

Enwhitened Spaces: A Critical Race/Critical Whiteness Content Analysis of Whiteness, Disinformation, and Amazon Reviews

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Abstract

Since September 2020, Fox News spawned an anti-critical race theory (CRT) disinformation campaign, that has reverberated in the whitestream's echo chamber. The disinformation largely appeals to white people who refuse to see racism, unless they feel it is impinging their rights. The campaign against CRT has penetrated the e-tailer site Amazon.com where books identified by Fox News as CRT texts have experienced increasingly hyperbolic and disinformed customer reviews. Encountering these reviews, we questioned how Amazon reviewers used a mundane platform to reify whiteness, while feigning hurt and ignorance. In this article, we present results from a qualitative critical race content analysis of Amazon.com customer reviews of four books identified by Fox News. A dialectical engagement between the tenets of CRT and key concepts of critical whiteness studies guided our analysis to describe how Amazon reviews enforced en/whitened postdigital spaces. Our results indicate that reviewers transmitted emo-social whiteness, discursively keeping white racism implacable yet, off the table. Framing our discussion, we examine current violent movements resulting from the anti-CRT echo chamber and its impact on education.

Keywords: *critical race content analysis, critical whiteness studies, white emotionality, disinformation, white ignorance*

Introduction

In the fall of 2020, critical race theory (CRT) became a catalyst for a conservative whitestream public to organize against increasing calls for racial justice. On September 2, Fox News denounced CRT as a "destructive, divisive, pseudoscientific ideology" presenting "an existential threat to the United States" (Wallace-Wells, 2021, p. 6). The segment purposefully pronounced CRT as "weaponized against core American values" (p. 6), establishing it as the "perfect villain" for the conservative culture war (p. 5). Since the broadcast, policymakers, and the media have rallied around anti-CRT disinformation, stoking white people's fears of "woke education" (p. 7). CRT has become a lightning rod symbolizing the whitestream's fear of an impending deep indoctrination of revisionist history (Kreiss et al., 2021).

Fox News broadcasters subsequently fomented a vitriolic anti-CRT campaign with on-air

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mentions increasing steadily, peaking in at 901 references in June 2021 (Power & Savillo, 2022). Fox News coverage has weaponized a misinformed public by providing increasingly pointed disinformation about CRT, painting it as anti-American (read: anti-white). Ultimately, the disinformation has been effective, as policymakers mirror key falsities repackaged in public protest. The disinformation has crept into all aspects of US culture, including the inundation of anti-CRT rhetoric in negative reviews of CRT-identified books and their authors on e-tailer sites, such as Amazon.

In this article, we explore how Amazon reviews became a site for transmitting whiteness-centered disinformation through a critical race content analysis (CRCA; Pérez Huber et al., 2018) informed by critical whiteness studies (CWS; Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). First, we briefly examine anti-CRT disinformation in the postdigital era (Matias & Aldern, 2020). Next, we describe our methodology, positioning our analytical engagement with CRT and CWS, before moving to a presentation of the findings. To conclude, we discuss the inherent dangers of CRT misinformation, examining the echo chamber of emboldened whiteness and the anti-CRT legislative impact on education.

"The Perfect Villain": Critical Race Theory in the Whitestream

Critical race theory is a transdisciplinary social and academic movement centering around the consensus that theory can actively address, call into question, and dismantle the knowledge and powers which have perpetuated race, racism, and the structural and systemic inequalities therein (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). With foundations in critical legal studies, early CRT scholars interrogated the intersections between the law and race in the United States, critiquing the racist groundings, policies, and practices of American liberalism in the legal system (Bell, 2023; Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). Since then, CRT and its composition of tenets have crossed disciplines to examine and challenge racism and white supremacy in multiple aspects of U.S. society, including education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015).

Core tenets of CRT derive from the acknowledgment that race is a social construct created to advance the racialized social system, centered on developing a white race deemed civilized and supreme above all Othered races (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Given that race was created to distantiate, there can be no race without racism, and disparate racial outcomes are results of social, structural, and institutional dynamics rather than the actions of individuals. The intercentricity of race means that racism is a structural and relational, normative and ordinary phenomenon integral to institutions and social practices in the U.S. (Bell, 2023). Following this proposition, CRT scholars critique dominant ideologies of liberalism to instead prioritize race-conscious approaches to social change, including the advancement of counternarratives guided by intersectional and anti-essentialist epistemologies (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

The *whitestream*—the discursive, material, and physical spaces that pass as the mainstream but are structures intended to serve white interests (Grande, 2003)—has long villainized CRT (Tate IV, 1997). The theoretical orientation entered public consciousness in the early-1990s during Lani Guinier's confirmation hearings for Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. During the confirmation proceedings, the political right discredited Guinier's scholarship and legacy, provoking a white public's fears that nominating a Black woman to the highest court would set a dangerous precedent for radicalizing the *mainstream* legal system through the *fringe* concerns of CRT (Tate IV, 1997).

In the summer of 2020, white conservatives seeking a counter to protests against the brutalization, police murders, and citizen vigilantism against Black people homed in on CRT. When Fox News presenter Tucker Carlson denounced CRT's "racial orthodoxy," influential figures enthusiastically embraced the message. Following Carlson's segment, the then president signed an executive order labeling anti-racist education and critical social theories, including CRT, "offensive" and "anti-American" (Pettit, 2021). Since then, numerous states have introduced legislation banning CRT in schools (Pettit, 2021).

The anti-CRT campaign has driven out school board members and faculty and divided neighbors, attracting national-level attention and dollars as different organizations have profited from the controversy. As the anti-CRT legislative firestorm surges, scholars and activists argue that the vilified CRT is no more than a "poorly drawn caricature" (Pettit, 2021, p. 2), evident in public protests where parents and concerned community members echo disinformation presented in the news. The white public has been galvanized to support CRT bans by the systematic creation and dissemination of disinformation in digital spaces.

Disinformation is factually incorrect and deceptive information created to purposefully mislead people and has become an increasing focus of study since the 2016 U.S. federal election (Freon & Wells, 2020). As a political tactic, disinformation rapidly spreads in digital spaces, which offer unfettered access, instant sharing, and minuscule fact-checking. Specifically for the anti-CRT conservative movement, there are dedicated websites (e.g. PragerU), memes, Twitter threads, Facebook petitions, and viral videos which broadcast disinformation about critical race theory, how and where it is taught, and the subsequent risks to white America (Benson, 2022). The success of digital disinformation exacerbates the issue that U.S. citizens primarily get news and do research from sources that align with their beliefs, "masked as objective and accurate; where what constitutes news and factual information is blurred into whatever one wants to hear" (Benson, 2022, p. 4). For white people and racialized others indoctrinated into the whitestream, the abundance of disinformation about CRT allows for the theory to be discredited, simultaneously dismissing the value of "revealing race-related knowledge...redirecting attention away from the responsibilities of knowing" (Pham, 2023, p. 300).

Postdigital Whitestreaming

As with other digital spaces, such as seen across social media (Matias, 2020), Amazon's unmoderated platform for opining provides a compelling space to study the postdigital spread of disinformation and whiteness. Postdigitalism is the intersection of daily life and digital technologies, where the digital world is no longer differentiated from human interaction (Knox, 2019). In the field of education, where, to date, digital technology has been mostly treated as a neutral supplement to learning, postdigital studies explore how the digital world shapes and is entangled in the pedagogies, social practices, and systems driving education (Jandrić & Knox, 2022; Knox, 2019). With this focus, postdigital scholars describe how cultures of surveillance, capitalistic desires for data, and neoliberal impulses for performance and measurement merge to influence how, what, why, and where teaching and learning occur (Jandrić & Ford, 2022)..

Matias and Aldern (2020) furthered the goals of postdigital studies suggesting, "with postdigitalism, we need to consider how whiteness operates even more multidimensionally...enacted in novel ways through multiple spaces over time" (p. 336). The digital world is primarily perceived as raceless, obfuscating how platforms, infrastructures, content, and sociality are undergirded by and reproductive of white supremacy (Noble, 2018). Within education, postdigital whitestreaming

enforces the "normality" of whiteness through micro-interactions and macro structures developed to capitalize on extractive labor and data harvesting in processes linked to colonialism (Kwet, 2019). In microenvironments, for example, a pre-service teacher who shows TikTok videos in class is operating on a platform that uses algorithms known to prioritize the content of white users, which is culturally appropriative and normalizes white culture through cyber-stereotypes (Davis, 2022). Within macrostructures, Matias and Aldren (2019) described the mechanisms that postdigital spaces provide for institutions to profit from the physical presence and intellectual labor of racialized faculty and students while simultaneously silencing faculty and students who speak out on the ways the institutions perpetuate racialized injustice.

Given our interest in postdigital whitestreaming, the ongoing attack against CRT, and the ways that digital technologies provide fertile ground for disinformation, Matias and Aldren's (2020) call served as a point of departure for our analysis, illuminating how reviewers parrot CRT disinformation through book reviews. Anyone can leave an Amazon review without purchasing or reading books, while positioning the reviewer as an authority on the topic. Therefore, book reviews offer insight into the mundane processes people engage to maintain white "ignorance" in the post-digital era, addressed through the following question: *How do reviewers reproduce whiteness in their attempts to sway future readers of CRT texts?*

Methodology

As we were concerned about the permeative reproductiveness of whiteness in postdigital spaces, we conducted a critical race content analysis (CRCA) in dialectical engagement with the tenets of CWS. Pérez Huber et al. (2020) developed CRCA to centrally locate tenets of critical race theory in analyzing embedded racism in children's literature. These tenets include attending to the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of oppression, the need to uncover white supremacist ideologies, and an overarching commitment to social justice through centering the experiences of racialized people and incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives. Through analytically applying these tenets, a CRCA can reveal how power operates within literature, which discursively encodes and perpetuates racialized inequities, among other social oppressions (Pérez Huber et al., 2020). Given that whiteness attempts to invert the logic and tenets of CRT, we applied concepts of critical whiteness studies to guide our analysis.

Critical Whiteness Studies as a Theoretical and Analytic Guide

CWS is a transdisciplinary orientation developed to interrogate the societal functions of whiteness, including how people embody, perform, and internalize whiteness. Whiteness is a multifaceted ideological property and discourse with material, political, historical, cultural, mental, physical, and relational impacts on all people and institutions in the United States (see Cabrera et al., 2017 for a review). The structural dimensions of whiteness maintain and constrain "cultural practices, values, and attitudes by determining what is normative and simultaneously invisibilizing and naturalizing white supremacy" (Jordan, 2023).

In response to whiteness, critical whiteness studies is a transdisciplinary project, known by different names (see Matias, 2022a; Matias & Boucher, 2021 for reviews), that aims to name, deconstruct, and debilitate the structures and processes of whiteness (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Grounded in the early works of racialized scholars and artists who studied whiteness as an act of resistance and survivance in a racially-hostile society (Baldwin, 2013; Du Bois, 2018; Matias,

2022), whiteness scholars suggest that "the bonds of whiteness can yet be broken/deconstructed for the betterment of humanity" (Nayak, 2007, p. 738).

Core to our engagement in CWS is our embrace of Mills' (2007) warning that white ignorance, an ignorance that "*resists... fights back*"; is "*militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, and ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly... presenting itself unblushingly as knowledge*" (p. 13; Italics in original). This ignorance is an agentic and collective effort to maintain the racial contract through an "inverted epistemology" that produces "the ironic outcomes that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (Mills, 1997, p. 2). While CWS scholars focus on a variety of components, we were driven to understand how white emotionality (Leonardo, 2009; Matias, 2016) and white sociality (Sleeter, 1994; Yoon, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2006) became discursive acts used to maintain ignorance, thereby eliding culpability in white supremacy and responsibility for racial justice (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Matias, 2020; Matias & Zembylas, 2014).

White Emotionality

Matias (2016) described white emotionality as emotional weaponry that white people employ when confronted with hegemonic whiteness, white privilege, and white supremacy. Emotions, such as anger, defensiveness, denial, guilt, and sadness, serve to either deflect or distance the feeler from the topic, thereby shutting down dialogue and denying the pain and violence of racialized people. Matias (2021) explores the psychology of enacted emotional whiteness as rooted in the "psychological connection between whiteness and Blackness. Meaning, whiteness has no merit on its own, instead, it can only be defined by its ontological opposite: the vilification of Blackness" (p. 175). Given this reality, the enacted emotionality of whiteness is a symptom of deeper trauma, related to the fact that white people's humanity is wrapped into the dehumanization of Others (King, 2019).

Leonardo and Zembylas' (2013) focus on how these emotional enactments become a technology, in the Foucauldian sense to allow people to discursively perform an ignorant yet "possessive investment in whiteness" (Lipsitz, 1995, p. 369). These affective technologies are "instrumentalized, containing certain social norms and dynamics of inclusion/exclusion with respect to one's self and an Other" (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013, p. 151). White technologies of affect include the policing of others' emotions as irrational, while simultaneously positing that white emotions are reasoned and proof for the emotion itself. For example, if a white woman feels fear at the sight of and subsequent interaction with a Black man, and takes her fear as proof that the Black man means her harm, she establishes to herself that she has rational evidence to call the police (Nir, 2020).

White Sociality

Given that so much of the emotionality wrapped into whiteness occurs in relationship to power and people, we were also interested in how whiteness maintains itself relationally through creating a society built for the comfort, benefit, and exaltation of white people. For this analysis, we were drawn to the work on white racial bonding, which Sleeter (1994) defined as "interactions that have the purpose of affirming a common stance on race-related issues, legitimating particular interpretations of groups of color, and drawing conspiratorial we–they boundaries" (p. 261). Boundaries are established through linguistic acts of white people that connote alliance with whiteness and affinity with each other, akin to a verbal wink and nod, or as Yoon (2012) described,

"whiteness-at-work" (p. 608)-the microprocesses embedded in daily interactions to preserve and recenter white comfort.

While there are many ways that white racial bonding occurs, we were particularly interested in the semantic moves that reviewers used, which stem from U.S. societal discourse. Primarily we were led by Bonilla-Silva's (2006) argument that the dominance of colorblind ideology in legal systems is a form of racism developed to allow racialized disparities and violence to progress unabated. To be "colorblind" offers white people a powerful tool to deny the presence and impact of racism and their complicity in white supremacist systems (Matias, 2021). Colorblind racism² goes hand-in-hand with white emotionality as people who attempt to persuade others and themselves that they "do not see color" are often confronted with the realities of racism and respond with deflective emotions (Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). In efforts to keep up the mask of colorblindness, they hold tight to arguments that one's experience of racialized disparity is that individual's fault because the United States is a meritocracy, where material success is a function of hard work and ethos rather than living in a white supremacist system (Tatum, 2017).

A Note on Subjectivity

Engaging critical whiteness in our analysis is core to our commitments as scholars concerned with white perpetration of mundane violence. The first author, a white ciswoman, grew up in South Carolina, the seat of the confederacy, seeing racial injustice and hatred in Ku Klux Klan rallies, not understanding that it was committed by more than confederate flag flyers. The second author reflects her Midwest semi-rural upbringing: white, middle class, evangelical, loosely tied to eastern European roots. Her sense of self came from an acidic mixture of Christian-infused whiteness politics that, until adulthood, guided her decision-making. The third author is an international student from the Bahamas pursuing higher education at a Mid-South predominantly white institution. She is a Black, cisgender, queer/questioning woman with a disability, who was raised in a Christian-dominant society that maintains complicated relationships of race and ability. The fourth author, a white cisgender woman, grew up in the rural Midwest in a lower-middle-class family with a stay-at-home mom and a father who identifies as a right-wing Fox News viewer. As authors and friends, we share solidarity in this work, albeit from different stances. Most importantly, we interrogate our manifestations of whiteness, seeking to understand how colorblind ideologies have shaped our beliefs and actions. We remind each other to be accountable for disrupting the power of language and its violent tendencies.

As Matias and Newlove (2017) described, the current practice of emboldened and en/whitened epistemology "persists because ... a White supremacist society that naturalizes Whiteness as Truth" (p. 923) rejects the knowledge, experience, and humanity of those who are not white. Here, we commit to making visible the invisibilized and violent language of whiteness by examining Amazon reviews of CRT-themed texts through the lens of CWS.

2. In this article, we draw from Bonilla-Silva's (2006) work and therefore use the terminology of color-blind racism. However, we recognize that Annamma et al., 2017 suggest color-evasive as a better terminology that does not lean on ableism (i.e., connoting blindness with ignorance) while describing how white people actively evade the reality of racism and white supremacy.

Procedure

To initiate this study, we read and watched a selection of Fox media to understand what texts broadcasters targeted as being CRT-oriented, naming authors who discuss race and whiteness regardless of their association with CRT. For example, Fox News broadcast a segment featuring a senator from Arkansas who introduced a bill to ban critical race theory. In their reporting, Fox aligned Ibram X. Kendi and Robin DiAngelo with critical race theory, specifically naming their books and misaligning the authors as critical race theorists (Dorman, 2021). Fox News also highlighted authors and books aligned with CRT, as seen in Wulfsohn’s (2021) article that describes Crenshaw, Delgado, and Stefancic as “authors of the introductory textbook on CRT” (para. 4).

Ultimately, we identified four texts for our analysis, which included identifying four books: Delgado and Stefancic (2013), Crenshaw et al. (1996), Kendi (2019), and DiAngelo (2018). We then collected all Amazon reviews for each book posted from September 3, 2020, to August 31, 2021, resulting in 1,379 reviews in total. We also collected metadata, such as the reviewer’s username, the date posted, the star-rating given, if the book was a verified Amazon purchase, and how many readers found the review helpful. During the time period of our analysis, we read each text if we had not read it prior to this study.

When analyzing existing content from online sources, there is no assured process to determine demographic details, such as age, gender, or race. However, in this study, we were more interested in the discursivity of reproducing whiteness (Matias, 2020) than who was spreading disinformation. Amazon reviews are part of the public domain and are exempt from human ethics approval. Nevertheless, to protect reviewers’ identities, we created pseudonym-handles mirroring the tenor of the original handles.

Analysis

Through the lenses of white emotionality and white sociality, we sought to understand the strategies reviewers employed to recenter whiteness in their arguments against the place of CRT in society. As seen in Table 1, we adapted Pérez Huber et al.’s (2020) critical race content analysis (CRCA) framework to include components of CWS discussed above. Applying the concepts of white emotionality in frames two and three, we focused on how white emotional responses decentered racialized experience while at the same time arguing for rationality and reason. In frames one, four, and five, we focused on how reviewers recentered colorblindness to align with whiteness in inverting the logics of critical race theory.

Table 1: *Framework for a Critical Race-Critical Whiteness Content Analysis*

| | Critical Race Theoretical Tenets | Critical Race Content Analysis Components | Critical Whiteness Components That Invert Logics of CRT | Guiding Analytic Questions |
|------------------|---|---|--|---|
| Frame One | Centricity of race and racism | Recognizing that race does not exist without racism, a condition which mediates cultural storylines and texts | Denying that whiteness is a structural, ideological, and cultural mechanism that reproduces race, and therefore white supremacy in society | What characteristics do reviewers assign to the authors? To the public? How do the reviews, reviewers, and books become |

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|--------------------|--------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| | | | | raced? Or how are they described as raceless? |
| Frame Two | Challenging dominant ideologies | Revealing the operations and ideologies of white supremacy that undergird literacy devices | Reinscribing a "hermeneutics of whiteness" (Matias & Newlove, 2017), wherein the ideologies of white supremacy are rooted in commonplace speech. | What dominant ideologies are performed and reproduced within the reviews? How do they operate relationally? Emotionally? |
| Frame Three | Centrality of experiential knowledge | Centering the experiences of people of color | De-centering the experiences of people of color through white emotionality and experience | How are the realities and experiences of racialized people represented? How is the perspective of reviewers represented? Who is centered in this review? |
| Frame Four | Interdisciplinary perspectives | Integrating intersectional knowledge to inform the contexts in which reviews are written | Integrating whitewashed perspectives to deny the contextual reality of the time and place books were written | How do reviewers contextually situate race and its intersections? What contexts and standpoints are overlooked? |
| Frame Five | Commitment to racial justice | Committing to social justice to challenge and transform inequity in writing | Advocating for a colorblind approach to justice and equality | How is focalization of the review constructed (perspective of the reviewer)? How does power operate within the linguistic devices of the review? |

Note. This table displays the elements of our analytical approach, which merged Pérez Huber et al.'s 2018 critical race content analysis (CRCA), with tenets from critical whiteness studies. Each frame describes the tenet of CRT and CRCA component, as delineated by Pérez Huber et al. (2018), and then a component of critical whiteness studies which inverts the logic of CRT.

Utilizing abductive coding, we maintained dialectical engagement between subtextual meanings, the key theoretical propositions of CRT and CWS, and our orientation to the data. The first phase of analysis began with data familiarization, reading each review and condensing the data set to focus on unfavorable, mixed, and ambivalent reviews. While it could be valuable to understand affirmatives responses to the reviewed books, our interest was in understanding how disinformed whiteness was performed in book reviews, and therefore we opted to exclude reviews

that were favorable, such as RobertC's review, "An incredible book that is about so much more than racism or people, instead ideas and action and deep reflection on deeply ingrained thoughts and beliefs are unearthed." The process required a close reading to determine if a review was genuinely supportive or if it teetered between affirming and dismissive. For example, one review stated, "If you want to learn what CRT is all about, this book is great. Having said that, I am not a fan of the theory. It's a half-baked, recitation of socialism" (Potatoes). The reviewer gave the book a 5-star rating but dismissed the theory using a disinformation tactic of comparing CRT to socialism. However, in another example we excluded a 3-star review that stated "The overall concept is good with the distinction between the person and the policy. Disliked the excessive use of the "F" word. It added Nothing to the dialog" (ConsumerReader), as the reviewers did not use their concern of Kendi's use of explicatives to demean the overall work. To triangulate the decisions of Authors 2 and 3, Author 1 read all reviews and memos to reach an agreement on the eliminated and maintained reviews, resulting in a final data set of 744 reviews.

During the second phase, Author 1 open coded a random selection of one-fourth of the data to create initial codes, which were tentative and focused on overarching concepts such as the code "emotional display," or "politicizing." Authors 1–3 then met to develop the codebook from these codes, utilizing language from CWS. For example, we re-coded the data initially labeled emotional display, to be more precise in what was occurring within the reviews, using codes, such as "hiding fear," "masking guilt," "feigning outrage." During the third phase of analysis, Authors 1–3 undertook the abductive analysis utilizing the codebook and *process coding*, which utilizes gerunds, or -ing words, to highlight the discursive strategies underlying a written text (Saldaña, 2021). Author 1 moved between our guiding theoretical frame and codes to integrate and refine categories and identify significant themes. For example, one of the process codes, "pearl clutching", became an overarching category label and ultimately a theme that encased multiple codes within. Authors 1-3 memored throughout the analytic process, noting initial interpretations, questions, and provocations encountered within the data. During the final interpretative writing stage, the authors developed labels and definitions of the themes and subthemes and identified exemplar illustrative quotes.

Findings: Emo-social Strategic Whiteness

Specific to the goals of this study, we sought to illuminate how Amazon reviews became a form of protest against books identified as CRT texts through reviewers' oppositional re-centering of whiteness. We grounded our analysis in the reviews' focalization with specific interest in how power operated, how issues of race and racism were contextually situated, and how dominant ideologies were performed. Overall, our findings indicate an interconnected display of *emo-social strategic whiteness* to maintain the racial contract, permitting white people to validate their moral superiority and feign racial ignorance (Mills, 1997). The prefix, *Emo-* represents the emotionality often aligned with white peoples' displays of anger, discomfort, and fear when confronted with discussions of race, racism, and whiteness (Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). Our analysis revealed countless displays of reviewers' abandonment of reason, throwing aside "objectivity" to indulge in the primacy of white emotions. This yielded our first theme, *pearl clutching*, comprised of the subthemes *affective technologizing* and the *emotional dynamics of distancing*. The social aspect of emotionality described in this paper indicates how reviewers manifested linguistic white racial bonding to solidify a connection to other white readers and protect whiteness (Sleeter, 1995). Our

second theme, *working whiteness*, describes the socio-emotional bonds and contains the sub-themes *color-binding through color-blinding* and *meritocraticizing*. We describe these themes alongside relevant text from the reviews.

Pearl Clutching: The Emotionality of Re-centered Whiteness

Pearl clutching refers to the illustrative metaphor of a person (typically a woman) who, when shocked, grabs at her pearl necklace in a demonstration of offense at what she perceives to be morally wrong. Today, the turn of phrase indicates when a person's dramatic display of outrage exceeds typical responses. Here, it describes reviewers' feigned melodramatic white emotionality. From asserting that the authors promote violence to locating the offenses internally through shame, emotionality was evidenced throughout as reviewers characterized the books as "hatred in book form" (Ken), an "instrument of doom," and "bible of hatred and chaos" (VanaWhite). Two sub-themes comprise pearl clutching—*affective technologizing* and the *emotional dynamics of distancing*—which present distinct displays of emotionality and attempts to discredit and detract.

Affective Technologizing

The subtheme *affective technologizing* refers to reviewers' discursive operationalization of fear in stating that the books are "designed to divide people and create hate" (Summer) and are harbingers of the destruction of the "American values that make this country so Great!" (Topher). As discussed in the above, affect as a technology of whiteness concerns how white people police emotions, describing what and who can feel which and how much emotion (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). In the reviews, affective technologizing warned "Americans" that CRT books were not written "to create a more equal playing field for all" but to "support the creation of a different group with power" (ItinerantJew). Such technological pearl clutching escalated when other reviewers described efforts to remove the threat physically: "I hid every copy of this at my local store" (Kate).

Reviewers deflected the realities of white racism by suggesting that their reviews were merely warning of the books' potential societal impact. MissRia wrote, "we are once again entering into a very dark time in the history of this nation if we allow this hatred to continue unchecked" through books that "fuel the fires of racial hatred," thus suggesting that the United States is a post-racial society, and it is because of CRT texts that we risk returning to darker days.

One reviewer encapsulated the affective technologizing displayed in pearl clutching writing as follows:

A toxic philosophy of nihilism and hatred...Anyone who sincerely engages with the message of this book will be sent down a recursive rabbit-hole exactly like the one found in brainwashing cults. Beware!... Critical race theory is not simply daft. It is extremely powerful and lusts after power, which is its actual agenda....Their agenda is nothing less than the destruction of history, western art, language and thought as well as family structure. Though not explicit in the text, it is very easy to find the author's declarations in other media, as she does not make a secret of them. THIS IS A VERY VERY DANGEROUS BOOK (Laney).

This review exemplified several discursive technologies displaying Laney's emotionality and shock at the book. Words such as "toxic," "brainwashing cult," and "Beware!" and the use of ALL CAPS evinced urgency mixed with fear to dissuade. Laney also anthropomorphized CRT, suggesting that it has motives, thereby writing the theory into existence as a literal bogeyman (allusions to the use of bogey as a derogatory term for Black men intended; for further discussion, see Safire, 2004). Finally, Laney stated that "their" agenda—painting an *us-versus-them* division—is meant to destroy "western" society, thus decrying the downfall of a society built and maintained on white supremacy. Therefore, what we conceptualized as the technologies of whiteness employed in pearl clutching was illustrated by dire warnings of the coming dangers stemming from CRT's "senseless message... that will cause a great deal of harm" (PlantarFascia), in the authors' attempts to "Make the world black!" (ItinerantJew).

Emotional Dynamics of Distancing

While reviewers exhibiting *affective technologizing* warned readers of the books' destructive potential, in the *emotional dynamics of distancing* subtheme, reviewers displayed overt and covert white emotionality. As discussed above, the emotionality of whiteness consists of what Matias (2017) wrote as, "those racialized feelings that surface when teaching and learning about race that can either hinder (e.g., guilt, denial, resistance, anger, silence, etc.) or better support (e.g., empowerment, acceptance, determine, love, etc.) the fruition of racially just education" (p. 119). Within this analysis, reviewers openly displayed fear, resistance, guilt through their writing, as well as warning potential readers from engaging the books, lest they also feel these feelings.

Reviewers alluded to emotionality through linguistic removal, blaming the authors for trying to elicit emotions, as illustrated in statements such as "The writer simply shamed all white people" (Matthews) or "it attempts to make you feel guilty for the way you were born" (Ansley). The attempt to disembodify the emotional self while being overly emotional was evident in David's review: "This is a book for 'woke' self-hating or guilt-ridden white people and virulently racist blacks. Decent, INTELLIGENT whites and blacks will avoid it like the COVID-19 virus." Here, the reviewer used emotionality to demarcate *us* from *them*—*us* being the civil and *them* being the unintelligent.

Regardless of the authors' perceived intentions, reviewers posited that they were not susceptible to such emotional "tricks." This protestation appeared in Peter's review: "do not expect me to feel like a bad person for who I am. How dare you!!!" Kris also suggested that DiAngelo's attempts to create guilt were "Complete nonsense!! I am a White Male (oh my!) and in no ways a racist. I will not be made to feel like a racist, nor will I teach my children they are racists." Kris's feigned horror at being white and male, indicated by the pearl clutching parenthetical aside of "oh my" juxtaposed with an insistence of not being racist, is a tactic we saw throughout the data.

Reviewers also described the physically emotional experience of being white in a CRT world. Jack illustrated the tendency to reference the pain of encountering these books, writing, "I'm sick to tears...", while Debbie wrote, "When I opened this book and looked through it I got sick to my stomach..." Overt displays of emotionality were also apparent in the linguistic formatting of reviews. Reviewers indicated their anger and frustration in ALL CAPS, as in BlueCan's scattershot of emotionality beginning with "ARE YOU PEOPLE OUT OF YOUR MIND!!! ... YOU ARE SICK!! RACIST SICK!! YOU NEED HELP!!" It is unclear who "you people" are, but one assumes it is anyone who believes that white supremacy is ongoing. BlueCan proceeded to share

that they are "A WHITE AMERICAN AND I AM PROUD OF IT!! MY NATIONALITY ANCESTORS WERE SLAVES TOO!! BRUTALLY TORTURED!! GET OVER YOURSELF!" By alluding to the ancestral enslavement of Europeans, BlueCan suggested they have "gotten over it," as should descendants of enslaved Black people—a favorite quip of white Americans who do not want to face the legacy of US white slaving. BlueCan then suggests that DiAngelo's text is an affront to the principles of colorblindness and Christianity as "GOD CREATED MAN IN HIS IMAGINE, YES JESUS WAS A JEW, BUT WOULD IT EVEN MATTER IF HE WAS BACK, BROWN, RED, PURPLE, OR GREEN???? OF COURSE NOT!!" because we "ALL BLEED RED BLOOD." BlueCan suggested they were "NOT RAISED RACIST AGAINST OTHER PEOPLE OF ANY COLOR!!" stating others should "SHUT UP AND SIT DOWN!!" This one review illustrates the extreme emotionality of white people, displaying how deflection intertwines with contempt and outrage—the metaphorical hand rising to the throat to clutch one's pearls.

Working Whiteness: Reinscribing White Solidarity

The theme *working whiteness* captures the social processes through which white people maintain the power of whiteness while denying that whiteness exists. Guided by elements of CWS, we were interested in the ways that reviewers' alignment with and affinity to whiteness was maintained through how they engaged the readers as acts of white racial bonding. Within our analysis, we noted reviewers bonding on multiple discursive levels, from the use of overt sarcasm, seen when PeanutButter wrote "Tried it [i.e., being anti-racist], not as fun as being proracist," to semantic eye-rolling represented by rhetorical questions, such as "Do I have to break it down, or is it obviously stupid to everyone but him?" (Santa). Beyond reviewers' linguistic choices, we noted their semantic moves (Bonilla-Silva & Foreman, 2000) as a process of developing solidarity within the Amazon reviews. The most common semantic moves were inscribing colorblind (subtheme one) and meritocratic (subtheme two) ideologies, thereby reinscribing racist beliefs about racialized peoples.

Color-Binding through Colorblinding

In the subtheme *color-binding through colorblinding*, reviewers promoted solidarity in decolonized whiteness through colorblind discourses (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Core to this stance was that the reviewed books did not deconstruct racism but instead promoted racial injustice for white people. The denial and racism in proclaiming racism appeared as a tactic to bind white people. A common refrain in reviews was that "the best way to rid ourselves of racism is to STOP TALKING ABOUT IT" (Army). This quote (attributed to Morgan Freeman) encapsulates how reviewers tokenized the decontextualized words of people of color (POC) to bolster support for white people's painstaking desire to avoid racism. Such semantic tokenizing elevates the work of certain POC over others because it neatly aligns with white people's desire for comfort.

While centuries of scholarship and the arts point to the violent reality of white supremacy, reviewers heavily relied on translations of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s work, imploring others to listen to "those that follow MLK Jr.'s beliefs and teachings" (D&L), so that his words "echo in EVERY person's ears and hearts, no matter what your skin color is" (ThreeMenandABaby). Ultimately, reviewers argued that instead of the "divisive" language of CRT, we should base our judgments on "the content of one's character, not the color of one's skin" (a sentiment paraphrased by 12 other reviewers).

The white twist of colorblind logic also appeared in reviews, making plain the cognitive dissonance of those who deny that racism exists while elevating the "plight" of anti-white racism. Reviewers decried being "discriminated against because of the color of my white skin...picked on relentlessly" (ShoppingSleepingEating). Swoozie took umbrage at the idea of white privilege, having "taken enough hits off of black & brown people because I'm white to last me a lifetime." Finally, LetsGo stated, they have "had 11 interactions with cops in the past decade. The two in this post's screenshot were both ready to draw their weapons. Another tailed me home. Don't you dare tell me I have WHITE PRIVILEGE!" These reviewers made themselves symbols of racism against white people, conflating their potentially uncomfortable experiences with the violence of living within a system not made for POC.

Meritocraticizing

The "meritocratic mythology" remains a core investment that guides colorblind ideologies in resisting deep understanding of the role of white supremacy in U.S. society (Gotanda, 1995, p. xxix). Within our subtheme *meritocraticizing*, we observed reviewers leaning on meritocratic discourses to bolster their promotion of colorblindness while confirming racist interpretations of racialized POC. These discourses are semantic moves meant to mask privilege based in white supremacy and gain the buy-in of likeminded white people (Leonardo, 2004). Among the more common moves was the denial of white privilege: "IM STILL WAITING ON MY WHITE PRIVILEGE CARD TO COME IN THE MAIL" (Sammy). Instead of seeing white privilege as real, reviewers affirmed that the US system rewards hard work and perseverance. Through meritocraticizing, we witnessed the social act of writing reviews from a position of moral authority to suggest, as Cringe did, that the reviewers would do better to "focus on reminding them [POC] that we all have the equality of opportunity, not equality of outcome."

BigCasino noted that blaming social inequality on racism is akin to "lumping all hardworking black people in with anyone living off handouts and unwilling to work or contribute in any way to even their own community because, hey, that's their culture." As in this quote and across the data, reviewers displayed overtly racist beliefs predicated on centuries of depicting POC as lazy, writing in a matter-of-fact rhetorical style in an attempt to mask racism while expressing it.

Reviewers argued that although we live in a meritocracy, "white Americans have been burdened by affirmative action for nearly 60 years" (Brantley), a familiar protestation that US policies aimed at equity purposefully disadvantage white people. Yet such policies are routinely dismissed as failing, as seen in ItinerantJew's argument that Kendi "ignores the fact that all past efforts to do that [promote equity] have failed over the last 7 decades. Affirmative action, Welfare, Medicaid are all efforts to create equity that have not succeeded." Routinely in the reviews, mentions of failed policies were coupled with blaming racialized people for their failure, as seen in Utah's statement that "instead of lifting people to a point of self sufficiency it has done the opposite to most of the African American community, as these communities are still suffering with getting motivated to seek an education and to strive for their dreams and self sufficiency in life," utilizing the racist language seen in white-dominant spaces that the problem of inequality is the problem of the racialized. After all, "if the country was racist, there would be absolutely no upward mobility for anyone who is not white" (Rhizome).

Discussion

In this CRT/CWS analysis, we explored the emo-social ways that Amazon reviewers weaponized and repackaged disinformation about CRT to persuade the reading public against the theory. Our findings lead us to agree with Matias and Boucher (2021) that it is not enough to engender "white racial epiphanies" (p. 3); instead, we must interrogate how whiteness spreads in ordinary spaces. While we cannot know the racialized identities of all reviewers, in many cases the reviewers noted being white, undergirding how our findings demonstrate that white people do know whiteness and get angry when confronted about being white. At the same time, the omnipresence of whiteness within postdigital society means that all people living in the United States are at risk of knowingly, or not, spreading the disinformation that fuels white supremacy and ignorance.

We saw this anger in the dramatically feigned contempt for the reviewed texts in our first theme, pearl-clutching. Feigning has taken a front seat in US political and infotainment outlets, seen recently in Justice Jackson's Supreme Court confirmation hearings. Throughout, Republican committee members displaced the primacy of Judge Jackson to center their incoherent paranoia about CRT (Gyarkye, 2022). For example, Senator Ted Cruz (R-Texas) waved a poster-sized replica of a page from Kendi's text "Antiracist Baby" at Jackson, asking her "Do you agree with this book that is being taught with kids that babies are racist?" which Jackson deftly responded while distancing herself from CRT (Associated Press, 2022). The feigned outrage and fear became a circus of emotionality, also displayed throughout the Amazon reviews. Leonardo and Zembylas (2013) described these processes as technologies of whiteness, drawing attention to how "emotions, beliefs, and actions... may appear as authentic expressions of our mentality, but they are socially organized and managed" (p. 159). Maintaining whiteness through technologizing affect draws boundaries around who belongs and whose emotions count. Just as Senator Cruz was welcomed to emote overtly, Jackson was expected to embody "composure," for which white Democratic senators praised her (Gyarkye, 2022).

Similarly, Amazon reviewers spouted anger, rawness, and dejection while suggesting that POC should "get over it." Technologizing in reviews privileged the wellbeing of whites while policing all others. While the affective technologizing subtheme was drawn from data across the four books, primarily, the emotional dynamics of distancing subtheme came from reviews of DiAngelo's text. We found twisted irony in observing how reviewers created an ipso facto display of white fragility—the thesis of DiAngelo's book.

Technologizing and "fragility" matter owing to the power of CRT disinformation. Currently, 24 states have banned CRT or are considering banning it in schools—legislation aimed at subjugating the lives of POC in the service of white comfort. The reviews normalized white feelings about CRT, providing shorthand proof that CRT in schools is harmful, blocking the potential to analyze racism in the classroom, and ensconcing "aggrieved" white people in the shroud of innocence.

In the theme working whiteness, reviewers engaged white-racialized language reifying the "(un)common sense" of white superiority (Matias & Aldern, 2020, p. 330) through colorblind and meritocratic tropes. Bonilla-Silva and Forman (2000) described white people's semantic moves to mask racialized beliefs while conveying racist perspectives. In the Amazon reviews, semantic moves played out in an interwoven process whereby the intersections of *colorblinding* and *meritocracy* formed a tautological argument against CRT. Reviewers argued that we should only judge

people on the basis of "character" when defending whiteness, leading to the next subtheme, embracing meritocracy. By prioritizing one's character, the reviewers lambasted CRT and the books' authors and made generalized arguments about the inherent worth of (mostly) Black communities.

The intersection of meritocracy and colorblinding is core in the spread of disinformation about CRT. We see states, like Georgia, passing executive orders declaring that the state is not racist, therefore, there is no place for CRT in school; instead, students and parents must simply "work harder." We cannot overlook how this positioning of a colorblind meritocracy has had and will have lasting effects on students of color as white teachers, administrators, parents, and children pretend that white success is due to hard work rather than racialized dehumanization.

Today, anti-CRT rhetoric coalesces around disinformation "designed to manufacture white grievance in the service of white power" (Kreiss et al., 2021, para. 9). Books utilizing "CRT-terms," such as "structural inequality," "critical self-reflection," and "racial prejudice," are banned (Wisconsin Assembly Bill 411). Provocations of "indoctrination" led to the Florida legislature's removal of 41% of math textbooks which the legislature decided referenced CRT topics, infringing on students' freedoms (Pérez-Carrillo, 2022). These legislative moves are just one aspect of an expansive echo chamber reproduced in Amazon reviews in the direction of causality so intertwined it is impossible to untie.

Ultimately, our findings point back to Mills' (1997) racial contract—the social system that was developed by settler colonizers in the United States to justify genocide and enslavement and establish settlers as white, superior, and civil (Jordan & Dykes, 2022). To maintain the pinnacle emplacement of white people, they must deny that white supremacy exists; otherwise, white people must confront that their humanness is predicated on the dehumanization of Others (King, 2019). Therefore, white people have developed a purposeful and agentic "inverted epistemology" of ignorance. Our findings indicate that this ignorance was displayed in reviewers' emo-social feigning and alluded to a "particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)" used to maintain the racial contract, albeit through white ignorance (Mills, 1997, p. 2).

While studying the fevered attacks against CRT through Amazon reviews might seem tangential, we argue that it is crucial for surfacing the cyclical and dangerous nature of disinformation. Disinformed whiteness not only spreads hate and fear, which sidetracks any meaningful conversation and acts towards racial justice, but the response to disinformation—seen in states like Florida, where bans on diversity, equity, and inclusion (Diaz, 2023)—writ large, leaves a vacuum of knowledge. In creating the vacuum, racialized people's knowledge, theorization, and experience, and ultimately, their humanity is at risk of erasure, making way for the whitestream to continue as always, unquestioned and ignored by white people. This vacuum is one that, given our postdigital society's hunger for content, is rife to be filled by whatever theory best aligns with the goals of white supremacy. For example, on the eve of submitting this article, a white man killed 10 people in a grocery store with a gun inscribed with the N-word (Peters, 2022). Citing "great replacement theory," the terrorist justified his actions as saving the American (white) way of life. It is no coincidence that in his tenure at Fox News, Tucker Carlson (who also catalyzed the current anti-CRT movement), has discussed replacement theory over 400 times. This theory proposes that *[insert minoritized group here]* is superseding white culture and, in 2019, was the cudgel for a man in El Paso, Texas, who killed 23 people and a man in Christchurch, New Zealand, who murdered 51 people (Peters, 2022).

We name these mass shootings to acknowledge that our focus can no longer be on revealing whiteness to white people or that postdigital spaces are innocent. That Fox News allowed one of

its most popular pundits to air the grievances of replacement theory is proof enough that white people are well aware of the racialized social system and are willing to kill to maintain and profit from it. The refrain of replacement theory echoed in the disinforming words of Amazon reviewers, who argued that there is no white privilege, white supremacy is over, and if *anyone* should be aggrieved, it is white people, whose star is diminishing. Banning CRT simply creates the space and non-critical-thinking skills for "theories" such as great replacement to breed.

For postdigital studies of education understanding how whiteness and disinformation intertwine in digital spaces is crucial. From where teachers obtain their content, to the ways that students and parents think about the role and goal of education, disinforming whiteness continues to go viral across digital platforms. Disinformation feeds the fires of white ignorance, "designed to manufacture white grievance in the service of white power" (Kreiss et al., 2021, para. 9). Problematically, the response to conservative mobilization has rested on pointing out that the CRT portrayed in these campaigns is inaccurate. However, our analysis of Amazon reviews shows that people are not looking for accuracy but assurance that they will not be made liable for white supremacy. As educators and researchers, we should not waste our time arguing "but that is not CRT" with those who are committed to not hearing this. Instead, we must make plain that the humanization of white people, hinges on white ignorance and supremacy predicated on the dehumanization of non-white people (King, 2019). To counter feigned ignorance, we must hold a united front against disinformation, calling out how the justification of banning antiracism in the classroom exemplifies political and legal systems' support of white-humanization through Othered-dehumanization (Kreiss et al., 2021). To do so would be to embrace the spirit, the knowing, the scholars, and the goals of CRT.

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