Through the Decades: Critical Race Theory and Pathways Forward in Sport Sociology Research

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Critical race theory (CRT) is a powerful framework and methodological tool for sport scholars and practitioners to incorporate into their work. While CRT tenets vary depending on discipline, individuals utilizing the framework understand the permanence of racism and how it is institutionalized within various social structures. In honor of the 40th year of the Sociology of Sport Journal, we conducted a review of the journal to assess how CRT has been used among sport sociologists. After reflecting on the 40-year history of Sociology of Sport Journal, we argue for the continued use of CRT and CRT extensions to fulfill the maximum potential of this foundational framework to achieve its goals of emancipation, social justice, and racial equity. We conclude by discussing the future of CRT in sport sociology research and practice in a post “racial reckoning” society, specifically within the U.S. context.

As critical sport scholars who study how race and racism inform and marginalize lived experiences in sport, our scholarly training and continued scholarship are heavily influenced by critical race theory (CRT). For us, CRT is our “home” framework, methodological guidance, and our epistemological reference on matters of power, race/racism, structural racial stratification, and many more issues regarding racial inequity. While CRT has enlightened and provided us with the tools and language necessary to discuss why and how race matters in sport organizations and sporting experiences, CRT has also morphed into the proverbial boogeyman in the United States. CRT was born out of critical legal studies (CLS) in the 1970s and has primarily been utilized among academic social scientists as a framework and methodology to discuss how racism is institutionalized in varying social structures. Through the lens of CRT, the true ill of racism is not individual racist behavior but the systemic and structural apparatuses that intentionally dictate which racial groups maintain power, access, and opportunity.

Conversely, this understanding of CRT as a scholarly tool to explain systemic and structural racism is contemporaneously weaponized by right-wing media outlets, such as Fox News. In fact, Fox News’s fascination (or obsession) with discussing CRT intersects directly with the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 (Power, 2021)—a time when many (mostly white) Americans were experiencing a “racial awakening” and subsequently sought out texts discussing structural racism to make sense of the violence that Mr. Floyd experienced. According to Media Matters for America, Fox News mentioned the phrase “critical race theory” one to three times in June 2020, and by June 2021, “critical race theory” was mentioned 901 times in a singular month by political Fox News pundits (Power, 2021). Such glaring statistics demonstrate how CRT was largely unknown to the masses before the murder of George Floyd but popularized and weaponized by right-leaning outlets in just a year. Additionally, political commentators, government representatives, and community groups have made propositions and have taken action to ban specific texts and college courses that “appear” to align with or resemble CRT, no matter how far-fetched and loose these connections may be. For example, parents in Tennessee organized to forbid their local elementary school from reading a children’s book about Ruby Bridges, the first Black child to integrate U.S. schools after Brown v. Board of Education decision, because the text did not provide a redemptive depiction of the white people who violently attempted to impede her enrollment (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). Although telling Ms. Bridges’s story is not directly a matter of CRT, children reading this factual (and historical) account in school are perceived and argued as CRT propaganda (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). Similar “CRT bans” are being executed via the power of U.S. state legislatures and U.S. governors. In April 2021, Florida Governor, Ron DeSantis, signed into law the Individual Freedom Act or the “Stop Woke Act,” which “… bans teaching that one race or gender is morally superior to another and prohibits teachers from making students feel guilty for past discrimination by members of their race” (Golden, 2023, para. 3). Since its implementation, professors at universities in Florida have canceled their courses and seminars that focus on race, racial colorblindness, and the ills of white supremacy. This broader sociopolitical context serves as the genesis and purpose of this paper.

Given CRT is misunderstood, viciously demonized, and often oversimplified in the broader U.S. polity, we found it pertinent for the 40th anniversary of Sociology of Sport Journal (SSJ) to examine how we as sport sociologists have engaged, possibly misunderstood, or perhaps oversimplified CRT in our research analyses. Thus, this paper provides an overview of CRT, examines how CRT has been used during the first four decades of SSJ, and discusses extensions of CRT (e.g., BlackCrit, whiteness, LatCrit). While we discuss numerous critical social concepts and frameworks as a foundation, we found it pertinent to narrowly focus on CRT, given contemporary cultural politics and dynamics.
inaccurately weaponizing CRT. Our narrow focus on CRT hopefully encourages scholars to build upon this piece by exploring race-based critical thinking concepts and theories related to and outside of CRT that are published in SSJ. As such, we reviewed applications of CRT and theoretical extensions of CRT in SSJ to ensure our use of CRT is in congruence with its original/actual aims, purpose, and tenets to strengthen our future uses of CRT and other extensions as sport sociologists. Our intent is to ensure that other critical race-specific theories are not incorrectly labeled as CRT solely because they examine race issues through a critical lens. We intend to reflect and pay homage to CRT, as we cannot include every critical race-specific theory presented in SSJ over the past 40 years. Lastly, we discuss the future of CRT in sport sociology research and argue the relevance of CRT in a post-racial reckoning summer of 2020 society, a society implementing book bans (among other changes) to halt the racial consciousness of future generations, while also idealizing anti-racism and anti-Blackness as the new ideal state.

Precursors and Adjacent Critical Frameworks to CRT

While the focus of the article is on CRT, it is important to acknowledge epistemologies, frameworks, and/or theories that have influenced and those that operate adjacent to CRT. An in-depth discussion of every framework is beyond the scope of this paper; however, we situate a few schools of thought in relation to CRT. It is well-documented that CRT was born out of CLS (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Harris, 1994; Tate, 1997). CLS is centered around the thought that the law does not operate in isolation from social biases and hierarchies, which represented a challenge to classical legal thought (Tate, 1997). Critical legal scholars were inspired by the work of Karl Marx and Max Weber in combining functionalist methods with radical goals (Harris, 1994; Tate, 1997; Unger, 1983). For example, “CRT inherits from CLS a commitment to being ‘critical,’ which in this sense means also to be ‘radical’—to locate problems not at the surface of doctrine but in the deep structure of American law and culture” (Harris, 1994, p. 743). As such, CRT is often noted to have ties to Marxism. Part of this thought is due to the influence that neo-Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci had on CLS in acknowledging the ties to classism within the legal system (Tate, 1997). Principles of Marxism are not necessarily dominant throughout CRT; instead, scholars have adopted the radical storytelling methodologies utilized by Karl Marx and sociologists Émile Durkheim and Max Weber to address social issues. CRT has faced critiques from Marxists who feel that the framework does not account enough for social class and economic influences (Hyton, 2009; Mills, 2009). The two frameworks are not wholly incompatible; however, tension exists between CRT and a class-reductionist Marxism that minimizes racialized implications (Hall, 1986; Mills, 2009).

CRT was also influenced by and pulled from traditions of Black feminism. Although intersectionality is considered a tenet within the CRT framework, this analytical lens exists within Black feminist traditions. Kimberlé Crenshaw is often credited with coining the term “intersectionality”; however, evidence of intersectionality predating Crenshaw (1989) and the critical legal movement is extant in the speeches and writing of Julia Cooper, June Jordan, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Frances M. Beal, Sojourner Truth, and many others. In Truth’s speech, “Ain’t I a Woman” delivered in 1851, she brought attention to and challenges why society refrains from treating and perceiving Black women as women, as femininity and womanhood during her era (and contemporaneously) were exclusively reserved for white women. Thus, intersectional race-colored epistemologies existed long before CRT developed as a framework. Despite Black feminism and intersectionality influencing CRT, there are feelings that CRT is still exclusionary regarding racially or ethnically minoritized women. As such, critical race feminist theory emerged from and exists in dialog with CRT while being informed by Black and multicultural feminists, such as those previously mentioned, as well as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Gloria Anzuldua, and Audre Lorde (Few, 2007). The transdisciplinary grounding of CRT (discussed later) highlights how various perspectives (e.g., legal studies, sociology, Marxism, and Black feminism) shaped the construction of the framework and its pertinent tools.

In addition to the mentioned influences of CRT, numerous frameworks exist that work to address issues of culture, race, and racism. Such frameworks can be found in the work of scholars in cultural and ethnic studies (e.g., Hall, 1986; Kelley, 1996; Lipsitz, 1995) and sociology (e.g., Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Omi & Winant, 2015; Ray & Seamster, 2016). As CRT has been critiqued for the lack of theory to serve as its foundation (Cabrera, 2018), work such as color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010) and racial formation (Omi & Winant, 2015) are racial theories sometimes used to supplement CRT. Omi and Winant (1994/2015) were instrumental in situating race as a social construction and identifying characteristics of racialization. Bonilla-Silva (1997, 2010) advanced discussions of racism by conceptualizing it as structural as opposed to an individual matter. Furthermore, Bonilla-Silva (2010) argued color-blind racism maintains the structure of white supremacy. In essence, there are numerous critical frameworks/theories focused on race and racism that have a similar goal of addressing racial inequity; however, their avenues for achieving that broad goal differ (e.g., focusing on class, race as a social construction, intersectionality, structural racism). Synergy exists between many of these racial frameworks, although ideas are often siloed within their respective disciplines (Cabrera, 2019). The strength and need for CRT lies in its transdisciplinary foundation, which has the potential to maximize the utility of these frameworks, such as understanding the social construction of race while also acknowledging its structural existence and incorporating radical methodologies to achieve its goal of emancipation, social justice, and racial equity.

Overview of CRT—What it Is Not!

Ladson-Billings (2013) authored a book chapter titled “Critical Race Theory—What it is Not!” which provided an overview of CRT and challenged those engaging with the framework to produce rigorous scholarship, point out endemic racism in public spaces, deconstruct racist policies, and “be willing to say what critical race theory is not” (p. 50). Similarly, we provide an overview of CRT, describe its purpose, and note what it is not intended to accomplish so that sport scholars are equipped to utilize the framework appropriately within their work. While CLS represented a necessary critical examination of the law, CRT was conceptualized as scholars were dissatisfied with CLS’s lack of reckoning with how race influenced laws within the U.S. CRT developed in the 1970s and 1980s as a framework used to explore and interrogate the presence and persistence of systemic racism within the U.S. legal system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ray, 2022). Of note, CRT is not necessarily a theory; rather, it has been
described as a set of epistemological and ontological premises that serve as a theorizing counter space (Cabrera, 2018; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Since its inception, CRT has traversed disciplinary silos by being adopted in education research and other social science and humanities fields. Although there are no canonical tenets that all CRT scholars subscribe to (Williams, 2022), most scholars utilize legal or education-grounded tenets, which overlap in multiple instances (see Table 1). Ultimately, CRT is grounded in an activist orientation with a social justice aim (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) note that CRT consists of five generally recognized legal tenets: (a) racism as ordinary, not aberrational; (b) interest convergence; (c) race as a product of social construction; (d) intersectionality and anti-essentialism; and (e) unique voice of color. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) highlighted five education tenets: (a) the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination, (b) challenge to the dominant ideology, (c) commitment to social justice, (d) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (e) transdisciplinary perspective. 

The remaining tenets within education research include the challenge to the dominant ideology, which rejects claims of meritocracy and colorblindness that perpetuate oppression. Commitment to social justice relates to the activist orientation of CRT and advocacy of structural changes. Transdisciplinary perspective highlights how critical race theorists draw from diverse disciplinary approaches, such as sociology, law, education, and psychology, to address racial oppression. This final tenet encompasses the foundation for CRT as scholars pulled from traditions of Marxism and feminist theory when conceptualizing the framework (as previously noted). While these tenets have guided their respective fields, there are many themes and guiding principles, such as racial realism, structural determinism, and whiteness as property, to name a few that are related to CRT. We encourage scholars to further engage with CRT literature highlighting these nuances.

Collectively and individually, the described tenets are used to analyze how systemic racism has manifested in policy, practice, and personnel (Conyers & Wright Fields, 2021; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Gillborn, 2013). As the utility of CRT expanded beyond legal analysis, sociologists introduced innovative applications of CRT within their subdisciplines. The application of CRT within education-based sociology has been used to highlight the embeddedness of white frameworks and operations within educational policy (Gillborn, 2013), along with presenting culturally responsive teaching practices to enhance the experiences of racially minoritized student communities (Powell et al., 2021). Within a broader context, the framework has the range to influence perspectives on a number of topics. For example, CRT analyses provide valuable insights and nuance into the role of the U.S. military industrial complex—which signals to the racialization and racialized othering within the global context, such as wars and resource exploitation of countries in the Global South and East, while also maintaining hegemonic structures domestically (Alvarez et al., 2021). Going further, CRT also explores the role of those racialized as non-white and their role in perpetuating racially hegemonic structures and systems. Overall, the development of CRT has expanded from U.S.-based legal analyses to a broader exploration and interrogation of racism and racialization across U.S.-based institutions, such as education, health, business, and sport.

Within the discipline, sport sociologists have championed the place and impact of CRT within the study and operation of sport. Singer (2005) serves as a seminal work that bridges the gap between sport scholarship and CRT by arguing the embeddedness of race and subsequent permanence of racism within sport—which bears noteworthy implications in participant, consumer, and practitioner experiences. Building upon Singer’s work, sport sociologists have addressed racial inequities within head coach hiring practices (Singer et al., 2010), fan interactions with college athletes (Oshiro et al., 2021), and presented developments for culturally responsive leadership practices in high-level college athletics (Cooper et al., 2017). These works, in conjunction with the

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<td><strong>Legal field (Delgado &amp; Stefancic, 2017)</strong></td>
<td><strong>Education (Solórzano &amp; Yosso, 2002)</strong></td>
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<td>Racism as ordinary, not aberrational</td>
<td>The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination</td>
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SSJ Vol. 40, No. 4, 2023

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contributions of scholars across differing sociological contexts, have enriched and strengthened the placement of CRT within scholarship and practice. The broad design of the tenets coupled with the explicit theorization of race, are the key strengths of CRT—which gave way to interdisciplinary and liberatory scholarship.

While CRT has been established as a viable analytic tool, the development of race-specific frameworks carved new theoretical pathways for more socially and culturally grounded scholarship. Given the development of these theorizations, the utility of CRT in race-specific studies has drawn some criticism. As a result, previously explored topics are being revisited through race-specific lenses to add much-needed nuance and application of cultural lenses to topics that the general race-grounded design of CRT could not fully address (at the time). CRT is not, and should not be used as, a catch-all for understanding race, racialization, and racial injustice—which is a key element in further understanding the need to develop other race-based theorizations outside of CRT. Acknowledging this weakness within the framework does not diminish the existing scholarship, but it illuminates a needed pathway to investigation and interrogation. For example, CRT has gained a popular, yet incorrect, alignment with focusing on the specificity of Black issues and topics (Dumas & Ross, 2016). While the embeddedness of anti-Black racism and anti-Blackness within the U.S. context provides some justification for this utilization, the true intention of CRT interrogates racialization and racism. Going further, the contextual development of CRT presents considerable challenges when implementing a global perspective since the framework was initially designed around the U.S. legal system. When considering the contextual limitations regarding racial specificity and location, the application of CRT within sport (and other disciplines) set the foundation for the next wave of race-critical scholarship.

Use of CRT Throughout SSJ History

To assess how CRT has been utilized through the first 40 years of the SSJ, we conducted a database search. The initial search using the phrase “critical race theory” produced 148 results (a combination of articles and book reviews). After sorting through the search results, we removed articles that failed to include “critical race theory,” “CRT,” or an extension of the framework within the main text. This section focuses explicitly on the use of CRT, whereas later sections discuss the utilization of CRT extensions. After eliminating sources that were not directly tied to CRT, the number of articles and book reviews remaining was 35. The next step was to set aside articles that utilized extensions of CRT as their primary framework. We were left with 22 articles and four book reviews, which will be highlighted and discussed in this section due to their use of CRT. When reviewing the remaining articles, we specifically looked for how the authors used the framework (e.g., as an analytical tool, framing device, or simply referencing CRT). We also noted whether scholars incorporated positionality statements or gave any acknowledgment of researcher identities. While positionality statements are not required using CRT, it is an important practice for scholars engaging in research, as it provides the necessary context for which the studies are situated.

It is important to acknowledge that some critical race-based work is not included within this section or the subsequent section discussing CRT extensions. For example, although intersectionality is a foundational tenet or guiding principle of CRT, we excluded the analyzing articles using intersectionality as a stand-alone framework from our discussion of CRT extensions. Although excluded in the analysis, we note that important work utilizing intersectionality exists within SSJ (see Allison, 2020; Norman et al., 2019; Oxford & McLachlan, 2018). For the purposes of this manuscript, however, we reiterate our explicit focus on CRT through the first 40 years of SSJ.

1984–1993

The first decade of SSJ did not include any articles featuring CRT. However, it is imperative to contextualize CRT usage in academia, as SSJ was not an anomaly. While CRT emerged in the 1970s, most of the work published in the following decade was in legal outlets (e.g., Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1988, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Harris, 1993). Thus, CRT, at that time, was not widespread within sociology or sport-specific research.

Birrell (1989) is the first published piece providing a foundation for future critical race-based work in SSJ. Birrell (1989) critiqued the field of sport sociology for not engaging in critical race analyses, much like the legal critique by Derrick Bell and others that birthed CRT. At the time of publication, very few studies challenged the structure of sport as oppressive along racial lines. Although Birrell (1989) does not introduce CRT, the author provided a pathway toward incorporating the framework that scholars could leverage. Similarly, Foley (1990) centered on the intersection of race, gender, and class inequality in his ethnographic study of a football season in a rural Texas community, demonstrating that a critical racial lens has always been apparent in the outlet.

1994–2003

Similar to the previous decade, no articles published in SSJ mentioned or utilized CRT as the primary framework. However, what is different or concerning about this decade is that CRT was gaining traction in other fields and outlets other than SSJ. For example, in addition to legal scholarship and studies outlets publishing CRT work, the framework gained traction within education scholarship (e.g., Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Tate, 1997). One of the first sport-specific pieces utilizing CRT was a peer-reviewed article by Harrison and Lawrence (2003).

Several reasons could explain the lack of adoption of CRT within sport-specific and SSJ articles. One reason is simply the inevitable delay associated with publishing and the widespread adoption of novel frameworks. As Funk (2019) presented, knowledge diffusion within the sport management discipline is, unfortunately, slow. Most articles reach a tipping point 8–10 years from publication, in which their ideas are widespread or cited more frequently (Funk, 2019). Thus, it is not inconceivable to posit that the lack of adoption in SSJ or sport research broadly during this decade could be due to CRT being in the infancy stages within an adjacent discipline of education. Another reason could be due to a lack of epistemological diversity among editors of SSJ, which has the potential to skew theoretical and methodological belief systems that do inform the review process (Singer, 2005; Singer et al., 2022). We are not suggesting that this was specifically the case with SSJ; however, it is a reality of academia for editors to reject and/or be late adopters of CRT and extensions of the framework.

While CRT-specific analyses were absent during this era, scholars did draw upon other critical race-specific epistemologies that heavily influenced the direction of the outlet, like multiracial feminism (Jamieson, 1998) and racial formation (Andrews, 1996). Andrews (1996) considered how broader racial formation in the
United States influenced how race shaped perceptions of Michael Jordan to challenge racial dynamics and stereotypes of Black people. Jamieson (1998) drew upon Chicana and Black feminist concepts like “outsider within” (Collins, 2015) to examine the intersectional experiences of a Latina professional golfer, Nancy Lopez.

2004–2013

The third decade of SSJ brought forth the first article utilizing CRT with the work of Comeaux (2010). Unfortunately, this was the only article that fit the criteria during this period. By this time, sport-based research incorporating CRT was being adopted by other outlets (e.g., Agyemang & Delorme, 2010; Donnor, 2005; Hylton, 2005, 2010; Singer, 2005). Thus, the lack of CRT-centered work within SSJ this decade is concerning.

Comeaux (2010) did not include a positionality statement within the study; however, the author utilized CRT as an analytical tool to uncover racist ideologies faculty members held about college athletes through color-blind and racially-coded language. Within this work, Comeaux embraced the praxis orientation of CRT—a move beyond simply theorizing but using the framework to inform practice. As such, Comeaux (2010) argued, “To have an impact, however, research informed by a critical race theory critique must extend beyond its current existence in academic circles and penetrate practical educational spaces like classrooms, athletic departments, and professional training arenas” (Comeaux, 2010, p. 406). This challenge from Comeaux and the creative methodology employed within this study provides SSJ readers with a view of the potentiality of incorporating CRT within sport sociology research.

2014–2023

Within this decade, SSJ published 21 articles that mentioned or incorporated CRT in the main content. Additionally, all four book reviews mentioning CRT were published in this decade. Of the 21 articles, 10 (48%) simply mentioned CRT instead of integrating it within the framing or analysis of the studies. In other words, CRT was only discussed briefly about its relevancy in previous studies (Harrison & Coakley, 2020; Markula, 2019; Norman et al., 2022; Wilson & VanLuijk, 2019), future studies (Comeaux & Martin, 2018; George, 2023; McGuire-Adams et al., 2022), or how critics have attacked CRT and how to protect the school of thought (Kusz & Hodler, 2023; Mower, 2023; Newman, 2019). Similarly, three of the four book reviews only briefly mentioned CRT or an extension of the framework (Hodler, 2018; Olive, 2020; Posergh, 2021). While each study and review are important for their respective topics and likely used frameworks to better situate their research, how the scholars utilized CRT does little to advance the framework or provide an increased understanding of its benefits. Additionally, like in other decades, race-specific work was present, but these analyses did not specifically draw upon CRT. For example, George (2023) drew upon Black feminist theory to examine how Black Canadian female athletes negotiate their identities to access basketball spaces. Love et al. (2017) examined the racialization of recruiting commitments discussed in college football internet chat spaces and drew upon a postracial critique to advance their inquiry. These works and many others have made meaningful contributions to how issues of race are explored in SSJ, but they did not specifically advance CRT.

Despite an uptick in articles mentioning CRT within SSJ, only 11 of 21 (52%) this decade and 12 of 22 (55%) between 2004 and 2023 utilized CRT to frame or analyze their studies. Of note, three of these 11 articles (27%) within this decade were published in the special issue edited by C. Keith Harrison and Jay Coakley in 2020 on “Hip-Hop Culture(s) and Sport.” The special issue did not focus on CRT; however, the influence of race on hip-hop and sport is undeniable, thus, lending itself to more potential of utilizing CRT to frame or analyze content. Another important note relates to the book reviews. Only one out of the four book reviews thoroughly highlighted CRT. In the review of an edited book focused on CRT by Hawkins et al. (2017), Williams (2020) provided a brief overview of the framework as it was central to the content of the reviewed book.

Of the 11 studies meaningfully incorporating CRT in the latest decade, only three (27%) of those incorporated a positionality statement or acknowledgment of identities within the work (Book et al., 2023; Frederick et al., 2022; Rankin-Wright et al., 2016). While noting the usage of positionality statements, we recognize that word count constraints could influence scholars’ choice to include it within the manuscript. As Pasque et al. (2022) noted, “Positionality can provide opportunities for the researcher to critically interrogate beliefs, assumptions, motivations, and decisions at multiple stages of the research process” (p. 8). In addition, a researcher’s identity can influence how participants engage with the research process, which makes positionality an important consideration when engaging in critical race-centered research.

Of the reviewed studies, 11 out of 21 (52%) were empirical and utilized CRT to either frame the study or analyze data. An example of using CRT to frame the study can be found in Knoester et al. (2022), as the scholars, within the quantitative study investigating public opinion of athlete protests, did not analyze the data from a critical race perspective. However, the study and included discussion were influenced by the framework. Knoester et al. (2022) described, “Critical race theory is especially useful in understanding cultural citizenship and the racialization of public opinions about athlete protests” (Knoester et al., 2022, p. 25). Thus, in this case, and with other studies (e.g., Knoester & Ridpath, 2021; Shaw et al., 2019), CRT was influential in situating the study within the broader discussion of racism, racial inequities, and systemic power differentials. Northcutt et al. (2020) provide an example of how CRT has been utilized to analyze data. The scholars described incorporating the framework, noting, “Using components of CRT to analyze Jay-Z’s perceptions of the Black experience, themes emerged that highlighted the battle with Blackness, economic enslavement and financial freedom, and systemic subjugation” (Northcutt et al., 2020, p. 202). Other studies utilized CRT in a similar manner to analyze data (Allison, 2020; Book et al., 2023; Frederick et al., 2022; Harrison et al., 2020; Rankin-Wright et al., 2016; Sandrin & Palys, 2022; Smith & Hattery, 2020). Ultimately, the studies incorporating CRT highlight a strength of the framework to be used to not only analyze data but also to situate a study and provide an avenue to employ creative, nontraditional methods to collect data.

Within this decade, five articles and one book review incorporating CRT focused specifically on Black populations (Book et al., 2023; Frederick et al., 2022; Harrison et al., 2020; Northcutt et al., 2020; Smith & Hattery, 2020; Williams, 2020). Book et al. (2023) published an autoethnography of three researchers (two white and one Black); however, the reflections were of their experiences researching with Black youth in sport settings. Thus, we categorized the study as focusing on Black populations. Of note, contrary to ill-advised media pundits and scholarly interpretations critiquing CRT, it is not a framework to solely explore
Black issues and Black communities. Work published in SSJ illustrates the nature of CRT to be used to center historically marginalized racial groups to examine racial stratification. For example, Sandrin and Palys (2022) focused on racialized and Indigenous populations in Canada. Other studies have focused on general populations’ perceptions about race-related issues (Allison, 2020; Knoester & Ridpath, 2021; Knoester et al., 2022; Rankin-Wright et al., 2016; Shaw et al., 2019).

A final note regarding CRT use throughout SSJ relates to the fields in which the framework is housed. As noted, CRT started as a legal framework and was adopted in education and adjacent disciplines. Within this decade and the previous, there was no consistency in whether scholars publishing CRT-related articles adopted legal or education-based tenets. Instead, scholars tended to incorporate a mix of CRT conceptualizations from both fields.

CRT provides researchers with the flexibility to examine racial and structural inequities for racialized populations in sport. This flexibility, while great in many regards, does create some challenges when studying racialized groups. All racialized groups do not share the same experiences, nor are they racialized in the same manner. Thus, having one overarching framework, such as CRT, can sometimes be insufficient to thoroughly highlight the experiences of specific racialized oppressed groups. In the following section, we provide an overview of prominent CRT extensions and note how (or if) they have been utilized in SSJ to highlight the benefits of utilizing these extensions with specificity to individual racialized populations.

**CRT Extensions**

CRT is a foundational framework for interrogating racism and structural inequity that plays an important role in sport sociology research. We value its importance and argue for its continued use within SSJ. With that noted, we recognize the potential limitations of a one-size-fits-all framework. We are not the first scholars to make this distinction. For example, Brayboy (2005) introduced tribal critical race theory (TribalCrit) because of these very reasons, arguing CRT “does not address the specific needs of tribal peoples because it does not address American Indians’ liminality as both legal/political and racialized beings or the experience of colonization” (pp. 428–429). TribalCrit is not the only extension; thus, as a secondary goal of this paper, we utilize this section to highlight extensions of CRT so that scholars can utilize (where applicable) to center the experiences of specific racially or ethnically minoritized groups.

Questions may arise, such as, “What are the limitations of singling out ‘individual groups’ in examining structures of oppression?” However, we counter by asking: What are the harms of perpetuating the essentialization of racialized groups? Although commonalities exist within the fight against structural oppression, there must be consideration for the unique circumstances of respective oppressed groups. For example, the acronym BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) is used by many progressive and well-meaning individuals to describe these communities, although the acronym perpetuates harm. Deo (2021) posited, “Centering particular groups only in name ultimately furthers their marginalization because they remain excluded in fact though referenced in the term, erasing the power that comes from participation and inclusion” (p. 118). Furthermore, BIPOC elevates Black and Indigenous groups while clustering other racialized groups together, which means these two communities are always centered (Deo, 2021). Indeed, there are times when other racialized groups (e.g., Latino/a or Asian communities) should be centered as their needs cannot be essentialized to be the same as those of Black communities. CRT’s anti-essentialist foundation and critique of liberalism necessitates an intentional focus on the unique experiences and challenges faced by racialized groups. As such, it is powerful to name and center the unique needs of racially minoritized populations in an act of resistance. We provide brief overviews of the extensions with tenets (see Table 2) and encourage readers to further explore the cited work for more information.

**AsianCrit**

Asian CRT (AsianCrit) extends CRT theoretically, methodologically, and conceptually by uniquely focusing on the experiences of groups and individuals with and of Asian descent in the United States (Chang, 1993). AsianCrit centers on foundational aspects of CRT, like an attentiveness to the influence and power of intersecting social systems, critiquing and bringing attention to white supremacy, and racial stratification (Yoo et al., 2022). While the foundations of CRT are present, AsianCrit uniquely considers the historicity of Asian people in the United States, illuminates how stereotypes and biases of Asian people fuel racial stratification at the expense of other marginalized groups, specifically Black people, and analyzes how Asian American identity is globally influenced by imperialism, colonialism, and neoliberalism (An, 2017; Yoo et al., 2022). Hence, AsianCrit is critical of how the Asian American experience is simultaneously used as a weapon and marginalized by white supremacy. There are seven core tenets of AsianCrit (see Table 2). These seven distinct yet interconnected tenets enable analyses to study how race and racism matter, inform, and dictate the lives of Asian Americans (Chang, 1993). SSJ has yet to have publications drawing upon or referencing AsianCrit to examine the racial marginalization of Asian Americans or Asians in other global contexts.

**BlackCrit**

Black critical theory (BlackCrit) was developed along the same lines as other race-specific developments of CRT to properly explore the Black condition, space, and experience (Dumas & Ross, 2016). While CRT has been used to establish and explore the Black experience, the design of CRT left elements of these experiences to be considered further. To address these components, Dumas and Ross established a conceptualization of BlackCrit by outlining three central components of the framework (see Table 2). Although relatively novel, BlackCrit has been utilized within education-based research (see Coles & Powell, 2020; Dumas & Ross, 2016). While this framework has gained traction across disciplines, usage within the study of sport is minimal. Within SSJ, two articles have integrated BlackCrit into sport sociology and analysis. To note, Foster et al. (2023) presented a reconceptualization of historically Black college and university athletics and Howe (2023) analyzed the self-presentation of Black male college athletes through a BlackCrit lens.

**Critical of Whiteness Studies**

While CRT acknowledges the permanence and institutionalization of racism in U.S. social structures and social systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), critical of whiteness studies (CWS; commonly referred to as critical whiteness studies, see Matias, 2022) examines how racism and the social significance of race is at the behest of whiteness (DiAngelo, 2018; Feagin, 2020). There are no agreed-upon tenets of whiteness, but there are accepted characteristics of
whiteness that encapsulate CWS and its intent. It is essential not to situate CWS as a contemporary body of scholarship, as Black scholars like Julia Cooper, W.E.B. Du Bois, and others brought attention to the ills of whiteness before scholarship that framed whiteness as a privilege (see McIntosh, 1988).

As an extension of CRT epistemologies, CWS considers the violence (physical, emotional, economic, and mental) of racial stratification and how this violence directly harms varying racial minoritized groups in the United States while elevating the social positioning of white and white-passing individuals (Du Bois, 1903; Feagin, 2020). Keaton (2022a) argued, “Whiteness is violent, as it operates subtlety and overtly to disadvantage, discredit, and dismiss its connection to White supremacy” (pp. 4–5). This means racially minoritized groups are often well-versed in what whiteness is, while white people can and do dismiss how navigating a racially stratified society benefits them (Hextrum, 2019, 2020; Keaton, 2022a; Vadeboncoeur et al., 2021). Essential within CWS is challenging and bringing attention to how white people draw upon, racialized groups, and the framework has also been combined to highlight the intersection of racial oppression and ableism. This combination resulted in dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit; McDonald, 2005). While many SSJ studies have brought attention to racial marginalization and the social power of white individuals in a racialized society, contemporary work in SSJ is more explicitly drawing upon CWS (see Dix, 2022; Frederick et al., 2022; Klein et al., 2023; Kluch et al., 2022).

**DisCrit**

CRT has been extended to better understand the needs of specific racialized groups, and the framework has also been combined to highlight the intersection of racial oppression and ableism. This combination resulted in dis/ability critical race studies (DisCrit; Annamma et al., 2013). In describing the framework, Annamma et al. (2013) noted, “DisCrit seeks to understand ways that macrolevel issues of racism and ableism, among other structural discriminatory processes, are enacted in the day-to-day lives of students of color with dis/abilities” (p. 8). Ultimately DisCrit is guided by seven tenets (see Table 2). While SSJ has published critical disability scholarship, none have utilized a DisCrit framework.

**TABLE 2** Tenets/framing ideas of CRT Extensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Extension</th>
<th>Tenets/framing ideas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AsianCrit (Museus &amp; Itikar, 2013)</td>
<td>(a) Asianization, (b) Transnational context, (c) (Re)constructivists history, (d) Strategic (anti)essentialism, (e) Intersectionality, (f) Story, theory, practice, and (g) Commitment to social justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BlackCrit (Dumas &amp; Ross, 2016)</td>
<td>(a) Anti-Blackness is endemic in how social life is understood, (b) Blackness exists in tension with the neoliberal multicultural imagination, and (c) BlackCrit creates a space for the presence and persistence of the Black Liberatory Fantasy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical whiteness Studies</td>
<td>No agreed-upon tenets, but rather a collection of characteristics/attributes underscoring how and why white individuals benefit from racially stratified societies that inform structures, institutions (e.g., sport, education, etc.), and lived experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 11)</td>
<td>(a) Focus on how forces of racism and ableism circulate to uphold notions of normalcy, (b) Values multidimensional identities and challenges singular notions of identity, (c) Emphasizes the social construction of race and dis/ability and the material and psychological impacts of those labels, (d) Privileges voices of marginalized populations, (e) Considers how dis/ability and race have been used legally and historically to deny the rights of citizens, (f) Recognizes whiteness and ability as property, and (g) Requires activism and supports all resistance efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KanakaCrit (Reyes, 2017)</td>
<td>(a) Occupation and colonialism are endemic in society, (b) ʻOiwi identities are multiple, intersectional, and liminal, (c) Social justice is inherently tied to our ea and lāhui, (d) We work toward social justice as we work to restore pono, (e) As we learn and tell our moʻolelo, we contribute to our survivance, and (f) Knowledge must be developed and used to benefit lāhui</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LatCrit (Valdes &amp; Bender, 2021, p. 1)</td>
<td>No agreed-upon singular tenets; rather, its basic goals building upon CRT are (a) to develop a critical, activist, and interdisciplinary discourse on law and policy toward Latinas/os/x; and (b) to foster both the development of coalitional theory and practice as well as the accessibility of this knowledge to agents of social and legal transformative change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TribalCrit (Brayboy, 2005, pp. 429–430)</td>
<td>(a) Colonization is endemic to society; (b) U.S. policies toward Indigenous peoples are rooted in imperialism, white supremacy, and a desire for material gain; (c) Indigenous peoples occupy a liminal space that accounts for both the political and racialized natures of their identities; (d) Indigenous peoples desire to obtain and forge tribal sovereignty, tribal autonomy, self-determination, and self-identification; (e) The concepts of culture, knowledge, and power take on new meaning when examined through an Indigenous lens; (f) Governmental and educational policies toward Indigenous peoples are intimately linked around the problematic goal of assimilation; (g) Tribal philosophies, beliefs, customs, traditions, and visions for the future are central to understanding the lived realities of Indigenous peoples; (h) Stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being; and (i) Theory and practice are connected in deep and explicit ways such that scholars must work toward social change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QuantCrit (Gillborn et al., 2018)</td>
<td>(a) The centrality of racism, (b) Numbers are not neutral, (c) Categories are neither “natural” nor given, (d) Voice and insight: data cannot “speak for itself,” and (e) Using numbers for social justice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Some extensions use tenets, while others use less rigid framing ideas. Additionally, we acknowledge that other CRT extensions may exist; however, we highlighted the framing ideas of those extensions that have been widely adopted. CRT = critical race theory.
**KanakaCrit**

Kanaka Maoli’s critical decolonizing framework (KanakaCrit), which derives from CRT and TribalCrit, is a framework specific to Hawai‘i and its indigenous people (Reyes, 2017). The most unique component of KanakaCrit is the focus on colonization and the endemic nature of colonialism within society, which has led to the appropriation of Hawai‘i identity, customs, and beliefs. KanakaCrit has not been utilized in studies pertaining to Hawaiian (and the indigenous people of Hawai‘i) sporting experiences, particularly in *SSJ*.

**LatCrit**

Latina/o critical race theory (LatCrit) is a framework utilized to highlight experiences of structural/institutional racism unique to the Latina/o population. LatCrit is used to show the ways that Latinas/os experience various iterations of oppression (e.g., racism and classism) while highlighting how their experiences also include issues with language (and barriers), education, ethnicity, culture, and immigration status in the United States (Valdes & Bender, 2021). Previous scholars have utilized LatCrit for various studies, but there remains a sparse usage of LatCrit in relation to *SSJ* and its focus on the sociology of sport.

**TribalCrit**

Indigenous scholars began employing a “CRT spinoff” of sorts in the late 1990s to examine the effects of institutional racism on indigenous populations within the United States. As noted, Brayboy (2005) ultimately introduced TribalCrit to allow indigenous scholars to generate indigenous-specific analyses of policies, laws, and behaviors in the United States (Writer, 2008). Though including tenets like CRT, TribalCrit operates under the primary understanding that colonialism is endemic within society and aims to facilitate change by situating the lived realities of indigenous populations within the larger context of society (and structures).

The usage of the framework is sparse in sport (specifically in the *SSJ* space), apart from Castagno and Lee (2007) utilizing TribalCrit in their analysis of ethnic fraud and Native American mascots (Hodler & Maddox, 2021). This is in alignment with the contemporary problematization of Native American mascot usage by sport teams, which has led to numerous teams at the professional level (i.e., the name change of National Football League’s Washington R*dskins to Commanders; the name change of Major League Baseball’s Cleveland “Indians” to Guardians). For example, in *SSJ*, Hodler and Maddox (2021) utilized TribalCrit and interest convergence to analyze how the Myaamia Heritage Logo, used by Miami University, exists as a site of recognition of the Myaamia people—while ignoring the possessive investment of whiteness. Other scholars (e.g., Norman et al., 2022; Thorpe et al., 2020) have researched indigenous communities within sport, but few have utilized TribalCrit for their analyses.

**QuantCrit**

Quantitative critical race theory (QuantCrit) takes a CRT foundation and applies it to the use and interpretation of quantitative data. A popular argument is that quantitative data are neutral and “objective;” however, as Gillborn et al. (2018) argued, “all data is manufactured and all analysis is driven by human decisions” (p. 167). Therefore, subjectivities and biases exist across all forms of research and data. While Gillborn et al. (2018) noted that QuantCrit was not designed as an “off-shoot movement of CRT,” it was conceptualized so that CRT principles are used in conjunction with quantitative data and studies (p. 169). QuantCrit is guided by the principles listed in Table 2.

Primarily used within education-related research, QuantCrit has yet to be adopted within sport-centric scholarship. However, ample opportunity exists to incorporate a CRT framework within quantitative sport research. While each of the five principles is important, two overarching thoughts from Gillborn and colleagues should influence how sport scholars utilize quantitative methodologies and data. The scholars argued, “QuantCrit exposes how quantitative data is often gathered and analyzed in ways that reflect the interests, assumptions, and perceptions of White elites” (p. 170). Additionally, Gillborn et al. (2018) posited, “in many cases, numbers speak for White racial interests; their presentation, as objective and factual, merely adds to the danger of racist stereotyping where uncritical taken-for-granted understandings lay at the heart of analyses” (p. 173). Sport scholars must consider how and what data are collected as well as how analyses of data are interpreted. We encourage the sport industry to vacate the harmful ideology that numbers and quantitative work are neutral (read: unbiased).

**Concluding Thoughts: Moving Forward and Future Possibilities in Using CRT**

Throughout this manuscript, we have provided an overview of CRT, highlighted its utilization in *SSJ*, and briefly highlighted extensions of CRT to provide additional insight into frameworks tailored to specific marginalized groups. To move forward, we had to reflect on where we have been as a discipline (as highlighted through published work in *SSJ*). We conclude this paper with three overarching truths that, once accepted, can move the field forward in a powerful and effective manner.

**Truth 1: We Have Work to Do**

Only 12 articles and one book review throughout the first 40 years of *SSJ* substantially incorporated CRT within their work. Additionally, only a handful (n = 10) of publications incorporated an extension of CRT during this same period. With a premier outlet that has published 1,000+ pieces of scholarship, knowing that, at the time of writing this manuscript, only 22 papers considerably used CRT (or an extension) is shocking and particularly concerning. It is shocking, partly because of the relationship *SSJ* has with the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS) as its flagship journal. NASSS is considered one of the more welcoming and inclusive sport research-focused organizations, and our scholarship must reflect that if we are to continue to be agents of growth within the academy (Singer et al., 2022).

Discussions comparing NASSS and the annual meeting of the North American Society for Sport Management often arise; however, the publication records related to critical race-based work are not drastically different. Singer et al. (2022) found the *Journal of Sport Management* (*JSM*; flagship outlet for the North American Society for Sport Management) published seven articles focused on race and ethnicity that used a critical lens in 2018–2020. While this does not necessarily mean these articles incorporated CRT, it does show that although the North American Society for Sport Management and *JSM* receive necessary criticism, *SSJ* is not above reproach either. Annually, many NASSS conference presentations utilize CRT or an extension as the primary framework; however, it
is apparent that presentations are not translating to publications within SSJ. Thus, as a society and within its conferences, NASSS has been inclusive of varying race-specific frameworks; however, there is still work to be done when it comes to publishing CRT-specific analyses in SSJ. Thus, while part of this paper argues for using CRT extensions, we are advocating for more work incorporating CRT to be directed at and published in SSJ.

**Truth 2: Oversimplification Is the Enemy**

A problem within some literature and understanding of CRT is the oversimplification of a complex framework. Oversimplification is twofold: (a) authors briefly mention CRT but provide no explanation or (b) use of CRT as a blanket framework without specific application. Relating to the first point, 45% of the studies reviewed either mentioned CRT once or simply referenced it concerning other studies. Thus, although there may have been a brief exposure to CRT (in the name), readers unfamiliar with the framework gain minimal insight into its underlying principles and true purpose. We are not suggesting that those articles simply mentioning CRT should be using it as the primary framework. However, when referencing the framework, it would behoove scholars to provide some insight for readers to understand more about CRT and its possibilities for future use.

The second issue with oversimplification is the generalization of the framework. CRT is a framework and a methodological tool in which scholars dedicate entire academic articles, books, and semester-long courses to teach and provide in-depth insights. CRT is a complex framework that scholars fail to meet its full potential when oversimplified. As Hylton (2010) noted, CRT embodies a commitment to social justice and seeks transformation or a challenge to the status quo. Numerous frameworks exist that can highlight racism; however, the power of CRT comes with the commitment to social justice and challenging hegemonic norms. Through our review, many articles fell short of maximizing the full potential of CRT’s activist orientation. A commitment to social justice involves advocating for radical structural and systemic change (Cabrera, 2018). As Ladson-Billings (2013) posited, “We must be willing to say what critical race theory is not” (p. 50). We are not declaring that the mentioned scholarship is not based on CRT; however, there is a difference between simply using CRT because it fits a topic and engaging with the work as a critical race theorist. This is an introspective critique of the field, as we (the authors) and other sport sociologists should continuously reflect if we are advocating for radical structural change or simply pushing race-critical analyses.

We advocate for scholars to challenge themselves to ensure we, and others, are maximizing the utility of CRT. We have also argued for incorporating CRT extensions, as oversimplifying and generalizing CRT minimizes its effectiveness. Ties to CRT cannot be forgotten, but extensions of the framework are more specific, which allows a more pointed examination of racial marginalization. Thus, while CRT may be an adequate analytical or methodological “fit” for a study, we challenge sport sociologists to consider the population of focus and how drawing upon an extension of CRT actually emphasizes the issue and how race matters for specific populations in a racialized society.

As we consider how to propel and strengthen the work of CRT within sport-based research, addressing limitations is imperative. One critique is that CRT fails to meet the threshold of being a theory (Cabrera, 2018; Trevisano et al., 2008). Cabrera (2018) argued the theoretical basis for CRT could be strengthened by incorporating a racial theory in conjunction with the framework. While CRT has the merits to stand as its own theorizing counter space, scholars can consider how coupling CRT with theories, such as racial formation (Omi & Winant, 2015), white hegemonic theory (Cabrera, 2009; Miller, 2022), or other racial theories can bolster their use of CRT by providing important context on which to build.

**Truth 3: Liberation Is Never Easy**

As noted within the introduction, CRT has become the proverbial boogyman to many far-right conservatives, making incorporating the framework in research, teaching, and practice more difficult for many individuals within the United States. Such pushbacks indicate that CRT works. When achieving its goals, CRT praxis will upset white elites and those perpetuating racial marginalization as inequitable systems begin to balance. In full force, CRT is a liberating framework and practical tool; however, scholars must understand that engaging in this work is no easy task. Racial progress is never a steady upward trend; instead, it is often met with racial opposition (Ray & Seamster, 2016). Such is the example of CRT, which is currently being co-opted into something that it is not, necessitating our hyperfocus on the framework throughout this paper. Those engaging in CRT-informed work must be ready to resist these oppositional efforts.

Scholars utilizing a CRT orientation in their work must strive to advance theory and simultaneously find ways to break the bounds of knowledge circulation within academia to advance CRT in practice. With SSJ being a sport-centric journal, there may be a question of how CRT can impact the sport industry. We advocate for sport practitioners to think about ways for theory to influence diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices/initiatives (among other avenues of influence). As we enter a new wave of racial consciousness (Howe, 2023), practitioners must not become complacent and allow the symbolic nature of many DEI initiatives (or statements) and DEI leaders (Keaton, 2022b; Kluch et al., 2023) to create a façade that appears to present system challenging solutions. As such, consistent reflection on CRT tenets should inform how the sport industry discusses racial equity and inclusion. Scholarship utilizing CRT (or an extension of CRT) has highlighted the experiences of numerous racialized sport stakeholders (e.g., Howe & Rockhill, 2020; Singer, 2016). While CRT can be used to highlight these experiences, the sport industry must act to reach the full potential of the framework—through praxis.

Within this manuscript, we have advocated for the continued utilization of CRT and its extensions within SSJ and sport-centric research more broadly. As the field of sport sociology celebrates four decades of SSJ, it is vital to reflect on where the journal has been so that sport sociologists can understand shortcomings, highlight successes, and ultimately begin to imagine a more equitable future for the field—one that emancipates and altruistically includes those of racially minoritized backgrounds as opposed to perpetuating exclusion or symbolic inclusion. This can be achieved by embracing the full power of CRT in future scholarship and practice, along with its many extensions that we have yet to utilize fully.

**Notes**

1. Review of articles within the 2014–2023 decade ended with the special issue submission deadline of January 2023. Thus, we acknowledge that future articles within 2023 may incorporate CRT or extensions of the framework but were not included in the manuscript.
2. There was a desire to be inclusive of all publications within SSJ, however, we note that the goal of book reviews is not necessarily to advance theoretical contributions as opposed to providing a holistic view of published books. Thus, book reviews are less likely to incorporate specific frameworks other than to note any significant use within the reviewed work.

3. We acknowledge, similar to other race-critical work, that scholars may engage critical frameworks related to racialized communities that do not explicitly utilize a CRT extension. In other words, we are not suggesting that scholars who are not explicitly using terms, such as “BlackCrit” or “TribalCrit” are not producing important, emancipatory work for these populations. Scholars employing frameworks, such as settler colonialism, critical disability studies, or racial capitalism have critically examined the conditions faced by marginalized groups.

References


