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The Impossibilities of CRT as Racial Knowledge

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Résumé de l'article

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Abstract

Analogous to the political use of language itself in determining, even producing, student learning outcomes, the use of politically charged discourse circumscribes (the boundaries of) student learning opportunities. This 'positive' (i.e. productive) understanding of discourse does not only prohibit discussion about race and racism but helps determine how we can, even should, engage with issues related to race and racism. In light of both the power that discourse exerts upon students' and teachers' educational opportunities and the increasing racial diversity of the U.S. student population), such a development demands consideration of its potential impact on educator praxis. This paper explores how (anti-)CRT discourse contours and outlines the 'appropriate' teaching, discussion, and learning of race and racism within educational spaces. By examining 'moments' in (anti-)CRT discourse, including moments when educators push back against censorship efforts, this largely conceptual article seeks to highlight how discourse (unintentionally) produces 'normalized' and 'common sense' ways of thinking and teaching about race that get reified and (re)produced.

Introduction

> "CRT has become weaponized as anti-American or anti-white. He also acknowledged that it has caused divisions and made some people feel bad or ashamed, but he said that wasn't the theory's purpose…It's more about *inclusion,* he said…It's about *recognizing the humanity and erasure of people of color* (Adams, 2021, para. 14-15, emphasis ours).

The opening quotation comes from an online news article written by Dwight Adams (2021), a reporter for the *Indianapolis Star,* who investigated whether Critical Race Theory (CRT) was being taught in PK-12 Indiana schools. Although Adams found no evidence that CRT was being taught in Indiana schools, his investigation concluded that the purpose of CRT is to "promote inclusion and to acknowledge the humanity and historical erasure of people of Color"(para. 15).

As scholars who approach this work from a critical discourse perspective, we assert that regardless of *how* something is talked about, discourse shapes knowledge about that thing (in this case what CRT actually *is*). Discourse cannot be neutral, it is always a site of political contestation over the production of 'real' knowledge (Catalano & Waugh, 2020; Fairclough et al., 2011). As such, we approach this work with the position that discourse (even when largely affirmative) plays an integral part in outlining what can and should be said about particular topics (like CRT) (Catalano & Waugh, 2020; Fairclough, et al., 2011). Importantly, such a view of discourse shifts the conversation in a more expansive direction; it asks researchers to not only think about the accuracy of terms and language, but also focus on the social, historical, and political conditions that allow for certain ideas to be discussed and deemed 'true' (Hall, 2018). In other words, this approach to discourse asks: what are the discursive rules and norms that enable and constrain the socially productive "imagination" (McHoul & Grace, 1997, p. 34)?

To connect this understanding of discourse back to Adams' quote in the opening, we believe it is necessary to think deeply about how the affirmative definitions of CRT communicate, and set the boundaries for, certain ways of talking about race and racism in the classroom. Theorizing discourse in this way opens possibilities for interrogating the underlying assumptions and processes that bound discussion about race and limit radical and liberating teaching of it. Thus, in this conceptual piece, we draw on theories of productive inclusion and neoliberal multiculturalism (Bourassa, 2021; Monreal, 2024; Saleh, 2022) alongside critical discourse approaches (expanded upon later; see Jäger, 2001) to analyze discursive "moments" (Dumas, 2016) from online news articles featuring social studies educators opposing (anti-)CRT legislation. We argue that even discourse intended to challenge (anti-)CRT legislation can (re)produce knowledge that reifies 'normalized' and 'common sense' (Leonardo, 2013) ways of thinking about how race and racism should be taught in PK-12 classrooms.

Although scholars have begun examining the effects of (anti-)CRT legislation on educators' instruction in both K-12 (Pollock et al., 2022) and higher education settings (Miller et al., 2023), little attention has been given to PK-12 educators who *oppose* (anti-)CRT legislation, and their logics for supporting the teaching of race and racism. The goal of this paper is not to argue the authenticity of certain CRT representations and definitions or to make claims about (the intentions of) social studies educators who advocate for teaching about race and racism. Rather, we seek to examine how educators pedagogical "racial signs" (Dumas, 2013, p. 531), or the knowledges produced from educators' (anti-)CRT discourse, "can be 'read' as communicating something about race" (Dumas, 2013, p. 532).

Literature Review

This paper is grounded in three interrelated streams of research that outline how educators come to think and teach about race: anti-racist education, racial pedagogical content knowledge, and race and racism as difficult histories/knowledge. We use this research to contextualize the discourse of teaching about race and racism in the classroom.

Anti-Racist Education

Drawing from scholarship that examines critical theories of race (e.g., critical race theory, critical whiteness) several scholars have offered diverse definitions of anti-racist education or anti-racist pedagogy (Blakeney, 2005; Dei, 1996; Husband, 2016; Kishimoto, 2018; Ohito, 2019). For example, Dei (1996) argued that anti-racist education involves "a critical discourse of race and racism in society and of the continuing racializing of social groups for different and unequal treatment (Dei, 1996, p. 25). Relatedly, Blakeney (2005) contended that anti-racism pedagogy "is a paradigm located within Critical Theory utilized to explain and counteract the persistence and impact of racism using praxis as its focus to promote social justice for the creation of a democratic society in every respect" (p.119). Ohito (2019) maintained that anti-racist teaching is an "orientation toward teaching aimed at deepening understandings of how racial subjugation functions in schooling" (p. 2).

Despite the varying conceptualizations of anti-racist education, common themes throughout many of the definitions suggest that effective anti-racist educators must: acknowledge that racism is both historic and present in our current society (Husband, 2016); engage in critical reflection on their social positions (Kishimoto, 2018), transform and challenge policies, practices, and curricula in their schools that perpetuate inequity and white supremacy (Blakeney, 2005); and be willing to take action against racial injustices that occur both in and outside of the classroom (Kishimoto, 2018). Although preparing, developing, and supporting educators to enact anti-racist pedagogies effectively is a complex task, the need for anti-racist educators is imperative given that schools in the United States serve as microcosms of the broader society, often functioning as sites of violence that perpetuate white supremacy.

Building on the scholarship that outlines and describes anti-racist education, our work contributes to the literature by highlighting how, despite the use of well-meaning or justice-oriented terms, language is never neutral and always produces particular forms of knowledge; often collapsing and containing radical projects of anti-racism into gestures of inclusion (Marks et al., 2023). In other words, even as educators claim to be anti-racist, we must remain vigilant about how the discourses we use may unintentionally reinforce existing power structures or perpetuate "common sense" ideas about race that contradict our stated goals of justice and equity.

In the following sections, we move to focus on social studies education, both our academic home and a central arena of CRT censorship efforts, specifically, to examine the literature on Racial Pedagogical Content Knowledge, a framework designed to support social studies educators with implementing these anti-racist pedagogies. Additionally, we explore literature that analyzes why histories centered on race and racism are often situated as difficult histories and difficult knowledge.

Racial Pedagogical Content Knowledge

Educational scholar Lee Shulman (1986) observed that historically content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge were often partitioned as separate entities within teacher education programs. Challenging this partitioning, Shulman (1986) argued that it was important to move "beyond knowledge of subject matter per se to the dimension of subject matter knowledge for teaching" (p. 9) and offered a new framework to bring the two concepts together, Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK). Expanding on Shulman's framework, Chandler (2015) introduced racial pedagogical content knowledge (RPCK), which merges PCK with tenets of critical race theory (CRT) and applied this framework to social studies education. RPCK posits that social studies educators should not only possess content and pedagogical knowledge but also "a working racial knowledge of how race operates within social science, from CRT perspectives" (Chandler, 2015, p. 5). An RPCK approach to social studies education also acknowledges that the racialized history embedded within each social science discipline influences how students understand these topics and seeks to create pedagogical possibilities for these subject areas to be taught and understood through critical lenses (Chandler, 2015).

While RPCK has the potential to be an effective theoretical framework within social studies teacher education spaces (Demoiny, 2018), its practical application in classrooms may be constrained because it presupposes that teachers have a working racial knowledge. As Brown (2011) contended, pre-service teachers often enter social studies programs with limited understandings of racial historical knowledge which, subsequently, limits their ability to teach the social sciences through a lens that "takes the structural nature of race/racism into account" (King & Chandler, 2016, p. 12). Furthermore, even if (social studies) teachers do have a working racial knowledge when they enter their classrooms, they, particularly white teachers (Hawkman, 2020), struggle with consistently implementing anti-racist pedagogies effectively.

The extant literature on teaching race and racism in social studies classrooms primarily concentrates on the instructional strategies that educators can use to teach race and racism or examines the various ways that teachers, particularly white teachers, avoid these conversations (Bolgatz, 2005; Brown, 2011; Howard, 2004; Husband, 2010; Martell, 2013) leaving much to be learned about educators who want to teach about race and racism. While a few scholars have examined how social studies teachers' experiences about and with race and racism influence their anti-racist pedagogies (Castro et al., 2015; Duncan, 2022; Martell & Stevens, 2017), this paper contributes to this literature by investigating the ways discourse sets forth what counts as racial knowledge, and then what are the 'appropriate' curricular and pedagogical commitments when teaching race and racism.

Race and Racism as Difficult Histories and Difficult Knowledge

Histories related to race and racism are often labeled difficult histories in the social studies literature (Jones & Edmondson, 2025). A well-researched topic in the field, scholars have not only created various definitions to differentiate difficult histories from other historical events, (Epstein & Peck, 2018; Gross & Terra, 2019) but have also offered numerous strategies for teaching these histories effectively and responsibly (e.g. Harris et al., 2022; Stoddard et al., 2017). Epstein and Peck (2018) provided one of the most concise and comprehensive conceptualizations of difficult histories: "historical narratives and other forms (learning standards, curricular frameworks) that incorporate contested, painful and/or violent events into regional, national, or global accounts of

the past" (p. 2). Jones and Edmondson (2025) found in their systematic literature review that what often makes these histories challenging to teach are the emotions and feelings, such as the fear, worry, and dread evoked in educators and students from teaching and learning these topics. These emotional responses stem from what Britzman (2000) theorized as difficult knowledge, which examines the psychological and emotional implications of teaching and learning histories marked by suffering and trauma. Extending on Britzman's definition of difficult knowledges, Garrett (2017) noted that difficult knowledge is more than just teaching and learning about the tumultuousness and violence of the past but is also a recognition of how we orient to the tumultuousness of society and centers uncertainty as a central feature in teaching and learning about difficult events.

Focusing on the ways that educators orient themselves to, and within, the tumultuousness of society, Jones (2023) challenged the partitioning of histories into difficult/non-difficult binaries by asking: Are historical events inherently difficult, or do educators have difficulty, experience discomfort, or even avoid (Garrett, 2011) teaching certain topics? This paper extends the literature on difficult histories by examining the discursive paradox of educators who claim a desire to teach about race and racism while simultaneously (re)producing logics that support pedagogies enabling them to avoid fully engaging with these "difficult" topics.

Theoretical Framing: Productive Inclusion and Neoliberal Multiculturalism

> The most radical of Black and Indigenous projects - abolition and decolonization - exceed the horizons of freedom currently imagined by a White leftist imaginary (Lethabo King, 2019, p. 208).

In line with our interest in positive (i.e. permissible rather than prohibitory) functions of discourse, we rely on conceptualizations of productive inclusion and neoliberal multiculturalism (Bourassa, 2021; Monreal 2024; Saleh, 2022; Singh, 2024) to consider how (anti-)CRT actors *as well as* more progressive educators produce, and police similar boundaries regarding the 'appropriate' teaching, discussion, and learning of race and racism within educational spaces. Concentrating on productive inclusion and neoliberal multiculturalism allows us to flip analysis of (anti-)CRT discourse towards how both exclusion *and* inclusion can function to keep intact and to control acceptable ways of integrating racial knowledge and content into the (history) classroom. That is, productive inclusion and neoliberal multiculturalism show how (anti-)CRT rhetoric and a corresponding, well-meaning defense of teaching about 'diversity' and 'culture' operate together to reify a discursive field with attendant self (teaching) conduct that divorces racial knowledge from transformational change efforts and radical freedom dreams (Au, 2016; Jay, 2003; Kelley, 2003; Love, 2019). As Bourassa (2021) writes:

> While inclusion is often imagined as a counter and remedy to violent and repressive forms of exclusion, I argue that the two are not diametrically opposed. Instead, they should both be understood as technologies of power that complement one another through biopolitical mechanisms of capture, control, discipline, governmentality, and management." (p. 254)

Said another way, certain types and/or discourses of racial knowledge and difficult histories can be incorporated into social studies classrooms so long as they fit within "the horizons of freedom currently imagined by a White leftist imaginary" (see above epigraph, Lethabo King, 2019, p.

208). As a tool of power, then, these allowable and tolerable discourses (about race and racism) fulfill (i.e. reproduce) the instrumental goal of norming racism as an individual defect, a relic of backward thinking, and, in the spirit of neoliberalism, an antiquated market inefficiency that will be ameliorated by global capitalism (see also Singh, 2024). Once again, in the words of Bourassa (2021):

> Productive inclusion describes a number of mechanisms that operate by absorbing, coopting, channeling, extracting, and appropriating that which has previously been deemed abject and outside – even antagonistic to – the logics of capital, and enlisting it within the circuits of capitalist accumulation. (p. 254)

For such content about race and racism to be defensible as an object of school learning, it must correspond with and be a complement to a "common sense logic" (Leonardo, 2013, p. 4) of race-evasive difference that prioritizes learning about the Other as an economic competitive advantage (Monreal, 2020). Ephemeral rhetoric of culture and equality (e.g. cultural food and festivals; see Banks, 2016; Banks & Banks, 2016, Monreal & Floyd, 2021) must fit within a conservative grid of knowledge, neoliberal multiculturalism, that emphasizes the abilities of an 'objective' capitalism, and its individual participants, to find value in post-racial diversity (Flores, 2019). In short, we think of neoliberal multiculturalism as the productive effort to collapse and capture previously disruptive ideas like anti-racism, global citizenship, cultural competence, and diversity for the ends of economic gain and competitive advantage (Melamed, 2006, 2011). The inevitability of rationality within (global) capitalism stands in for a more radical, race-conscious, and structural curriculum of transformation.

As we see in the preceding examples from teachers and educational officials, neoliberal multiculturalism rhetorically privileges culture and cultural inclusion to discriminate against — or at least stymie [the] radicalism of certain race-conscious knowledge and action (Melamed, 2006, 2011). Any questioning and critique of this regime of truth (neoliberal multiculturalism), say in the form of an alternative epistemological and structural critique (such as CRT) lies outside the bounds of appropriate educator discourse and behavior. Educators would rather claim they do not teach about race, than risk engaging in and/or admitting to non-normative and unacceptable teaching behavior.

Hence, we argue that such neoliberal multicultural discourse - the ways in which one *can*, even *should*, talk about race and racism - serves as a powerful tool for maintaining White supremacy. As Melamed (2011) cautions, (productive) inclusion *and* explicit racial retrenchment "can be seen as competing visions within pluralism," (p. 34; see also Hewett, 2005; Omi & Winant, 2015). One side argues for an assimilative pluralism (into Whiteness) and the other advocates for a positive pluralism (some version of multiculturalism). In essence, in addition to looking at what is banned (textbooks, authors, and history), critical educators and researchers would benefit by investigating what is *allowed* (to be said, taught, and read). What is rarely examined, particularly in social studies and teacher education, is how both exclusion and inclusion attach themselves to politics of (non)representation in lieu of race radical, material reimagining (Robinson, 2021). Our goal is to gently question the purpose and effect of (anti-)CRT discourse that *invites* surface level discourse on diversity, inclusion, and recognition but diffuses discussions of the material politics of racial justice.

Discursive Moments

Although this article is primarily conceptual, we did engage in a structured process to analyze how discourse about CRT outlines normative knowledges and ways teachers talk and, possibly, teach about race and racism. In alignment with the literature review and theoretical framing, we hold that discourse constitutes more than speech. Discourse includes the normalized rules, standards, logics, and practices that govern certain relations and set the boundaries for 'acceptable' actions. As Popkewitz (1991) succinctly states, "it [discourse] is the intersection of language and the construction of practice" (p. 25). Thus, to understand how the norms of proper teaching and learning of race and 'difficult histories' are furthered by both the attack on *and* defense of CRT, we collected media examples when educators discussed and affirmed the necessity of teaching about race with individuals and groups that made accusations of inappropriate and unnecessary school teaching and learning about race. We found these 'conversations' not in literal meetings and interactions, but rather through a discursive arena facilitated and created through media, specifically news articles that used quotes and press releases to capture the different sides of the CRT 'debate.'

To create a corpus of such conversations, each author searched[1] for three to four popular (i.e. widely accessible) media examples in which educators discussed their objections to (anti-) CRT legislation and/or other efforts to limit the teaching of race and racism (total n = 10; see example articles in Figure 1 and a full list in Appendix A). Importantly, we did not attempt to create a representative or exhaustive sample of such articles. Instead, and in alignment with previous uses of discursive 'moments' (Dumas, 2016; Monreal, 2024), we sought to analyze relatively banal and everyday statements that (in)validate certain ways of talking about an issue. We are not claiming this is representative of all CRT discourse (in K-12 education), but rather these moments offer illuminative examples of how productive inclusion and neoliberal multiculturalism interact with (anti-)CRT discourse. Overall, we sought to think about how certain examples of (anti-)CRT discourse "promote [certain teaching] interventions and delegitimize others" (Dumas, 2016; p. 101).

- Adams, D. (2021, May 11). *What we know about the critical race theory controversy, impact on Indiana education*. The Indianapolis Star.
- McCausland, P. (2021, July 1). *Teaching critical race theory isn't happening in classrooms, teachers say in survey*. NBC News.
- McGee, K. (2021, May 26). *Texas Educators Worry Bill Limiting Critical Race Theory Lessons Would "Whitewash History."* The Texas Tribune.

Figure 1. *Example popular news and media articles that we used in analysis.*

[1] Each author completed their own internet searches for 'popular' news media articles that featured teacher opposition to accusations of CRT classroom teaching. Each author used their own search terms, often a variant of "classroom teachers discuss/defend against CRT bans and charges." By 'popular' we mean widely accessible (i.e. freely available) and the appearance of state/national reach (i.e. not hyper-local, small newspapers/magazines). Each author used their own search terms

We analyzed the articles in two phases. First, to get a general sense of the data, we engaged in generic content analysis (Brown & Brown, 2010) by creating a table (see Figure 2) with the following categories: Article/Media Title; Two-Three Sentence Summary, Relationship to CRT Bans; How CRT is Described; Key Quotes. Each author was responsible for inputting their examples into the table before the other authors read the media articles and tabled any additional information. We then met to discuss broad themes and ideas emerging from the data. In particular, as an initial understanding, we were fascinated by how many educators (at various levels) pushed back against potential CRT bans by denying any use of CRT teaching/curriculum, while also defending a (ephemeral) need for diversity and inclusion.

Article/Media Title	2-3 Sentence Summary	Relationship to CRT Bans (positive, negative, neutral)	How is CRT Described?	Key Quotes

Figure 2. *Table for generic content analysis.*

In the second phase, we examined the examples and previous content analysis (Figure 2) concerning our theoretical frame and the following specific critical discourse analysis questions from Jager (2001, p. 32):

- What does valid (at a certain place and time) knowledge consist of?
- How does this valid knowledge evolve?

Each author applied these questions to specific data chunks/excerpts ('moments') they found most significant. The authors wrote notes and analytic memos in a shared document before engaging in a series of Zoom conversations to share thinking and analysis. Through this process, we continued to see how race *could* be talked about. As Monreal (2020) writes in previous research, "teachers are [often] not barred from addressing topics of race or racism (with students) as much as they managed to talk about it in a certain apolitical, [safe], and neoliberal multicultural way" (p. 273). As we detail below, the appropriate learning about race and racism is bound within its attention to inclusion, instrumentality, and difficult topics which then creates any pedagogy of radical, anti-racism to be outside acceptable praxis.

In the following section, we analyze four discursive moments to explore how current (anti) CRT discourse often reinforces normalized, common-sense, anomalous, and color-evasive approaches to teaching and learning about race and racism.

Moment # 1 — Inclusion and Diversity

In this first moment, we highlight two educator responses against various claims of 'indoctrination.' Pushing back against CRT censorship efforts in Indiana and Missouri, the respective educators call upon common-sense (mis)understanding to defend public school curriculum and instruction:

> In an interview with the IndyStar [Indianapolis], Hayes said CRT has become weaponized as anti-American or anti-white. He also acknowledged that it has caused divisions and made some people feel bad or ashamed, but he said that wasn't the theory's purpose…It's more about *inclusion*, he said. (Adams, 2021, para. 14, emphasis ours).

> "What our schools [in Missouri] are teaching is equity. What schools are teaching is fairness in our society. What our schools are teaching is cultural competency among our students, so that they can be prepared for the future," Fleming said, later adding: "And I don't understand what is so upsetting about that." (Weinberg, 2021, para. 36)

In both statements, the educators speak in the affirmative to explain how schools can, and do, talk about race and racism. Although explicit discussion about race, racism, injustice, and discrimination is absent[ed], words such as "inclusion," "equity," and "cultural competence" stand in as non-controversial alternatives. This way of talking about race and racism replaces race with culture, a move that allows discussion about school appropriateness to be bounded within a discourse of apolitical, even post-racial diversity. A (safe) way of talking about race that doesn't talk about race. As Melamed (2006) writes, the discourse of neoliberal multiculturalism "deracializes official antiracism to an unprecedented degree, turning (deracialized) racial reference into a series of rhetorical gestures of ethical right and certainty" (p. 16). Thinking with the conceptual frame of neoliberal multiculturalism and productive inclusion, then, race talk, (i.e. cultural competence) is acceptable so long as it appeals to (white) certainty and instrumentality - agreeable feelings (e.g. "not upsetting" and "inclusion"), consensus (e.g. "fairness") and economic value (e.g. "prepared for the future") - rather than racial justice.

As we centered the CDA question "what does valid [racial] knowledge consist of?" (Jager, 2001, p. 32), we also saw how folks on different 'sides' of the CRT 'debate' work together (discursively) to *invalidate* CRT as acceptable racial knowledge. Said another way, in defending the rights of educators against censorship (a laudable goal no doubt) by invoking and encouraging the learning *of* 'common-sense' multiculturalism, we (i.e. the entire public regardless of political background) need not explicitly ban CRT (and a corresponding focus on structural inequality, material harms and redress, and transformative justice). Instead, we compel educators to reify conservative grids of racial knowledge, not by prohibiting CRT, but by norming and normalizing other ways of teaching and learning about race. Importantly, we do not claim this is the intent of the above or any educators; however, we feel it is important to draw attention to the innocuous effects of discourse, and how it creates limited understandings of racial knowledge.

Moment #2 – Instrumentalities and Skills

In this second moment, we use a news article from the *Texas Tribune* to show how another discursive strategy to defend teaching about race and racism centers academic credentialing and success rather than broader notions of justice:

> Educators also worry Texas students will be at a disadvantage when taking Advanced Placement or dual enrollment classes in high school if they don't receive thorough lessons about how race and gender have shaped American society…(McGee, 2021, para. 32)

> In a letter to Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and the Texas Senate, the American Historical Association also cautioned that this legislation would limit student access to college courses. 'The uncertainty of how [the legislation] will be implemented and the likely loss of offerings for dual-enrollment and AP History courses could hurt Texas's progress toward increasing its college-educated population,' Jacqueline Jones, association president, said in the letter. (McGee, 2021, para. 35, 36)

This article links (anti-)CRT legislation to the loss of dual enrollment and AP History courses. The argument that censorship efforts will ultimately hurt the scholastic opportunities of all students is in line with the idea that teaching and learning about race is meant to be more instrumental than transformative. In other words, the result of racial knowledge should be the facilitation of academic advantage and progress towards "increasing the college-educated population." In this sense, racial knowledge, in line with neoliberal multicultural discourse, is a certifiable (e.g. dual-enrollment, AP) commodity "that should be available to all communities" (Flores, 2019, p. 61). Racial knowledge functions as a means (of positive power, rather than negation) to manage and control differences towards an end of competitive economic development. In this regard, we see a clear distinction between the invocation of academic achievement as gathering 'advantageous' skills contra the necessity of academic achievement for cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness (i.e. culturally relevant pedagogy; Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2014).

In further analyzing this moment, it is important to note that our critical discourse analysis is not meant to make claims about individual intentions and motivations. We note this because whilst it is possible that the educators appealing to academic opportunity are doing so as a pragmatic strategy rooted in interest convergence, we are more interested in how such discourse reproduces and implants norms for teaching and learning about race (Melamed, 2011). In turning race and racism into an academic skill, it works to recreate racial knowledge as an object of (white) consumption; a "privileged tool" (Melamed, 2011, p. xvi) that (white) Americans can master for an 'edge' in the global education marketplace (Monreal, 2020; see also Cervantes-Soon, 2014). Hence, the discussion of appropriate teaching and learning occurs within a bounded discursive field, a grid of intelligibility that recognizes racial knowledge as learning about, representing, and commodifying the Other. Any divergence in the CRT debate is tied to the nature of said representations rather than how such knowledges might inform the politics of material redress, reconciliations, liberation, and transformation (Marks et al., 2023; Melamed, 2006). In schools, appropriate racial knowledge is at best revelatory, not revolutionary.

Moment #3 – Difficult Histories

Our third moment illustrates how educators' discourses regarding (anti-)CRT legislation produce binary oppositions that situate histories about race and racism, or difficult histories, as anomalous to broader U.S. historical narratives... The following quotes come from three different articles:

> "We are not doing harm to students by teaching them the history of this country -- *the good, the bad and the ugly.*" (Alfonseca, 2021, para. 12)
>
> "I'm worried that constrained conversations about difficult real-life issues will ultimately disadvantage students." (McGee, 2021, para. 25)
>
> "HB 1775's provisions are dangerous, and its prohibitions bring the culture wars into the classrooms and makes people who have decided to take on the ungrateful job of being a teacher in Oklahoma determine whether they can teach reality and difficult history or give the sugar coated version of history." (Carter, 2022, para. 17)

In the first quote above (one of many across the articles that used the phrase "ugly"), educators advocate for teaching histories about race and racism by (re)creating binary oppositions

that obfuscate the complexities of the past, and the interconnectedness of historical events and long-term impact. As Jones (2024) writes, such rationales for teaching 'difficult' histories (of race and racism) "not only creates binaries and antitheses that necessitate opposites…but also ruptures the dynamic process of historical thinking" (p. 66). Confining particular histories to a 'difficult past' not only sidesteps the ongoing dialogue between the past and the present but also infers that these labels are static and carry the same value to everybody; in other words, the act of labeling histories centered on race and racism as 'difficult' assumes universal agreement that these histories are, indeed, difficult. This discursive process not only disregards the lived experiences of racially marginalized individuals but also renders their perspectives and feelings inconsequential (Jones, 2023). Hence in the quotes above, educators can juxtapose "real-life issues" with "difficult history" to suggest that real-life issues or one's reality cannot simultaneously be difficult - the two concepts must exist separately.

Discursive labels, then, operate as tools of power for rendering histories of race and racism as knowable things with certain a priori, (non)acceptable value(s). This discourse outlines what can be said and taught about certain histories (e.g., "good" histories, "bad" histories), which impedes students' ability to develop race-conscious knowledge about the ways race and racism transcend history through the present (Jones, 2024). The idea that history only happens in the past, in tandem with the notion that (racial) knowledge about such events has been predetermined, may limit opportunities for students to engage in social action to *change* history, to cultivate more just futures. Even more, these binary oppositions create feelings of comfort (Britzman, 2000) for stakeholders (e.g., legislators, educators) who are more interested in distancing the "ugly past" from the "progressive" present (Trouillet, 2015), a potential strategy to disassociate themselves from those racists people of the past as well as that pasts entanglement with/in the racist present (Tatum, 1997).

By partitioning present reality from difficult histories, these discursive binaries imply that the marginalization of racially marginalized groups is anomalous, as opposed to a consequence of the U.S. being a country founded on and maintained by systems of white supremacy, antiBlackness, and settler colonialism. Once again, this fits within the normed ways of knowing and teaching racial history because these anti-censorship arguments are couched in, appealing to larger scripts narratives of (racial) progress in which ideas of systematic white supremacy are unspeakable, and in the classroom, unknowable. Regardless of intent, a critical discursive analysis of this moment outlines how valid knowledge of teaching race and racism evolves (Jager, 2001, p. 36) so that the boundaries of acceptable racial knowledge reinforce "common-sense logic" (Leonardo, 2013). That is, how educators equate teaching *about* culture or difficult histories as the same as teaching *for* and *toward* radical freedom dreams that center on the abolition of racialized peoples (Kelley, 2022; Love, 2019).

Moment #4 – The Impossibilities of CRT as Racial Knowledge

This last moment features three quotations from two different articles to spotlight the analysis of a most popular defense against CRT bans: that the teachers themselves say they aren't teaching CRT (anyway). As the three statements show, these three educators fold in different discursive moves from the previous sections to further a similar point of those who wish to outlaw certain content about race and racism. They signal, albeit for different reasons, that CRT is *inappropriate* racial knowledge:

> "We're saying, 'What is the fuss about?'" said Lynn Daniel, a ninth-grade English teacher in the Phoenix area. "We don't get it. This objection is being pushed upon us, and it's not even happening in our classes. I don't understand it." (McCausland, 2021, para. 3)
>
> Jenni Meadows, a teacher at a public high school near Dallas who specializes in teaching reading to at-risk youth…said the critical race theory discussion is not one that she's having with her students because the focus in K-12 is on developing critical thinking skills… "We're asking, 'Should we promote it or forbid it [CRT]?' That's not even the level to have the discussion on," Meadows said. "The question is: Are we giving students good literature? Are we giving them great thinkers to interact with so that they themselves can become great thinkers? (McCausland, 2021, paras. 8, 10)
>
> Paula Lewis, chair of the Oklahoma City School Board, said though the state's new law bans teachers from discussing concepts they weren't discussing anyway, and though its penalties are not yet clear, the danger is the fear it instills. (Florida, 2021, para. 8)

The educators are clearly stating that CRT is not part of their pedagogical and curricular classroom work. While this serves a discursive purpose in refuting bad faith accusations, the teachers also reinscribe narrow ways of learning about race and racism. Here, discourse works (from both teachers and their 'opponents') to outline the bounds of normative and acceptable racial knowledge as *not* CRT (and other race critical theorizations). In other words, by defining what appropriate racial knowledge is *not* (CRT), discourse forecloses (radical) debate about what racial knowledge is, and perhaps more importantly, what it could become. In other words, CRT is impossible racial knowledge in schools.

It would be one thing for the educators to explain that while they currently do not teach (about/with) CRT concepts, they would welcome discussion about it, learning about it, and/or a general desire to include curricular and theoretical frames that challenge structural racism and white supremacy. However, as this moment shows, educators reinscribe the normative bounds of talking and knowing race (inclusion, "great thinkers;" instrumentality, "critical thinking skills;" and emotionality, "fear it instills"), rather than inviting and/or admitting to non-normative and unacceptable teaching behaviors about race. Even more interesting, one teacher invokes the idea that CRT is inappropriate (for "at-risk" kids) "because the focus in K-12 is on developing critical thinking skills." In divorcing critical thinking from CRT, the teacher further divides normative purposes of teaching about race and racism (academic instrumentality and economic skill development, moment two) from more (race) radical epistemological possibilities. As such, we see how particular forms and uses of (racial) knowledge work co-constitutively to (re)produce certain truths about teaching and learning about race in schools. Importantly, the teacher is the point of application and the vehicle for normalizing such (racial) knowledges about these acceptable purposes and practices of education about race and racism (Ball, 2016).

Concluding Thoughts

In this article, we outlined how the CRT 'debate' in education exists as discourse and therefore, this discourse works to (re)produce normative ways of understanding race as an object of school/education knowledge. Our subtle shift was to focus on what (anti)CRT discourse

allowed, created, and produced, rather than what was restricted and prohibited. Applying critical discourse analysis to various moments in this debate, we saw the normative and acceptable ways that educators *can* talk and teach about race and racism in the classroom. The discursive moments revealed how educators, often in defending their praxis, called upon the general logics of productive inclusion and neoliberal multiculturalism – racial knowledge as a means of (economic) utility over justice. For many of the educators in the above moments, learning about cultural diversity and difficult histories was enough, it was part of an agreeable and 'common-sense' grid of understanding and applying racial knowledge. Sometimes, it even appeared that to say one *did not* teach about race and racism (instead using the rhetoric of "inclusion" or "developing critical thinking") was more acceptable than entertaining the possibility of learning from/with CRT. As a tool of (white) power, then, these agreed upon and tolerable discourses (about race and racism) function to fix, close, and claim the proper meanings of racial knowledge.

We suggest that certain racial knowledges also work to continually map the boundaries of tolerable teacher/ing conduct (see also Monreal, 2021). As Popkewitz (1998) writes, "the recipes and practices of teaching [about race and racism] place certain boundaries on what is acceptable, abnormal, and unreasonable in schooling" (p. 83). Discourse serves to not only norm what can and cannot be said but always what can and cannot be done (by educators). Certain fields of discursive (im)possibilities, systems of racial knowledge, become the location for battles over how teachers internalize and understand correct teaching action and behavior. Hence, we believe it is significant and imperative that educators think through the (unintentional) implications of their rhetorical positions about CRT in schools. In seeking to resist and challenge (anti-)CRT politics, we must also critically challenge the normative bounds of discourse and knowledge that make CRT in schools impossible.

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