History Education Research Journal

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Research article

White, award-winning history teachers' navigation of anti-'CRT' efforts across the United States

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Submission date: 27 August 2024; Acceptance date: 7 March 2025; Publication date: 30 April 2025

How to cite
Brooks, C. (2025) 'White, award-winning history teachers' navigation of anti-"CRT" efforts across the United States'. *History Education Research Journal*, 22(*1*), 7.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.22.1.07.

Peer review
This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Abstract

This article explores how White, award-winning history teachers have been differently affected by legislative efforts to restrict teaching about race and racism, and teachers' various resistances in response. Findings describe how teachers' feelings of constraint (or lack thereof) around race-restrictive policies, rhetoric and legislation were often locally determined, resulting from actions by parents, local policymakers, school administrators and other community-based actors. The article then reports on a subset of teachers' various responses to restrictions, illuminating how teachers exerted agency and tactical manoeuvring in order to continue to teach about race and racism in contradiction to official policy and unofficial pressure. Findings showed how teachers in a variety of sociopolitical contexts continued teaching about race and racism in history despite the risks of official or unofficial retribution. They did so through wielding explicit denial, through selective silences and by directing student attention to topic suppression in ways that conveyed meanings about race and racism even when remaining officially silent.

Keywords history teachers; critical race theory; CRT; anti-CRT movements; conflict campaigns; resistance

Introduction

Since 2021, state, local and federal lawmakers in the United States have passed a slew of legislative efforts aimed at prohibiting 'critical race theory' (CRT) in educational spaces, including higher education and K–12. In reality, CRT is an interdisciplinary legal theory that examines the permanence and entrenchment of racism in laws, underscoring race as a fundamental determinant of inequality, and revealing how policies, systems and laws confer power that disadvantage non-White people by design (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2021). However, since 2020, the term 'CRT' has been co-opted and demonised by conservative ideologues who have engaged in 'definitional subversion', distorting the actual meaning of CRT to instead encompass all topics related to race and racism determined to be 'divisive' and discriminatory towards White people by the right-wing apparatus (Cobb, 2021; Kaplan and Owings, 2021; Vue et al., 2024). In this article, the term 'CRT' is referred to within quotation marks to distinguish between actual CRT and its co-optation by critics seeking to demonise CRT in pursuit of eliminating discussions of systemic racism altogether. Central to the efforts to prohibit 'CRT' are the desire to decentre the voices of Black people, Indigenous people and people of colour, and to eliminate discussions of race, and systemic racism, in service of protecting White people, deemed to be victims. As Jayakumar (2024: 3) puts it, 'The words change, but the goal remains the same: to capitalize on white America's sense of threat by creating policies and laws that move instruction about systemic racism backward, rather than forward.' Given the emphases of legislation on race-related curriculum, history/social studies teachers are among the most impacted in terms of what they can or should teach.

This article explores how White, award-winning history teachers were differently affected by these legislative efforts and other policy-based and public interventions geared towards restricting what teachers teach about race, racism and antiracism. Having been selected for their state's History Teacher of the Year award, the participating teachers in this study could be considered among the most socially insulated of US teachers from these efforts. In addition to having been identified as excellent in their craft, all the teachers in the study identified as White. In this unique combination of privileges (state-sanctioned excellence paired with the structural protections of Whiteness), in many ways the teachers in this study embodied a highly protected class of teachers presumably exempt from the swirling anti-'CRT' fervour affecting schools and teachers nationwide. Interested in exploring questions of protection and agency for history teachers in the face of restrictive bans, this study poses the following research questions: How are some of the most seemingly structurally insulated (White, award-winning) history teachers navigating the onslaught of anti-'CRT' policies and politics nationwide? And what factors inform feelings of constraint or lack thereof?

Using the theoretical framing of creative insubordination and ideology articulation, findings describe the particularities informing this group of history teachers' navigation of anti-'CRT' policies, rhetoric and legislation, showing that the level of restriction experienced by teachers was most often locally determined, resulting from actions by parents, local policymakers, administrators and other community-based actors who either conferred respect or opposition on teachers, regardless of whether official policies had been legislated. Additionally, findings describe how teachers in potentially hostile contexts continued to teach about race and racism despite official risks. They protected themselves from fears of reprisal through specific strategies that included strategic denial and selective silences, and through directed attention to content suppression. These discursive tactics constituted acts of creative insubordination that are described in more depth in the findings below.

Literature review

CRT, Whiteness studies and attacks on 'CRT'

Debates about what to teach have been present since the dawn of public education in the United States (Moreau, 2003; Teitelbaum, 2022). Still, the most recent conflict campaigns, defined by Pollock et al. (2022: vii) as the purposeful and interconnected efforts on the part of 'powerful conservative entities (media, organisations, foundations, PACs, and politicians)' to 'block or restrict proactive teaching and professional development related to race, racism, bias, and many aspects of proactive diversity/equity/inclusion efforts', have dominated the educational landscape since the 2020 'racial reckoning' ignited in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Christopher Rufo (as cited in Williams, 2022: n.p.), one of the originators of the campaign against 'CRT', described his goal of aggregating

the various 'cultural insanities' into one 'brand category' by infiltrating the public imagination with interpretations of 'CRT' as dangerous and discriminatory against White people in order to mobilise a (largely White) constituency in support of right-wing formations rooted in White supremacy.

In bills across states, 'CRT' has been operationalised as a vehicle through which to ban teaching about race-related concepts such as systemic racism, (un)conscious bias and privilege (Harrison et al., 2021). Vue et al. (2024) frame the attacks on 'CRT' as characterised by race-evasiveness – an ideology that reduces racism to individuals while promoting meritocracy – and White racial identity, which weaponises White victimhood and collective persecution that emerged in the face of the Black Lives Matter movement, Barack Obama's presidency and growing public recognition of the ongoing use of racial violence in the United States. While much of the anti-'CRT' opposition has appeared to be driven by groups of local, largely White parents, LoBue and Douglass (2023: 548) have argued that this emergence of mobilised parents' rights movements was part of a 'national disinformation campaign led by astroturf advocacy organisations', who 'maintain a façade of grassroots support' by hiding their elite, conservative financial backers.

The impacts of these anti-'CRT' efforts have been felt throughout the United States across educational levels and community contexts. Pollock et al. (2022: viii) identified that at least 894 impacted school districts, enrolling 17,743,850 students, or 35 per cent of all K–12 students in the United States, have faced conflict campaigns in states with and without official restriction. They found that districts experiencing rapid demographic changes were three times more likely than districts with little change to their White student populations to experience impacts from local conflict campaigns, and that communities either leaning conservative or liberal (that is, politically 'purple'), with racially mixed and/or majority White student populations, were most likely to be affected by conflict campaigns (Pollock et al., 2022), rather than in more politically or racially homogeneous communities. Since January 2021, 44 states have taken steps (legislative or otherwise) to restrict how teachers teach about race and racism (Schwartz, 2025). As of February 2025, 18 of those states had successfully passed legislation restricting how teachers can teach about race-related content. Five additional states have introduced legislation, and 21 states had anti-'CRT' bills that had been vetoed, overturned or stalled indefinitely (Schwartz, 2025).

In analysing the restrictive bills across the United States, Filimon and Ivănescu (2023) found that these bills largely set about this mission through: (1) defining sets of prohibited concepts; (2) creating mechanisms to detect perceived 'CRT' offences; and (3) dispensing penalties and sanctions against potential transgressors. In January 2025, the bans took a federal turn, with Donald Trump's signing of the executive order 'Ending Radical Indoctrination in K–12 Schooling', which pledges to revoke federal funding from states that teach 'discriminatory equity ideologies', which, among other topics, make illegal the teaching of White privilege, unconscious bias, and that 'the United States is fundamentally racist, sexist, or otherwise discriminatory' (The White House, 2025: n.p.; see also Dorn, 2025).

The campaigns against 'CRT' have had a range of impacts on primary, secondary and post-secondary education, including: the reallocation of state funds away from diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts (Moody, 2023); bans on books related to race and racism (Powell, 2023); and teacher firings for broaching content considered to be 'controversial'. An analysis in the *Washington Post* found that 160 teachers had lost their positions due to political debates, signalling the heightened political tenor of the moment, and the attendant risks surrounding teachers' curricular and pedagogical choices (Natanson and Balingit, 2022). Administrators of colour have been accused of indoctrinating children and have even received death threats (Morgan, 2022). Morgan (2022) has explored the current and potential impacts of anti-'CRT' laws on states such as Texas and Pennsylvania, arguing that students of colour are likely to be those most harmed by this legislation. Jayakumar (2024) surveyed 117 teachers across the United States, finding that CRT bans harmed school racial climate, limited conversations about race, stymied racial justice efforts and contributed to the systematic burnout and pushout of teachers, especially those in states with official CRT bans and those who identify as liberal.

Additional research has looked at the effects of anti-'CRT' rhetoric on related social justice efforts. For example, Villavicencio et al. (2023) reported that their school-based partners engaged in research–practice partnerships centring on racial justice were profoundly affected by fears of retribution for even mentioning race with their students. In Florida, college professors of race and ethnicity have been forced to cancel or modify their courses due to government pressure (Golden, 2022). Even in Democratic California, Chang (2022) found that White parent activists mounted a successful opposition campaign to ethnic studies by positioning Christian White boys as the victims of ethnic studies curricula and binding their movement to local disability activists, exposing the durability of the right-wing

apparatus. Koyama (2023: 78) found that in relation to the 'CRT' bans, Arizona principals worried about potential lawsuits and parental pushback that risked 'hurting white children by too much talk of slavery or race', and, at the same time, also feared being labelled as sell-outs should they adhere to the bans in contradistinction to their social justice commitments or alignment with different Arizonan communities. All the principals in her study admitted that the bans would lead to the diminishment of curriculum grounded in historical fact. At the same time, they also engaged in complex assemblages of dynamic, shifting and competing forces. When faced with the 'CRT' bans, none of the five principals, Koyama (2023: 80) argued, 'were made to do anything … but were actively engaging with/creating/extending assemblages around/through the bans', for which they engaged 'principals, teachers, children, and families in relation to each other, to public discourse, and to the ban, itself'. Although not explicitly related to history teaching, these examples speak to the variety of manifestations of anti-'CRT' campaigns across sociopolitical contexts, and the messy assemblages that emerge out of the prospect of the bans. This research study seeks to explore the specific and localised experiences of history teachers in relation to these bans and to capture various resistances that teachers are drawing on to teach about race and racism despite official restrictions and/or unofficial local pressure.

White teachers teaching about race and racism

Irrespective of the current onslaught of anti-'CRT' fervour and the passage of 'divisive concepts' legislation, a great deal of research has examined the intersections of White teachers' race and racism, asserting that White teachers require cross-racial understanding to avoid perpetuating racial inequality in their classrooms (Cochran-Smith, 2000; Haviland, 2008; King, 2014, 2016, 2018; Kohli, 2009; Kohli and Solórzano, 2012; Leonardo, 2004; Washington and Humphries, 2011). One prominent strand of this literature specifically examines the ways in which White teachers engage with race-related topics (Garrett and Segall, 2013; Hytten and Adkins, 2001; Sleeter, 1993; Smith and Crowley, 2014), identifying the active and inactive responses reflective of Mills's (2007) theory of 'White ignorance', wherein White supremacy and racial injustice are structurally maintained through ignorance that is embedded in educational institutions. In these varied examples, White teachers were found to engage in strategies of silence (Castagno, 2008) and evasiveness (Frankenberg, 1993), and a slate of other deflective patterns (Picower, 2009).

When it comes to teaching about race, White teachers' ideologies and applications are often inconsistent, despite their antiracist intentions. Jupp et al. (2016) reviewed literature on White teachers' race evasion from 1990 to 2015, most recently identifying the theme of 'fertile paradoxes', whereby White teachers' understandings of race often operated in contradictory ways, in which race cognisance/visibility existed alongside power evasion, which served to diminish the effects of racism itself. For example, White teachers acknowledged White privilege while also reifying ideas such as 'we are all the same people', serving to deflate or render invisible an analysis of White supremacy in determining who has power (Jupp et al., 2016: 28). Emblematic of this stance, Hawkman (2019) found that teachers vacillated between antiracist and nonracist stances in their history teaching. Washington and Humphries (2011) studied how one White history teacher struggled to confront her students' overt racism that surfaced during her attempts to teach 'controversial issues', and Wetzel and Rogers's (2015) case study found that despite the teacher's increased understanding of racism and Whiteness, her efforts to enact racial literacy with her students ended up reifying an understanding of race as biological.

Along similar lines, King (2014) described an underdeveloped understanding of systemic racism among pre-service teachers, and Wills (2001, 2019) found that history teachers tended to individualise their teaching of racism during the civil rights movement, promoting an understanding of racism as individual animus rather than as functioning through institutions, systems and structures. Similarly, Martell and Stevens (2017) found that even among race-conscious teachers who did centre race in their teaching, there were key distinctions between those who sought to eliminate individual prejudice and those seeking systematised equity within their teaching. Crowley and Smith (2015) grappled with the pedagogical blockages that hindered critical conversations about Whiteness, finding that pre-service history teachers had difficulty understanding the structures of White supremacy, integrating their personal experiences with Whiteness, and recognising structural racism as occurring in their classrooms, through their teaching and in educational contexts. Each of these examples point to the prominence of White social studies, defined by Chandler and Branscombe (2015) as centring White peoples, eliding the study of systemic racism, and ultimately reifying White common sense (An, 2020). Besides the

undercurrent of anti-Blackness, defined by Carruthers (2018: 26) as a 'system of beliefs and practices that attack, erode, and limit the humanity of Black people', this body of research broadly implies an underlying lack of racial literacy on the part of White teachers attempting to teach about race and racism, even without a larger hostile sociopolitical context conspiring to eliminate the teaching of race and racism altogether.

A CRT approach to teaching history

While the academic framework of CRT is not generally taught in primary or secondary classrooms, despite arguments to the contrary (Marrun et al., 2024), there are tenets of CRT that are applicable to the teaching of history and social studies. In their literature of review of CRT research in the social studies from 2004 to 2019, Busey et al. (2022) identified tenets of CRT in social studies research, including the permanence of racism, a critique of liberalism and the validity of counter-storytelling. Applied pedagogically, the CRT tenet acknowledging the permanence and reality of racism might include teaching about racial projects, racism and racial violence of historical topics such as chattel slavery, the Jim Crow era, settler colonialism and redlining (Busey et al., 2022). Teaching the CRT tenet of interest convergence, a critique of liberalism which asserts that progress for people of colour only happens when it benefits White people (Bell, 1995), might involve a re-examination of the Voting Rights Act with an eye towards the benefits afforded to White people (Crowley, 2016). Counter-storytelling views the stories of people of colour as legitimate and valid counterweights to hegemonic White social studies, and, therefore, pedagogically could include centring the voices of educators, youth and families of colour (Busey et al., 2022). It also might involve centring the feelings of youth of colour as they learn about histories of injustice tied to their own pasts.

As Busey et al. (2022) note, Cheryl Harris's (1993) theory of Whiteness as property, which seeks to demonstrate the material and intangible benefits that Whiteness confers on White people, is another tenet of CRT ripe for further exploration and pedagogical application. Harris (1993) considers the origins of the United States, whereby enslaved Africans were considered property, and offers additional examples, such as via the legal codification of Whiteness which bestowed citizenship, resources and types of property on persons recognised as White by law; the right to exclude certain individuals from spaces or opportunities; and the right to access quality education and housing in desirable neighbourhoods.

Each of these ideas have a slew of historical examples that could figure well in history teachers' curricula. In using a CRT approach to teaching, teachers provide more complete accounts of history that push back on false majoritarian narratives that bolster White supremacy and meritocracy that perpetuates deficit narratives about people of colour. In doing so, teachers forward asset-based counter-stories celebrating the 'genius and assiduousness of People of Color', thereby transforming the lived experiences of students of colour in their schools, and in society more broadly (Marrun et al., 2024: 82). Distilling the differences between CRT and its possible applications to teaching history and social studies highlights the murkiness of this study when it comes to determining whether one is or is not teaching 'CRT'. The historical examples may feature in teachers' curricula without explicit attention to the larger theoretical ideal.

Guiding concepts: creative insubordination and ideological articulation

To understand how the teachers in this study navigated their sociopolitical situations, and the strategies by which they continued to teach about race and racism regardless of official restriction, this article applies Gutiérrez's (2015, 2016) research on creative insubordination, which focuses on how secondary mathematics teachers bent 'the rules' in order to advocate for all students' access to high-quality mathematics education. Gutiérrez (2015) described how teachers work to ensure that system directives (such as state-wide legislation and/or district-wide policies) do not impinge on their ability to teach and students' abilities to learn, while also avoiding the backlash that might accompany outright defiance. Her project documented various strategies through which teachers navigated their workplaces, including creating counter-narratives to the achievement gap, highlighting the humanity and uncertainty of mathematics, and refusing to go along with certain procedures required by workshop leads

(among others) (Gutiérrez, 2015). Gutiérrez (2015: 679–80) described these 'violations' as 'benign and counter-bureaucratic' in order 'to ensure that the system directives do not impinge unfairly or inappropriately on teachers and students and to avoid the possible backlash that outright defiance might incur'. The history teachers in this study engaged in similar bending of rules, with differing degrees of self-consciousness and motivations for their actions.

I couple the lens of creative insubordination with Stuart Hall's (1986) theory of articulation so as to make sense of the discursive dynamics that accompanied teachers' navigation of official policies and expectations. Articulation works from a Gramscian notion that hegemony is not uniform but rather that there exist multiple common senses which are always operationalised differently to varied effects depending on the time, place and social conditions (Gramsci, 1973). This definition holds that articulation is engaged at all levels in 'play[s] of power'. In this sense, I understand the navigational tactics employed by teachers as a form of ideological articulation whereby they appropriated or rejected various discourses, syntactic phrasing, jargon and so on, in order to continue to teach about race and racism in ways that they wanted to, based on their unique understandings of their community contexts. These navigations were imbued with a sociopolitical force, meaning that their rejections and/or adaptations to right-wing constraints at times constituted subversive acts where they resumed control over the messages they espoused. Whether or not they acknowledged it as such – in fact, many described these acts as maintaining neutrality or being above politics – these articulations constituted a form of political action (Clarke, 2015).

Methodology

Methods

Data for this study come from a larger mixed-methods dissertation study that explored White, award-winning history teachers' narrations of race and racism, Whiteness and antiracism, along with their navigations of the anti-'CRT' sociopolitical contexts emergent at the time of data collection during autumn and winter 2021. The findings reported for this study are based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 39 White, award-winning history teachers across the United States and focusing on their views of race, anti/racism and Whiteness, their teaching of related historical events and their navigation of the anti-'CRT' movements circulating throughout the United States. Interviews were conducted with teachers who had won their state's History Teacher of the Year award, distributed annually since 2004 by a prominent history education non-profit organisation. Each state typically receives up to one hundred nominees for the award each year, and finalists are ultimately selected by a panel of state officials and local departments of education. To be considered for the award, teachers must be nominated by a colleague, parent or student, and must then put together a portfolio demonstrating their leadership roles, creativity and use of multiple sources with students. Criteria for being selected as a winner include taking on leadership roles in advancing history education for their schools, districts or states; demonstrating a commitment to teaching American history; using creativity and imagination in their pedagogical practices; and engaging students with American history through an effective use of documents, artefacts, historic sites, oral histories and other primary sources. Those who are nominated have usually had a previous affiliation or contact with the organisation, which inevitably impacts and limits the types of teachers who are nominated and selected as finalists and winners.

A list of state winners is publicly available online. After locating teachers' contact information and ascertaining that they were still secondary history teachers, I first emailed a survey to 314 award-winning teachers who were still teaching in secondary schools; 114 teachers completed the survey, 70 of whom stated willingness to participate in an interview. I contacted those who were willing to be interviewed, and 39 teachers ultimately responded and scheduled an interview. This group of teachers represented 30 states and 1 US territory. Interviews ranged from 40 to 120 minutes and were conducted on Zoom, transcribed using Sonix (an online transcription service) and manually corrected by me. During the interview, teachers shared their responses to questions about the role of race and racism, Whiteness and antiracism related to their personal experiences, their teaching and to their views on society more broadly. They also discussed how they were navigating the political bifurcations and the onslaught of anti-'CRT' efforts, their responses to which are detailed in this article. Each of these questions provided insights about teachers' commitments, pedagogical approaches and racial ideologies, as well as about

the sociopolitical conditions informing these beliefs and actions. The full interview protocol is shown in Box 1.

Box 1. Interview protocol

1. Tell me a story about why you decided to become a history teacher? What do you feel are your most important responsibilities as a history teacher?
2. How might you explain race to your students in terms of its history (where it comes from) and the role it plays in society?
3. How do you teach about what race is?
4. Where does race and racism come up in your curriculum?
5. What are some of the historical events involving race that you teach?
6. Can you walk me through the details of how you teach a historical event related to race and racism/Whiteness in particular?
7. How are you navigating the current political climate regarding the attacks on CRT and teaching about race and racism? Are you affected? If so, how? How are you responding?
8. How did you teach about the January 6th events on Capitol Hill? What were your considerations for that decision?
9. What overarching messages do you think students walk away from your class with regarding the world, the country, etc.?
10. Do you consider yourself to be an antiracist educator? Why or why not?
11. Describe to me what antiracism looks like in teaching.
    i. Probe how they're defining antiracism ('so, for you, antiracism is _____')
12. Describe the demographics of your neighbourhood where you spent most of your years before college.
13. When did you first learn about race yourself? Tell me a story about when you first realised you were White?
14. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Participants and rationale: multiple layers of privilege

This study broadly considered the insights of teachers publicly recognised by their peers, communities and states as experts in the field. This sample of teachers had an average of more than 15 years of teaching experience. They also tended to have had many history-focused professional learning experiences and/or educational backgrounds. Six of the teachers interviewed had their PhD in history and/or education, and one was a doctoral candidate. Multiple teachers discussed being on the PhD track after receiving their master's degrees, but instead opted to become secondary teachers, and two more mentioned having parents who were professors. Table 1 includes additional demographic information about interview participants. Table 2 includes additional information about each participant's racial identity, school type, region and community type, and information about their state's restrictive legislation status. This information was self-described and emerged from their survey responses and/or their interviews.

Table 1. Overview of interview participants

Region	**West (%)**	**Southwest (%)**	**Midwest (%)**	**Northeast (%)**	**Southeast (%)**	**Department of Defense (%)**
	18	13	23	18	27	3
School type	**Public (%)**	**Private (%)**	**Charter (%)**	**Magnet (%)**		
	64	13	13	10		
Community	**Urban (%)**	**Suburban (%)**	**Rural (%)**	**Small town (%)**	**Island (%)**	
	31	44	15	10	3	
Student demographics	**Predominantly White (%)**	**Predominantly students of colour (%)**	**Diverse (%)**			
	62	15	23			
Gender identity	**Cis-men (%)**	**Cis-women (%)**				
	49	51				

Table 2. Participants' contextual information

Name	Race	Region	School type	Community type	Student demographics	Anti-'CRT' laws in place
Eric	White	Northeast	magnet	urban	diverse	no
Leo	White	Midwest	public	urban	diverse	no
Nick	White	Northeast	public	urban	predominantly students of colour	no
Owen	White	Southeast	public	suburban	predominantly White	yes
Trip	White	Department of Defense	private	rural	predominantly students of colour	no
Tyler	White	Southwest	charter	urban	predominantly students of colour	yes
Francesca	White	West	charter	suburban	predominantly White	no
Jack	White	West	public	suburban	diverse	no
Maureen	White	West	charter	rural	predominantly White	no
Delia	White	Midwest	public	small town	predominantly White	yes
Drake	White	Southeast	private	urban	predominantly White	yes
Cathy	White	Southeast	public	rural	diverse	yes
Leon	White	Northeast	private	urban	predominantly White	no
Polly	White	Southeast	charter	urban	predominantly White	no
Helen	White	West	public	small town	predominantly White	no
Colleen	White	Southeast	public	small town	diverse	no
Harold	White	Midwest	public	small town	predominantly White	no
Peter	Hispanic, White	Northeast	private	suburban	predominantly White	no
Marie	White	Southwest	public	suburban	diverse	yes
Ursula	White	Southwest	public	urban	predominantly non-White	yes
Rick	White	Midwest	public	rural	predominantly White	no
Zeke	White	West	magnet	suburban	predominantly White	no
Brenda	White	Midwest	public	suburban	predominantly White	no
Caden	White	West	public	suburban	predominantly White	no
Courtney	White	Northeast	public	rural	predominantly White	no
Carla	White	Southwest	public	suburban	predominantly non-White	no

https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.22.1.07

Susan	White	Southeast	magnet	urban and rural	diverse	yes
Elizabeth	White	Southeast	magnet	suburban	predominantly White	yes
Michelle	White	Southeast	public	suburban	predominantly White	yes
Arthur	White	Northeast	public	urban	diverse	no
Kevin	White	Midwest	public	suburban	predominantly White	no
Christina	White	Northeast	public	suburban	predominantly White	yes
Vernon	White	West	public	urban	diverse	no
Ariella	White	Midwest	public	urban	predominantly non-White	no
Lauren	White-coded, Native	Southeast	charter	suburban	predominantly White	yes
Ronald	White	Midwest	public	rural	predominantly White	yes
Stuart	White	Southeast	private	suburban	predominantly White	yes
Olivia	White	Midwest	public	suburban	predominantly White	legislation introduced
Mia	White	Southwest	public	suburban	predominantly White	no

Crucially, all of the teachers interviewed were White. This was mostly incidental, resulting from the overwhelming Whiteness of the sample of award-winning teachers itself. Only 2 of the 114 survey respondents identified themselves as people of colour, which is itself a commentary on the awarding body and the teachers that it serves, and which raises questions about whom various states value and deem to be considered 'excellent', pointing to a more systematic favouring of the dominant, hegemonic White culture in addition to the overwhelming Whiteness of the teaching profession itself (NCES, 2020). The Whiteness of the sample added an additional layer of privilege that informed my research questions about how the most (at least facially) protected class of teachers was affected by and navigating the onslaught of anti-'CRT' rhetoric and activities. Also notable was that of the 30 teachers who fully completed the survey (9 abstained), all either strongly or somewhat considered themselves to be antiracist teachers. Their rationales for identifying strongly or somewhat were elaborated on during the interview phase of research.

In sum, this study focused on teachers who were broadly considered to be extremely protected through their professional qualifications, their state-sanctioned/approved teaching experiences and their Whiteness. Each of these elements offered protection to teachers amid anti-'CRT' efforts. Still, many teachers reported feeling professionally limited and/or deterred by the possibility of retribution by the new legislation and rhetoric. Studying this group of professionally lauded teachers both telegraphed prototypical standards of excellence and offered particularly interesting insights into those factors driving teachers' feelings of constraint (or lack thereof) based on their sociopolitical contexts, even among teachers who were structurally privileged on many fronts.

Positionality

My identity as a White, middle-class, cisgender woman doctoral candidate at the time of data collection, who formerly taught history, inevitably shaped the ways that participants perceived me. In some cases, my Whiteness likely made teachers more comfortable talking about their sense-making about race, feeling less encumbered by propriety or fear of being accused of being offensive or racist. In other cases,

teachers likely performed a version of antiracism that they anticipated I might like to hear. In either case, what teachers' chose to disclose shed light on their particular racial ideologies and inflections on their teaching.

In addition, while my position as a doctoral candidate had no tangible bearing on the work of any of the teachers who opted to participate in this study, for many participating teachers, talking to a researcher presented a variety of attendant risks. In fact, on many occasions, participants asked about the level of protection regarding their identities that they would be afforded in sharing. Talking to an outside observer also potentially provided an external validation about the level of hostility they faced in their teaching climate. Many teachers were curious about the conditions facing others, comparing the stories that I had heard with their own, noting overlaps and/or worrying about the potentialities of the constraints facing others to one day affect them similarly. In these ways, I, as the researcher, wielded a level of determining power – both in providing them with information about the circumstances facing other teachers, and in my ability to possibly expose them. With these elements in mind, I approached this dynamic carefully and sought to represent my participants generously.

Analysis

Using MAXQDA, a computer-assisted data analysis software program, transcripts were first coded descriptively for instances when teachers referenced anti-'CRT'/divisive concepts measures, either in direct response to an interview question, or obliquely when explaining other aspects of their teaching conditions (Creswell, 2007). Transcripts were then grouped based on teachers' reported levels of constraint, along with their willingness to engage in teaching that they considered to be risky. These groupings were analysed alongside official state and local policies limiting teaching about race and racism. What emerged was that teachers' feelings of constraint did not necessarily coincide with their state's legislation. In some cases, teachers from officially restrictive states reported feeling unburdened by new laws. In other cases, in states that officially lacked official policies, teachers felt restricted for other reasons. Thus, teasing out the factors that contributed to these feelings of constraint became a key part of this article.

To further uncover the factors playing into teachers' feelings of constraint along with their responses, transcripts were analysed thematically, using both in vivo and a priori codes from the literature on teaching about race and racism, history education, and the critical frameworks provided by Gutiérrez's (2015) creative insubordination and Hall's (1986, 1989) theories of ideology articulation, to generate, refine and subsume categories (Saldaña, 2013). Coding was an iterative process and analysed both within and across cases, and the analytic process was punctuated with intermittent analytic memo-ing to make further sense (Maxwell, 2013).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size of 39 teachers is relatively small, limiting the generalisability of the findings. Second, findings were based on teachers' self-reporting during interviews, which means that how and what they teach is not confirmable by other data sources or observation. Without opportunities to triangulate findings, I focused on teachers' own descriptions of both their context and their instructional decisions around teaching. I treated these descriptions not as indisputable should someone observe them or interpret their actions differently, but, rather, as instructive regarding their perceptions of what was happening to them about the larger political backdrop. What they shared indicated their understandings and their reactions to their context.

Findings: anti-'CRT' risks and resistances

Structural reductions of risk

Although most (69 per cent) of the teachers in this study taught in states that had either introduced or passed anti-'CRT' legislation, only 38 per cent expressed feeling restrained by the anti-'CRT' laws or rhetoric, the extent to which varied based on structural conditions (school type, student demographics), and community position, in states with and without restrictive anti-'CRT' policies. Teachers who taught in private and charter schools described having much more leeway in their curriculum because they were

not beholden to the same degree of state-level curricular oversight as typical public schools. Polly, a high school teacher at a diverse charter school in a Southeastern state, described that she had no fear about putting her job on the line, explaining, 'I would fight that battle … it's just so patently ridiculous to me to teach in any other way.' Other factors seeming to influence teachers' disregard of official policy included teaching in wealthy schools (both private and public) and teaching predominantly students of colour whose caregivers are less likely to express fear or hostility to diversity, and who may not be the target of right-wing stoking of fears about increasingly diverse spaces (real or imagined) (Bertrand et al., 2023; Grewal, 2018; Major et al., 2018).

A final factor pertained to teachers' feeling of adequate expertise, or to community-conferred approval or clout meaning that they did not have to worry about retribution. For example, Francesca, who taught in a predominantly White charter school in an affluent community in a conservative suburb of a Democratic state, attributed her lack of fear to her school's college-going culture. This meant that students depended on teachers for letters of recommendation, which provided leverage for teachers who felt empowered to push back against parental complaints about using historical texts centring different groups' counter-narratives, modelled on Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. In other words, feeling that they were understood and supported by their administration or community insulated teachers from opposition, even when they had different political stances.

Creative insubordination and rearticulation in navigating anti-'CRT' efforts

This section describes how teachers in officially restrictive contexts managed to continue to teach about race and racism. These teachers engaged in a variety of discursive articulation and rearticulation tactics, which included strategic denial, selective silences, and directing student attention to topic suppression in ways that conveyed meanings about race and racism even while seemingly silent.

Denial of 'CRT'

Denying that they were teaching CRT was a common thread among nearly every participant in the study. Some teachers in the study claimed ignorance or a lack of expertise about CRT, drawing sharp distinctions between what they taught in their history courses and the university level they may have encountered during college. Others were more explicit in their awareness of the overlaps between CRT tenets and historical examples illustrative of CRT principles. In some cases, teachers revealed the strategy behind their pointed denial of CRT, citing that it enabled them to continue to teach historical examples demonstrative of CRT principles, such as systemic racism and/or the ongoing presence of racism throughout US history, while avoiding confrontation with hostile constituencies. In both cases – those claiming a lack of expertise and those more strategically aware – participants expressed awareness of the politicisation of CRT, acknowledging the cynical ways in which it had been weaponised by the Right. In one example, Brenda, who taught in a predominantly White public school in a Midwestern state that had introduced restrictive legislation, drew a disciplinary distinction between CRT and history, asserting:

> I'm not teaching CRT. I'm teaching history. You know, honestly, I know what CRT is, kind of abstractly, but I never took a course in CRT because I didn't go to law school. So, you know, it's just a dog whistle. And I'm not going to bow down to that.

In this case, Brenda drew a contrast between teaching history and CRT, while also alluding to the 'dog whistle', for example, the Right's contortion of 'CRT,' naming the cynical intent behind the anti-'CRT' movement.

Tyler, who taught mostly students of colour in an urban charter school located in a conservative Southwestern state, also denied teaching about CRT, citing that he was not 'qualified'. At the same time, Tyler asserted:

> I do need them to understand that there are some overlaps … This boogeyman that people have created surrounding this critical race theory thing … we do talk about systematic racism.

Illustrative of this commitment, Tyler described teaching myriad examples of racism within laws exemplified in a variety of court cases, and racial massacres, including Tulsa. He described teaching about the Dred Scott decision, Japanese internment and the killing of Ahmaud Arbury in 2020. He taught about his city's history of redlining, which directly impacted many of his students' families. Each of these examples are illustrative of CRT principles regarding past and present systemic racism entrenched in law. In this case, claiming silence on CRT enabled him to teach historical events in alignment with CRT principles. He explained the context in which he operated, and how he oriented his pedagogical practice in a politically conservative environment, when asked about how he was dealing with the national movement against 'CRT':

> What I've taught in class has not changed … Nowadays, people really try to figure out a way to put a label on it so that they can say what they want about it. But what I say about race and what I say about the past when it comes to the United States and race, the message has always been the same. The lessons have always been the same when it comes to the students.

Here, Tyler acknowledged the aligning threads within his teaching goal of excavating systemic racism. He also recognised the increasingly hostile sociopolitical landscape, naming it as a 'boogeyman'. Still, Tyler claimed that the content of his teaching has been largely unchanged. Implicit in this explanation is a critique of people trying to 'figure out a way to put a label on it', but steadfast was his refusal to be pigeonholed or targeted, or to change the content he taught about racism. Tyler rejected the terms of the debate as proscribed by the right-wing apparatus in order to maintain fidelity to his approach and his commitment to teaching about race systemically.

Drake, who taught in a predominantly White private school in a Republican-led Southern state that had passed legislation, understood that there were many commonalities with the way he approached teaching US history and the tenets of critical race theory, explaining:

> By the standard definition of critical race theory, it's impossible to teach American history well and not talk about the underlying systems that have created inequality and notions of race.

Still, he recounted how his administration dealt with the onslaught of parental concern about the 'dangers' of 'CRT' by vehemently denying that it was a content area being taught at their school. He recalled how at the beginning of the school year, the principal told the staff, 'Listen, we're not going to talk about critical race theory.' Drake elaborated:

> Effectively, what he was saying was, I know what you teach, but don't call it critical race theory, because some parent is going to lose their marbles over it, because it was all in the news.

Drake and his administration understood the political landmine risked by acknowledging CRT and, thus, like the other educators described, he made strategic denials to protect teachers' autonomy over content.

These examples point to the affordances of denying the CRT label. While teachers acknowledged, to varying degrees, the corruptive politicisation of CRT, their refusal to adopt the label of CRT, regardless of alignment with historical examples, provided a layer of insulation from potential hostile parties.

Strategic silences and rearticulation

In addition to denial, teachers reported heightened awareness of politicised terminology and described adjusting their language to avoid buzzwords that might be tripwires for explosive political discourses. Delia described how being immersed in her rural, mostly White, Midwestern community with statewide restrictions, gave her an understanding of the differences between the conservative rhetoric employed by parents in her middle school and their actual sentiments around diversity. She explained:

> I think if you were to ask our people in our community what they thought about critical race theory, they'd be very anti it. They're a very Fox News sort of crowd around here. But I think if you said, I just want to teach history to make sure that we're including everybody's stories, including, you know, the Black Americans or including Native Americans, they'd be like, oh yeah, that's fine. You know, it's like they just hate the name. They don't even know what it

> means. And so as long as you're not using it, as long as you're just like, oh, no, we're just going to tell everybody's stories. They're like, oh, that's fine. Then they'd be very reasonable about it.

This example demonstrates how Delia's understanding of her community informed her framing of potentially inflammatory topics. She understood the effects of content that was perceived to be incendiary by her parent population, but she also understood that alternative framing of the same topics would subdue that opposition. In this sense, Delia reframed the terms of the debate predetermined by right-wing political formations' demonisation of 'critical race theory', instead fusing it with terms such as 'everybody's stories' to regain articulative power and narrative control, about which she believed parents and community members would 'be very reasonable'. The rearticulation of CRT to 'everybody's stories' could be interpreted as a neutering act that makes racism palatable for her largely White student body. However, Delia did engage her students in a variety of explorations into historical topics regarding systemic racism, including educational segregation, protests during the civil rights movement and an array of systemic actions that harmed the local Indigenous people in her state, notably the systematic killing of bison and the flooding of Indigenous lands by the construction of a dam. These examples, along with Delia's resolution to 'tell the truth … this is what happened', indicate a commitment to centring explorations of power and the material impact of racism.

Susan, who taught in a diverse, relatively liberal magnet school in a very conservative part of a Southern state that had passed restrictive legislation, explained how she avoided using certain buzzwords that she knew would be agitating in her conservative context. She denied embracing antiracist principles, stating 'I don't use any of that language', and explaining:

> That label is so charged down here that if I put that on, I wouldn't be able to bring everybody along with me.

Despite her resistance to the label, Susan followed up by explaining that she did in fact teach antiracist materials and kept up with her colleagues' curricular developments in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. She described various historical exercises she taught where students reckoned with incidents of racial terror in ways that many would deem to be in accordance with CRT principles, including the Tulsa Race Massacre (and she described the change in the naming convention from 'riot' to 'massacre') and the Colfax Massacre. Still, Susan was keenly aware of the politicisation of certain terms, and she avoided the use of certain concepts that she considered to be politically 'loaded'. She explained one instance:

> We were having to revise our course catalogue … and in the description of it [the course], it talked about American exceptionalism post-World War Two. So, I went to the assistant principal and said, 'let's take out that. Let's just call the power of the United States post-World War Two. We do not need to use that loaded language. I will teach American exceptionalism in terms of, this is an idea, and we'll look at the pros and the cons of it'.

Like Delia, Susan anticipated the sensitivities of her community, and she reframed content that could be seen as political. While she affirmed her commitment to teaching the idea of American exceptionalism, she understood how students' political backgrounds may cause them to 'shut down' when confronted with certain politicised rhetoric. By defanging progressive buzzwords, Susan felt she could be more efficacious in teaching ideas, even those that may be considered controversial.

Stuart, who taught in an elite, majority White private school in a conservative Southern city with statewide restrictions, pushed up against the limits of his privileged school community. While he did recount teaching about White supremacists and the Ku Klux Klan, he opted not to 'use the word Whiteness', for fear that to do so would put his largely White students on the defensive, entrenching their White supremacist attitudes rather than disrupting them. He detailed an incident where a student group focused on cultural awareness brought up 'White privilege' at an all-school meeting which went 'absolutely nuclear'. He explained, 'That phrase tapped into that partisan kind of ideological identity politics and just … wildfire.'

Stuart situated this reaction within larger questions of antiracism and the limits which he knew his school community could endure. He believed that talking about racism from the angle of just individual justice made it more palatable:

> Is it OK for the police to assault somebody who is unarmed? And I think they're much more open to discussing that kind of thing. But if they feel like there's … kind of criticism of their identity, it goes bad very quickly. Calling myself an antiracist at school, I don't think would be one of those trigger words. But if I said I was attacking White privilege, I think I might get run out of town.

This example showcases a sense of threat that accompanied the implications of White supremacy for White students in a school and community context that continued to be heavily shaped by the legacy of enslavement and its aftermath. While Stuart acknowledged that his community could tolerate the language of 'antiracism', he knew that White privilege would be an inflammatory 'trigger word', leading to widespread displeasure from the White population at the school. Stuart deliberately silenced discussions of Whiteness to enact what he viewed as a more effective course of action, explaining, 'I think if it's seen as a balanced discussion that's not picking on any of these scabs, you know, those trigger words, it goes a lot better for us.'

Directed attention to suppression

Directing students' attention to silences and suppressions was a powerfully disruptive tactic employed by teachers who were teaching in particularly constrained contexts. To begin, Lauren, who taught in a conservative Southwestern state with restrictive laws, and who described herself as an abolitionist teacher, framed her work through an inquiry approach. She explained:

> Being in a state where we have people actively trying to convince parents to sue us for teaching this sort of stuff, I find if you give them a chance to lead to the water, it really does help in presenting that knowledge, because [if you] do the research, you're going to find it out.

For Lauren, one of the most effective antidotes to parental concerns about 'CRT' was involving students in their own learning so that they could pursue their own questions as part of the course content. Also effective was delicately drawing students' attention to the critical content that many of their parents were afraid of without calling out parents directly. She explained that 'most of the students are on board', and 'want to know this sort of stuff':

> The strange thing is the students are protecting the teachers from their parents because you do have kids who do want the knowledge, they do want the understanding … 'If I'm not allowed to know it, why am I not allowed to know it?'

In this example, Lauren described introducing students to Nikole Hannah-Jones's essay in the 1619 Project by asking why some might have a problem with it. In asking questions about stakeholders' interests in silencing Hannah-Jones's story, Lauren lobbed an (albeit silent) critique against those who wished to silence the project without having to do the heavy lifting herself. Instead, by inviting students to grapple with questions of 'why', her students were able to come to new truths about both the validity of the narrative and the fundamental fallaciousness of the anti-'CRT' movement writ large.

Marie also drew attention to content suppression as a pedagogical strategy. Teaching in an increasingly conservative university town in a Republican-led state impacted her storytelling. She blithely described having to read sections of the student handbook aloud to her students as part of the new restrictive law, promising that she would not make them feel 'prejudiced' because of their race and that she would not critique meritocracy, an essential underpinning of the 'American Dream', a portion of the law which Marie laughingly admitted she had already 'broke', having recently taught about social Darwinism from a critical stance. In describing this event, Marie also noted her students' reactions, saying that they 'scoffed at the whole thing'.

This example showcases both the structural constraints on teachers who are forced legally to humble themselves as professionals, and the ways in which teachers can and do work within the system. For Marie, her dry recounting of this event, along with her blatant admission of having broken the promise regarding meritocracy, revealed the layered and subversive way in which individuals participate in and subvert official acts. The anti-'CRT' discourses circulated alongside discourses critical of the anti-'CRT' forces in equal measure. Despite adhering to the bureaucratic policies of reading the legislation aloud, Marie's retelling, underlaid with her own critique of the ridiculousness of the request along with students'

'scoffing', constituted an act of creative insubordination where humour punctured the power of the institutional discourse.

In a final example, Mia, another teacher from a Western, politically conservative state in the process of passing anti-'CRT' legislation, provided an incisive example of drawing students' attention to suppression. She described a lesson on imperialism and her response to a student's question about whether American imperialism was connected to racial superiority, explaining:

> I said, 'Oh, I cannot answer that question … I can't … I won't even mention that word …' And so, several students were like, 'Wait, what did she say?' … And I said, 'I can't bring that up. *You* can bring it up, but I'll leave you to make the conclusion. But you should know I cannot talk about that issue without creating a firestorm for myself. If any of you should choose to go home and say that I said there was anything to do with racial superiority and imperialism …' And so, most of the students knew what I was saying without me saying it. And so, they don't like that, they're like, that is stupid … why can't you talk about what is real?

In her expressed unwillingness to 'answer that question' and 'even mention that word', Mia sent a message to her students that accentuated the initial question about the connection between imperialism and racial superiority. By naming the silence, and refusing to answer their questions, Mia effectively disrupted the dominant narrative and, like Lauren, forced her students to confront questions of why some knowledge has been deemed off limits for them, surfacing their own critiques – 'that is stupid, why can't you talk about what is real?' In this example, Mia wielded the silences imposed by her state's legislature loudly, conveying to her students not only the connection between race and imperialism, but also silently inviting critiques of the gag order imposed by the state, and the other forces that prevented students from learning certain content – an implicit indictment of many actors, including many of the students' parents, culminating in students' frustration: 'Why can't you talk about what's real?'

These teachers drew attention to the various suppressions forced on them by legislative decree. They did so by highlighting the ridiculousness of the laws through humour, by asking direct questions about content and why one might want to ban it, and by giving space for research to answer students' questions without the teachers' imprint. Each of these pedagogical choices reconfigured the effects of institutional and/or bureaucratic impositions and rearticulated the terms of the anti-'CRT' debate for students, conveying pointed messages to them about the role of race and racism in society, and the students' own role within those debates.

Synthesis and discussion

While much has been reported about the anti-'CRT' legislation across the United States, less is known about how specific teachers have been impacted and how they have navigated this fraught political moment. Findings from this study challenge generalisations about what teaching looks like in different states and assumptions that policy equally affects all teachers in the same ways. Instead, this study showcases the hyperlocal ways that policies and public discourse are taken up by different actors in response to mobilisation efforts circulating through a variety of right-wing political formations – both inside and outside official politics. This research shows that individuals in non-restrictive states felt threatened by parental or community constituencies that determined the bounds of acceptable content and curriculum for students. And teachers in officially restrictive states were often able to find or create enough spaciousness to continue teaching about the connections between race and racism and history with enough disciplinary fidelity.

For the teachers in particularly constrained contexts, these new limitations meant that they had to avoid certain concepts and buzzwords, and, in some cases, alter the stories that they were teaching. The wielding of tactics such as denial, silence and attention to suppression created space to convey counter-hegemonic meanings to students, enabling teachers to touch on race-related content that would have otherwise been foreclosed, and to implicitly critique the power structures responsible for said constraint.

At the same time, this careful curation and tactical navigation of the political terrain also raises questions about the protection of the status quo and who these efforts ultimately protect most. For example, did Stuart's refusal to talk about Whiteness with his students for fear of invoking their own rage at White identity indictment ultimately harm the larger project of racial justice? Or did this choice enable

him to effectively carry on with his antiracist goals in ways that his student population would be able to tolerate? Did this work in favour or against the interests of his students of colour who had expressed a need for a space to talk about racial injustice? How did his stance continue to protect the White students at his school at the expense of students of colour, and how much does it matter that he moved the needle even slightly? Similarly, was Susan's refusal to explore the concept of American exceptionalism ultimately a hindrance to their larger understandings of America on the world stage? Or was her rearticulation to 'post-World War Two America' a strategic choice that offered more opportunities for students' being led to water but not forced to drink? Slack (1996: 125) asserted that 'identities, practices, and effects generally constitute the very contexts within which they are practices, identities or effects'. Does this then mean that if the practices are self-reproducing in certain ways, they simply recreate the status quo?

Although commonly invoked by the participants of this study, the denial of teaching 'CRT' in K–12 contexts is illustrative of larger implications of outright rejection of CRT. Stovall and Annamma (2021) argued that conversations about whether 'CRT' is or is not taught in K–12 contexts as a defensive stance miss the larger point and the impetus behind these bans – mainly that 'divisive concepts' laws are just a bad faith cover designed to protect White supremacy. Unveiling White supremacy, by engaging in learning about systemic racism, will never be 'palatable' to 'those invested in upholding it' (Stovall and Annamma, 2021: n.p.). This tension raises questions about whether the expediency of the defensive stance that temporarily quiets concerns about 'CRT' is the best approach when one's goal is antiracism. In what ways does denying CRT end up giving weight to the stance that CRT is something to be avoided in the classroom? And do the benefits of preserving classroom autonomy to address race-related concepts in the classroom ultimately outweigh the risks of reifying right-wing talking points?

In his writing about articulation, Hall (1986, as cited in Slack, 1996: 124) described hegemonic 'lines of tendential force', which are 'potent, persistent, and effective', serving as 'powerful barriers to the potential for re-articulation' because they represent dominant modes of thought articulated by those with power and privilege. Concepts such as Whiteness, White privilege and American exceptionalism are particularly powerful articulations, imbued with hegemonic meaning about the foundations of America, what Hall (1989: 43) described as constituting '"material force" dominating the cultural'. To raise these concepts with students as fodder for learning was viewed by participants such as Susan and Stuart as potentially destabilising in their classrooms, because critiquing White supremacy and American exceptionalism are existentially threatening to particular (White) constituencies. According to Slack (1996: 124), the aim of cultural theorists is to determine 'when, where and how these [dominant] circuits might be rearticulated'. The teachers in this study were doing just that – recognising, based on their cultural understandings of their communities, the level of tolerance of their constituencies and making tactical choices about how to approach their students in ways that they could hear. As with denial of CRT, questions emerge about the effects of choice to cater to the comfort of dominant voices, and the ways in which tactics, such as those employed by Susan and Stuart, either pushed back on or reproduced the White-centred status quo.

The questions I raise lack easy answers. Instead, the articulations and rearticulations – the discursive clashes that each of these teachers waged – represent the contextually specific and locally bound conditions within which teachers found themselves. Importantly, recreating the status quo may take place alongside moments of transformative education. As Ira Shor (1980: 113, 123) argued, teaching should be 'adapted, amended, re-invented, used or discarded, depending on the requirements of the specific teaching situation. In each school or college, teachers need to assess what level of liberatory learning they can assert, given student consciousness and institutional politics'. Rather than taking an all-or-nothing enterprise when it comes to educational liberation and justice-aligned curriculum, perhaps it is preferable to embrace teachers' expertise and agency in negotiating competing sociopolitical forces, interpersonal dynamics and the complex work of teaching.

In their acts of creative insubordination, teachers acted on the world, effectively altering the political terrain. Even when they did not think they were being political, their discursive choices likely had implications for the messages conveyed to students about the role of race and racism in their lives. Many in this group of structurally protected White teachers had the luxury of choice regarding how much to push back. Of course, not all who are teaching today experience similar privileges. Carla, a Southwestern teacher in this study, worried about the teachers of colour who would leave the profession, or choose not to enter at all, along with the resultant impact on students, especially students of colour:

> Through the lens of these laws, that's not a very safe working place for [teachers of colour]. And then you have students who are not going to see themselves in the curriculum and have no reason to relate. And knowing first-hand, seeing kids learn about somebody they can identify with is a really, really powerful thing to witness.

Ultimately, the larger sociopolitical climate that foreclosed on teachers to teach about race and racism will likely impact students' comprehensive racial learning (Winkler, 2012), and their understanding of society more broadly. In witnessing their teachers' varied confrontations with sociopolitical forces, and their externally or self-imposed silences, students have been exposed to explicit and implicit lessons – about who wields power in society, the stories able to be passed on, and the necessary strategies for traversing competing tendential forces. This research demonstrates that the meaning-making of students, like teachers', is far from unidirectional and, instead, is dialogic, with potentially far-reaching consequences for multiple directions likely unanticipated by the architects of the anti-'CRT' movements.

Implications

At the time of writing, Donald Trump has launched his second term as US president with immediate attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI; the new CRT) across the federal government, in sectors ranging from Veterans Affairs, to the Federal Aviation Agency, to the National Science Foundation (NSF) and beyond. NSF staff have been instructed by the Trump administration to comb through thousands of active research projects for keywords that indicate activities in violation of his executive orders. Some of the words in question include 'equity', 'diversity', 'biases', 'historically', 'institutional', 'multicultural', 'racially' and 'socioeconomic' (Johnson et al., 2025). These actions signify an intensified and highly aggressive extension of the anti-'CRT' campaigns, with still unknown implications for history teachers, although one can imagine similar restrictions bleeding into the educational sphere presenting incredible challenges for history teachers trying to teach the past with fidelity. (Just imagine teaching history without using the word 'historically'!)

Still, as this research demonstrates, teachers maintain agency both in micro-ways – in how they frame historical events, in the voices they surface in their classrooms, in their staging of implicit and explicit critiques – and in macro-ways – in pushing back legally, administratively and collectively. For example, in response to their state's anti-DEI programmes bill (Alabama Senate Bill 129), which prohibits the teaching of 'divisive concepts' (for example, systemic racism, structural inequality, social justice and race more generally), Alabama K–12 teachers, professors and students have partnered with the NAACP and the ACLU to file a preliminary injunction on the anti-DEI law (Contreras, 2025), and have filed a lawsuit against Alabama Governor Kay Ivey and the University of Alabama's trustees, accusing them of violating the First Amendment and of discriminating against Black students (Associated Press, 2025).

In the face of efforts to erase the actual past in service of a myth free of institutional racism, the role of history teachers matters more than ever. White teachers, particularly those who are most insulated from retribution, must be keepers of this past, navigating their sociopolitical terrains with an eye towards passing on the truth about racism and the workings of White supremacy. As Milan Kundera (1996: 133) stated, 'The destruction of a people's culture begins with the destruction of their memory.' Thus, the discursive fight continues.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to recognise the anonymous reviewers of this article, along with Cynthia Lewis, George Bunch, Zeus Leonardo, Keith Barton, Lora Bartlett, Kim Vachon and Ian Slattery for their contributions to this article.

Data and materials availability statement

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the University of California Santa Cruz Institutional Review Board.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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