionality is vitally important to framing race and racism in digital literacies research and educational practice. Intersectionality calls into question the traditional binary understanding of identity and systems of oppression (Black/White, native/immigrant, wealthy/poor), and instead posits that oppression and people's lived realities are based on interrelated forms of discrimination and inequity, including racism, nationalism, classism, homophobia, sexism, and ableism (Haney-Lopez, 1994). Relatedly, CRT critiques essentialism—the notion that all people in a particular racial group think, act, and experience life in the same ways (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Essentialism masks the reality of diverse and multi-layered identities and does not account for the ways in which the intersection of multiple forms of oppression and identities shape people's lived experiences and the oppression they face. Acknowledging intersectionality in scholarship on digital literacies is essential for understanding the increasingly complex dimensions of racism and oppression in online and multimodal communication and representation.

Third, CRT studies of counter-narratives in digital spaces are needed to voice the lived experiences of Indigenous people and People of Color through powerful coalition-building and new agentic identities (Brock, 2012; Byrne, 2008). A better understanding of how such counter-narratives circulate across space and time, and how they affect both creators and users, can contribute to anti-racist literacy pedagogies in which students gain awareness of intertwining modes of oppression (Florini, 2015; Gabriel, 2016; Hull & Stornaiuolo, 2014). Similarly, through literacy pedagogies that encourage anti-racist engagement in interactive digital texts—through retweets, public comments on news sites, and other media—youth can consider how to participate in techno-cultures and dialogues in ways that affect social change.

Digital spaces and techno-cultures, like the tangible spaces and cultures that we participate in, are not neutral, post-racial environments. They have the potential to reproduce racism and oppressive representations of race or to create liberatory alternatives. To create anti-racist techno-cultures, researchers, educators, students, and youth need conceptual tools, such as offered by CRT, to challenge their own racial biases. We need to continually dissemble oppressive representations of racism to produce and circulate powerful counter-narratives that speak to self-determination, social justice, and agency across global contexts. White scholars of digital literacies can apply CRT principles to uncover “White bound” thinking and practices (Hughey, 2012). Research and pedagogy informed by CRT can help break the bonds that serve to maintain White privilege and property in digital sites, in scholarship, and in our digital lives.

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