

Racial Ideology or Racial Ignorance?

An Alternative Theory of Racial Cognition*

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ABSTRACT

Directing attention to racial ignorance as a core dimension of racialized social systems, this article advances a process-focused Theory of Racial Ignorance (TRI), grounded in Critical Race Theory and the philosophical construct white ignorance. TRI embodies five tenets—*epistemology of ignorance*, *ignorance as ends-based technology*, *corporate white agency*, *centrality of praxis*, and *interest convergence*. TRI's tenets explain how racial ignorance reinforces white domination, attending to mechanisms of white knowledge evasion and resistance that facilitate racial reproduction—in everyday life, through institutions, and across societies more broadly. I illustrate TRI's assets by comparison to an extant theory of racial cognition—color-blind theory (CBT). I argue TRI generates returns by shifting from racial ideology to racial ignorance, and from era-defined structures to ongoing historical processes; and demonstrate TRI's unique capacity to explain and predict changes in dominant logics, supporting more strategic resistance.

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James Baldwin once named a sober truth – being “white” is nothing but a lie. Merciless critic of “that particular romance,” Baldwin chided,

[T]his cowardice, this necessity of justifying a totally false identity and of justifying what must be called a genocidal history, has placed everyone now living into the hands of the most ignorant and powerful people the world has ever seen: And how did they get that way? By deciding they were white. (1984:91)

From Baldwin’s perspective, the greatest obstacle to black liberation was white people’s allegiance to a false, race-centered fantasy – assuming whiteness as a real, essential trait. Today, many argue whites’ thinking appears quite different, driven by *lack* of commitment, even inability to grasp the significance of race and whiteness – a pattern known as colorblindness. While these distinctions may look like evidence of how much white racial logics have changed, I argue they expose a different conclusion; namely, that *ignorance is the foundation of white thinking*.

Indeed, Baldwin’s analysis urges we scrutinize white ignorance, not as simple absence of knowledge or widespread phenomenon, but as a *core process involved in maintaining white domination over time*. This article aims to capture that process by establishing a Theory of Racial Ignorance (TRI) for the United States. Building from critical race theory, the philosophical construct *white ignorance*, and a scattered but undertheorized body of studies, I define five tenets that explain how racial ignorance reinforces white supremacy, attending to mechanisms of knowledge evasion and resistance that facilitate racial reproduction in everyday life, through the work of institutions, and across societies more broadly.

Given TRI’s foundation in critical race theory – a distinct corpus increasingly applied outside the legal academy from which it originated – my efforts help disentangle critical race

theory from related sociological approaches. I bring TRI into relief by comparison with the prevailing materialist theory of racial cognition – color-blind theory (CBT). TRI addresses challenges to CBT raised by recent empirical work and related calls for innovation. I offer TRI as an alternative to CBT, one that enhances analysis by shifting focus from *racial ideology* to *racial ignorance* and from *era-defined structures* to *ongoing historical processes*; and by defining a mechanism that explains and predicts changes in dominant logics.

Below, I review CBT’s evolution to build the case for an alternative. I outline shared premises and TRI’s unique foundations before detailing TRI’s tenets and how these align to establish racial ignorance as a core process of white domination. Finally, I take up three key questions that illustrate TRI’s distinct perspective and conclude with research ideas.

COLOR-BLIND THEORY

Though rarely framed in the language of “cognition,”¹ most structural theories of race are concerned with the ways social actors perceive, understand, and interpret the world and how such knowledge – whether explicit or tacit – relates to power, practical behavior, and the persistence of racial domination (Brekhus, Brunnsma, Platts and Dua 2010; Mueller 2018; c.f. Emirbayer and Desmond 2015; Feagin 2013; Omi & Winant 2014). Of these, CBT remains one of the most influential approaches of the last generation owing especially to the work of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. Building from his “racialized social system” approach (1997) and continuing with analysis of “the new racism” (2001) – a highly institutionalized, covert system of domination – Bonilla-Silva challenged claims that softened attitudes signaled a decline in racism. Rejecting racism as an all-powerful ideology, Bonilla-Silva shifted the agenda for studying ongoing white domination in the post-Civil Rights era and the features of a companion ideological defense: colorblindness.

CBT links racial ideology to the structure of racialized societies, explaining how material relations of domination – which organize people economically, politically, and socially into “races” – shape ideological thought and discourse. More than mere reflections of structure, Bonilla-Silva argues racial ideologies operate as “*broad mental and moral frameworks ... that social groups use to make sense of the world, to decide what is right and wrong, true or false, important or unimportant*” (2001:62). Using racial ideologies like an interpretive matrix, dominant actors explain and justify, and subordinated races challenge the racial status quo (Bonilla-Silva 2001). The highly popular *Racism without Racists* (Bonilla-Silva 2018) further detailed the contours of a contemporary ideology arguably “as smooth and seemingly nonracial” as “practices of the new racism period” (Bonilla-Silva 2015b:1364). Arguing white people use ideologies “the way children use building blocks,” Bonilla-Silva codified central frames – abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization – alongside common rhetorical styles and storylines (2018:75). CBT thus explains how whites navigate a (still) racially ordered world, using ideologies like tools for “sift[ing] through contested and often contradictory information” and building “non-racist” rationales (Bonilla-Silva 2001:63).

WHY AN ALTERNATIVE?

CBT’s reputation is undoubtedly well-deserved. The theory sparked an explosion of studies detailing the “who’s, when’s, and where’s” of colorblind ideology (Burke 2016), lending support for colorblindness as the unique ideological buttress of a historically “new” racism (Bonilla-Silva 2015b; Doane 2017; Forman and Lewis 2006). Still, concerns have surfaced more recently. Proponents find central questions about how and why racial ideologies work with “material force” to reinforce white domination remain unanswered (Bonilla-Silva 2015a:78; Hughey et al. 2015). Because users can sidestep CBT’s external anchor in “racialized social

systems,” many overlook the concrete social relations from which racial ideologies emerge and infer ideologies are the *source* of persistent inequality (Burke 2016; Doane 2017). These patterns clear the way for studies that characterize whites as passive, unwitting agents overcome by ideology, rather than possessive defenders of white power, privilege, and wealth.

Others point to CBT’s challenges with essentialism (Thomas 2014) and the “fluid and dynamic” nature of ideologies (Doane 2017:1). In principle, CBT assumes that dominant ideologies are “always ‘in the making’” (Bonilla-Silva 2015a:79) and flexible enough to accommodate “contradictions, exceptions, and new information,” not to mention intragroup distinctions (Bonilla-Silva 2001:63). In practice, however, analysts typically study color-blind ideology as a dependable structure that produces predictably patterned reasoning within discrete racial groups – a problem that emerges from CBT’s structure-heavy approach. CBT describes ideology like a ready-made set of tools; consequently, researchers chase, document, and reify CBT’s established frames (Burke 2016), often with little attention to intersectional analysis (Bonilla-Silva 2015a). Relatedly, because the theory prioritizes declarative culture (i.e., explicit discourse and conscious schema), CBT obscures other, equally important indicators rooted in affect, practice, and tacit schema (Jung 2015; Lizardo 2017; Thomas 2014).

CBT thus pulls attention away from the creative and less obvious cultural processes by which racial logics adapt, evolve, and find expression locally and over the course of history. Equally alarming, CBT’s structure-heavy hand undersells the theory’s own assumption that racial contestation is “the crucial driving force of any racialized social system” (Bonilla-Silva 2001; 2015a:77). CBT attributes stability to how “generalized and cohesive” dominant ideologies are in comparison to subordinated groups’ “fragmentary” counter-frames (Bonilla-Silva 2001:63) – a position that minimizes resistance, agency, and the extent of white power.

Moreover, with no clear mechanism to explain how racial ideologies change or predict when ideological challenges are likely to be successful, CBT does less to guide practical resistance than is possible.

TRI'S FOUNDATIONS

TRI works to reconcile these issues. TRI also addresses critical race theorists' call for tools that accommodate a broader range of analyses. The theory's traditional focus on macro-legal forces has limited attention to micro- and meso-processes of race-making. TRI thus provides new means to study the interpersonal and local processes of everyday life through which people reproduce, defend, resist and challenge white supremacy under "the shadow of law" (Carbado and Gulati 2003:1761).

TRI shares many of CBT's premises. These include assuming racism is a foundational and ordinary element of the U.S. social system; one rooted in a material reality that structures the logics of institutions and interests of actors. Both TRI and CBT reject narratives of linear progress (Carbado 2011; Seamster and Ray 2018), and assume racial hierarchy is produced through ongoing patterns of violence, exploitation, and inequitable resource distribution (Mueller 2013; Bonilla-Silva 1997; Delgado and Stefancic 2012; Harris 1993; Leong 2013). Moreover, both assume that, at its core, race is an ideological fiction invented by European colonizers and enslavers to legitimate domination (Allen 2012). Neither naturally discrete nor biologically fixed, CBT and TRI recognize "races" must be made and remade, generating conflict over resources and ideas (Bonilla-Silva 2015a; Haney-López 2006; Omi and Winant 2014; powell 1997). Finally, both see racial domination as bound to a broader matrix of domination whereby race is co-constituted in relation to other forms of domination (Collins 2008; Crenshaw 1991). However, the theories diverge on the nature of racial cognition, ideological contestation, and

how dominant logics reproduce and change over time. Though some of these differences stem from TRI's basis in critical race theory, many are revealed by TRI's focus on *racial ignorance*.

Ignorance – A Missing Lens

Periodic interest notwithstanding, ignorance has been grossly overlooked in social theory and research (Mueller 2018; McGoey 2012; Proctor and Schiebinger 2008). The neglect is ironic given an old and widely held assumption that power mediates knowledge, structuring cognition in ways “always partial, always selective, and always vulnerable to dismissal or manipulation” (Foucault [1970] 1994; Marx [1845] 1988; McGoey 2012:557; Said 1981).

In common wisdom, ignorance signifies a vacuum of knowledge; a weakness and precursor to understanding that should be corrected whenever possible (Mills 2007; Smithson 2008). However, ignorance is “the twin ... not the opposite of knowledge” (McGoey 2012:3); a social product in its own right, and a “pervasive and fundamental influence on human cognition, emotion, action, social relations, and culture” (Smithson 2008:209). To be sure, people often have interests that make *not* learning and *not* understanding rational, even when knowledge is freely available (Somin 2015). Moreover, people in power often have unique capacity and incentive to suppress knowledge and nurture ignorance, not just interpersonally but also by using institutions to structure broad architectures of non-knowledge (Frickel 2014). Studying ignorance and non-knowing thus promises key insights into the origins and persistence of racial orders.

Of course, racial theorists have long recognized ideological mystification as central to white domination (see Bonilla-Silva 1997; Collins 2008; Omi & Winant 2014), and research sometimes nods to ignorance (see Forman and Lewis 2006; Steyn 2012). Still, sociologists have not developed a full framework for studying racial ignorance, shining light on *racial ideology* instead (Jung 2015). The appeal is understandable given ideology's Marxist origins, which

accent the political nature of consciousness and how groups' relative hold on power shapes which logics gain legitimacy and diffuse through society (Bonilla-Silva 2001; Mills 2007). Bonilla-Silva argues further benefits include the concept's neutrality ("all groups can have ideologies"), broad applicability ("ideologies are not just about class domination"), and non-formulaic character ("an ideology is not a wholly coherent set of beliefs") (p. 63).

With its emphasis on ignorance, TRI tests the limits of these claims. While ideology attends to people's explicit, if "false" consciousness, ignorance exposes how consciousness is defined not only by presence, but also *absence* (Croissant 2014; Jung 2015; McGoey 2012); specifically, the presence of false and mystified beliefs and absence of understandings, feelings, and moral judgments that could or arguably should be present (Dotson 2011; Mills 2007; Santos 2014). Though flexible and non-formulaic in principle, as already noted, ideologies appear highly structured and static in most materialist analyses. In contrast, one "need only hear the active verb 'to ignore' in the word 'ignorance'" to grasp how ignorance invokes agency and dynamic action (Frye 1983:119). Indeed, ignorance is far more than an inert mental state. TRI conceptualizes ignorance as *a cognitive accomplishment grounded in explicit and tacit practices of knowing and non-knowing*. Ignorance thus remains attentive to the intersections of domination; better avoids formulaic constrictions by embedding process; and, widens purview to more fully capture the sum of "conscious and unconscious ... ideas, prejudices, and myths that crystallize the victories and defeats of the races regarding how the world is and ought to be organized" (Bonilla-Silva 2001:64).

Ignorance has the added benefit of *not* being neutral. Following critical race theory, TRI theorizes from "the bottom," centering the lived experiences and knowledge of marginalized groups (Matsuda 1987). This method exposes the most covert ways domination is naturalized

and the intense degree of coercion subordinated groups experience under white supremacy, an institutionally and ideologically totalizing system (Bell 1992a, 1992b; Crenshaw 1988). TRI recognizes that all groups can engage in practices of racialized ignorance and non-knowing. However, TRI establishes that ideological struggles are not simply conflicts between politically different, but equally believable constructions of reality. From TRI's perspective, subordinated races have both greater reason and greater capacity to generate "truer truths" about racial phenomena by virtue of second-sight (that is, interpretations that are more robust and humane), while white people appear committed to "thinking badly" on such matters (Du Bois [1903] 1989, [1920] 2007; Collins 2008; Feagin 2013; Hammer 2017; Jung 2015; Mills 1997). As such, TRI emphasizes conflict between marginalized group epistemologies inclined toward better, more reliable empirical interpretations of the world and dominant epistemologies that are aggressively deformed (Mills 2007). Though neither innate nor essential, TRI assumes that the conditions of white supremacy engender these talents and ineptitudes as consistent and pervasive.

TRI thus capitalizes on common belief in a modern world allegedly ordered by reason and rationality, where ignorance is imagined as the "darkness retreating before the spread of Enlightenment" (Mills 2007:13). Given the exercise of power in most Western nations is legitimated by trust in the human capacity to reason, it follows that reasonable people will and *should* choose knowledge over ignorance whenever possible (Gross and McGoey 2015). Because white ignorance so often appears "militant, aggressive, and not to be intimidated" – like "an ignorance that resists . . . [and] fights back" (Mills 2007:13) – TRI's focus draws much-needed attention to white people's investment in domination (Lipsitz 2018).

Indeed, foundational scholar of white ignorance, philosopher Charles Mills (1997) argues that one of the primary ways whites establish allegiance to racial domination is by proving

willing to use an epistemology of ignorance to ironically “*misinterpret ... the world they themselves have made*” (p. 18). Engaging in a process of knowing designed to resist racial understanding, empathy, and moral responsibility is inevitably more demanding, given “actual reality” diverges from “officially sanctioned reality” (1997:18). Put differently, white ignorance requires real effort and dedication in a world saturated with evidence of racism and the suffering, counter-discourse, and resistance of people of color (Bell 1992a; Feagin 2013; Jung 2015). However, the payoff is immense. Being granted cognitive standing in the white polity unlocks many benefits – from more valuable and numerous material resources; to feeling safe, moral, and righteous; to enjoying psychic and often literal ownership of institutional spaces (Bracey 2015; Du Bois [1920] 2007; Moore 2008). Whites thus become possessively invested in numerous “localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)” (Mills 1997:18); dysfunctions that help secure and protect these many “property” assurances of whiteness (Harris 1993).

TRI’S TENETS

TRI establishes five tenets – *epistemology of ignorance; ignorance as ends-based technology; corporate white agency; centrality of praxis; and interest convergence*. These tenets align to describe how racial ignorance works as a core process to reproduce white domination – addressing questions about *how* and *why* racial ignorance is produced, as well as *when, where,* and *by whom*. Table 1 summarizes these principles.

Epistemology of Ignorance

TRI’s first tenet explains *how* ignorance is produced; specifically, the *general cognitive method* that generates racial ignorance. TRI assumes racial ignorance persists as a broad social phenomenon by virtue of whites’ militant commitment to an *epistemology of ignorance* – a way

Table 1: TRI's Tenets

TENET	WHAT THE TENET EXPLAINS	CORE ASSUMPTIONS
EPISTEMOLOGY OF IGNORANCE	“How” (general process) – the cognitive method used to produce racial ignorance	White ignorance persists as a regular social phenomenon by virtue of whites’ militant use of an epistemology that evades and distorts racial reality.
IGNORANCE AS ENDS-BASED TECHNOLOGY	“Why” – the function of racial ignorance	White ignorance is a social product with a functional goal – provide support for maintaining white supremacy by legitimizing domination. Whites pursue ignorance to defend against anti-racist critique and evade moral and practical implications of critical racial consciousness.
CORPORATE WHITE AGENCY	“Who” (and “Where”) – the agentic source of racial ignorance	The source of persistent white ignorance rests in whites as a corporate group; ignorance is maintained and defended through the collective power and work of elite and ordinary whites – institutionally, organizationally, and in the everyday.
CENTRALITY OF PRAXIS	“How” (specific processes) – practical ways racial ignorance manifests and is observable in social life	White ignorance is both explicit and tacit; observable at the level of explicit discourse, but also tacit discourse and practice, and non-discursive practice. So, too, are efforts to resist ignorance.
INTEREST CONVERGENCE	“When” – the conditions that generate changes in racial ignorance	Progressions and regressions in white racial consciousness are patterned by whether or not white interests align with subordinate group interests. Progressions are never settled, and often regress toward ignorance when conditions allow.

of knowing oriented toward evading, mystifying, and obscuring the reality of racism to produce (mis)understandings useful for domination.

Imagine racial cognition as akin to navigating a maze. In a field defined by ideological contestation, TRI assumes white thinkers regularly encounter evidence that threatens to confirm the “essential social fact” of racism (Bonilla-Silva 1997:899). Indeed, TRI establishes epistemic conflict is constant because the theory assumes white ignorance is not just political, but empirically distorted. Amidst this thorny cognitive terrain, TRI assumes even the most well-structured if accommodating forms of ignorance (like colorblindness) are subject to fail – in response to mass counter-majoritarian resistance, under certain conditions of local challenge, and because of their base inaccuracy. TRI thus arms white thinkers with an *epistemology of ignorance* – a hardy means to resist antiracist critique and evade the kinds of critical racial knowledge that would have moral and practical implications.

Consider my own research (Mueller 2017), examining how students responded to conditions where color-blind frames were hard to use. Approximating a breaching experiment that nurtured “estrangement” from colorblindness (Garfinkel [1967] 1991:37), I find white students studying racist inheritance patterns in their families could detect and were often willing to reject color-blind frames and concede participation in reproducing racism. In the wake of such breaches, however, students evolved new logics to neutralize these troublesome conclusions. Many produced testimonies of passive and allegedly involuntary ignorance to rescue ideas about personal and family morality and “white people” more broadly. Furthermore, despite cogent analysis and self-described “awakenings,” many implied great mystery and doubt about practical solutions, even those their research, instruction, and experience should have logically advised. These various *white epistemic maneuvers* (p. 225) are united by an epistemology of ignorance.

TRI’s epistemology tenet captures process, situating white ignorance in the logics of history (Sewell 2009), both in ebb-and-flow of everyday life and with respect to broad, macro-

transformations. This approach surfaces important historical continuities. Consider how the original concept of “race” rested on an epistemology of ignorance through which whites “mythically” saw “the other” and fantasized essential human differences as a rationale for genocide, colonialism, and slavery (Mills 2007:28). TRI’s epistemology tenet connects this “original ignorance” (biological essentialism) to the color-blind form observed today, linking both to a common mechanism of racial non-knowing. Henricks (2018) offers another compelling case that roots color-blind frames in unlikely historical soil. Studying congressional debates on the three-fifths clause, Henricks finds contemporary storylines (like “I’m not a racist, but...”) are predated by antebellum equivalents similar in form and function (e.g., “I’m principled against slavery, but...”) – an “unexpected” form of colorblindness TRI’s tenet quickly captures.

As such examples imply, epistemologies of ignorance can operate in both micro- and meso-processes. Consider further studies that surface how epistemologies of ignorance are embedded in institutional logics. For example, comparing post-Civil War and Civil Rights Supreme Court jurisprudence, Moore (2014) reveals the Court regularly uses an epistemology of ignorance to establish legal standards. The Court asserted a formal commitment to legal equality in both eras, alongside conditional legal frames that divorced formal equality from structural reality. As Moore demonstrates, the resulting legal standards – “separate but equal” in the post-Civil War era, and “intentional, individual animus” in the post-Civil Rights era – obscure the depth and scope of racism and foreclose numerous legal arguments and remedies.

TRI’s epistemology tenet also helps explain how seemingly incompatible white logics can co-exist and even reinforce one another. Indeed, while colorblindness may be consistent, the forms that colorblind logics take vary across intersectional white identities (McDermott 2015). Even individual whites can exhibit “racial consciousness” alongside colorblindness (see Burke

2012; Rodriguez 2006); and colorblindness is well-documented among surprising subgroups (e.g., elder white southerners defending Jim Crow racism in the present, see Lavelle 2014). Moreover, conflicting white logics can work in mutually reinforcing ways at the institutional level. Studying racist incidents on college campuses, scholars find color-blind institutional responses merge with explicit racist practices to “invert reality” (Combs et al. 2016:339) and reinscribe the exclusionary nature of white institutions (Moore and Bell 2017).

TRI’s tenet unites and explains these diverse and seemingly contradictory forms of white ignorance, opening *a theoretical infinity of cultural logics whites have produced and will produce* to navigate the maze of racial cognition successfully – individually and with the help of institutions. The tenet explains dominant, habitual, and highly structured forms of white ignorance (like biological essentialism and colorblindness), while making space for creativity, intragroup distinctions (e.g., related to gender, class, and sexuality), and cultural evolution, whether local or broad. TRI’s tenet thus explains how epistemologies of ignorance bolster ongoing practices of making and re-making race.

Ignorance as Ends-Based Technology

TRI’s first tenet defines *how* white ignorance is generated; the second follows to explain *why*. In other words, *ignorance as ends-based technology* defines the *function* of racial ignorance. TRI assumes dominant groups hold a unique, rational investment in *not* understanding a variety of things related to race, racism, and racial domination. In a system of white supremacy, ignorance is a valuable resource; it eases the work of maintaining domination practically and psychologically and makes it possible to fully enjoy the spoils of racism. Therefore, TRI’s tenet establishes that white ignorance is more than just a reflection of whites’ limited standpoint; it is a mental state that white people are motivated to pursue.

Even as thinkers may be unaware of their influence, cognition regularly works in support of motivational concerns (Bourdieu 1990; Emirbayer and Desmond 2015; Vaisey 2009). As such, TRI assumes people approach the maze of racial cognition with vested ends in mind, tacitly if not consciously. For white actors, “successful” cognition is often defined by being able to execute or at least abide by racial domination without being racist (i.e., without feeling bad or being regarded as deviant or immoral) – an objective that racial ignorance facilitates. Note how the ends-based tenet establishes rational motives for white ignorance by directing attention to whites’ possessive investment in systemic racism, ensuring that analyses remain anchored in materiality. Consider again the conceptual evolution of race. While Europeans used both religious and racial rationales to legitimize their conquest of non-Europeans, theological distinctions eventually gave way to the secular category of race (Feagin 2013). Both implied the sub-humanity of non-Europeans, but race had the advantage “of permanency over any individual’s lifetime;” marginalized races could not simply convert to secure rights (Mills 1997:54). In a related example, Allen (2012) documents how 17th century elites codified a system of privileges that functionally invented the white race, to subvert coalitions between African and European workers. These symbolic transitions expose the material ends that hang in the balance of many white deliberations.

Despite being grounded by the material, TRI is clear that psychic ends are never far removed. TRI avoids privileging material objectives over psychic interests, assuming both shape white cognition and the form white logics take. For instance, some might think the psychological wage of whiteness (Du Bois [1920] 2007) captures an intersectional phenomenon where white thinkers (subordinated by other statuses) prioritize psychic ends over material ones. Many highlight white workers (Ignatiev 2009; Roediger 2007), poor whites (Hochschild 2016), and

white women (Collins 2008; Crenshaw 1991) who appear so taken in by the psychic comfort of whiteness that they sidestep potentially beneficial interracial coalitions. From TRI's perspective, however, this kind of white ignorance appears driven as much by a "bird-in-the-head" of psychic wages as by the fairly defensible belief that whiteness provides a firmer basis to pursue racially privileged resources, like wealth, education, and social networks (Mueller 2013). Similarly, just as we should resist conceptualizing ordinary whites' as "dupes" who act irrationally against material interests, TRI's tenet calls attention to elites' psychic interests. There is little reason to believe white elites simply wield racial ignorance self-consciously to "divide-and-conquer" class and gender groups. Takaki's (2000) analysis of early U.S. colonists' obsession with virtue and contempt for vice is exemplary. Despite wanting to be free of the monarchy's control, pursuing wealth without constraint generated a "special anxiety" for men who imagined themselves "virtuous republicans" (p. 9). The fantasy of biologically defined races resolved this psychic dilemma, offering a resilient rationale for genocide, slavery, and imperialism in a nation built on the values of liberty and justice by "virtuous men" (Dunbar-Ortiz 2015; Feagin 2013).

TRI honors that material and psychic motives are rarely pure or easily teased away from one another. Instead, TRI's tenet assumes the conditions of white supremacy orient most white thinkers toward a twin pursuit: maintain white power, status, and wealth alongside a "lifelong white moral identity" (Du Bois [1920] 2007; Lavelle 2014:185). As such, TRI describes racial deliberations as anchored by the weight of history and material relations, but also shaped by psychic, many times subconscious interests. Furthermore, TRI recognizes multiple factors – intersectional identities, political orientations, subgroup affiliations, individual biography and even psychology – shape the perfect, if variable storms of ends that animate white thinking. In the same way, then, that TRI's epistemology tenet opens a theoretical infinity of white logics,

TRI's ends-based tenet opens *an infinity of possible motivations toward ignorance*.

Indeed, these varied motives play a role in shaping the forms white logics take. Consider, again, my analysis of white students' efforts to repair "breaches" in non-knowing about familial racism. White students appeared commonly invested in sustaining unjust enrichment. Yet, more progressive forms of ignorance (from students who appeared to reject color-blind frames) diverged with conservative types. The latter preserved colorblindness by forcing bad racial interpretations willfully – even when doing so was clearly illogical, and in a context where professors hold power, high grades are a common motivation, and students had tools that facilitated critical interpretations. For example, despite developing a solid, detailed analysis of privileged wealth transfer, one student remained emphatic:

I still do not agree that I am unconsciously adding to the inequality of race. Hopefully when I start a family I want to have the advantages of being able to place my children in a top school system. Maybe I am just being greedy, but I feel that this assignment has shown me that I must start making a future for my children. My children will be my priority over other children. (Mueller 2017:229)

Unlike many who conceded participating in racism with some regret, this student forcefully recants obvious, race-critical interpretations he himself generated, abandoning his analysis for color-blind frames inadequate to defend his chosen arguments. Though often tacit, here ends-based thinking appears remarkably clear. Believing his pursuit of privileged resources was legitimate, this student needed no further psychic adjustments to feel less "greedy."

TRI connects diverse white racial projects, which can generate divergent or historically distinct forms of white ignorance still tied to common mechanisms. Consider how both elite and working-class whites used early American minstrelsy to maintain a sense of white superiority by mocking and projecting vices onto marginalized races (Pérez 2016; Roediger 2007). A contemporary parallel, Burke (2017) finds whites with ostensibly polar racial politics – Tea Party

organizers and liberal Democrats and progressives in a diverse urban community – use similar ideological maneuvers to construct a “good white self” (p. 277). TRI’s ends-based tenet connects white people’s consistent if tacit investments in white domination without essentializing whites as a racial group. Moreover, TRI’s focus on ends invites attention to anomalous motives and behavior, helping explain why some whites become “race traitors.” History reveals many examples of whites who prove invested in racial justice not just psychically but *practically*, working toward racial liberation and resource redistribution (see Curry 2000; Warren 2010). By establishing rationality in relation to decision-makers’ own objectives (Somin 2015), TRI’s tenet brings forth these “forgotten alternatives” (Lavelle 2014:48) and the conditions that lead whites to commit to seemingly “irrational” racial ends – not just in word but *deed*.

Focus on ends opens new avenues to theorize people of color’s racial cognition as well. TRI recognizes that systemic white dominance nurtures false consciousness among people of color, some of which appears sincere (Ayala 2018; Bonilla-Silva 2018). Nonetheless, TRI rejects any inference that racial ignorance among people of color signals “consent” to or complicity with white domination (Crenshaw 1988). Subordinated races endorse whites’ color-blind frames less frequently and manage to cultivate “oppositional views, ‘good sense,’ and even countercultures” (Bonilla-Silva 2001:76, 2018; Feagin 2013). Still, navigating white-normed institutions and gatekeepers often means people of color have to engage in forms of racial un-knowing and “testimonial smothering” to secure resources and, quite literally, survive (Bracey and Moore 2017; Dotson 2011:244; el-Khoury 2012; Evans and Moore 2015). In addition, though people of color usually have less psychic investment in whites’ self-delusions, they may adopt racial ignorance at times to preserve mental health (Alcoff 2007), or to shore up privileges related to other, intersecting statuses (e.g., gender and class; cf. Ayala 2018; Grundy 2013; Lacy 2007).

Finally, the ends-based technology tenet preserves focus on micro-, meso-, and macro-processes. Indeed, TRI adopts the language of technology not just to signify the utility of ignorance, but also the fact that technologies require “upgrades” and maintenance (Benjamin 2016). Relatedly, the technology analog invokes how non-knowing can be “programmed” into organizational logics and practices to facilitate desired ends. Again, Moore’s (2014) work on Supreme Court jurisprudence exposes how building epistemologies of ignorance into legal standards makes obvious racism appear “covert” (i.e., harder to name and detect); easier to execute, literally and psychologically; and harder for people of color to avoid and ameliorate. As such, institutionalized mechanisms facilitate material, symbolic, and cognitive-psychic goals simultaneously.

TRI thus emphasizes white thinking as a process driven by ends, where varied, intersectional, even contradictory versions of normative white identities unite around common material interests. The ends-based tenet explains how whites across history and diverse racial projects are motivated to pursue racial ignorance, which allows them to reproduce racial domination without being racist; that is, while looking – and *feeling* – “good” (Bonilla-Silva 2015b; Du Bois [1920] 2007). TRI’s tenet captures consistency in whites’ efforts to maintain white supremacy individually and through institutions, while again holding space for agents’ creativity and diverse politics, be they “racially rational” or not. Finally, TRI’s tenet tracks people of color’s aversion and coercion to white ignorance.

Corporate White Agency

TRI’s next tenet connects pursuit of racial ignorance to the broader structure of society and directs attention to the human source of white ignorance; in short, *where* ignorance emerges from and *who* is responsible. The *corporate white agency* tenet explains how whites operate as a

functional collective to cultivate, enable, deploy, and defend white ignorance. TRI assumes white ignorance is broad and pervasive not simply because of whites' possessive investments, but also because white people hold an unparalleled collective power that makes sustaining a limited, empirically challenged worldview possible. TRI's corporate agency tenet captures the totalizing dimensions of white supremacy by highlighting how structural and institutionalized mechanisms facilitate white ignorance, without sacrificing attention to white agency and responsibility.

TRI's tenet originates in a simple principle: "social systems have no purposes, reasons or needs whatsoever, only human individuals do so" (Giddens 1979:7). Of course, systems precede the life of any individual, and social institutions and otherwise highly structured patterns of interaction present many paths of least resistance which constrain and enable human agency (Johnson 2008). Nonetheless, TRI rejects the idea that structures operate like autonomous (and neutral) "social actors" who "make" racial reproduction happen. TRI adopts, instead, critical race theory's instrumentalist position, which assumes dominant institutions function as *white institutional space* (Moore 2008) – that is, as organizational technologies designed by whites to advance collective interests and maintain domination. Bracey and Moore (2017) explain:

White institutional space is created through a process that begins with whites excluding people of color ... during a formative period in the history of an organization. During this period, whites populate all influential posts within the institution and create institutional logics – norms of operation, organizational structures, curricula, criteria for membership and leadership – which imbed white norms into the fabric of the institution's structure and culture. Although the norms are white, they are rarely marked as such. Consequently, racially biased institutional norms [appear] race neutral and merely characteristic of the institution..., masking inherent institutional racism. Upon this tacitly racist foundation, institutional inertia and actors build a robust culture that privileges whites by vesting power in white leaders' hands, populating the organization with white membership, orienting activities toward serving and comforting whites, and negatively sanctioning non-white norms. (p.285)

In terms of historical formation and contemporary operation, all major U.S. institutions evidence this kind of institutionalized whiteness (Feagin 2014; Harris 1993; Obasogie 2013). Note, too,

that a central function of this institutionalization is to *produce* ignorance about the “preplanned equilibrium” by which these institutional spaces are ordered – an equilibrium that is in actuality, racially biased and unalterably white supremacist in orientation (Bell 1991:80; Bracey 2015).

TRI’s tenet assumes whites’ corporate power is absolute and permanent (Bell 1992b). Moreover, though white elites wield significant and disproportionate power, TRI assumes all whites are beneficiaries commonly invested in maintaining white institutional space. Because elites structure institutions to naturalize white interests as “common interests,” they effectively extend *to all whites* rights to *do racism* (Bracey 2015; Harris 1993; Kennedy 1982; Matsuda et al. 1993) and to *enjoy* and (when necessary) *defend related ignorance about racism*. Indeed, Mills (1997) argues that ordinary whites act with brazen ignorance, in part, because they can be fairly assured dominant institutions will sanction their false perceptions and racialized non-knowing. White people enjoy many affordances for ignorance (and the associated comfort ignorance enables) by virtue of the ways ignorance is embedded in the structure of everyday worlds (Salter et al. 2018) – affordances observed in the organizational logics, cultural artifacts, technologies, and structured practices of law (Bracey 2015; Moore 2014); formal knowledge production (Cazenave 2016; Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva 2008); education (Salter et al. 2018; Teeger 2015); news and politics (Jungkunz and White 2013; Rosino and Hughey 2018; Said 1981); and media and popular culture (Daniels 2015; Mueller and Issa 2016; Pérez and Ward 2019). White institutional space thus relieves many of the literal and psychological burdens involved in racial reproduction by helping ordinary whites launder racial oppression through formal organizational apparatuses that obscure racial domination and protect even deeper states of racial non-knowing (Bracey 2015).

Importantly, the corporate agency tenet also tracks how whites’ absolute power

circumscribes marginalized races' options for resistance and likelihood of success, if success is defined as redistributing resources and disrupting white dominance broadly or even locally (Crenshaw 1998; Moore and Bell 2011). As already noted, members of subordinated races often must engage white people's distorted beliefs and "smother" their voices in white institutional spaces to be heard and secure material resources (Dotson 2011:244; Evans and Moore 2015). TRI's tenet reveals how white people subject people of color to significant symbolic violence through these systemic arrangements (Jung 2015). Beyond the sustained impoverishment and discrimination ignorance helps secure (Mueller 2013), this complex infrastructure elides and marginalizes "non-white" perspectives and aims to coerce people of color to perform the psychically repelling work of disregarding insights they derive from their experiences living with racism (Du Bois [1903] 1989).

TRI thus explains how a broadly distorted worldview becomes firmly entrenched and legitimized throughout society. Recognizing white supremacy as a "quintessentially cultural-psychological and socioeconomic phenomenon," the corporate agency tenet captures how whites use their vast, unparalleled hold on power to achieve ends-based goals, embedding preferences for ignorance into institutions, practices, and artifacts – as material instantiations of whites' "mind-in-context" (Salter et al. 2018:151). Further, TRI's tenet establishes whites' exclusive corporate power to: (1) ignore, distort, and misrepresent reality amidst ongoing evidence of the "essential social fact of race" (Bonilla-Silva 1999:899) and the "extraordinary costs and burdens" of racism (Feagin 2014:22; Forman and Lewis 2006); (2) resist more robust racial counter-analyses that exist in the culture and their personal networks – explicitly, tacitly, and largely without consequence (Jung 2015; Mills 1997); and, (3) ensure "mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority, whether religious or secular," by virtue of whites'

instrumental control of all major social institutions (Mills 1997:18). TRI's tenet maintains materialism while resisting structural determinism, ensuring users assign agency and motive to white actors and foreclosing analyses that personify non-living technologies (e.g., racial structures, social institutions, racial ideologies) as acting with independent force in the world. Finally, by dissolving naturalizing distinctions that separate dominant institutions from ordinary whites, TRI establishes the depth of coercion people of color experience under these conditions.

Centrality of Praxis

TRI's next tenet revisits how ignorance is produced, attending to the *specific social processes* and many practical ways ignorance manifests and can be observed in social life. The *centrality of praxis* tenet highlights indicators that reveal racial non-knowing and knowledge resistance, and the various maneuvers used to *generate and deploy* as well as *resist and challenge* ignorance. TRI's tenet assumes that racial ignorance (and efforts to resist ignorance) are not just explicit, but often tacit. Relatedly, TRI's tenet honors the importance of discourse (i.e., what people *write* and *say* in ways both explicit and tacit) but draws equal attention to what people *do* (i.e., practice) as a reflection of racial logic. In this way, TRI moves beyond explicit discourse to bring less obvious ways people signal, accomplish, and resist racial non-knowing into view, along with non-declarative practices that express logics "without much comment," often outside of people's immediate awareness (Jung 2015:50-51; Lizardo 2017; Thomas 2014).

Though not usually discussed as ignorance, research on ideological maneuvers in explicit white discourse is well established (see Bonilla-Silva 2018; Moore and Bell 2017). Tacit maneuvers are more challenging to document but research assures, far from impossible. For example, Teeger (2015) shows how South African teachers cultivated ignorance using a practice of "telling both sides of the story" – a pedagogy that inhibited students from understanding the

historical and ongoing impact of apartheid. Similarly, in my study I found white students' efforts to evade knowing were sometimes explicit (e.g., when students admitted avoiding race-based questions); however, many more were tacit (Mueller 2017). Some students wrote papers using no words or phrases related to race, racism, or racial inequality, despite receiving unambiguous instructions to produce racial analyses in the context of race-based courses with overt racial content – a meaningful “empirical absence.”

Relatedly, philosophers argue for tracking practices of epistemic silencing – through which dominant groups avoid registering the perspectives of marginalized others. For example, Pohlhaus (2012) explores *willful hermeneutical ignorance* – the tendency for dominant groups to dismiss the intellectual resources and insights marginalized people develop by virtue of their experience; refusals of knowledge that allow dominant groups “to misunderstand, misinterpret, and/or ignore whole parts of the world” (p. 715). Dotson (2011) identifies *testimonial quieting* – where people of color are denied the status of “knower” because dominant groups presume them intellectually incompetent (p. 242; see Gutiérrez y Muhs, Niemann, González, and Harris 2012). Finally, Berenstain (2016) suggests dominant groups exhibit a *default skepticism* that manifests in unwillingness to accept or understand testimonies from people of color (perversely, even when they have *solicited* those testimonies!).

Of course, these sorts of *a priori* “refusals to know” can be institutionalized and explicit, as with antebellum laws that denied blacks the right to testify against whites in legal disputes (Mills 2007). However, researchers also surface evidence of tacit practices. For example, Jung (2015) analyzes the 1924 Hanapêpê Massacre in Hawaii, where police shot and killed 16 Filipino workers engaged in a protracted labor strike. Aware of pervasive stereotypes concerning their inferiority and violent proclivities, Filipino strikers called for nonviolence deliberately and

repeatedly. However, Jung highlights key points where authorities tacitly ignored workers' discourse in ways that legitimized their use of fatal violence and the white public's apathetic response. Indeed, tacit ignorance can also be observed in the "non-feeling" exposed by *racial apathy* and inaction (Forman and Lewis 2006), and the "non-knowing" captured by a *language of silence* (Rosino and Hughey 2017) – evidence conceivable at all levels of analysis.

The centrality of praxis tenet invites examinations of these sorts of maneuvers, moving beyond "what's there" (e.g., in explicit discourse), to consider "what's not there" in discourse and action, but which could or *should* be. Note how this tenet also tracks limitations in subordinated groups' power to challenge white ignorance discursively if not practically, further marking the oppression involved in being marginalized as a knower. Equally important, TRI's tenet surfaces everyday ideological resistance among people of color that is often obscured. Researchers usually conceptualize resistance as overt, planned, public, and collectively organized; however, ongoing experiences with everyday oppression generate related practices for surviving and resisting oppression, many of which could be described as epistemic. For instance, el-Khoury (2012) documents how black people use self-governing tactics during encounters with the police to internally counter "the invisible facts of domination" (p. 87). Similarly, Evans and Moore (2015) reveal how students of color in elite law schools and black pilots and flight attendants use an array of internalized micro-resistance practices to navigate workplaces that are psychologically hostile, but necessary for survival and mobility.

Finally, TRI's praxis tenet takes white people's practical achievements as a form of tacit expression. Practices reveal cognitive states and the less obvious, embodied forms of knowledge that find expression in behavior, "when minds are purportedly at work" (Bourdieu 1990; Emirbayer and Desmond 2015; Maynard 2006:105). As such, TRI leans hard on common

wisdom: actions speak, often more loudly than words. The centrality of praxis tenet establishes white ignorance as political, specifically racist, by virtue of the ends it achieves, not in reference to white people's self-performances, self-reflective claims, or declared intentions. TRI recognizes white people do not have to be wholly intentional nor malicious to reproduce racism, but marks white people's practical involvement in reproducing racism as an expression of willingness to collude in executing and (through institutions) subcontracting the work of white domination, even as this generates suffering and immiseration for people of color.

Centrality of praxis thus widens empirical focus, directing attention to non-discursive and tacit maneuvers by which white people evade and distort the perspectives of people of color and empirical facts of racism. Further, this tenet shores up TRI's materialist foundation by deterring study of white logics divorced from actual practice and urging cautious interpretation of any non-practical, discursive data whether derived from surveys, interviews, or the field. TRI's tenet highlights, as well, the challenges, costs, and burdens people of color face navigating worlds designed around whites' ignorance; and their practical efforts to resist and minimize psychic damage. Finally, by focusing attention on actual practice and outcomes, the praxis tenet discerns a wide-variety white racial projects, including the most well-meaning and progressive.

Interest Convergence

TRI's final tenet explains the conditions that generate evolutions and regressions in white racial consciousness and broader white ignorance. *Interest convergence* not only explains *when* such changes are likely to occur, but also *how*. TRI's tenet derives from critical race theory, where interest convergence is a core assumption (Carbado 2011; Delgado and Stefancic 2012). There, adherents describe how progress in legal entitlements is secured during episodes of interest convergence, when white decision-makers recognize that protecting the rights of people

of color will “further interests that are their primary concern” (Bell 2004:49; Carbado and Gulati 2003). Progressive racial advances are never fully settled and typically follow with predictable patterns of retrenchment (Crenshaw 1988; Moore and Bell 2011), where the rights of people of color are sacrificed and remedial policies abrogated at the point they threaten white dominance (Bell 2004; Bracey 2015).

Given how vital racial ignorance is to maintaining white supremacy, TRI adopts these principles – of *interest convergence* and *racial sacrificing* – to explain progressive and regressive shifts in white racial consciousness. Moreover, interest convergence defines and predicts how white ignorance evolves and persists interpersonally, institutionally, and across society and history more broadly. To be sure, TRI is anti-essentialist and recognizes that:

White ignorance is not infeasible (even if it sometimes seems that way!); ... [S]ome people who are white will, because of their particular histories (and/or the intersection of whiteness with other identities), overcome it and have true beliefs on what their fellow-whites get wrong. (Mills 2007:23)

Nonetheless, because white ignorance advances whites’ material and psychic interests, large segments of society have little incentive to alter or eradicate it (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). As such, the interest convergence tenet establishes that whites’ individual and collective willingness to embrace critical racial consciousness (and related anti-racist practice) will align most readily with subordinated races’ when doing so helps maintain conditions of white domination. Further, TRI’s tenet assumes that progressions in white racial consciousness are never settled and often regress toward ignorance when social and political conditions allow.

Notably, TRI’s tenet explains progression and retrenchment at various levels of analysis. Consider how multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusion – demands that emerged from people of color following Black Power mobilization (Bell 2014) – have been appropriated and rearticulated in educational and corporate settings in ways that retrench and solidify white institutional space

(Ahmed 2012; Embrick 2011). Interest convergence can also be observed at the individual level. Warikoo (2016) documents a “diversity bargain” that captures white students’ contingent support for diversity and inclusion. She finds white students favor affirmative action and inclusion plans as long as they believe they reap the benefits of a diverse learning environment; however, students withdraw support when they sense such programs could hamper their advancement.

Given the strength of evidence, TRI assumes progressions in white consciousness are never settled and that whites often regress toward false understandings and indifference, and abandon truer, more empathic racial logics when conditions allow for it. This position receives support from further studies that document how white people lean into racist and racially illiberal behavior in social contexts that allow for it (Daniels 2015; Picca and Feagin 2007). Note, too, interest convergence forecloses the common hope that once you know something you can’t “un-know” it. In my study, white students often cast doubt not only on other whites’ ability to know about racism, but even their *own* ability to retain racial consciousness. One student described being upset to learn about her role in reproducing racism because she knew she would “likely ... unconsciously ... follow in the steps of keeping racial segregation alive.” And yet, “how do whites *unconsciously* reproduce patterns of which they are *conscious*” (Mueller 2017:233)? Rejecting one’s *own* awareness to project a future, unconscious racism exposes a “symbolic perversity” (Jung 2015:143) that perfectly defines the orientation of white epistemic maneuvers: racially conservative, ends-based, and powered by a militant commitment to ignorance.

The interest convergence tenet also highlights, once again, white people’s attachment to social conditions where ignorance is easier to maintain. Indeed, white-normed organizational settings (Ray 2019) and white habitus (Bonilla-Silva, Goar and Embrick 2006) are arguably as driven by whites’ interest in resource-hoarding as they are by preferences for less “epistemically

threatening” contexts. Moreover, the interest convergence tenet holds non-practical expressions of white racial consciousness to further scrutiny, requiring whites’ antiracism be established by evidence of materially disruptive behaviors – for example, actions driven toward power-sharing and resource redistribution. Collectively, TRI’s tenets suggest white people establish antiracism most clearly when they exhibit *sustained* willingness to abandon and renounce ideological views; and when they engage in practices where they use their power and resources to ameliorate and share the “extraordinary costs and burdens of racism” with people of color to the greatest extent possible (Feagin 2014:22; Thomas 2014). The tenet of interest convergence thus explains how and why dominant racial logics are reproduced (or change) over time; predicts the terms under which evolutions and regressions occur; and guides ideological and practical interventions.

TRI REVISITED

Below, I summarize TRI on its own terms and demonstrate the theory’s benefits by entertaining three questions from the perspective of TRI and CBT. I follow with suggestions for using TRI in research.

TRI Self-Defined

As a theory of racial cognition, TRI anchors the epistemological dimensions of social life in “materialist roots” (Burke 2016:103; Doane 2017; Hughey et al. 2015), linking racial cognition and related action to the ebb-and-flow of everyday life, institutions, and broader history. TRI highlights how racial reproduction is supported by recurrent mechanisms of knowledge evasion and resistance. TRI establishes that (1) whites commonly adhere to an epistemology of ignorance that inverts racial reality and helps white people resist understanding racism and the essential social facts of white domination. The ignorance generated by this epistemology (2) functions like a technology that helps maintain white supremacy by allowing

white people to experience their inequitable and unjust power, status, and wealth as legitimate. More specifically, ignorance functions to support white people's pursuit of material and psychic ends by making it easier to abide by and perform racism without appearing or feeling racist (i.e., deviant and immoral). Given that ignorance helps secure white power, privilege, and wealth, TRI defines race-making as continual and, in the process, unites all forms of white ignorance, past and future. TRI also honors anti-essentialism by recognizing that people always hold the capacity to act creatively (and in "unexpected" ways) as material life unfolds, even under the weight of unjustly ordered systems – both *in maintenance of* and *in resistance to* various institutionalized structures. Nonetheless, TRI recognizes historical reality: because white supremacy is a totalizing system underwritten by the lie of whiteness, white people enjoy tremendous structural, institutional, and everyday agency to reproduce white domination materially and ideologically by virtue of (3) their solidified corporate power. Moreover, whites develop tremendous interest in protecting the many benefits this arrangement secures. As such, TRI marks (4) the centrality of praxis to establish whites' motive and involvement in racial reproduction; whites' regular coercion of subordinated groups' in pursuit of racially privileged ends; and people of color's regular resistance to that coercion as well as harms suffered. Finally, TRI recognizes that within this totalizing system, whites assume little incentive to resist, let alone destroy epistemic technologies that make white domination easier to maintain and will usually only do so under conditions of (5) interest convergence, when their interests in racial consciousness align with those of people of color. TRI thus captures the durability and evolution of white ignorance and, indeed, predicts its permanence.

TRI Compared: Three Questions

To illustrate benefits of the approach outlined here, I take up three questions that surface

meaningful distinctions between TRI and CBT.

What is the relationship between white racial cognition and racial reproduction?

Causal mechanisms that link racial logics to material realities are underdeveloped within CBT (Hughey et al. 2015). Still, in the same way TRI ties racial ignorance to the persistence of white domination, CBT establishes racial ideology as “inextricably linked to modern racial discrimination and inequality” (Hughey et al., p. 1349). In Bonilla-Silva’s terms, “racial ideology ... is co-constitutive of all racial domination situations” (2015a:79); so, too, with racial ignorance. However, the causal mechanisms that mediate this relationship appear quite different.

CBT describes racial cognition as a rules-based process that propels racial reproduction. White thinkers approach the thorny maze of racial cognition with a dominant ideological repertoire in hand (or “mind” as it were); then navigate the maze using frames, styles, and storylines like a ready-made set of tools for making sense of social reality (Bonilla-Silva 2001). Practical action presumably flows from the ideological interpretations that result, which “rationalize, legitimate, and thereby [help] (re)produce a social order of stratification based on race” (Hughey et al. 2015:1350). CBT thus connects white cognition to a material end-game – maintaining “the racial order” (Bonilla-Silva 2014:3); but implies a process driven by the “basic principles” that dominant ideologies “furnish,” through which white people generate meanings that produce, explain, and generate material outcomes (Bonilla-Silva 2001:63; 2015a). Notably, much of the scholarship relating culture and cognition defies this kind of rules-based approach (Vaisey 2009).

In contrast, TRI assumes racial cognition is always rooted in ends, not rules. TRI establishes racial ignorance as the primary cognitive resource white people need to support the work of achieving racially biased ends. TRI thus conceptualizes racial cognition as a process

where white thinkers resist racial knowing to construct a distorted reality so they can perform, abide by, and enjoy the spoils of racism without being racist. In short, white people are already attached to the last line of the story – the end of their maze – and have to work backwards to furnish the logics needed to arrive at that conclusion. They often draw on habitual logics made available to them, but can and do reason creatively, especially under conditions that necessitate adjustments.

These disagreements have serious implications for analysis. For instance, though CBT argues racial ideology is a “material force” (Bonilla-Silva 2015a:78) and not just superstructural (Bonilla-Silva 2001), the theory’s rules-based format generates explanations that often obscure this principle. Indeed, CBT makes it possible to reify structure and ideology as the executive source of whites’ participation in racism, a conclusion TRI prohibits. For instance, Burke (2012) argues that whites with “pro-diversity” views often “unintentional[ly]” recreate a “white habitus” because of pervasive colorblindness (p. 61). Similarly, Trepagnier (2010) contends that “well-meaning,” progressive whites remain apathetic in practice despite “good intentions” because they are neither “well informed about the historical and cultural impact of racism ... nor clear about what is racist” (p. 44). Here, white people reproduce racism technically, but it appears their choices are more passive or automatic than invested or possessive. Given CBT claims that ordinary whites have “real agency” and are not just “cultural dupes” (Bonilla-Silva 2001:64; see also 1997; 2015a), this pattern should concern adherents.

TRI recognizes ends-focused work in both cases immediately – namely, maintaining unjust access to resources (apathetic practice, habitus recreation) alongside white moral identity (declared progressive ideals). Indeed, TRI establishes these as the exact conditions needed to perform racism without being racist. Note how TRI reframes these studies’ shared inference that

progressive whites would *do* differently if only they could *know* differently. TRI highlights that, in fact, white actors *need* to “not-know” in a certain way in order to “not-do” (i.e., not make different choices), thereby establishing why racial ignorance remains an epistemic pursuit. TRI also recognizes white people’s possessive investment in structures that afford for white comfort and ignorance. People like Trepagnier’s (2010) respondents can use storytelling to sustain ignorance (Lavelle 2014; Steyn 2012) while relying on a cultural infrastructure that affords for white fantasies and makes it easy to avoid marginalized counternarratives in the news (Rosino and Hughey 2017; Said 1981), popular culture (Daniels 2015; Mueller and Issa 2016) and formal education (Glover 2019; Teeger 2015). Burke’s (2012) families are supported by policies and practices that distribute wealth and other forms of capital inequitably (Mueller 2013; Seamster 2015), making it easier to shape valuable white habitus and legally defend resource-hoarding and zones of ideological-safety (Henricks and Seamster 2016; Moore and Bell 2017).

TRI thus makes easier work of the data most likely to confound critical interpretation – when white progressive discourse fails to match antiracist practice. The theory forecloses analyses the cast white actors as overcome by immutable, “alien” structures that overpower them against their will (Eliasoph and Lichterman 1999:229) and exposes naturalizing distinctions that position ordinary whites as divorced from the white institutional spaces in which they are invested. These features also help cut through common (and distracting) debates about intentionality. Again, TRI honors that white actors need not be wholly intentional nor malicious to reproduce racism, but accounts for the inevitable malice connected to maintaining and enjoying unjust power and privilege on the backs of marginalized groups. In fact, TRI accents white people’s common motivations *toward* “unintentionality,” which ensure whites can feel a sense of moral certitude. Alongside material motives, these attachments to “sincere fictions of

the virtuous white self” (Feagin 2014:93) make white people highly inclined to support structures that facilitate the self-delusions that buttress racial reproduction.

The theories’ divergences also have implications for institutional analysis. CBT-based meso-analyses are likely to accent how dominant rules shape the ways institutions are built and the organizational logics that take form. TRI’s ends-based approach elevates, instead, white people’s motives to embed epistemologies of ignorance into institutional logics and practices. Indeed, institutionalizing whiteness in this way appears a clearly rational goal, given how much it facilitates the taxing work of distorting reality. Note, too, how analysts who overlook CBT’s materialist grounding might be inclined to reason that people of color who integrate into dominant institutions could reshape them by simply “changing the rules.” TRI precludes such an analysis by documenting white people’s totalizing control of dominant institutions already built in preplanned orientation toward white ends, including racial ignorance.

TRI thus offers a promising home for materialist analysts who want to theorize the structural basis of racial cognition but rest the source of sustained white domination and ignorance consistently – in the ongoing “purposes, reasons and needs” (Giddens 1979:7) of white people, not anthropomorphized systems. TRI accounts for the real agency of all actors; and, importantly, never loses sight of the possibility that white people may pursue goals that lead them down paths of greater resistance, whether in conformity or resistance to white domination.

How should we explain dominant white logics among people of color?

Both TRI and CBT recognize that “groups subordinated along racial, class, or gender lines develop oppositional views, ‘good sense,’ and even countercultures,” patterns that distinguish people of color’s racial cognition from white people’s (Bonilla-Silva 2011:76). Similarly, both recognize that the conditions of white domination nurture false consciousness

among people of color, some of which appears to be sincere. That said, the theories disagree about the extent of this mystification and how racialized subjectivities take form.

Bonilla-Silva uses Althusser's theory of ideology to accent how racialized subjectivities arise from institutional apparatuses that enable and constrain options for acting in the world. Althusser ([1971] 2006) argues that ideologies "recruit" individuals to subjectivity through *interpellation*, a process that "hails" individuals "along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'" (p. 86). At the moment social actors recognize ideologies are "really" addressing them, individuals are generated into subjects as an effect. Using Althusser, Bonilla-Silva argues that racial ideologies interpolate individuals similarly – as *racial* subjects: "[Racial ideology] expresses racial relations but becomes, for actors interpolated as racial subjects, indistinguishable from lived experience" (2001:71). In CBT, racial ideology "structurates" people's lives – "providing arguments to account for racial inequality;" "representing the imaginary relations among the races" (pg. 71); providing the "rules of engagement" and "racial episteme to make decisions about Other and Same" (pg. 73); providing the "basic script for actors' racial subjectivity" (p. 75); soliciting "hegemonic" consent from people of color; and, "normaliz[ing] racial inequality by portraying the particular interests of the dominant race as universal" (p. 77; see also Bonilla-Silva 2015a, 2015b).

TRI, of course, avoids naming ideological structures as an executive source of human behavior. TRI also resists the idea that racial subjectivities emerge from a generic process that works the same across racial groups. From TRI's perspective, subordinated races respond to hailing as racial subjects because they *must* under white supremacy. Meanwhile, whites need no coercion to join a racial subjectivity through which they derive substantial material benefits and discover they are "white and by that token, wonderful!" (Du Bois [1920] 1999:17). As such, TRI

rejects the inference that racial ideologies hail white people in a way that is “police”-like in any way. History reveals white workers (Ignatiev 2009; Roediger 2007) and white women (Collins 2008; Crenshaw 1991) demonstrate a remarkable capacity to somehow *avoid* being hailed to a racially inclusive class or gender subjectivity so they might answer, instead, the hail of whiteness – a status that promises, at minimum, psychic wages now and a basis to work toward privileged material benefits. History also reveals white people who become “traitors” to whiteness (see Curry 2000; Warren 2010), answering the hail of a racially inclusive humanity instead.

TRI and CBT also disagree about the nature of ideological logics and extent of people of color’s mystification. Focus on the era-based distinctions of “new racism” informs how CBT explains marginalized group experience across eras. Using Gramsci, CBT distinguishes white rule under new racism versus slavery and Jim Crow thusly:

As domination through coercion became costly, unstable, and ineffective, the form of racial domination grew hegemonic. In most contemporary racialized societies, the dominant race seeks to maintain its power through *consent*, that is, by actively seeking to convince oppressed groups to accept their norms, views, and practices ... as the ‘normal’ framework of reference. (Bonilla-Silva 2001:76)

CBT recognizes that hegemonic control is undertaken for whites’ benefit but implies this transition represents a strategic maneuver – here, whites adopt “new” hegemony over “old” coercion because it better mystifies people of color. On the matter of whether people of color consent to this domination, CBT is inconsistent. Bonilla-Silva (2001) suggests people of color are *less* mystified by whites’ hegemonic frames (p. 76; see also Bonilla-Silva 2018), but argues

[T]he ideologies of the powerful ... comfort rulers and charm the ruled much like an Indian snake handler. Whereas rulers receive solace by believing they are not involved in the terrible ordeal of creating and maintaining inequality, the ruled are charmed by the almost magic qualities of a hegemonic ideology. (2018:54)

Here, consent is implied by the idea that people of color help maintain white domination because they are so “charmed” by whites’ self-delusions that they fail to resist. One might conclude that

the success and resilience of white logics and people of color's embrace of them thus stems from dominant ideologies being "better," as in more functional and thus attractive for explaining reality. For example, CBT suggests people of color's logics are mostly "fragmentary," and not "generalized and cohesive" like white people's (Bonilla-Silva 2001:63). One could also believe white people encounter few empirical challenges and little serious resistance to their worldviews.

TRI rejects the idea that white logics are good logics if reliable empiricism is the test, along with the idea that racial ignorance among people of color represents consent to white domination. Like hailing, consent is a concept that fails to capture how limited people of color's options are for resisting white domination (Crenshaw 1988; Moore and Bell 2011). TRI explains the persistence of dominant logics as resulting from the totalizing power white people hold over racialized groups under white supremacy. TRI makes clear, people of color may be "coerced into living in worlds created and maintained by others" but should never be theorized as "consenting" to this arrangement (Crenshaw 1988:1357). Marginalized groups can be compelled to work toward whiteness (Ignatiev 2009) and perform ignorance cynically to access resources controlled by whites (Roediger 2007); but rarely if ever do they enjoy the full privileges of corporate whiteness (Mills 1997). As such, TRI predicts people of color can seldom be fully sincere in their racial ignorance and will, on general principle, choose racial consciousness over whites' "magic" when conditions allow. Furthermore, TRI accents a good deal of resistance among people of color is unrecognized – everyday resistance in the form of "silent non-compliance, acts of empowerment, non-coordinated collective ideas, ... autonomy" and other "weapons" of the racially marginalized (el-Khoury 2012:87).

How do dominant racial logics evolve and change?

The question of how racial logics evolve and change is an important one. Here, CBT struggles to inspire questions for which TRI immediately generates interest, predictions, and explanations. Reflecting on his early efforts, Bonilla-Silva (2015a) remarked that he had not provided sufficient guidance for studying the continuous process by which racial formations stay in “constant flux” (p. 79). As argued earlier, part of this challenge rests in CBT’s structure-heavy approach, which emphasizes the stability of dominant ideologies, thereby pulling attention from change and evolution. Of course, CBT identifies racial contestation as “the crucial driving force of any racialized social system” (Bonilla-Silva 2001; 2015a:77) and looks to the mobilization and resistance of racial “transgressors” as the source of change (2015b:1361). Bonilla-Silva (2001) argues, “[w]hen the counterviews of oppressed groups match periods of deep sociopolitical crisis and social upheaval, they can produce fundamental breaks and even revolutionary transformations in the social structure” (p. 77). Nonetheless, even as “crisis” and “social upheaval” gesture toward an explanatory mechanism, CBT offers no precise way to explain the conditions under which “fundamental breaks” and “revolutionary” structural shifts occur, leaving these matters to appear unpredictable. Moreover, CBT discourages attention to and minimizes the significance of everyday resistance and local contestation. Though CBT acknowledges contestation can be “expressed at the individual level,” such efforts are characterized as mostly “disjointed.” The theory privileges, instead, those rare moments when resistance “becomes collective and general” and “meaningful systemic changes in a society’s racial organization” become possible (Bonilla-Silva 2001:43). CBT is thus best equipped to explain race-making *post hoc*, primarily in reference to major historical shifts where dominant ideological “rules” change following major macro-structural changes. In short, CBT explains

changes in whites' racial consciousness primarily after the fact, in relationship to major societal shifts following "successful" antiracist mobilization.

Unlike CBT, TRI invites immediate attention to evolution and change by incorporating mechanisms for process and flux throughout. Beginning with epistemology as a mechanism and continuing with an emphasis on practice, TRI explains *how* ignorance and other logics are generated – sometimes creatively – in local contexts and through institutions. TRI then uses interest convergence to establish and predict the particular conditions that produce progressions and regressions in white racial consciousness, again locally and institutionally. Notably, TRI does not regard the question of whether white logics progress and regress as resting on people of color's will and tenacity to see through the "magic" of white hegemony and mobilize collectively; TRI assumes whites' totalizing hold on power makes it possible for white people to resist progressive evolutions in racial consciousness on many occasions, when whites' interests are untethered to the interests of subordinated groups. Indeed, TRI establishes that because of whites' corporate power, racism and white ignorance (in all its infinite possible incantations) are both "here to stay" (Bell 1991:79). That said, TRI accents the permanence of racism as an invitation to new insight and more effective planning (Bell 1991:79; see also Bell 1992a; 1992b). In predicting conditions likely to be conducive to progressive advancements, TRI helps guide ideological resistance whether one's methods are internalized, interpersonal, or institutional; or take the form of cultural, educational, intellectual, administrative, or political interventions, formal or grassroots. In contrast, without a defined mechanism that can explain how transformations occur and predict when strategies of resistance are likely to be successful (or not), CBT may misguide practical efforts more often than necessary. Finally, TRI is not so quick

to dismiss the significance of everyday ideological contestation. Here, TRI explains and advises “revolutions of the everyday;” that is, forms of resistance that may not establish a new racial order but which are nonetheless effective and meaningful, particularly when it comes to nurturing a less despairing, “more satisfying,” liberated existence (Bell 1991:79) and countering “the invisible facts of domination” for oneself and one’s community (el-Khoury 2012:87).

Deploying TRI Empirically

While my primary goal has been to elaborate TRI as a theory, TRI joins recent efforts to establish an agenda for studying ignorance and racial ignorance, in particular (see e.g., Mueller 2018; Jung 2015; McGoey 2012). Research described in the tenets and the above discussion begin to shed light on questions TRI is suited to explore. Here, I extend further ideas for using TRI empirically.

TRI addresses an array of questions at all levels of analysis and can be used with a variety of data. TRI is particularly well-suited for studying *how* (and *why*) people produce and abide by ignorance. In terms of micro-analysis, TRI moves beyond the common focus on codifying people’s attitudes and lay analyses of racial phenomena (e.g., naturalization). Though TRI can still produce this kind of “frame typology,” the theory better explains how agency and motive influence the development and use of logics, not just broadly but often in reference to particular goals. Here, TRI focuses attention on the *cognitive tactics* people use to generate ignorance (e.g., evading discourse, selecting certain types of information over others) and the *ends* that motivate these behaviors (e.g., securing resources, feeling righteous). TRI especially invites interview, focus group, and experimental studies that strategically disrupt normative ignorance under conditions favorable for critical racial learning and knowing. Such approaches

elevate the labor and creativity involved in sustaining, resisting, or yielding to ideological views.

Breaching studies of this sort can tackle a variety of meaningful questions: What conditions lead people to hold fast to (or abandon) ignorance? Are some forms of ignorance more entrenched, some more malleable? Are some groups more amenable to critical learning than others; and if so, which and why? Indeed, note how TRI invites forth intersectional studies that consider how power, positionality, and other types of domination influence the mechanisms by which ignorance is claimed, practiced, or solidified. Researchers could examine how class, gender, and sexuality shape the contours of white ignorance; whether intersectional positionalities amplify or weaken tendencies toward ignorance; and test predictions about whether (and under what conditions) race overrides other statuses. Relatedly, researchers can study the ease (or challenges) to disrupting ignorance among people of color, and evaluate how gender, sexual orientation, religiosity, class and other markers of identity shape willingness to embrace or reject ignorance. Indeed, TRI opens up avenues to co-theorize intersecting structures of ignorance related to gender, class, and sexuality.

Meso-level approaches benefit from TRI's attention to the ways formal structures merge with everyday actions to solidify white institutional space under a system of white supremacy. TRI directs ethnographers to examine not only how ignorance is cultivated in a field, but also what people *do* with ignorance in particular settings and the practical logics that influence people's behavior outside of conscious awareness. Institutional analysts could study how (and why) powerful, elite actors coerce ignorance, not just interpersonally, but also by structuring affordances for ignorance into organizational logics (see e.g., Moore 2014); and how others adopt and defend or resist ignorance in response to conditions where counternarratives are

repressed and perhaps penalized (see e.g. el-Khoury 2012; Evans and Moore 2015). Moreover, ethnographers can capitalize on field methods that combine direct political action with research – what Jung (2015) calls “observant participation” (p. 51). Imagine, for example, researchers in educational or corporate settings observing how various stakeholders respond to diversity and inclusion proposals that demand resource redistribution and real power sharing. These kinds of active interventions disrupt the smooth reproduction of racism in organizational contexts, rendering previously implicit practices visible (Jung 2015). Researchers could also reimagine or revisit existing ethnographies to examine how TRI reframes findings. For example, what would TRI elevate in Hagerman’s (2018) multi-neighborhood study of colorblindness among young white children? If children aren’t just passively socialized into colorblindness, as Hagerman argues, do ends animate how they rework color-blind logics, and if so, how? Do family or neighborhood-level distinctions generate unique patterns of ignorance or epistemic maneuvers?

One could imagine comparative-historical work as well, that considers how ignorance is produced through common or different maneuvers across time or location. Consider Kendi’s (2016) study of racially contradictory ideas among “great American thinkers” over U.S. history; and, again, Moore’s (2014) and Henrick’s (2018) comparative historical analyses of Supreme Court jurisprudence and congressional decision-making. Relatedly, while TRI is a U.S.-centered theory, racism is a modern *global* project; one which gives rise to particular racial orders situated in a broader relational field defined by white supremacy (Christian 2018; Mills 2015). As such, transnational scholars could study localized patterns of racial ignorance and how these relate across contexts. Promising models include Ahmed’s (2012) study comparing how higher education institutions in the U.K. and Australia “look over” racism through diversity work; and

Beaman and Petts' (Forthcoming) study comparing colorblind ideology in France and the U.S.

Researchers can also use unobtrusive methods like content and discourse analysis to study how affordances for ignorance are structured into cultural products and practices. Here, TRI directs attention to evidence of what *is* there (i.e., textual or discursive patterns), as well as that which is not but which could or arguably *should* be. Exemplary are Glover's (2019) study of college criminology textbooks, which strategically silence, marginalize, or amplify racial demographics to reify white ideological perspectives; Pérez and Ward's (2019) analysis of "racist blue humor" – racially derogatory police jokes that normalize dehumanization, legitimize violence, and facilitate "nonrecognition" of racial harm; and Teeger and Vinitzky-Seroussi's (2007) work documenting how museums circumscribe how visitors "read" racially-themed exhibits to minimize what is known and emphasize white-comforting narratives.

Finally, TRI can be used with survey or other forms of secondary data to examine relationships between regional concentrations of ignorance or test ideas about broader fields of "structured ignorance." Consider Jung's (2015) clever study analyzing how *New York Times* unemployment reporting waxes and wanes relative to racial differences in unemployment statistics produced by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Examining these two dominant institutions over a 460-month period (beginning in 1972, when the Department of Labor began collecting data on black unemployment), Jung finds that white, black, and overall unemployment rates are highly correlated with coverage in the *Times*; however, black unemployment is the *least* predictive and white unemployment the *most* (even more so than the overall rate). Moreover, Jung observes that the *Times* is neither more nor less likely to publish articles on unemployment even as racial inequality faced by blacks relative to whites deepens. Jung concludes these

patterns evidence a depraved apathy about black suffering that is not just knowable, but *known*; in short, an indifference rooted in the most perverse type of white ignorance.

CONCLUSION

TRI is clear, “[r]acism, like all structures, cannot be reduced to material interests, or resources” (Jung 2015:47). As such, analyzing the social epistemologies and psychological processes that reinforce racism so we can challenge and destroy them will remain an important agenda. TRI aims to support this work by delineating the breadth and depth of the “contractual terms” (Mills 1997) by which white domination is secured and reproduced, so those focused on resistance can be as racially realistic as possible about the challenges we face, and strategic in our efforts (Bell 1992b). Nonetheless, accepting the persistence and permanence of white domination and ignorance opens, too, the continual threat “disabling despair” (Bell 1992a:ix). As such, TRI aims to support, too, the ongoing task of determining when, where, and how to direct our precious energies. There is no essence that *demand*s white people remain allegiant to a lie that underwrites so much violence and suffering. And to be sure, the choice to participate in dehumanization “marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it” (Freire 1970:44). In this sense, white people not only negate the humanity of people of color by holding to racial ignorance militantly; we frustrate our own calling to become “more fully human” (p. 44). By destabilizing white fantasies to pursue the most immediate goal of racial liberation, TRI thus hails everyone to join a more beautiful struggle – toward humanization, “the people’s vocation” (p. 44).

NOTES

¹ For many, the term “cognition” calls up subfield literatures in cultural sociology and social psychology, if not cognitive psychology. Though I derive many insights from these traditions, my use flows primarily from critical philosophers who discuss cognition in relation to social epistemologies that emerge among “social groups, within a given social milieu, in a society at a particular time period” (Mills 2001:14). A germane reference point, Charles Mills writes that 19th century Marxism located “the individual agent and individual cognizer in group ... structures of domination” (2001:14). I am compelled, as well, by the term’s parsimony and because it marks an important assumption; namely, that the sum total of what people know (or don’t know) is far greater than what can be captured in the realm of conscious thought and explicit discourse. In this sense, my work aligns with key debates on culture and cognition, even as space prohibits full engagement with this literature.

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