

Misunderstanding the Campaign Against CRT: Absurdity and White Supremacy in Attacks on Teaching and Teacher Education

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Abstract

*Recent efforts to ban the teaching of Critical Race Theory in U.S. public schools have been criticized for fundamentally misunderstanding both CRT and K-12 teaching and teacher education. This paper argues that Anti-CRT fear-mongering in the U.S. is a new face on an old practice, the racist use of public education to sustain White supremacy. Using the method of critical discourse analysis, it examines the current anti-CRT fulmination in terms of its continuity with the history of US White supremacy in education, looking in particular at the ideological strategies employed to silence oppositional voices. It first identifies the players—both people and money—behind the public face of the CRT ban movement, linking them to the initial reaction to *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1955. It then dissects the visible tactics and hidden strategies in anti-CRT efforts to describe a three-step process of disaster capitalism in education. It ends with thoughts on how unmasking of this sort can provide the basis for community action in defense of social justice and equity in education.*

Keywords: *Critical Race Theory, White supremacy, critical discourse analysis, disaster capitalism, teacher education*

The importance of racial thought is misunderstood if only its absurdity and bad taste are seen and the continuation within it of an older and "respectable" trend is ignored... German anti-Semitism is a part of German intellectual history, it does not stand outside it.
(Mosse, 1958, pp. 265-266)

Introduction

Built upon Critical Legal Studies that analyzes systemic racism and its impact on American laws and institutions (Bell, 1987, 1992, 1996; Crenshaw, 1988; Crenshaw, et al., 1995; Delgado 1989, 1990, Matsuda, 1991, 1993, 1995), Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Education offers a framework for understanding institutional racism and educational inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). One of the goals of CRT in teacher education is the preparation of K-12 teachers able to recognize the “illusion of freedom” provided by the Whiteness of U.S. society (Matias & Newlove, 2017) and provide tools for schools and teachers to develop curricula and pedagogy that better reflect the diversity of American experiences. Recent efforts to ban the teaching of Critical Race Theory in U.S. public schools have been criticized for fundamentally misunderstanding both CRT and K-12

teaching and teacher education (Pollock et al., 2022). The absurdity of the bans, as well as the circus atmosphere surrounding their promulgation, encourages ridicule—but it also obscures the continuous thread of racism and White supremacy that links today’s farce with yesterday’s tragedies. George Mosse (1958) pointed out in his discussion of the rise of fascist anti-Semitism in German literature that what distinguished Nazi anti-Semitism from its German predecessors was its “absurdity and bad taste” (p. 265), but he warned against focusing on that absurdity. Nazi anti-Semitism was at bottom, in Mosse’s assessment, neither foreign to German culture nor an aberration in German intellectual history—more outrageous, indeed, but ideologically identical.

Anti-CRT fear-mongering in the U.S. is similarly a new face on an old practice, the racist use of public education to sustain White supremacy. As Mosse observed with respect to German anti-Semitism, the absurdity of right-wing “misunderstanding” of CRT should not disguise the reality that the CRT opponents have manufactured a “disaster” in public education—using CRT as a convenient target to further reinforce control of the educational discourse and practice by instilling White hegemonic ideologies and eliminating the voices from diverse communities. The absurdity of CRT bans *is* the point: the resulting confusion and uncertainty develops an overarching climate of disaster that enables reinscribing White supremacy in public education. This paper uses Critical Discourse Analysis (Gee, 1999; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; van Dijk, 2018; Wodak, 2021) as a general method infused with the insights from Critical Race Hermeneutics (Allen, 2021) to examine the current anti-CRT fulmination in terms of its continuity with the history of US White supremacy in education, looking in particular at the ideological strategies employed to silence oppositional voices. We first identify the players—both people and money—behind the public face of the CRT ban movement, linking them to the initial reaction to *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1955. We then dissect the visible tactics and hidden strategies in anti-CRT efforts, employing both *small discourse* and *big discourse* texts (Gee, 1999) to describe a three-step process of disaster capitalism in education (Miller & Liu, 2021): manufacturing a disaster, rendering teachers, students, and families disposable, and selling private solutions to profit from the public purse. We end with thoughts on how unmasking of this sort can provide the basis for transformative community action in defense of social justice and equity in education.

Methodology: Critical Discourse Analysis

The purpose of this study is to unveil the players behind the anti-CRT hysteria and the tactics and strategies they employ in their efforts to further inscribe White supremacy in public education. In doing so, we searched for federal policies and state education agencies and collected documents that were publicly available. We also searched for monetary support to the anti-CRT campaign and any information pertaining to the strategies these players have implemented to achieve their goals. We then used Critical Discourse Analysis (Gee, 1999; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Wodak, 2021) to read and analyze these documents. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to study discourse as a social practice in which power hierarchies and inequities are established, justified, and maintained (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). It highlights that language is a power resource (Willig, 2014) and that language use “moderates and produces social and psychological phenomena” in a purposeful way (Mullet, 2018, p. 116). van Dijk (1993) pointed out that institutions, as “speakers,” hold power and discursive resources and as such there exists power imbalances between the speakers and the listeners. Political discourses about marginalized groups, enabled and reinforced through media discourses, reproduce discrimination and oppression that further maintain a hegemonic and oppressive system

(van Dijk, 2007). CDA unveils the linguistic manifestations of power (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) and as such, it enables the researchers to gain critical understanding of and further reveal hegemonic ideologies, power asymmetries, and systemic inequities involved in discourse (van Dijk, 1993). At the same time, unlike CRT, CDA does not put race at the center of the analysis. For this reason, we turned to Critical Race Hermeneutics (Allen, 2021) to go beyond power in general to focus on the racial basis of the processes by which different players manipulate a false impression among the public regarding the manufactured disaster of CRT in K-12 education in order to perpetuate White supremacy in education and society. The result is an unveiling of racial capitalism (Robinson, 2021) at work in both the long-term (disaster capitalism in education) and the short-term (moral panics over CRT) alike, regardless of the corporate nature of the former and the absurd nature of the latter.

Theoretical Framework: Disaster Capitalism in Education

Disaster capitalism—the use of *disasters* to channel public funding into private pockets (Klein, 2005, 2014; Schuller & Maldonado, 2016)—is not a new practice in education. Indeed, although Klein coined the term with reference to the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans in 2005, the practice itself can be seen going back into the 1960s “White flight” from public schools undergoing desegregation into private and charter systems (Wilson, 2019, pp. 236-238). Over the succeeding half century, the commercial component of White flight has intensified, supporting “a long-running attack on public schools” (Miller & Liu, 2021, p. 2) featuring the funneling of public education funds into private organizations ranging from charter operators (Stride, Inc. being the largest such operator, reporting 2020 revenue in excess of \$1 billion) to testing organizations (NWEA, which runs the K-12 MAP testing, reports nearly \$200 million in annual revenue), and educational technology companies (Zoom, which holds the majority of the market for synchronous meeting software, reported revenue of \$2.6 billion in 2020 alone in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic). However, this capture of public education funding by private organizations has not simply been a slow and steady process; rather, there have been relatively short periods of rapid growth following which the new balance of public and private becomes the norm, never to return to the previous state. These periods of rapid growth are stimulated by crises, and thus represent disaster capitalism at work.

Disaster capitalism in education has historically worked through a cycle of three major strategies: 1) promoting the neglect of public resources, 2) rendering students, teachers, and families disposable, and 3) selling private solutions as substitutes for public resources (Miller & Liu, 2021). The initial step of the cycle, promoting the neglect of public resources, is typically predicated on an assertion of a state of “disaster;” sometimes the proximate disaster (although not necessarily the root disaster) is natural, as in Hurricane Katrina (2005), but in many cases the disaster is manufactured, as in the forecasts of “COVID learning loss” made in early 2020, even before the majority of public schools transitioned to remote teaching (Miller & Liu, 2021). Because the goal of disaster capitalism in education is to make private profit off the public purse, the second step—rendering students, teachers, and families disposable—is vital, as these three groups pose the only real obstacle because of the role of popular governance through school boards and parent-teacher organizations. With the preparation of the first two stages in place, disaster capitalism then proffers private solutions to the problems it has identified or invented, and with students, teachers, and families removed from the decision-making process, relies on the government-based leg of the

education industrial complex (Picciano & Spring, 2013) to funnel public funding into private pockets. In the succeeding sections we employ the theoretical framework of disaster capitalism in education to analyze the players, tactics, and strategies found in the anti-CRT movement in order to demonstrate the common base in racial capitalism.

Anti-CRT Players

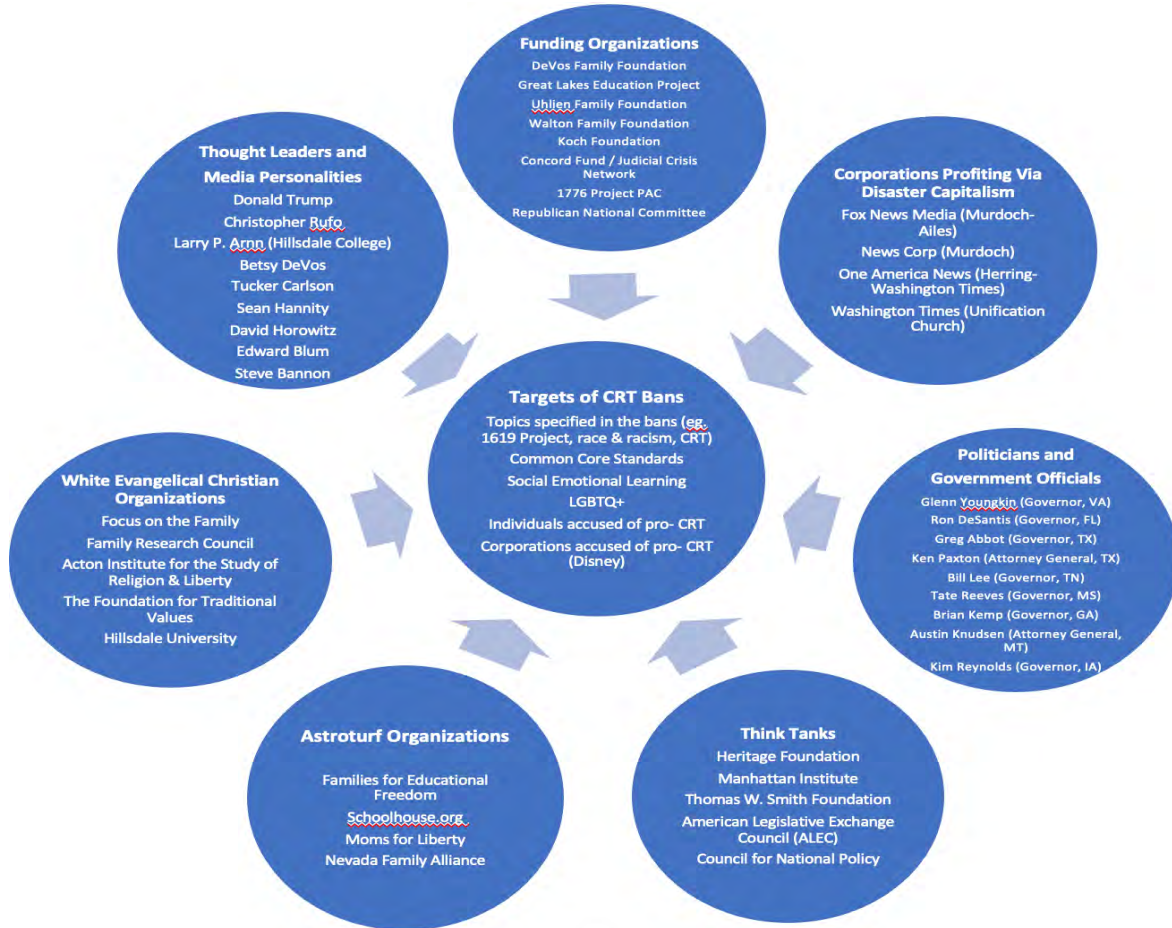
The current anti-CRT national movement can be traced back to then-President Donald Trump's 2020 memo in which the White House Office of Management and Budget ordered a stop to funding federal training on diversity and Critical Race Theory. Around the same time, Trump sought to rebuke¹ the 1619 Project (Hannah-Jones et. al., 2021), which culminated with the release of his administration's "1776 Report" just prior to his leaving office.² Trump's Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping, which forbade "divisive concepts," including "race or sex stereotyping" and "race or sex scapegoating" as newly-defined in the EO (Exec. Order No. 13950, 2020). By April 28 2022, 42 states introduced bills or took other steps to "restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism" (Schwartz, 2022).

Notwithstanding the politicians' roles in developing CRT bans, there is a wide range of players involved. Action at all levels has been coordinated by organizations dedicated to profiting from the privatizing public education and choreographed through the mass media via opinion leaders, media personalities, think tank fellows, and a network of activists in every state. At the local level, anti-CRT voices are typically presented as outraged parents—as is implied by organizational names such as Families for Educational Freedom and Moms for Liberty—unconnected to larger organizations, but these "astroturf" organizations are deeply engaged with right-wing think tanks, media outlets, and other organizations (Gross, 2021). There is a complex network of organizations and individuals funding, organizing, and acting as media figures for the anti-CRT movement; Figure 1 (below) outlines some of the key players.

1. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/1619-project-took-over-2020-inside-story/2020/10/13/af537092-00df-11eb-897d-3a6201d6643f_story.html

2. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/how-trump-administration-s-1776-report-warps-history-racism-slavery-n1254926>

Figure 1: Major Players in the Anti-CRT Movement



In Figure 1 the main players in the anti-CRT efforts are organized into six distinct groups: 1) funding organizations, 2) Thought leaders and media personalities, 3) Conservative White evangelical Christian organizations, 4) Corporations, 5) Politicians and government officials, and 6) Think tanks. However, numerous individuals active in the Anti-CRT moral panic and disaster capitalism play multiple roles, moving from private to public sector and back. For example, using information from Ballotpedia.org and ProPublica’s Nonprofit explorer, we coded Betsy DeVos as a “thought leader” not just because of her important role in promoting school vouchers in her home state of Michigan, and her position as Secretary of Education under Trump, but also because she is co-director of the DeVos Family Foundation, which supports charter and parochial schools across the country (Ballotpedia, 2023). Her natal family foundation, the Prince Family Foundation (directed by DeVos’s brother, Erik Prince), also funds the conservative evangelical Christian Hillsdale University and the lobbying organizations Focus on the Family and the Family Research Council (Focus on the Family, 2019). Similarly, before Glenn Youngkin became Governor of Virginia, running on the anti-CRT moral panic, he spent nearly three decades working for Accelerate Learning, including serving as CEO from the acquisition of that company by the Carlyle Group in 2018 until his campaign began in 2020 (Dickinson, 2018).

Anti-CRT Tactics

The visible tactics anti-CRT players focus on controlling the narrative in order to increase the strength and reach of their political influence, keep their opponents busy responding to attacks, support the efforts of other players, and reinvigorate their true believers. The primary tactics are 1) “flooding the zone” with disinformation to drown out opposition voices, and 2) gaslighting both opponents and followers to confuse the former and invigorate the latter.

Tactic 1: Flooding the Zone with Disinformation

The first tactic anti-CRT players have used is, in the words of Steven Bannon, to “flood the zone” with disinformation (Iling, 2020). Bannon coined the phrase to describe how he, as editor of far-right media outlet Breitbart News and then as advisor to the Trump campaign, dealt with facts, opinions, and events that threatened to derail their control of the narrative: pump out as many statements, no matter how short or how absurd, to as many media outlets as possible, “flooding the zone” with disinformation. To some extent this tactic reflects the saying often attributed to P.T. Barnum that “there is no such thing as bad publicity,” but it also reflects a deliberate effort to foment outrage (described by far-right provocateurs as “trolling the libs”). Starr (2020) describes three developments encouraging the flood: 1) attrition of journalistic standards, 2) degradation of broadcast/viral media standards, 3) digital ecology that prioritizes growth and profit. All three have been intensified by the weakening or elimination of regulatory apparatus, both in terms of media (e.g., FCC) and business practices. With the “flooding the zone” strategy, anti-CRT supporters have been using CRT as a “catchall” term to cover anything from race, racism, White privilege, gender, sexism, cultural difference, police killing, LGBTQ, non-White people or non-White history, to anything that addresses racial justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. They convey misconceptions that equalize CRT to racism and spread the fear among the public that teaching CRT is divisive, teaching students to hate each other and demolishing American values. Princeton historian (and Senior Fellow at the Claremont Institute) Allen Guelzo, interviewed for a Washington Post editorial by Marc Thiessen forebodingly titled “The Danger of Critical Race Theory,” connected CRT to the evils of Stalin and Marx, warning that CRT would provoke a backlash such as “genuine White supremacy...at which point the only solution becomes violence” (Thiessen, 2021).

In addition to flooding the zone through the media, anti-CRT players have flooded the governing and administrative processes of public education by disrupting school board meetings, harassing school board members and school staff, filing lawsuits and federal complaints alleging discrimination against White students, and harassing parents who support teaching about equity issues. Although, as mentioned above, the individuals engaging in these tactics represent themselves as local parents, their actions are informed by national players. As former Trump advisor Steve Bannon said on a podcast in April 2021, “The path to save the nation is very simple. It's going to go through the school boards” (Bannon, 2021C). Christopher Rufo’s Manhattan Institute provides a “Critical Race Theory Briefing Book” that is meant to support this goal, providing guidance to creating a “grassroots network.” Under the heading of “Winning the Language War,” Rufo supplies talking points for use in attacking public education, such as “I oppose racism, whether it comes from the Klan or from critical race theory,” and encourages demonizing teachers as “political predators” (Rufo, 2022), thus perpetuating an “epistemological racial ignorance” vital to promoting White nationalism (Matias & Newlove, 2017).

Although absurd, these visible tactics effectively manufactured a narrative of disaster, tapping into the existing “emotionality of Whiteness” at the “root of resistance toward CRT” (Matias et al., 2016, p.1) to spread fear, threat, and uncertainty among parents and the public. At the same time, it effectively spread unprecedented animosity toward teachers, school administrators, and school boards. Rufo’s Guidebook is conveniently available as a downloadable PDF, attractively typeset and illustrated with images of non-White children; accompanying it are several other documents produced by Rufo’s Manhattan Institute, including model legislation for “regulating” CRT in the schools, as well as similar model legislation for “curriculum transparency.” The rapid growth and uniformity of the anti-CRT movement across the U.S. is due in no small part to Rufo’s efforts, and the results have been striking in both extent and ferocity. For example, due to threats of violence, school board meetings were moved from in-person to virtual in Nevada and Arizona and other places. Extra security guards and metal detectors were added in school board meetings; one school district in Missouri hired security to patrol two administrators’ homes due to frequent severe threats against them (Kingskade, 2021). The lack of trust in teachers and schools not only spawned “curriculum transparency” laws based on Rufo’s model legislation, but reached the point where the Nevada Family Alliance proposed putting body cameras on K-12 teachers to ensure that they weren’t teaching CRT (Villarreal, 2021). In another example in the South Kingstown School district in Rhode Island, one woman filed more than 200 open records requests demanding details on the teaching of CRT in the public schools, bringing chaos to the local school district administration (Dorion, 2021). The moral panic Rufo and others launched has also targeted school board members for recall and replacement by anti-CRT stalwarts. Between 2006 and 2020, *Ballotpedia* documented an average of 23 recalls against an average of 52 school board members. However, it tracked 92 school board recall efforts against 237 board members in 2021, more than triple the previous two decades. This effort, far from representing spontaneous local concerns, has been coordinated by the conservative Evangelical Christian organization the Council for National Policy, which includes on its board many of the figures described above as players in the anti-CRT movement—as well as Karen England, the Director of the Nevada Family Alliance (Nelson, 2021). Fomenting a moral panic has thus been a highly successful tactic.

Tactic 2: Gaslighting

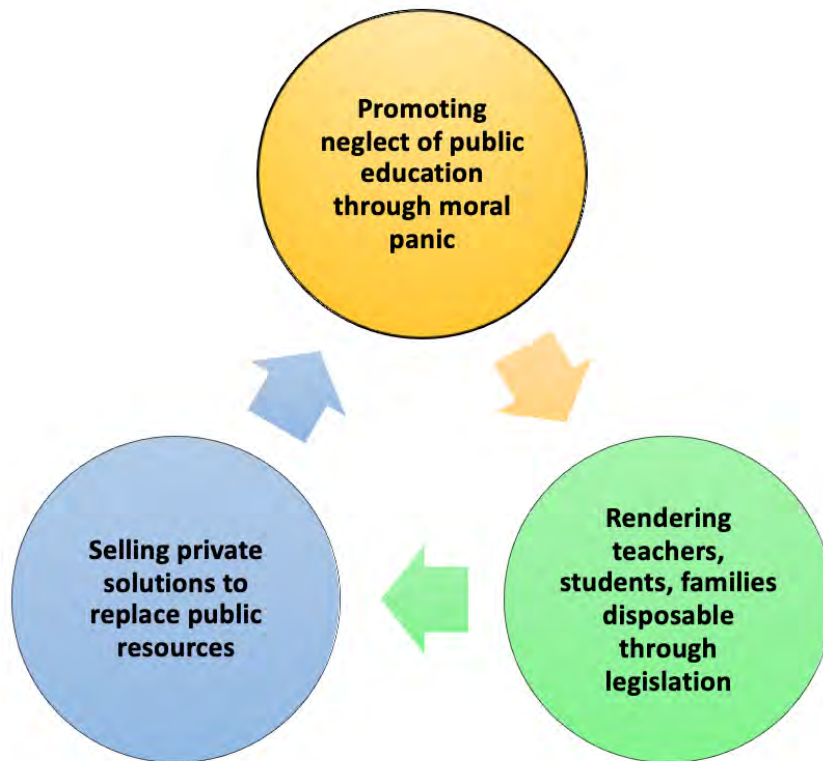
The second tactic of anti-CRT players is *gaslighting*, a form of emotional and psychological manipulation by bullies and other abusers that is intended to cause the targeted person to question their own knowledge and experience. The goal in classic psychological gaslighting is to confuse the targeted person, attacking their ability to trust their own perceptions and understanding, and render them dependent upon the gaslighter for a sense of stability and safety (Emamzadeh, 2022). In the context of political movements, gaslighting often takes the form of publicly and privately insisting that what is happening in an objectively verifiable way isn’t actually happening at all, or vice-versa—that something clearly not happening is, in fact, going on. In the context of racism, gaslighting works to deny the racial realities of people of color, even leading people of color to question their own experiences (Matias, et al., 2019, p. 219). This kind of gaslighting is at the heart of anti-CRT efforts. For example, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis stated in announcing the anti-CRT legislative proposal, Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees (DeSantis, 2021) that “In Florida we are taking a stand against the state-sanctioned racism that is critical race theory.... We won’t allow Florida tax dollars to be spent teaching [CRT to] kids to hate our country or to

hate each other” and the Florida Commissioner of Education Richard Corcoran stated “our classrooms, students and even teachers are under constant threat by Critical Race Theory advocates who are attempting to manipulate classroom content into a means to impose one’s values on students.”

Insisting that CRT is being taught in K-12 classrooms when there is no evidence that is the case is often combined with a more subtle form of gaslighting, in which the speaker links the target with negative images in a vague way that can neither be confirmed nor denied. This type of gaslighting is visible in the previous quote from Florida Governor DeSantis in his characterization of CRT as “state-sanctioned racism,” and the goal of CRT advocates to impose their values on others. Anti-CRT thought leader Christopher Rufo counsels this tactic in his Critical Race Theory Briefing Book and has made it clear that there is no sincerity behind the attack on CRT. As Rufo tweeted March 15, 2021, “The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory’” (Rufo, 2021). The vagueness of the accusations is deliberate, as it enables proponents to label anything they dislike as CRT; the use of gaslighting is an integral part, as it confuses opponents, who get caught up in refuting obvious untruths, but also further cements the true believers, who, not knowing what to believe, believe everything that comes from a source they trust (Hoffer, 1951). Moreover, it serves to refresh believers’ outrage to maintain the intensity of the disaster and their panic, escalating outrage with periodic announcements of new targets from CRT to LGBTQ+ to, most recently, the entire idea of public education at any level.

The actions described above, while themselves disruptive and dangerous, are merely the visible tactics of the anti-CRT players. As such, anti-CRT tactics bear striking resemblance to tactics in other social actions linked to the far right, such as protests against masking and vaccination for schoolchildren. The reason for the congruence of these tactics across a range of topics related to public education is that there are deeper strategies at work, and broader goals than simple control of the public-school curriculum. All of these efforts represent tactics in the strategies of disaster capitalism in education, the goals of which include the reinscription of White supremacy in the schools, and the conversion of public education into an engine for private profit. In the next section we detail the three stages of disaster capitalism in education articulated in (Miller & Liu, 2021) as they have been mobilized through the anti-CRT moral panic. Applying this model to the anti-CRT movement is instructive not only in revealing the absurdity of the discourse but the fundamental continuity of that discourse, absurdity and all, with previous efforts to turn public education into a cash cow for the private sector. An important element in the disaster capitalism use of anti-CRT to further privatize public education is the mobilization of a *moral panic* to instigate the first stage; rather than take advantage of a natural disaster, in this case disaster capitalism conjures one of its own. Figure 2 (below) demonstrates the three-stage process of disaster capitalism in the anti-CRT movement.

Figure 2: *The Process of Disaster Capitalism in Anti-CRT Movement*



Stage 1: Promoting Neglect of Public Education through Moral Panics

In understanding the anti-CRT movement as an element in a longer-running practice of disaster capitalism in education, it is important to recognize that the neglect of public education is first promoted by instigating a *moral panic* that can constitute a “disaster” that then demands action. Although the moral panic as an object of sociological study is not new (Cohen, 1972), its role in the history of public education is largely unremarked, so we briefly summarize below. Victor (1990), writing with respect to the Satanic ritual abuse panic among private evangelical schools in the 1980s, defined a “rumor-panic” as “a group’s fearful reaction to collectively shared stories about immediately threatening circumstances, in an ambiguous social situation” (Victor, 1990, p. 58). Victor’s rumor-panics are a subset of what Cohen (1972) first described as “moral panics,” and more thoroughly analyzed as social movements that begin by reacting to reported behaviors with anxiety (rumor-panic), moves to demonize the people associated with that behavior, exaggerating their conduct, and then linking that “evil,” exaggerated conduct with other similarly exaggerated conduct by claiming them all to be symptoms of a moral malaise (Garland, 2008, pp. 10-11).

Looking at the sudden rise of the anti-CRT movement we can see all the hallmarks of a moral panic. Conservative pundit Josh Hammer, referencing pieces by Christopher Rufo, announced that CRT in the schools “instilling racially divisive poison in the minds of impressionable students is a recipe for disaster.... Banning CRT...is a prudent and necessary first step to salvaging a fractious nation teetering on the brink of collapse” (Hammer, 2021). Similarly, Florida Governor

Ron DeSantis, in Rufo’s words, “framed the rise of critical race theory as a moral threat to the United States,” quoting DeSantis characterizing CRT as “an attempt to really delegitimize our history...to replace it with a very militant form of leftism that would absolutely destroy our country (Rufo, 2021).

The CRT moral panic is not simply an absurd attack on public education, however; it is the continuation of a long-standing effort to force neglect on the schools that previously focused on defunding education, deprofessionalizing teachers, and manufacturing a narrative of failure in public schools (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Zeichner & Peña-Sandoval, 2015). This neglect was exacerbated during natural or manufactured disasters, which functioned as an excuse for further neglect, as in New Orleans before and after Hurricane Katrina (Buras, 2007) and more recently as a result of the rush to remote teaching in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic (Miller & Liu, 2021). In the case of CRT “disaster,” neglect has been instigated through direct impoverishment of the curriculum such as removing books from classrooms and libraries, and forbidding a wide range of topics and viewpoints from discussion. Neglect has also been further threatened at both state and federal levels by Republican politicians, such as the Stop CRT Act introduced by Senator Tom Cotton (Arkansas) and a parallel act in the House of Representatives by Dan Bishop (North Carolina) that would eliminate funding for institutions at all levels of public education that “promote critical race theory” or, in the case of higher education, “compel faculty members, students, or any other individual to affirm the tenets of critical race theory” (Cotton, 2021). A similar law was passed by the Tennessee legislature in May 2021, that directed the state Superintendent of Education to withhold funding from schools that failed to comply (Allison, 2021). Accompanying these legislative efforts have been calls to “return to the basics” in public education—reading, writing, and arithmetic—that promise to further impoverish the curriculum.

Stage Two: Rendering Teachers, Students, and Families Disposable through Legislation

Once the moral panic was well underway, the next step was to remove teachers, students, and families from the equation. In the case of CRT, this happened at multiple levels, from decisions made in individual schools and districts to state, and national legislation and rule-making that forced changes to the curriculum—such as banning topics from classroom discussion, and books from the library—and move to fire if not prosecute teachers and administrators accused of “indoctrinating students.” A key maneuver here was to demand surveillance and conformity in place of critical voices: states and districts passed regulations requiring all curricular materials—including daily lesson plans—be posted on the Internet, and authorized anyone to object to them. Republican legislators in Oklahoma went farther, introducing a bill (SB 1470) in early February, 2022 that would establish fines and the potential to be fired for any “person that promotes positions in the classroom or at any function of the public school that is in opposition to closely held religious beliefs of students”. The fines would be levied against “any and all” persons named by the complainant, and would be assessed at \$10,000 per person per incident; if any evidence surfaces of the defendants receiving “assistance” in defending themselves or paying they fines, they would be fired. Note that, although the bill mentions “parents” as the people to launch the proceedings, no definition was provided in the legislation for either “parent” or “closely held religious belief,” nor was a mechanism suggested to prevent (or punish) frivolous claims.

Stage Three: Selling Private Solutions to Replace Public Resources

Once the schools and families were dispensed with, the ground was prepared for the third stage, selling private solutions. This stage of CRT disaster capitalism in public education is still in its infancy, but the basic elements are already clear. First, attempts have been made to use the evil of CRT in public education as “evidence” supporting the idea of dismantling the “public” part of public education through school vouchers. Although first proposed by Milton Friedman in 1955 as a direct response to the previous year’s ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, school vouchers today are most closely associated with the DeVos Family Foundation’s push to place evangelical Christianity at the center of US education (Rizga, 2017). Betsy DeVos, co-director of the DeVos Family Foundation, repeatedly attempted to implement school vouchers during her stint as Secretary of Education under President Trump, but was ultimately unsuccessful. It is notable, however, that her family foundation was successful in implementing school vouchers in her home state of Michigan in the late 1990s; the primary result was to stimulate White Flight into predominantly White school districts and private schools, while Black students moved into minority-majority charter schools, leaving the public schools to the relatively recent (and significantly poorer) Latino population (Rizga, 2017; Wilkinson, 2016).

School vouchers are only part of the story, however; while they do put enormous pressure on public school budgets, there are many other ways to extract private profit from public education, such as selling educational technology, required curricular materials, testing and test-training services, professional development services, and management. This aspect appeared with a shift from generalized denunciation of CRT in K-12 education to specific laws forbidding the teaching of CRT, which laid the groundwork for vetting textbooks and other materials for CRT. Initial efforts focused on lists of books to be removed from the curriculum and the libraries, primarily works of fiction, history, or social studies. On Friday, April 15, 2022, the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) released a list of K-12 math textbooks that had been prohibited for use in the state. The press release, titled “Florida Rejects Publishers’ Attempts to Indoctrinate Students,” gave no specific titles, or examples of forbidden materials, but asserted that 41% of the textbooks had been rejected because they “included references to Critical Race Theory (CRT), inclusions of Common Core and the unsolicited addition of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in mathematics” (Florida Department of Education, 2022a). The following week, after receiving many requests for examples, the FDOE provided four images (without identifying the offending texts) in a press release that trumpeted “Publishers are aligning their instructional materials to state standards and removing woke content allowing the department to add 17 more books to the state adoption list over the past 14 days” (FDOE, 2022b). The examples were two statistical exercises using data on reported racial prejudice, and two lessons that included SEL objectives.

As FDOE released updated lists of approved math textbooks, it became clear that although there was a large number of titles, there were very few publishers, Table 1 summarizes the publishers supplying all the approved K-12 math textbooks as of April 29, 2022.

Table 1: *Publishers Accepted by the Florida Department of Education for Math Textbooks*

Publisher	Parent Company	Number of Titles	Notes
Accelerate Learning	Carlyle Group (as of 2018)	9	Glenn Youngkin, now Governor of

			Virginia, is a former CEO of Accelerate Learning until he ran for Governor in 2020 on an anti-CRT platform
Big Ideas Learning	Privately held	13	Has joint math projects with Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (since 2013) and National Geographic Learning / Cengage (since 2017)
Savvas Learning Company	Nexus Capital Management	20	Spun off from Pearson to Nexus in 2019
McGraw Hill	Apollo Global Management	7	Apollo also owns University of Phoenix, Yahoo!, ADT Security, and several healthcare groups
Carnegie Learning	CIP Capital	8	Spun off from Carnegie Mellon U, Owned by Apollo until 2018
EdGems	Privately held	4	Has a joint math project with McGraw Hill
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt	HMH	5	Has a joint math project with Big Ideas Learning
Math Nation	Study Edge, which is owned by Stemscopes/ Accelerate Learning	10	Spun off from UF Gainesville

Agile Mind Educational Holdings	Private	8	Based in Grapevine, TX
Mathspace	Private	4	Based in Australia
Cengage	Apex Partners, KKR, Blackstone, and Searchlight Capital Partners	4	Has a joint math project with Big Ideas Learning
Bedford, Freeman and Worth	Holzbrinck Publishing Holdings	1	Holzbrinck is based in Stuttgart, and owns dozens of imprints, including Macmillan, Nature, Springer, Palgrave, St. Martin's, Farrer Straus Giroux....

Accelerate Learning (9 titles) is owned by the Carlyle Group and was helmed by Glenn Youngkin until he ran for Governor of Virginia on an anti-CRT campaign. Accelerate also owns MathNation (10 titles), giving the combined imprints 19 approved titles, only one fewer than the much larger company Savvas, which was spun off from textbook and testing giant Pearson in 2019. Grouping Cengage, Big Ideas Learning and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt together (they cooperate on math projects) gives them a combined share of 22 textbooks. Thus, out of the 93 total math texts approved by the FDOE, 61 (66%) came from one of three publishing groups. Florida was ahead of the rest of the country in certifying these companies' products as free of CRT, but it seems probable that other states will follow; given the weight of states like Texas in the K-12 textbook market, this development will not only affect textbooks sold to schools in states not under a CRT ban—it will also produce significant revenue for the publishing companies.

It should be noted that this three-stage model of disaster capitalism in education is cyclic: the profiteering in stage 3 is followed by a new disaster that demands neglect of public education. In the case of the anti-CRT bans, we are only beginning to enter the third stage with the Florida textbook procurement, but the outlines of the next moral panic are already visible in the pivot to anti-LGBTQ+ citizens and the crusade against Disney led, once again, by Christopher Rufo.

Countering Strategies

Effectively countering the anti-CRT bans and the underlying goals of White supremacy and disaster capitalism requires strategies that counter all three stages of disaster capitalism: countering the generation of disaster to neglect public resources, countering the disposal of teachers, students, and families, and countering the selling of private solutions to replace public resources. To this end, we suggest three counter-strategies: 1) reclaiming the narrative from those promoting moral panic, 2) litigating against the laws, policies, and regulations supporting the bans, and 3)

restoring the school-community relationship under attack by both moral panic and disaster capitalism, and using the solidarity developed between school and community as the base for transformative and generative action (Ball, 2009; Ball et al., 2021; Liu, 2020; Miller, et al., 2020; Miller & Liu, 2021). Undertaken with a sense of purpose and justice, these strategies should help counter the current anti-CRT moment and provide resilience for future moral panics and disaster capitalism.

Reclaiming the Narrative

The first task in countering the anti-CRT movement, and the underlying disaster capitalism, is to reclaim the narrative. This requires responding to disinformation not just with correction but with critical counter-narratives (Miller et al., 2020) from teachers, students, and families that uncover the players and the disaster capitalism strategies, making it clear that private profit from public education and epistemicide (Paraskeva, 2016) in public education are key goals in anti-CRT efforts. Reclaiming the narrative also requires developing and distributing model curricula that reframe historical and current events with the voices of minoritized groups. There are already several examples of this approach, including longstanding ones such as the Zinn History Project, and more recent ones such as the 1619 Project and the Asian American Curriculum Project. This task is vital to counteract the epistemicide perpetuated by the White supremacists currently directing the ideology of the anti-CRT movement. Undertaking these two tasks will clarify the links between White supremacy and disaster capitalism in education, and provide teachers, students, and families the materials needed to take back the narrative space in schools and the media currently occupied by the anti-CRT players.

Litigating Laws, Policies, and Regulations

In addition to reclaiming the narrative, opponents of the CRT bans also need to take actions against White supremacy and disaster capitalism in education. Although it is important not to be drawn into the surface tactics of the anti-CRT players instead of addressing the deeper strategic issues revealed above, that does not mean that the bans should be ignored. There have already been legal challenges on constitutional grounds by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in New Hampshire, Missouri, and Oklahoma, arguing that an anti-CRT ban “violates the free speech of students and teachers and denies students of color, LGBTQ students and girls the opportunity to learn their history” (Camera, 2021). Similar lawsuits have been filed by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). There have also been open records lawsuits in cases in which the rationale and implementation criteria for deciding which materials to ban have been kept secret (VPM News Sues Virginia Education Department, 2022). Although success in some of these lawsuits is not guaranteed—the US. Supreme Court has ruled that, as government employees, K-12 public school teachers do not have free speech rights in the classroom—the 2010 ban on “ethnic studies” in the Tucson Unified School District was ruled in violation of students’ rights to be informed (LoMonte, 2021), which suggests a potential avenue for litigation.

Restore School-Community Relationships for Transformative Action

Retaking control of the narrative and fighting the CRT bans in court are important responses to the immediate challenge of the anti-CRT movement, but ultimately it is the way CRT

bans link White supremacy and disaster capitalism that needs to be addressed. Here the problem is the way in which disaster capitalism attacks the relationship between school and community by rendering teachers, students, and families disposable, removing them from decision making or even oversight of the privatized public resources (Miller & Liu, 2021). In the case of the disaster capitalism associated with the anti-CRT movements, approaches to restore the school-community relationship must focus on organizing teachers, students, and families for both medium- and long-term efforts. These efforts should include 1) contesting far-right control of school and library boards to ensure community oversight of curriculum and procurement; 2) Moving toward community-based schools and teacher education to better represent students and families the schools serve; 3) Promoting formative evaluation approaches to teaching and teacher education, such as qualitative portfolios rather than high-stakes testing that are less amenable to replacement with private solutions; 4) Promoting community actions to hinder disaster capitalism, such as boycotts and protests aimed at disaster capitalist operations of scripted lessons, canned curriculum, and teaching and learning standards unmoored from the community.

Conclusion

To return to George Mosse, we observe that there are two parts to his quote. First, Mosse observed, “The importance of racial thought is misunderstood if only its absurdity and bad taste are seen and the continuation within it of an older and ‘respectable’ trend is ignored.” In the context of the anti-CRT movement, the lesson is clear that we need to look beyond the absurdity of the current moment and see the continuity with older, more “respectable” attempts to solidify White supremacy and divert the resources of public education to private profit. The second part of the quote tells us, “German anti-Semitism is a part of German intellectual history, it does not stand outside it.” The lesson for us is that the present moment, with all its absurdity, is not an aberration in an otherwise exemplary socio-political system. It is the logical outgrowth of how U.S. political and educational systems developed from and by means of White supremacy and racial capitalism, linking socio-economic modalities from slavery to the carceral capitalism (Wang, 2018) that has only intensified the more it has been resisted—and this, in and of itself, provides elegant proof of what CRT scholars from Derrick Bell forward have been saying. It is worth remembering, however, that by the time Mosse wrote those words (1958), although Germany seemed to have learned the lesson he hoped to make, the U.S. had not. The question is, is there still time for the U.S. to learn Mosse’s lesson?

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