Critical Race Theory, Afro-Pessimism, and Racial Progress Narratives

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Abstract
Much work in the sociology of race and ethnicity centers on an underlying narrative of racial progress. Progress narratives are typically conceptualized as a linear process of slow, yet inevitable, improvement. Drawing on Critical Race Theory and Afro-Pessimism, theoretical perspectives that emerged outside of the discipline of sociology, this paper urges a rethinking of linear progress narratives. First we elucidate the central tenets of these theoretical paradigms. We then apply them to diversity and labor market research, providing suggestions for how sociology can incorporate these perspectives.

Keywords
critical race theory, Afro-pessimism, labor markets, diversity, organizations

THE LIMITS OF RACIAL PROGRESS NARRATIVES
In 2008, Barack Obama won the presidency on a message of “hope.” His rise was celebrated around the world as evidence of racial progress in the United States, a country with a long and brutal history of slavery and racism. Although some cautioned that Obama’s election was not unvarnished evidence that America was shedding its racist roots (see Bonilla-Silva 2014), for many Americans President Obama’s election symbolized a postracial era. Donald Trump’s election has shattered the collective hallucination of postracialism. Trump’s campaign—focused on racial fear, intolerance, and xenophobia—secured the presidency. Trump embraced an open racism that scholars have claimed is uncharacteristic of the post-civil rights era. The so-called alt-right—white supremacists who publicly advocate for the pursuit of a white nation-state—were key supporters of Trump’s campaign. Trump has refused to distance himself from these supporters, elevating Steve Bannon, a key alt-right leader, to chief White House strategist. Given these dramatic changes in the political environment, scholars of race and ethnicity should critically reevaluate racial progress narratives that were furthered by Obama’s election.

In this essay, we draw on critical race theory (CRT) and Afro-pessimism, two theoretical perspectives that emerged outside of sociology, to interrogate the idea of racial progress, specifically as it relates to diversity and labor market research. Thus, although we are united in our critique of racial progress narratives as insufficient to explain the racial order, we apply different theoretical

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perspectives to arrive at our shared conclusion. Victor Ray focuses on works in progress—theorizing organizations and racial progress through the lens of CRT (Ray and Seamster 2016). Antonia Randolph highlights the utility of Afro-pessimism, a body of theory that is relentlessly focused on the historical specificity of antiblackness. Megan Underhill examines diversity’s association with whiteness and explores how our contemporary embrace of diversity should not be understood as a postracial victory, as it is often whites rather than minorities whom diversity benefits most. David Luke revisits the well-known debates on the primacy of race, class, or culture as determinants of economic inequality, illustrating how this longstanding conflict shapes current scholarship and delineating where this research should go next.

CRT AND RACIAL PROGRESS

Sociologists of race and ethnicity typically eschew the prejudice paradigm in favor of structural critiques of racial inequality (Golash-Boza 2016). Although structural understandings of racial inequality share intellectual precursors with the legal scholarship known as CRT, these two literatures differ on some key theoretical assumptions. Arising to explain the massive white resistance to civil rights era changes, CRT examines central sociological concerns, such as the relationship between institutionalized discrimination and organizational processes (Moore 2008) and the social force of whiteness (Hughey 2010; Lewis 2004). Unlike the tradition of sociological scholarship focused on racial progress (Myrdal 1944; Wilson 1978), which tends toward optimism, CRT sees progress as contingent, and reversible. Bracey (2015) argued that CRT, because of its refusal to accept linear notions of progress, better explains reversals of legislation such as the Voting Rights Act. We join several scholars who have recently pushed for a greater cross-fertilization between CRT and sociological theories of race (Brown 2004; Burton et al. 2010; Moore 2007), because CRT provides a theoretically consistent explanation for empirical patterns.

Greater engagement with the legal tradition of CRT helps sociologists better explain the relative degree and types of racial progress in the United States (Omi and Winant 2015) and the undertheorization of race in the sociology of organizations (Wooten 2006). Two ideas in particular—Bell’s (1991) “racial realism” thesis, which argues that racism is a permanent structural feature of the United States, and “interest convergence” (Bell 1980), which sees changes in the racial order resulting from shared white and black interests—provide theoretical purchase to these problems. Racial realism directs attention to the changing proximate mechanisms producing racial inequality, while not losing sight of the overarching structure of racial inequality. Interest convergence is predictive, allowing potentially testable hypotheses regarding the likelihood of progressive, and regressive, changes in the racial structure (Bracey 2015).

Racial Progress in American Sociology

The idea of racial progress haunts American sociology (Steinberg 2001). Early eugenic accounts couched ideas of racial progress in evolutionary metaphors ranking “civilizations.” Race was considered immutable biology, and progress was measured by one’s assimilability (Jung 2009). Even Du Bois, who rejected biological accounts of race (Morris 2015), often relied on metaphors implying progress as measured in relation to whiteness. These accounts of racial progress as a relatively linear process traveling in only one direction (Wilson 1978) should be questioned by race scholars. Take for example declines in racial employment gaps that occurred in the 1970s and into the early 1980s. Variable-based (Zuberi 2001) and historical accounts (Wilson 1978) of these changes were interpreted as racial progress, because it appeared that white and black employment rates were converging. This artificially simplified a complex set of interactions that were better understood as reshuffling of relations in a racialized social system (Bonilla-Silva 1997; Hughey, Embrick, and Doane 2015) on the basis of fundamentally racialized relations of sub- and superordination (Ray and Seamster 2016). For example, the rise of mass incarceration as a form of racialized social control (Alexander 2012; Western and Pettit 2005) co-occurred with an apparent decrease in black male unemployment. However, many of the employment gains that prior analyses claimed resulted from changes in the legal structure were nearly erased when incarcerated black men were included in the analysis. Racialized incarceration masked a fundamental continuity; because institutionalized populations are not included in “nationally representative” samples, measures of progress were inflated (Western and Pettit 2005). Yet a racialized narrative of improvement still grips the sociological imagination.

Another problem with progress narratives is that they remain mired in assimilationist paradigms that
accept the fundamental legitimacy of dominant (white) cultural norms and institutions (Carbado, Fisk, and Gulati 2008; Jung 2009). Measuring progress in this manner reifies whiteness as the norm. The whiteness of mainstream organizations remains an unquestioned default category, and symbolic inclusion in white cultural organizations stands in for substantive reform. Ultimately, models that assume the inevitability of racial progress cannot account for (1) the long-standing intractability of racial gaps in nearly every area of social life, (2) changes in forms and types of racial exclusion, and (3) the many countermovements against racial equality.

As the #blacklivesmatter movement has made clear (Yamahatta-Taylor 2016), many problems facing communities of color are transformations in the form—not content—of racial domination. Racialized policing, economic exclusion, and differential access to nearly every mainstream institution are constants for people of color. Trump's rise, on a platform of open white nationalism, should, at a minimum, give proponents of progress narratives pause. A CRT approach to racial progress simultaneously highlights changing mechanisms and hierarchical stability (Ray and Seamster 2016).

Organizations are a primary domain in which one can apply this approach. Although the dominant theories in the sociology of race and ethnicity are focused on macro-level state interactions (Omi and Winant 2015) or individual level prejudice or racial ideology, organizations are key meso-level arbiters in the reproduction of racism and race itself. Organizations are where most inter- and intraracial interactions occur, shaping both individual prejudice and state policies allocating resources. For instance, the addition of a diversity office or changing legal regulations may be taken as prima facie evidence of progress (Wimmer 2015). However, diversity programs have done little to change the hierarchy of power and privilege within organizations (Embrick 2011). Furthermore, diversity programming may reinforce occupational segregation as people of color are cordoned off from positions with authority and mobility opportunities (Collins 1997) or be used as a legal mechanism signaling formal compliance with discrimination law (Dobbin 2009). Formal compliance with post-civil rights legal regimes is not a racial panacea. In fact, compliance may simply make racial inequality harder to detect and combat as institutional change is taken as a synonym for progress (Acker 2006).

Instead of viewing racial progress as a linear affair, an adequate theory of racial progress should be able to account not only for decreasing economic gaps (Wilson 1978) but also shifting mechanisms reproducing changes in racial inequality in response to minority gains. Taken together, interest convergence and racial realism claim that changes in the racial order are relatively superficial, and typically benefit whites as much as, if not more than, people of color. Furthermore, changes in the racial order are reversible and analysts should predict backlash as whites respond in ways that maintain white privilege and power.

**AFRO-PESSIMIST APPROACHES TO RACIAL PROGRESS**

Afro-pessimism is an influential account of antiblackness among humanities scholars, which sociologists have been slow to adopt. Although Afro-pessimism shares CRT's skepticism about the racial progress narrative, it departs from CRT in several ways. Afro-pessimism insists upon the distinctness of antiblackness from other forms of racism. Antiblackness is the notion that the construction of blacks as nonhuman structures the status of all other racial groups (Sexton 2016).

Afro-pessimism also resists the push to abandon the black-white binary for studying race in the West. Instead, Afro-pessimism argues that existing scholarship inaccurately portrays the black-white binary's role in structuring racial inequality. Afro-pessimism replaces the binary between whites and blacks with an antagonism between blacks and nonblacks. Therefore, for Afro-pessimism, antiblackness, not white supremacy, explains the social conditions of blacks across the globe (Sexton 2016). Afro-pessimism challenges the idea that a triracial hierarchy is emerging and would identify the “collective black” as a construct hiding the specificity of being a person of African descent (Bonilla-Silva 2004). Additionally, Afro-pessimism critiques the construct “people of color” as inadequately conflating largely incomparable group experiences.

Afro-pessimism is also concerned with slavery and slavery's “afterlife,” or how slavery lives on in modern times (Hartman 1997). A basic tenet of Afro-pessimism is that slavery has changed form since its formal abolition (Sexton 2016). Sociologists such as Loïc Wacquant have made similar claims. Wacquant (2002) outlined four “peculiar institutions” of black subordination, claiming mass incarceration is the functional surrogate of slavery. Historians and criminologists have begun to focus on the legacy of slavery, charting the empirical continuities and divergences in markets, organizations (Roediger and Esch 2012), and the penal system (Wacquant 2002). Mainstream scholars of race and ethnicity could advance this trend.
Social Death and the Afterlife of Slavery

Racial slavery distinguishes the social location of blacks from that of other racial minorities. Slavery produced blacks as beings considered nonhuman, as they lacked human markers: ownership of their bodies and the ability to reason (Sorrentino 2016). Enlightenment philosophers developed their ideas about what it means to be human during the era of the transatlantic slave trade. Definitions of human-ity excluded the status of being enslaved (Sorrentino 2016). The meaning of whiteness as human (free, rational) developed in antagonism to the meaning of blackness as nonhuman (enslaved, incapable of reason). Africans emerged from the middle passage and slavery as blacks, a racialized group of not quite humans and the permanently subjugated property of whites (Sorrentino 2016). Scholars called this permanent subjugation social death (Patterson 1982).

The idea that Western democratic ideals are predicated on the exclusion of racialized others is not new (Mills 1999). What is new is Afro-pessimism's claim that slavery and the middle passage, through the experience of social death, gave blacks a different ontology than other racial groups. Three characteristics define slavery as social death: natal alienation, gratuitous violence, and social dishonor (Patterson 1982). Natal alienation refers to the way slavery severed Africans' ties to their family and to Africa. Blacks (not Africans) are a people without a homeland and without a legitimate tie to family (Sexton 2010b). Gratuitous violence refers to the structural violence whites used to establish and maintain slavery. Blacks have been and continue to be subjected to violence simply because they were black (Sexton 2010a). Blacks' low status in every corner of society was a manifestation of their social dishonor. Thus, slavery attempted to turn blacks into objects to be stockpiled and sold, rather than agentic human subjects (Spillers 1987). The status of social death extended to all diasporic blacks, slave or free, because free blacks could be captured and sold into slavery, a condition from which even the lowliest of whites were protected (Sexton 2016).

This afterlife of slavery is also evident in the way blacks remain subject to gratuitous violence and natal alienation, as well as in the warehousing of blacks in prisons and lower income neighborhoods (R.L.. 2013). In this light, Michelle Alexander's (2012) work on the criminal justice system as "the new Jim Crow" investigates gratuitous violence, while Dorothy Roberts's (1998) work on the criminalization of black drug-addicted mothers investigates natal alienation. Roberts, for instance, begins her history of black women being stripped of their right to parent within slavery. Roberts recounts the practice of white masters whipping pregnant black women with their bellies face down to show that the state was interested in black women as vessels for reproducing their property, rather than as mothers (Roberts 1991).

Critique of "People of Color" as a Construct

The experience of slavery and the social death it engendered give blacks a distinct ontology that has consequences for civil society and the possibility of cross-racial coalitions. Like CRT, Afro-pessimism argues that blacks are excluded from civil society. This means that a politics seeking redress from the state will likely fail. Afro-pessimism argues that racial slavery has no analogy, and thus the plight of blacks cannot be compared with the situation of nonblack people of color (Wilderson 2010). Moreover, Afro-pessimism argues that coalitional politics do not advance the interest of blacks. Instead, coalitions result in "people-of-color-blindness" that hides the specificity of antiblackness (Sexton 2010b). Afro-pessimism argues that nonblack people of color co-opt the tactics of the civil rights movement yet must abandon blacks to gain rights from the state.

Sociologists have also argued that the emphasis on the shared subordination of people of color hides how nonblack minorities reproduce antiblackness. Gans (1999) opined that the coming racial order would be defined by a black/nonblack divide, rather than a white/nonwhite one. Treitler (2013) contended that racialized minorities from Chinese Americans to Native Americans have undertaken ethnic projects to distance themselves from African Americans so that they could be viewed as ethnic groups, rather than racial ones. Indeed, Waters's (1999) classic finding that black West Indians strive to make known their ethnic difference from African Americans supports the claim that the advancement of racialized groups requires antiblackness.

Yet although race scholars have noted the specificity of antiblackness, few have questioned the usefulness of the construct of people of color. Generally, Afro-pessimism's critique of the construct of "people of color" raises an empirical question as to whether racialized minorities do distance themselves or otherwise subordinate African Americans when pursuing rights from the state. Theoretically, Afro-pessimism raises questions about how we conceptualize the racial order. Although Gans (1999) believes that a black/nonblack hierarchy is in the
offing. Afro-pessimism argues that it has always been in place.

Afro-pessimist theory has not paid much attention to distinctions among blacks, for instance, by examining whether native-born blacks are treated differently than immigrant blacks in the United States. Scholars have applied the theory to blacks in other parts of the diaspora, such as Brazil, showing that social death happened wherever blacks landed in the New World (Alves 2016). In short, blacks of whatever ethnicity experience the effects of social death and the afterlife of slavery to the extent that society views them as black. Still, Afro-pessimists have argued that those who identify solely as mixed race rather than as black are trying to escape the dehumanization that comes with blackness (Sexton 2008). This suggests that Afro-pessimists believe that blacks perpetuate antiblackness, just as nonblack people of color do.

The Centrality of Antiblackness

Afro-pessimism pushes us to conceptualize antiblackness as a force that is distinct from white supremacy. Most formulations of race-based systems of domination treat the subordination of specific racialized groups as branches off the tree of white supremacy. Settler colonialism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, and nativism have their own logics, but they are rooted in white supremacy. Afro-pessimism suggests that antiblackness is its own tree that intersects with white supremacy but is always operating by its own logic of dehumanizing blacks. Other racial groups achieve their subjectivity and citizenship through “othering” blacks, because humanity is measured through distance from blackness (Sexton 2016). Scholars of race and ethnicity would have to conceptualize this antagonism between blacks and all other racial groups. The conceptualization of black debasement is total within Afro-pessimism; that is what is meant by describing blackness as an ontology or a structure of being. This sweeping view of what race means could be a reason that philosophers and other humanities scholars have adopted Afro-pessimist thought more readily than social scientists. It is hard to measure or prove a racial “ontology,” as opposed to something more familiar to sociologists, like a racial “identity” (Sexton 2016).

As we can see, Afro-pessimism is as suspicious of the racial progress narrative as CRT is. Afro-pessimists would endorse the idea that racial realism and interest convergence better explain gains that people of color have made rather than racial progress. However, Afro-pessimism adds new concerns about whether antiblackness subsumes white supremacy, rather than the inverse, and whether “people of color” is a useful construct for studying race and ethnicity. Although contemporary research on diversity and on the race-class-culture matrix resounds with evidence that racial progress has been overstated, evidence of the claims of Afro-pessimism is more muted. In the reviews of research on diversity and on race and economic inequality below, we show how CRT and Afro-pessimism could fruitfully shape the current research.

DIVERSITY AND PROGRESS

In line with the interest convergence hypothesis, diversity initiatives rose to prominence in the 1980s in response to the Reagan administration’s dismantling of affirmative action. During this period, federally supported policies to redress racial inequality were replaced with voluntary diversity initiatives promoting the inclusion of underrepresented groups, racial or otherwise (Kelly and Dobbin 1998). White conservatives played a decisive role in limiting affirmative action’s restorative authority often via legal action. Such recent historical evidence reveals diversity’s close association with whiteness. Thus, it is not simply that “diversity is for white people” but rather that diversity itself is a product of whiteness (Berrey 2015a).

Given diversity’s white roots, it should surprise few that whites rather than people of color are the primary beneficiaries of the current “diversity moment” (Berrey 2015; Burke 2012; Mayorga-Gallo 2014; Randolph 2013). Below, we examine the advantages white individuals and organizations derive from diversity, identify areas for future research, and conclude with a brief discussion of why diversity is not emblematic of racial progress.

Diversity’s Individual Value

The insight that American understandings of diversity are informed by whiteness was first asserted by bell hooks in her 1992 book Black Looks. Sociologists Joyce Bell and Douglas Hartmann (2007:909) further developed this perspective, arguing dominant conceptions of diversity emanate from a white center wherein racial minorities are “outside contributors” or “addons” to white life. This idea resonates with CRT’s contention that Western ideas about humanity position people of color as the eternal “other” to whites (Mills 1999).

This white framing of diversity means that many whites, but specifically middle-class whites,
construct diversity as a source of personal enrichment (Burke 2012; Reay et al. 2007). By consuming diversity—or as hooks (1992) described, “eating the other”—middle-class whites achieve racial and class distinction. Embracing diversity allows them to position themselves as a different kind of white—one who is tolerant, progressive, and cosmopolitan (Burke 2012; Hughey 2012; Mayorga-Gallo 2014).

This finding points to a weakness in the diversity literature. To date, most diversity research focuses on the perceptions and practices of middle- and upper-class whites. Working- and lower-class whites are rarely studied. Now is an important time to investigate how they think about diversity, especially considering the media’s contention that Trump’s antidiversity base (i.e., those supporters who chant “build a wall” at his rallies) consists of less privileged whites. Although perhaps true, the media’s depiction of working- and lower-class whites as uniformly racist warrants further study, as some research indicates they (especially women) are more tolerant of minorities than middle-class whites (Bonilla-Silva 2014).

Furthermore, scholars’ focus on white understandings of diversity overshadows research on how racial minorities make sense of diversity. Drawing from the insights of CRT and racial socialization research, we know that racialization varies by racial group and that these differing experiences often produce distinct ways of seeing and interpreting the social world (Burton et al. 2010). Consequently, it stands to reason that minority perspectives of diversity may vary by racial group and that not all minorities understand diversity through a lens of white normativity. Diversity statements by #blacklivesmatter activists support this contention. They too espouse an inclusive vision of diversity, but they center their understanding within the black experience. Additional research is needed to assess how minorities from different racial backgrounds and social structural locations understand diversity.

**Diversity’s Organizational Value**

Diversity enriches (white) organizations. A diverse constituency helps an organization position itself as a stalwart supporter of an inclusive work environment, even if the organization is less inclusive than it purports (Embrick 2006). Diversity also improves business outcomes; employees of color help businesses expand into emerging markets via the identification, design, and marketing of products that appeal to a broader demographic of consumers (Herring 2009; Kelley and Dobbin 1998). In universities, diversity is thought to enrich student learning, particularly for whites, by adding color and complexity to their academic experience (Berrey 2015). That said, research offers some support for the singularity of antiblackness, showing that schools reward immigrant minorities to the extent that they are different from African Americans (Randolph 2013).

Diversity researchers are more ambivalent about the benefits minorities derive from organizational diversity initiatives. We know, for example, that white women experienced the greatest educational and employment gains from affirmative action (Collins 2011; Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006). Thus, the question many struggle with is why minority outcomes have not been more robust. For some researchers, the answer is linked to the white centering of organizational culture (Collins 2011; Embrick 2006, 2011; Moore and Bell 2011). Like the individual-oriented diversity scholarship, white organizations construct diversity as an “addendum to the core function in a company” (Collins 2011:535). For example, of the 708 private enterprises Kalev et al. (2006) assessed from 1971 to 2002, most pursued diversity initiatives focused on bias reduction, even though such initiatives were expensive and relatively ineffective because of whites’ perceptions of “reverse discrimination” (p. 611). Theoretical and empirical research is needed to delineate what a successful diversity initiative might look like and also what it is capable of achieving.

More research is also needed to test whether diversity practices reproduce antiblackness. A strategy would be to disaggregate diversity practices toward different racialized groups. That is, do different racial and ethnic minorities enjoy different benefits from the diversity regimes of organizations? Some research suggests that corporations make distinctions among minorities that reinforce the subordination of black Americans. For instance, research on skilled labor in California finds that employers prefer Latinos to African Americans because they believe Latinos are more compliant (Waldinger and Lichter 2003). Afro-pessimism and CRT both caution against the practice of lumping people of color together, because it obscures the unequal distribution of racial gains.

**Diversity as Racial Progress?**

The question most diversity researchers grapple with is whether diversity signals racial progress.
For most researchers, the answer is no. Part of the problem stems from the white centering of diversity. When whites think about racial diversity only in terms of the value it adds to white individuals and organizations, they reduce minority life and concerns to commodities whites may consume for pleasure or advantage (hooks 1993; Hughey 2012; Mayorga-Gallo 2014). This consumption-oriented embrace of diversity contributes to a white fetishization of diversity that elevates white individuals and organizations but does less for the racial groups they purport to embrace.

Diversity’s lack of conceptual specificity also inhibits progressive change. The term diversity does not privilege any one identity or relation of power. Rather, it positions all structural locations as equal, obfuscating the unique histories of oppressed racial groups. Individual or organizational avowals of support for “diversity” are thus not necessarily declarations of support for racial equality. As the meaning of the word has expanded to signify the inclusion of “difference,” it has moved away from affirmative action’s mandate to redress racial inequality (Collins 2011; Embrick 2011; Moore and Bell 2011).

Furthermore, because diversity today represents racial presence, emphasis is placed on the intentions of individuals and organizations rather than outcomes (Mayorga-Gallo 2014). This allows individuals and organizations to avoid the issue of racial inequality and absolves them of having to consider or redress racial disparities. The consequence is that racial inequality continues to flourish but within an environment that appears more sensitive and responsive to race-related matters (Moore and Bell 2011).

PROGRESS AND BACKLASH IN LABOR MARKET RESEARCH

Historically, scholars have followed a racial progress narrative in their accounts of the inclusion of people of color into the labor market. This research takes the upward mobility of racialized groups such as Asian Americans and some Latinos as signs of the success of the open opportunity structure in the United States (Portes and Fernandez-Kelly 2008). Yet the consistent lag of blacks within the labor market has interrupted the narrative of seamless mobility of racialized groups (Wilson 1997). CRT challenges the narrative of smooth economic mobility, and Afro-pessimism highlights the conditions that make black economic immobility distinct.

W.E.B. Du Bois was one of the first scholars to examine the economic conditions of the black community. His pioneering The Philadelphia Negro (Du Bois [1899] 1996) continues to influence scholarship in this field, and studies from the Atlanta Sociological Laboratory helped establish a legacy of research on the so-called Negro problem (Wright 2006). More than a century later, many of the issues identified by Du Bois—economic exclusion, racialized policing, and disproportionate poverty—remain central areas of sociological inquiry.

Contemporary research on race and the labor market has been deeply shaped by the debates surrounding William Julius Wilson’s (1978) concept of the urban “underclass.” Beginning with his controversial 1978 argument in The Declining Significance of Race, Wilson’s work has changed somewhat over the years in efforts to clarify his perspective. Generally, Wilson now contends that changes to the structure of the labor market and patterns of migration that produce skill and spatial mismatch and high levels of joblessness in urban ghettos are primary causes of racial economic inequality (Wilson 2009).

However, Wilson (1978, 2009) also says that these conditions produce cultural adaptations that are not conducive to upward mobility. Furthermore, he argues that the liberal reaction to popular culture of poverty arguments has created a climate in which liberal academics are afraid to explore culture as a possible component in the stratification of the African American urban underclass; he argues that culture is a factor, but not as significant as larger structural issues (Wilson 1978, 1987, 2009). Considering black/white inequality in the United States, residential segregation is certainly a factor when it comes to job prospects and employment, as skill and spatial mismatch issues come into play (Jankowski, Luke, and Oliver 2014). Furthermore, residential segregation also has a tremendous impact on wealth inequality, as the investments of black families in housing did not appreciate at nearly the same rates as most white families in the post–World War II era of suburbanization (Conley 2009; Oliver and Shapiro 2006; Sin and Krysan 2015).

How Sociologists Study Race and the Labor Market

Some of the most promising current studies of labor market inequality include audit studies (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2003; Dovidio and Gaertner 2000; Pager 2007). Devah Pager’s 2007 book Marked is a classic example of an audit study.
In the book, Pager randomizes the race and criminal justice status of job applicants and finds that in her study, among other things, a white applicant with a criminal record is more likely to be called back for a job he or she applied to than a black applicant with no criminal record. In this example, the potential for intersectional examinations of discrimination in the labor market is evident. Studies using data from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) complicate the narrative of white women’s disproportionate gains from the civil rights movement, showing that weakened enforcement by the EEOC has limited gains from affirmative action policies (Roscigno 2007; Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey 2012).

Furthermore, individuals have used interviews to explore how social networks perpetuate and reproduce racial inequality, sometimes systematically through black applicants lacking access to referrals, apprenticeships, or other opportunities (Janoski et al. 2014; Royster and Steinberg 2003). A CRT perspective informed by “interest convergence” would ask how decreases in black/white inequality can lead to white backlash, as whites see the benefits of other groups as their own losses (Bell 1980; Feagin and Vera 1995).

**Incorporating CRT and Afro-Pessimism in Sociological Labor Market Research**

The work of Wilson and others on the black “underclass” is important and problematic, as the focus on inner-city black poverty neglects the poverty of rural African Americans, people of other races, and multiracial individuals (Wilson 1978, 1987). Although from the perspective of Afro-pessimism, it makes sense in the United States to pay attention to differences in educational outcomes in different areas because of the long history and contemporary realities of black exceptionalism, this should not be to the neglect of other groups. Furthermore, cross-national comparative studies of race and economics would enrich our understanding of commonalities and differences in the market production of racial inequality. Similarly, artificially homogenized racial categories leave little room for variation within the categories; for example, exploring socioeconomic status beyond the aggregate categories of Latino or Asian, or exploring how immigrant groups economically “assimilate.”

Considering the malleability of racial categories and their change over time, as interracial romantic relationships have been on a small but significant rise, the population of individuals who identify as multiracial has increased (Luke and Oser 2014; Rockquemore and Brunsma 2002). What are some of the consequences for this in terms of labor market research? As just one example, multiracial individuals who identify as black with a white parent and a white parent may have access to some of their white parents’ social networks and may be advantaged in the labor market relative to those who identify as black. Additionally, research indicates that colorism affects the wage gap, such that darker skinned black men are paid less than their fairer skinned counterparts (Goldsmith, Hamilton, and Darity 2007).

How might policy be informed by this research? Some prominent scholars have made a case for reparations (Coates 2014; Conley 2009; Feagin 2010). Their primary opposition, beyond white reticence, is not to the principle of reparations, which can be justified by referencing historical payments to other groups (e.g., Japanese internment camp reparations), but the argument that reparations are too difficult to administer fairly. Difficulties surrounding the administration of payments and determining reasonable amounts remain. Darity, Lahiri, and Frank (2010) showed that poorly administered payments may exacerbate racial income gaps given blacks lack of access to productive capital. Critical race theorists have long supported reparations as an intervention to both historic and ongoing racial exclusion (Matsuda 1987). Reparations could be considered part of what CRT has called “radical emancipation by law” (Bell 1995), which reshapes racial structures through legislation.

**CONCLUSION**

We broadly argue that the tools of CRT and Afro-pessimism are currently underused within the sociology of race and ethnicity. Specifically, we see promise for further incorporating aspects of these theoretical traditions into the substantive areas of research on diversity and race in the labor market (as two examples). Scholars who study race and racism should challenge narratives of linear racial progress. Additionally, we encourage an orientation toward the “radical emancipation by law” when studying racial inequality and its systemic and legal roots. As interest convergence predicts, the embrace of diversity benefits whites more than people of color. Diversity rhetoric and the phrase “people of color” obscure differences among racialized minority groups. Still, there is some research suggesting that diversity practices reproduce antiblackness, as Afro-pessimism would predict. Diversity discourse may be the height of the
rational progress narrative at the current moment, with its “happy talk” of transcending race and embracing difference (Bell and Hartmann 2007). Yet this happy talk still revolves around a “white center” (Bell and Hartmann 2007:908).

Research on the incorporation of people of color into the labor market supports the claim that blacks face distinct obstacles. Racial progress narratives are inadequate when describing black labor market participation, given that the black unemployment rate remains near recessionary levels despite the United States’ economic recovery (White 2015). Antiblackness is an especially useful concept for explaining the persistent lag in black economic mobility compared with that of whites and of many racial and ethnic minorities. Still, conventional research into labor market inequality has not considered antiblackness as a factor that explains black economic inequality. Afro-pessimism might help explaining the persistent lag in black economic mobility compared with that of whites and of many racial and ethnic minorities. Stil, conventional research into labor market inequality has not considered antiblackness as a factor that explains black economic inequality. Afro-pessimism might help push sociologists to develop a specific sociology of antiblackness that refuses to homogenize various racisms. In sum, we hope this review will help moderate claims about the near inevitability of racial progress. Instead, we view the racial landscape through the lens of racial realism, which suggests that the mechanisms producing racial inequality mutate, rather than die off.

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