

## **Finding “Pity” within the “Haggle and Nag” Rhetoric around Critical Race Theory**

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The recent 2021 elections in Virginia, a state with nationally visible opposition to Critical Race Theory (CRT), appeared to be a referendum on the limits the general public is willing to tolerate when it comes to CRT. Conservative politicians continue to enthusiastically jump into the fray, with some calling for course syllabi reviews or even the end of tenure in public universities to potentially control how social justice-oriented topics like CRT are taught. This is cause for alarm in terms of how widespread this growing anti-CRT sentiment may reach, as this could stunt, even reverse, progress made in addressing issues of race in the US.

University scholars have been long held as stewards of society, navigating the ever-changing complexities of the social, cultural, and political landscape (Grafton, 1979). However, public opinions of scholars are increasingly more critical toward perspectives contrary to their own, demonstrating an increasing disconnect between scholars and society. Anonymous dismissive and disparaging comments such as, “hopefully, in the meantime, a whole lot of professors that are

pushing their radical nonsense will retire” can be seen frequenting the social media comment boards of pieces on CRT. This reflects an observable pushback to scholars and their perceived misaligned positioning on issues of race or misunderstanding of society. Critics of higher education in the US have taken advantage of the growing divide between scholars and society, using rhetoric as a weapon against CRT and higher education to demonize the well-founded intentions of scholars trying to advocate for racial equality in the US.

In Ray Bradbury’s book about censorship, *Fahrenheit 451*(2012), the main protagonist, Montag, comes to realize the ills of censorship and poignantly seeks to lift the veil of ignorance from those around him. Montag’s intellectual mentor, Professor Faber, offers this advice in response:

Pity, Montag, pity. Don’t haggle and nag them; you were so recently of them yourself. They are so confident that they will run on forever. But they won’t run on. They don’t know that this is all one huge, big blazing meteor that makes a pretty fire in space, but that some day it’ll have to hit. They see only the blaze, the pretty fire, as you saw it (pp. 99-100).

Professor Faber encourages empathy instead, not because he agrees with censorship, but because the veil of ignorance is not so easily lifted, and in some cases, it is never lifted because to know is too difficult and burdensome.

In this essay, Professor Faber’s words serve as a metaphorical, not literal, representation of current CRT discourse. CRT scholars continuously present and publish streams of information, though the general public has not shown a readiness or willingness to receive this information, and in some cases, has

provided a stern rejection of pro-CRT thinking that has fueled a rising and alarming trend in anti-CRT discourse. Arguably, CRT scholars are now faced with an unexpected dilemma: to continue the "haggle and nag" as Professor Faber stated or find a new rhetorical pathway to gain control of public discourse on CRT.

### **The "Pretty Fire" of Information Echo Chambers**

While experienced and established experts, such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado, have widely published on CRT for many years, the public is instead increasingly seeking its interpretation of CRT from web-based media, including news site editorials, online commentaries, and social media sites, which can misrepresent or distort the basic academic tenants of CRT (Sawchuk, 2021). Media pieces on CRT may briefly mention the names of CRT experts, but those experts are not the ones typically leading the narrative of those pieces. With over 65% of people 25 years or older in the US without a college degree (Nietzel, 2021), it is less likely that these individuals will seek out CRT scholarly experts, let alone feel confident accurately deciphering their academic-oriented texts. Further, accusations of media disinformation, used interchangeably as "fake news" or "alternative facts", that prey on the otherwise uninformed has rapidly increased (Wittenberg & Berinsky, 2020) and is being used as justification to disregard, even avoid, opposing viewpoints.

As division grows in CRT discourse, the public engaged in this discourse are becoming increasingly rigid in their position, opting for participation with like-

minded individuals to reinforce that position through comment boards on certain news sites or forming social media groups (Barberá, 2020). For CRT opponents, these information echo chambers create a safe space, allowing for a shielding from more accurate expert CRT viewpoints, but also promote a refusal to acknowledge the existence and persistence of structural and systemic racism in the US. These echo chambers allow individuals to bask in the “pretty fire” of a whitewashed reality and “All Lives Matter” rhetoric, which serves as a contemporary example of the color-blindness and meritocratic rhetoric that CRT proponents seek to reject. Color-blindness assumes neutrality to allow the majority to maintain power while also stating that is not true. Meritocracy allows the same majority to be empowered to have a clear conscious to avoid feelings of discomfort. The majority is only willing to relinquish some power if there is nothing to lose. In combination, color-blindness and meritocracy has historically represented the “pretty fire” that distracts the majority from the realities faced by the minority and is now renewed, even thriving, in the anti-CRT information echo chambers.

### **The Weaponizing of the Normalized “Haggle and Nag”**

The weaponizing of CRT, triggered by George Floyd’s murder in July 2020 and related protests, was publicly initiated by Christopher Rufo, a conservative journalist, in an article claiming CRT to be responsible for voluntary racial bias sessions adopted in response to Floyd’s death (Suddath, 2021). Rufo served as fearmonger for a sizeable online audience, using inflammatory trigger words such as “cult”, “anti-White”, and anti-American” to describe CRT. Then-

President Donald Trump furthered the anti-CRT effort by banning racial sensitivity training for federal employees, which propelled CRT into the national, though one-sided, spotlight. Rufo and others continue to use CRT as a weapon, and have now focused attacks on education, including writing anti-CRT education legislation at the local, state, and federal levels.

Rufo and others have capitalized on the public's misconceptions about CRT in promoting anti-CRT positions and policies. While scholars generally seek to avoid similarly absolute rhetoric, the persistent scholarship related to CRT in the last few years can be seen by those outside of academia as a "haggle and nag" of society's issues with racism, including laying blame to specific groups, creating an easily manipulated perception that higher education assumes an absolute position on CRT. Wayne Booth (2004) describes three types of win-rhetoric (WR), two of which, WR-b and WR-c, help to show how CRT is being weaponized. WR-b refers to a belief that a cause is absolutely justified and there is a will to win at all costs, even if it requires using false evidence or misleading arguments. Scholars may not use false or misleading information about CRT, but they feel justified on their position with a strong will to disseminate their position to others without consideration of potential costs. Opponents to CRT are also taking strong belief-based anti-CRT positions, often with knowledge of potential costs, to disrupt CRT discourse. WR-c refers to the use of rhetoric that gives an appearance of truth but is really deceptive, which is increasingly common in anti-CRT discourse. WR-b or WR-c is the rhetorical frame most often seen used in discussions around CRT, which has largely created the current conditions for

defensiveness and closed mindedness. Specifically, CRT presented within a rhetorical frame may include the following:

- *WR-b*: The use of modal qualifiers is helpful to temper the impact of words like “debilitating” “hidden” “vicious” and “oppression”. These words are strong and create defensiveness of those in the intended audience. Without providing evidence of debilitation, hidden, viciousness, or oppression, one may still feel justified to skip this part of the argument, as it might reduce the impact that these claims can demonstrate. This kind of critical language, to those who already oppose CRT, leads more to resistance and defensiveness rather than to openness and dialogue.
- *WR-c*: Broad generalization about groups of people, which negates the differences, both positive and negative, within groups that are known to exist. Generalizations may be used for efficiency in arguments, but the lack of precision tends to be alienating to group members who do not identify with the generalizations made. This kind of fallacious rhetoric is deceptive and seen in color-blindness and meritocratic rhetoric used by CRT opponents, which may also include nods to, and generalizations about, positions of scholars and higher education about CRT to further their oppositional argument.

### **Shaping the Incoming “Meteor” of CRT Rhetoric**

The underlying issues of CRT are serious but even more important is how scholars can use language to provoke respectful and reasonable public discussion about it to effectively address those underlying issues. The term “CRT” has

already been shown to be a simple but powerful rhetorical device to sway the minds of the general public. Much of the discourse around CRT assumes that institutions in the legal system, education, and political arenas are structured around unjust hierarchies and blind racism (Mill & Unsworth, 2018), which underlies a larger public moral argument, one that represents the incoming “meteor” that, while currently distracted by anti-CRT discourse, society will eventually need to face.

Lloyd Bitzer (1968) suggested that in public argument, the notion of a fitting response is key to effective engagement. The response is imbued with and embedded within persuasion; it is intended to persuade an audience to do something, either change their thinking or take a particular action. This creates a rhetorical situation, which requires responsiveness, a critical response, a time for a decision, and a call to action. A rhetorical situation involves an exigence, which calls one out to respond to something immediately, with urgency or dispatch. The situation is also calling for a fitting response that meets the requirements of a real situation consisting of tangible people, objects, events, and relations. Additionally, constraints often govern the situation and the one responding must work within those constraints or attempt to address the constraints in some way. Finally, the rhetorical situation is only rhetorical if the audience has the ability to do something, change their minds or take some kind of action; this kind of empowered audience is referred to as a rhetorical audience.

CRT in public discourse is situated within a rhetorical situation as follows:

- *Exigence*: CRT calls out observations and evidence of systemic racism in the practices of institutional, organizational, or governmental structures that organize society. The heightened urgency identified is tied to life and death stemming from George Floyd’s murder (Fortin, 2021).
- *Rhetorical Audiences*: The divisiveness of CRT has created two opposing factions, one long held by CRT scholars and other proponents who want to see systems of racism dismantled and the other anti-CRT more recently initiated by Christopher Rufo, seeking to remove CRT from discourse (Suddath, 2021).
- *Constraints*: Includes the idea that most people do not fully understand CRT but use the acronym in public discourse to disrupt discourse, such as Rufo did in July 2020. It may be misused in discourse, such as the current conflating of CRT philosophy and pedagogy and how it exists in education (Greene, 2021). CRT scholars can use Bitzer’s rhetorical situation to better understand the use of CRT in moral public argument in hopes of penetrating the increasingly dense walls of media echo chambers. The increased resistance to CRT and general anti-racism progress is notable, even jarring, but it is not yet irreversible.

### **Reconnecting with “Pity” in CRT Public Discourse**

Supporting and participating in public moral argument is central to democracy. When issues are public, and because the issues concern moral values of the human community, they hold currency to the historical moment and the human community. Racism is a public moral issue, and according to Mills and

Unsworth (2018), a part of CRT is having open discussions around race. Digital technologies have contributed to expanding participation in this discourse using multimodal communication which circulates communication practices more quickly to larger numbers of people in diverse arenas. This accounts for the widespread, immediate sharing of opinions on CRT but has also led to the “pretty fire” of information echo chambers.

Arguably, CRT scholars might be losing control of CRT discourse, with the “pity” for society’s slow progress on addressing racism waning. While structural and systemic racism persists in the US, the progress made in addressing racism is in danger of being quickly undone. The “pretty fire” is still more comfortable and compelling than the “incoming meteor” for much of the general public. CRT opponents are taking advantage to increase pressure on society into moving from empathetic understanding of the very real problem of racism to targeted blame, often aimed at CRT scholars, for the existence of that problem through the “haggle and nag” of continuous CRT information dissemination. Focusing on blame is one way opponents are creating conditions for defensive communication that ultimately closes down conversation about the real issue, in this case structural and systemic racism, thus limiting the possibility for real change (Gibb, 1961).

However, the blaming by the opposition presents an opportunity for CRT scholars to gain back the vital role in CRT public discourse. Rather than also assigning blame, CRT scholars can apply new rhetorical devices noted in this essay to shape, the rhetorical situation to promote more open and inclusive

discourse on CRT. Instead of potentially offending one's audience, creating defensiveness and an equally offensive response, CRT scholars can co-create common ground around the difficult and complex ideas within CRT, paying close attention to the language used and its connotations and showing "pity" by recognizing the complexity of related ideas are not easily understood.

CRT scholars are correct that there is a need for continued CRT discourse, perhaps more than ever given recent targeted anti-CRT efforts. However, if this discourse does not persuade those beyond those already engaged with CRT scholarship, then scholars cannot motivate the openness to CRT needed to promote the societal change that is needed to combat racism in the US.

Remember scholars, as members of society, "you were so recently of them yourself" prior to your education and experience. Show "pity" towards the general public, knowing that many have less development and opportunity for critical inquiry, which unfortunately perpetuates the quick, convenient, and reinforcing staring at the "pretty fire" of subjective and divisive information echo chambers. Then, show "pity" through stewardship by demonstrating a renewed patience and compassion through scholarship, breaking the current normalization of CRT rhetoric, to empathetically inform, then shift, public discourse to refocus on reducing and hopefully eliminating structural and systemic racism in the US.

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## **Table of Contents Summary**

This article identifies the challenges involving Critical Race Theory (CRT) in public discourse around the normalization of scholars' language and rhetoric, while also providing fodder for the weaponization of CRT. Suggests an alternative approach for scholars to refocus CRT in public discourse through the fitting use of rhetorical frameworks.

### **In Short**

- Anti-CRT discourse is rapidly being used to create public division and enact regressive policies and programs in the US.
- Americans are increasingly weary of CRT due to opponents' normalization of CRT scholarship and weaponization of CRT rhetoric, all which distorts the origins and intention of CRT.
- Though scholars have lost some control of CRT public discourse, we can reassume stewardship of CRT through more patient and relatable rhetoric using frameworks such as those by Wayne Booth and Lloyd Bitzer.