The Critical Race Theory Debates Through History and Through Teachers’ Eyes

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Abstract:

In this capstone, I explore how American history teachers today are negotiating and theorizing the debate over critical race theory (C.R.T.) in K-12 education. To do so, I provide an analysis drawing from 31 interviews with American history teachers in states (such as Texas, Georgia, and New Hampshire) where C.R.T. is a hot-button issue and place these teachers in conversation with relevant scholarship. In this process, I center interviewees’ unique perspectives as teachers and history experts on a cultural phenomenon which, although it drastically affects them, scholarship has not generally given them the space to theorize on. Prior to interview analysis, I also contextualize this debate as part of a longer history of the culture wars’—the struggle between the right and left to seize control of American values—fury over American history curricula. To do so, I examine the history and theories of the culture wars in broad strokes, then zero in on the history wars specifically. Finally, I carry my historical analysis through to the origins and current manifestations of the C.R.T. debates.

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Introduction

Throughout 2021—a year that began with far-right extremists storming the U.S. Capitol—and into these first months of 2022, Republicans have been sounding the alarm about the teaching of critical race theory in K-12 schools and the effects of this pedagogy on “vulnerable” (white) children. This controversy has generated more than its fair share of panicked rhetoric: in June, Senator Ted Cruz claimed that “‘Critical race theory says every white person is a racist.’”1 A website called Woke Pennsylvania describes the theory as “identity-based Marxism.”2 And parents and other concerned citizens across the country hold up signs and yell at

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the top of their lungs: “Protect our children!” “Critical Rac-ist Theory!” “I am not an oppressor!” (These words, printed in red and blue marker on a white poster board, are held up by a little girl.)

But the C.R.T. debate is much more than this frightening snapshot. The conflict has also led to tangible, sobering restrictions on what teachers can do in the classroom. *Education Week* reported that as of March 25, 2022, “42 states have introduced bills or taken other steps that would restrict teaching critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism,” and “fifteen states have imposed these bans and restrictions either through legislation or other avenues.”³ All of this chaos, although troubling, felt abstract to me when it began to ramp up—until I saw the teaching of American history being warped, squeezed, and curtailed right before my eyes.

Last summer, I worked with a curriculum design start-up called Kaleidoscope to create a unit of an original course called Social Sciences for Social Problems, which candidly examined the history of American racism, xenophobia, and white privilege. The course centered on texts such as *Thick* by Tressie McMillan Cottom, a collection of essays about the Black female experience in America; and *Shapeshifters* by Aimee Meredith Cox, an intimate ethnography detailing the complex negotiation of citizenship taking place among Black teenagers in a Detroit homeless shelter. Kaleidoscope sold this curriculum to high schools, including one in Tennessee. I was thrilled that within a few months, *actual students* would be engaging with the material I’d worked tirelessly on.

But in July, Kaleidoscope’s founder received a sobering email from the Tennessee school principal. The principal wrote that his school wouldn’t be able to use our curriculum because of a

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new bill that had been passed in the Tennessee state legislature, Bill SB062. Under the guise of banning “critical race theory”—a graduate-level legal framework that I will spend ample time defining later in this essay—the bill’s expansive language prohibited teachers from addressing the realities of structural racism and white privilege. One of the bill’s many impositions: teachers weren’t allowed to discuss the idea that “an individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, is inherently privileged,” or that this structural imbalance could have emotional consequences for marginalized people such as “discomfort, guilt, anguish, or [other forms] of psychological distress.”

Disappointed and angry, I read more about this so-called “critical race theory” debate. I discovered that it was the newest “culture war” in a longstanding American tradition of such conflicts, and I learned everything I could about its causes and implications. Still, one question remained in my mind: what did teachers think? It seemed to me that teachers, informed by their life experiences, would have valuable, grounded opinions on these pedagogical and curricular limitations—but I couldn’t find these opinions anywhere. And this absence felt personal: I hope to teach high school American history myself after graduating, and I couldn’t imagine kicking off my career amidst the tumult of the C.R.T. debates without the voices of experienced teachers to help me make sense of the moment. And so my capstone was born.

In this project, I conduct a historical analysis of how the culture wars—the struggle between the right and left to seize control of American values—originated and developed over time, how they have for the past century affected the teaching of American history, and what they can tell us about the present moment. I couple this analysis with interviews of public school

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4 The bill passed in Spring 2021 and became effective on July 1st.
5 Bill SB0623, TN State Legislature
6 Ibid.
American history teachers in “battleground” states and districts—areas in which the teaching of “critical race theory” to K-12 students is a hot-button issue—that reveal how they are experiencing this most recent manifestation of the culture wars.

My capstone aims to bridge the divide between scholars and teachers, so I hope that it will be read by both groups. But what do teachers (and the general public) have to learn from scholars on this issue, and what do scholars (and the general public) have to learn from teachers? To address the first point, I believe that a better understanding of the century-long trajectory of the history wars—in other words, of the precedent for the most recent attempt to circumscribe which elements of the American history should be highlighted and which should be obscured in schools—would allow teachers to imagine new pedagogical approaches that are both honest and sustainable, even amidst the constraints imposed by the public school system.

More broadly, much of the panic about the critical race theory debate seems to arise from the fact that it is viewed as a new, unique concern, but history begs to differ. The literature tells us that this current culture war has grown out of a history of cultural conflict between the left and right surrounding the meaning of America and American values, conflict that has long fixated on the American classroom. Without knowledge of this history and what it tells us about the nature of our country, we risk shutting ourselves off from potential solutions. On a fundamental level, understanding the history of the culture wars helps us make sense of the present moment and place it in its proper context.

Second, and more pressingly, scholars (and everyone seeking to understand the C.R.T. debates) need teachers because, put simply, teachers are the ones doing the work. Most (if not all) of the key thinkers on the culture wars are not themselves teachers, and therefore cannot fully understand the challenges and responsibilities that standing in front of a classroom of
students involves. Although scholars have delved deeply into the potential causes and developments of the culture wars and history wars in particular, they have never centered educators themselves as theorizers on the very issues that they are entrenched in. Even the rare pieces that do mention teachers rarely quote them directly, and primarily use teacher voices to further their own points rather than acknowledging their unique value. Popular education historian Diane Ravitch, for example, barely even mentions educators in her article “The Controversy over National History Standards” other than to deride “some social studies educators” for “dismiss[ing] history because it has too many facts, and they just don’t like facts; or they say that they want to teach ‘critical thinking’ not ‘content’; or they say that since no one knows which knowledge is true, it is best to concentrate on teaching students how to look things up.” Ravitch does not even consider that perhaps some of these educators’ concerns with teaching “objective facts” may be related to distrust of the assumptions about American history—explicit or implicit—that state or national standards are urging them to promulgate.

Many journalistic articles and podcasts do attempt to incorporate the voices of teachers. However, they primarily use their voices to sound the alarm about how “culture warriors” are making teachers’ work more challenging rather than attempting to understand how teachers are pedagogically responding to this moment and/or thinking through its causes and potential consequences. This glaring gap—scholarship ignores teachers, and popular media engages with

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8 Ibid.
them but does not recognize them as scholars in their own right—is what I will attempt to fill with my capstone.

Some teachers have published work theorizing the culture wars themselves\textsuperscript{11}, sometimes even on C.R.T. debates in particular.\textsuperscript{12} However, they have (with a few exceptions) primarily done so for audiences of other teachers and outside of the scholarly context, making it easy for them to be ignored and allowing scholars and journalists to take center stage. But the bans on critical race theory cannot be discussed from a solely theoretical standpoint because they have tangible, material effects. They include language that severely circumscribes teachers’ abilities to honestly discuss America’s history of oppression and how it has acted against our nation’s aspirational values of liberty, equality and democracy. Finally, the bans seek to suck the nuance out of history education, which teachers in particular—who know how young people learn and how to pique their interest—can understand as the greatest possible disservice to their students. If students are taught a one-note American story, whether it be one of triumph or of evil, they will see it as a book that they have finished, that they can set aside, that was too easy for their grade level to begin with. And if students believe they’ve mastered American history, they may never understand why it must still be studied, all the ways in which it is dynamic and alive rather than dead and buried. In sum, I believe that the current moment is crying out both to be contextualized and to be illuminated by those who are most directly affected by it.

Methodology

My project consists of two parts, the first part focusing on historical context and the second on teacher interviews. In the first section of part 1, I examine prominent theories of the culture wars. In the second section, I zero in specifically on the history wars in an effort to understand why the teaching of history in particular became a flashpoint in the culture wars debates. Finally, in the third section of part 1, I pivot to mapping out today’s critical race theory debates and placing them in their own historical context.

For part 2 of my project—my original contribution—I strategically identified 6 teachers to interview who represented a range of perspectives. Students in the Education Studies colloquium course—EDST 261—conducted 25 additional interviews on my behalf with IRB approval as research assistants, following my instructions on recruitment procedures and using my exact interview questions. Here is a table with demographic data for all teachers interviewed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Hispanic/non-Hispanic</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Political Identity$^{13}$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>NH: 2</td>
<td>White: 30</td>
<td>Non-Hispanic: 28</td>
<td>Male: 15</td>
<td>Liberal: 20</td>
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<td>Independent: 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GA: 3</td>
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<td>90% Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Blank: 1</td>
<td>Conservative: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Blank: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AL: 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>65% Liberal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$^{13}$ Political identity has been simplified in this table to liberal (including Democrat), conservative (including Republican) and independent (including moderate). In the interview analysis section, teachers’ political identities are not simplified in this way (see end of “Scope and Limitations” section for more details).
All of the teachers we interviewed were high school American history teachers working in public schools in “battleground states.” I chose to focus on high school teachers because, in working with older students, they have a greater capacity to push past memorization of facts, dates, and important figures and towards higher-level insights about American values and recurring historical themes. The nature of these more advanced musings on the character of America is what the C.R.T. debates tend to center on. Although C.R.T. debates have also cropped up in private schools, I chose to focus specifically on public education because I was interested in the specific set of constraints placed on teachers who are legally obligated to subscribe to state and national standards. I focused on “battleground” states because the term

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14 The few exceptions to “high school” and “American history” are outlined in my “Scope and Limitations” section.
allowed me to reach teachers in a wide range of states—those that had already passed bans on critical race theory, those that were only considering passing bans, those in which tensions surrounding this issue simply ran high—while still remaining relevant to my research questions.

To identify the subjects that I interviewed, I asked a former colleague who serves on the board of the teaching branch of the American Historical Association to reach out to teachers meeting the criteria who might have been interested in participating in the project. I asked the same of other colleagues and Ed Studies faculty who I knew were tapped into a large network of teachers. I shared an email template (see Appendix) introducing myself and my project with my contacts to assist them with outreach. I received responses from 6 teachers who, luckily, represented a wide geographic range: they hailed from Florida, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Texas, respectively. I then conducted 30-45 minute recorded Zoom interviews with each.

Although the 6 teachers I interviewed were geographically diverse, they were, due to the nature of my contacts’ networks, all white and taught in urban, predominantly relatively liberal areas (even if they were located in majority-conservative states). In order to include a wider variety of teacher positionalities in my study, I instructed EDST students to prioritize interviewing teachers from battleground states who met at least one of the following two criteria: 1) were non-white and 2) taught in majority-white suburban or rural areas. EDST students recruited teachers through various channels. Many students reached out to teachers they knew or were put in touch with via convenience sample and snowball sample in states with active C.R.T. debates, just as I did. These students sent personalized versions of my recruitment email to teachers. Two students mass emailed U.S. history teachers in Texas, Florida, and South Dakota by Google searching public schools in these states and then selecting the history teachers from
the directory. The choices of which schools to mass email were random. 150 teachers were emailed this way, and ultimately about 7 were interviewed. All students then proceeded to schedule and conduct interviews in the same manner that I did.

Ensuring that all teachers were completely anonymized was a top priority for my project, as my request for teachers to share their perspectives on an inflammatory topic such as this one could potentially jeopardize their jobs. Communicating clearly to teachers about the precautions I took was also important because many teachers expressed concerns about being identifiable, and required reassurances of my and EDST 261 students’ legitimacy as interviewers. After completing my own interviews, I assigned each teacher a random pseudonym and saved the interview transcripts and recordings in a password-protected disk image under the pseudonyms rather than under teachers’ real names. I asked EDST students to send me interview transcripts and recordings with relevant demographic information about each teacher, but without teacher names attached, and then to delete the transcripts and recordings from their personal computers. I also saved these transcripts and recordings under pseudonyms on the same disk image. Finally, I created a single document—password-protected, only accessible by me, and saved on a separate disk image—that connects the name of each interviewee whose name I do know to their pseudonym. I will destroy this document, as well as all interview transcripts and recordings, upon completion of my capstone.

After collecting interview data, I synthesized and analyzed excerpts of the interviews, putting them in conversation with historical scholarship, to understand how teachers are navigating the culture wars, the material effects of C.R.T. bans on their work, and how they might imagine proceeding with or adapting their pedagogical visions even within these extreme limitations. Throughout this process, I took pains to avoid several assumptions that would have
undercut rigorous conclusions. First, I did not assume that what teachers said in interviews with me or with EDST students was perfectly reflective of their real opinions and/or lived experiences—in other words, I remained mindful of the specific constraints of the interview environment. I also took each interview at face value: I did not twist teachers’ words to fit into a preexisting hypothesis; in fact, I did not even formulate a hypothesis before speaking to teachers. At every turn, I reminded myself that the goal of my project was to understand teachers’ genuine opinions on the C.R.T. debates as thoroughly as I could and put these opinions in conversation with scholarship, not to impose my own narrative.

**Scope and Limitations**

In the historical context section of this capstone, I explore and synthesize select scholarly perspectives on the history of the culture wars and, more specifically, the history wars, in order to arrive at my specific goal of placing the critical race theory debates in their proper context. I do not provide anything approaching a comprehensive history of the culture wars, the history wars, or even the critical race theory debates.

For the second part of my project, I and EDST 261 students interviewed a relatively small, imperfectly randomized, and self-selecting subset of American history teachers on how they are navigating the critical race theory debates. These were teachers who felt comfortable speaking to Yale students about this sensitive topic, and had the time, bandwidth and desire to do so. For this reason, I focus on centering the stories and lived experiences of these particular teachers and putting them in conversation with scholars who are thinking through similar questions. I do not put forth overarching conclusions about American history teachers’ opinions on the culture wars *in general*; my research is not generalizable. Any arguments I could make on this scale would be insufficiently substantiated.
As seen in the table on pages 7-8, the vast majority of the teachers interviewed for this project are white. While the majority of teachers in America are white, the proportion of white teachers represented in this capstone is slightly higher than the national average. This was certainly not intentional—in fact, I view it as a serious limitation on my ability to capture the widest possible diversity of teacher experiences in the current moment. Rather, it was accidental: for the 6 teachers I interviewed, it was due to the nature of my contacts’ networks, and for the interviews my research assistants conducted, it was due to who responded to their recruitment efforts and, sometimes, the nature of their personal connections if they interviewed teachers they knew personally. For similar reasons, there are also a disproportionate number of teachers from certain states—for example, Texas. Finally, although I was specifically looking to interview high school American history teachers, it is important to note that a few teachers teach and speak about other subjects in addition, and a few teach middle school (again due to responses to EDST students’ recruitment efforts).

Most of the teachers I and my research assistants interviewed lean left due to the nature of my networks and of the themes discussed in recruitment emails. However, this is not the case for all of them, and even those who lean left represent a wide variety of experiences. Throughout the interview analysis section of my capstone, I quote teachers’ political identities directly, exactly how teachers defined them. I do this to reflect the fact that, rather than presenting teachers with a multiple-choice list of options for political identity in their interviews, I and my research assistants allowed them to self-define in recognition of the diversity of political affiliations beyond simply “Democrat,” “Republican,” and “Independent.”
Historical Context

Theories of the Culture Wars

In 1991, sociologist James Davison Hunter coined the concept of the culture wars in his book *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. He beat Republican politician Pat Buchanan to the punch by one year: at the 1992 Republican National Convention, Buchanan’s dramatic discussion of a new “cultural war...for the soul of America”\(^\text{15}\) helped him consolidate the Republican vote for George H.W. Bush (more on this political strategy later). Hunter’s thesis in a nutshell, rearticulated in his 1996 essay “Reflections on the Culture Wars Hypothesis,” is that in the wake of “a fundamental realignment within American public culture and beyond that cuts across traditional religious divisions...the new lines of conflict exist between cultural systems: a world view that seeks to maintain the ideals and social institutions of that traditional civilization and a world view that seeks its transformation”\(^\text{16}\). In line with this hypothesis, his pioneering definition of the culture wars was a “conflict to define the meaning of America” waged between “a culturally conservative impulse” that “articulates unchanging standards” and “a culturally progressive impulse” that “tends to reject the possibility of universals,”\(^\text{17}\) the idea that all humans can possibly live by the same moral standards.

Hunter’s groundbreaking argument was met with ample support—and ample criticism. In his 1996 essay, he responds to three popular objections to his thesis, all seemingly centered around resistance to the metaphor of war to describe this conflict. First, that the warfare metaphor overblows healthy American pluralism and there is no culture war; second, that it

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\(^\text{17}\) Ibid.
“permits one to ignore the moderating influences that exist in American democracy”18; and third, that “to use the warfare metaphor is to reify or overly concretize the polarizing tendencies that are already quite destructive to American public life”19. Although these critics are seemingly concerned with the impropriety of the term “war,” Hunter argues that the problem actually lies with their understanding of culture. Crucial to Hunter’s argument is an understanding that culture—and by extension the culture wars—are more than just “aggregated attitudes of autonomous individuals”20, that they have a life of their own: “the social organization and articulation of these [competing] moral visions” has made them “a reality larger and independent (in the sense of disembodied) from those who give it expression”21. Critics of the argument, Hunter argues, fail to grasp this reality: take, for example, Irene Taviss Thomson, whose objection to Hunter’s argument falls in the second category.

Thomson, in her book *The Culture Wars and Enduring American Dilemmas*, argues that the binary metaphor of the culture wars—a culturally conservative versus culturally progressive impulse—is inaccurate because “public opinion analysts” present a much more complicated picture of American beliefs.22 People on both sides, despite disagreeing on policy issues, are working through the same set of “enduring American dilemmas” and have a shared set of core values: “1) respect for religion but uncertainty about its role; 2) use of moral frameworks but without ‘moralizing;’ 3) belief in individualism but not to excess; 4) respect for pluralism but within one culture; 5) ambivalence toward elites; and 6) a high regard for moderation.”23

18 Ibid., 247.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p. 2.
Thomson’s view, media and elite preoccupations with the culture wars obscure the fact that, rather than being cleanly split along the lines of conservatism and progressivism, most Americans “appear to manifest both a center-seeking tendency” and rather wishy-washy positions on issues raised as part of the culture wars. Most divisions, Thomson argues, take place “‘within most individuals’” rather than along party lines.24

Attending a single school board meeting in 2022 would seem to instantly invalidate the picture that Thomson painted in 2010: huge swaths of the American public, not just media and elites as Thomson alleges, are clearly anything but ambivalent about the culture wars right now. So what can we make of this? Has our country changed completely in 12 years? Perhaps not—Hunter perceived and was able to rebut this species of argument in 1996 in a way that clearly resonates with the present day. Per Hunter, Thomson’s assertion underestimates the power of extremist rhetoric: “It may be that there is a ‘center’ to American public opinion but if there is, it is statistical in nature and therefore contentless—it has no coherence or teleology as a system of moral public reasoning. As it concerns public discourse, any reasoned and substantive center that may exist is certainly eclipsed by the polarizing rhetoric produced by the gatekeeping institutions of public culture”25. Whether or not people’s internal beliefs are completely polarized, Hunter argues, American culture is polarized thanks to “gatekeeping institutions” like the media, which determine what information people on either side of the political divide are exposed to. And an analysis of today’s landscape reveals that this polarization of culture has tangible effects: although a recent poll found that 57% of Virginia voters oppose C.R.T. bans in schools,26 Glenn

24 Ibid., p. 7.
Youngkin was able to eke out a gubernatorial win by creating a media circus around the alleged threat of C.R.T., making the promise “‘On day one, I will ban critical race theory’”\textsuperscript{27} the centerpiece of his campaign. Thus, even if Thomson’s points about ambiguity within American minds and fundamental values-based agreement across them have validity (although it’s worth noting that the second point seems increasingly tenuous), American actions suggest extreme susceptibility to a polarized culture.

Although this polarized culture is certainly on view today, the poles aren’t necessarily equal: in debates waged over mask mandates,\textsuperscript{28} transgender-friendly bathrooms,\textsuperscript{29} and C.R.T.\textsuperscript{30}, conservatives appear to be the loudest voices in the room. Stephen Prothero, in his book \textit{Why Liberals Win the Culture Wars}, builds on the essential foundations of Hunter’s argument to explain this reality. A key element of Prothero’s definition of the culture wars is that although they often begin as “narrow…complaint[s] about a specific public policy,” they quickly gain symbolic weight, turning into “broader lament[s] about how badly the nation has fallen from its founding glory.”\textsuperscript{31} This idea of the “fallen nation” is politically charged: although the culture wars are fought on both sides of the partisan divide, Prothero argues that conservatives generally “fire the first shots,”\textsuperscript{32} sounding the alarm of national decline.

\textsuperscript{29} “Dozens Gather at Loudoun County School Board … - Youtube.com,” YouTube, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YLizvU0phBY.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 4.
Because conservatives and liberals have aligned themselves with a variety of parties and causes throughout American history, Prothero is careful to define what he means by conservatism in the culture wars context, namely “cultural conservatism.” Cultural conservatism is characterized by “(a) anxiety over beloved forms of life that are passing away, (b) a commitment to restore what has been lost, and (c) an effort to exclude from full cultural citizenship those who are responsible for this loss.” Trump’s “Make America Great Again” slogan perfectly exemplifies each component of the culturally conservative impulse: the assumption that something “Great” has been lost, the imperative to restore it, and the implicit exclusion of those who do not believe that a past America is worth returning to. His key argument—from which the title of his book derives—is that because the conservative position in the culture wars is defined by anxiety over already disappearing ways of life, liberals are set up for cultural victory. In other words, conservatives are compelled to instigate new culture wars only when they sense that they are well on their way to losing something: from Mormonism in the Civil War period, to the conflict over Catholicism in the antebellum period, to gay marriage in the 2010s, conservatives consistently sound the alarm when the country has already begun to change. In the end, Prothero posits that “causes [that were] once labeled ‘liberal’—for example, Catholics being permitted in politics—become automatic ‘American values,’ embraced by liberals and conservatives alike,” which explains why liberal victories, albeit omnipresent, are not always recognized.

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33 Ibid., 12.
34 Ibid., 12.
35 Ibid., 8.
Although Prothero’s argument about how conservative cultural anxiety motivates the culture wars is convincing, Andrew Hartman, in his essay “The Culture Wars Are Dead,” argues that there is also increasingly an economic component at play. Despite the essay’s dramatic title, Hartman’s argument is simply that cultural conflict alone is not enough to explain present-day battles. In his words, “economic anxiety and class resentment have mapped onto cultural divisions to make the culture wars angrier, more tribal, and more fundamental than ever before.” He arrives at this point by analyzing a survey conducted by James Davison Hunter and Carl Desportes Bowman, which found that “those lacking a college education,” who also tend to be the most economically disadvantaged, “are highly prone to alienation from government.” In the current moment, this distrust of the government and/or the economic elite is constantly weaponized by conservative politicians (Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene’s comparison of mask mandates on the House floor to the Holocaust, for example) and other culture warriors (in an interview, activist Christopher Rufo alleged that “‘elites…are seeking to reengineer the foundation of human psychology and social institutions through the new politics of race’”).

Even factoring in cultural and economic anxiety, however, our culture wars picture is still incomplete. As the current debates over C.R.T. reveal, focusing only on these two dimensions of the culture wars ignores the elephant in the room: race. Race is at issue because the C.R.T.

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debate is, at its core, a debate over whether systemic racism still exists, and if it does, whether white students should be exposed to its realities. Prothero writes that “race and culture, while inseparable, are nonetheless distinct, and this book focuses on the latter rather than the former…the questions that emerge out of the history of race in America are different from the questions that animate this history of the culture wars.” For Prothero, the conservative anxiety that spurs the culture wars has to do with the loss of a particular vision of American culture, while the conflicts that he categorizes as “racial” have different causes. But how can we make sense of this distinction today, when the critical race theory culture war seems fundamentally to be both a racial and cultural conflict?

Joel Olson, in his article “Whiteness and the Polarization of American Politics,” connects Prothero’s idea of conservative anxiety about the loss of a way of life to anxiety about the loss of white identity, demonstrating that the two are inextricably intertwined and together serve as a catalyst for the culture wars. Olson argues that the “way of life” that conservatives sense that they are losing is “whiteness…as a form of social status,” which he terms “whiteness as standing.” The Civil Rights movement, although it did not succeed in erasing the insidious power of white privilege, made explicit state sanction of white domination impossible. Thus, “the value and meaning of whiteness transformed from standing to normalization”: in the current moment, white privilege is “reproduced less through overt forms of discrimination than through market forces, cultural habits, and other everyday practices that presume that white interests and expectations are the norm.” Although whiteness is still a privilege, Olson argues, it is “now

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enjoyed primarily at the group rather than individual level”: although white people are statistically less likely to be imprisoned, no white person can trust the state to legally enforce their personal superiority over non-white people as they could before the Civil War.\textsuperscript{44}

This personal superiority is what exactly white people in the post-Civil War era—especially those who were not additionally advantaged by upper-class status—were anxious about losing. Political leaders such as Richard Nixon mobilized this anxiety, motivating whites to fight to reclaim their prior status using the racially coded idea of “the virtuous middle…constantly threatened by aristocratic elites from above and the rabble from below.”\textsuperscript{45} Crucially, this “mobilization of white ressentiment at the grass roots” spawned the contemporary culture wars because, in a national climate in which overt racial discrimination was no longer permitted, “culture” was often used “as a proxy for race”.\textsuperscript{46} Olson’s argument, then, makes clear that conservative anxieties about the loss of particular forms of culture are not only linked to, but actually stem from anxieties about the loss of a particular white identity. The current manifestation of the culture wars concerns whether the history of systemic racism can be taught in schools—clearly a racial issue. However, one of the primary attacks on critical race theory is that it is unpatriotic, bringing the debate firmly into the realm of “cultural conflict” concerned with the nature of American values that Prothero addresses. For this reason, it is crucial to understand the present-day culture wars as rooted in a deadly mixture of white, usually conservative, cultural, economic \textit{and} racial anxiety.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 709.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 710.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 714.
History of the History Wars

In his book *Whose America?: Culture Wars in the Public Schools*, Jonathan Zimmerman explores the century-long history of how the culture wars have affected public education. Zimmerman identifies two distinct strands of discord within the public school conflict with two distinct histories: religion and patriotism. While conflicts over religion have tended to affect science curricula, the patriotism conflict generally manifests in history and social studies, and has thus been termed the “history wars.”

Zimmerman’s main argument concerning the history wars is that they have largely been exaggerated. He writes that while minority groups in America—especially African-Americans—fought long and hard to have their voices included in the national story, a “compromise” was reached in the post-World War II era: “each racial and ethnic group could enter the story, provided that none of them questioned the story’s larger themes of freedom, equality, and opportunity.” Of course, Zimmerman acknowledges, there were local exceptions to this rule, such as “mint julep editions” of history textbooks for white southerners and textbooks created by black southerners to ensure antiracist narratives. Generally, however, even when opposing sides fought over the content of the American story as told in history textbooks (who was included and who excluded?) they did not question the tone that the narrative took. A coherent, triumphant understanding of American values and the American civic tradition remained largely intact—to Zimmerman’s chagrin—despite content-related debates.

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48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
Clearly, Zimmerman’s argument seems insufficient to describe the present day. It’s almost impossible to ignore that the culture wars today seem to center more on how the American story should be told—in short, reverently or critically—than who or what should be included in it. Tennessee’s new law is a perfect example: the bill encourages a pedagogy that, while it may include “impartial instruction on the historical oppression of a particular group of people”, may not teach about this oppression in a way that acknowledges racism and/or sexism as endemic—or “fundamental,” as they put it—to American history. The bill’s attempt to legislate away a pedagogy that focuses not only on including underrepresented perspectives but on rethinking blind patriotism reveals that legislators have picked up on a shift in tone, not just content. Zimmerman’s idea of a popular consensus on the patriotic quality of American history education no longer exists (if it ever did).

So when, why, and how did this happen? How did we pivot from debating whose stories should be included in textbooks detailing the heroic American narrative, and eventually reaching something of a compromise on this point, to debating whether the American narrative should be taught as heroic at all? In her 1998 essay “The Controversy over National History Standards,” Diane Ravitch teaches us that, in the early 1990s, as a new generation of historians—and citizens—began to take a more critical stance on the American tradition that centered race, gender, and class as points of inquiry, conservative critics began to sound the alarm about history instruction that “magnified the failings of American society while belittling its accomplishments”.

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52 Bill SB0623, Tennessee State Legislature
One of the leading “critical stance[s]” arising during this time was critical race theory itself. The ideas of Derrick Bell—first a Civil Rights lawyer with the N.A.A.C.P. and later an academic—are widely recognized as having provided the foundation for critical race theory, which emerged in earnest in the 1980s and gained traction towards the end of that decade.\(^\text{54}\) According to Jelani Cobb, as Bell’s career progressed and he watched the long-term outcomes of landmark Civil Rights cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* unspool, he “began to question the efficacy of…the drive for integration” that he had initially wholeheartedly supported as an N.A.A.C.P. lawyer.\(^\text{55}\) Later in his life, Bell came to the conclusion—central to his scholarly work—that “[r]acism is so deeply rooted in the makeup of American society that it has been able to reassert itself after each successive wave of reform aimed at eliminating it. Racism, he began to argue, is permanent.”\(^\text{56}\) Critical race theory, then, developed—thanks to Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and others who sought to make racial inequality more prominent in the burgeoning field of critical legal studies\(^\text{57}\)—as “‘a way of looking at law’s role platforming, facilitating, producing, and even insulating racial inequality in our country.’”\(^\text{58}\) (That conservatives today grossly misdefine C.R.T. is a crucial point I will explore later in this essay).

While C.R.T. in particular was a legal theory, the shift that it represented—in short, a shift from “inclusive” history to increasingly antiracist history—permeated more than just the legal field. It became a site of intense conflict when, in 1994, the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded grants to groups of scholars and


\(^{56}\) Ibid.

\(^{57}\) Ibid.

teachers to develop new national standards in various disciplines of K-12 education, including history. The organization that received funding to create the history standards was the National Center for History in the Schools, which Lynne Cheney—conservative scholar, activist, and wife of ex-vice-president Dick Cheney—had a hand in founding. Despite the fact that Cheney’s own organization crafted the standards in response to a supposed lack of rigor in history curricula, she excoriated a draft of them in an October 1994 op-ed, days before they were actually published. Cheney argued that the standards glorified nations other than the United States; belittled the United States itself; and substituted “great man history,” as well as substantive talk of the Constitution and other founding documents, for an offensively “politicized history.”

Cheney’s denunciation was just the beginning. “In the days and weeks after Cheney’s pre-emptive strike,” Ravitch writes, “conservative talk-show hosts excoriated the standards as a menace to the republic, historians debated their merits, editorialists opined pro and con, and a spokesman from the Clinton administration issued a statement pointing out that the standards had been funded by the Bush administration.” The standards were eventually revised and the controversy “left the headlines,” but it was never really resolved: as Ravitch noted in 1998, “the debate…has certainly produced lots of thesis and antithesis; we have not yet seen much in the way of synthesis.”

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60 Ibid., 16.
61 Ibid.
64 Ibid., 19.
65 Ibid., 26.
The history standards debate made the teaching of history an unusually prominent issue in public consciousness, a theme we are seeing reprised today (perhaps due, in part, to the lack of resolution in the ‘90s). But although it became especially visible to the public in 1994, this conflict did not come out of nowhere: a larger uproar over so-called “multicultural education”—as noted above, education that was increasingly critical of American values and narrative—was coming to a head. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.’s 1991 jeremiad to the Massachusetts Historical Society, titled “History: Text Vs Context,” is a (tellingly dramatic) example of the concerns in the air. Schlesinger’s argument perfectly maps onto Zimmerman’s distinction between inclusive history—which, at this point, was largely agreed upon—and the new wave of critical history. While Schlesinger firmly believed in “multicultural education” as long as it only “mean[tr] telling our children about other races, other cultures, other continents,” he decried what he called “militant multiculturalism,” which included (allegedly) the idea “that our public schools should teach subjects like history and literature not as intellectual disciplines but as emotional therapies” and “the assumption that ethnicity is the defining experience for all Americans, that the point of education is to make children feel good about their ancestors, that we must discard the idea of a common culture and instead celebrate, reinforce, and perpetuate separate ethnic and racial communities”. Although the specific claims Schlesinger makes about the changes scholars on the left were advocating for are wildly exaggerated, they reveal a grain of truth: “the theory of America as one people,” or more accurately, as a nation that gave all of its citizens an equal stake in its history and future, was crumbling before their eyes.

67 Ibid., p. 7.
68 Ibid., p. 6.
As the 1990s receded, the lively battle over what American history meant and how it should be taught died down (without entirely disappearing). An unstable compromise of sorts was reached, and persisted until quite recently: as late as 2014, Ian López wrote that “today the dominant etiquette around race is colorblindness.” ⁶⁹ In the wake of the election of America’s first Black president, and the misguided notions of a post-racial society that it provoked ⁷⁰, many Americans became comfortable with the idea that “teach[ing] their children to reject racism by studiously ignoring race” ⁷¹ (in other words, colorblindness) was a strategy that would work. Colorblindness was not a politically neutral concept: for example, conservatives like Antonin Scalia used it as justification to ignore, as López puts it, “the deep social connection between race and group differences” ⁷² that our country has perpetuated in order to counter affirmative action. Colorblindness also, even at its most popular, did not go uncriticized: Lopez and numerous other scholars ⁷³ faulted it for, in short, compounding racial inequity by denying its existence. Still, for a while, a significant bipartisan block of this country believed (or said they believed) that race was no longer much of a problem in America—which made it a lot less of a problem in schools. But, as we know all too well today, this relative peace couldn’t last. In fact, the war would soon get bloodier than ever.

⁷² Ibid., p. 90.
Critical Race Theory Debates Today

Even a cursory review of the past 6 years of American history makes clear that the 2016 election of Donald Trump changed everything about how our country conceptualized race relations. As Hartman puts it, “the Trumpist capture of the American right [made] the racial lines of the culture wars…fully visible again.” While racism had been forced to go underground post-Civil Rights Movement, Trump validated its return to the light of day: “when Trump called the unrepentant “tiki torch” white supremacists who marched in Charlottesville…‘very fine people,’ there was nothing tacit about his endorsement. The upshot of Trump discarding coded rhetoric about race is that our political discourse is at once both more vicious but also more honest.”

This frightening turn, on top of the mounting economic tensions that arose from the 2008 recession (and everything else Trump said and did), injected a heavy dose of polarization back into American political and cultural life. Sprinkle in a global pandemic which, by forcing school online, gave already-stressed-out parents unprecedented access to the ins and outs of what their children were learning, and you have a perfect recipe for the resurgence of a conflict over the teaching of K-12 American history. This time, however, it wasn’t standards that came under attack, but so-called critical race theory.

After reading Kimberlé Crenshaw’s definition of C.R.T. in the previous section, you may already have gathered why I use the qualifier “so-called.” Despite all of the conservative uproar over critical race theory (and the very real consequences of this uproar on legislation), these culture warriors’ use of the term bears virtually no resemblance to its true meaning, no reference to its origins. Rather, according to Ibram X. Kendi, “Republican operatives...have” with critical

75 Ibid.
race theory “conjured an imagined monster to scare the American people and project themselves as the nation’s defenders from that fictional monster.”\textsuperscript{76} This tactic is an uncanny echo of the conservative “virtuous middle” ideology of the 1950s and 60s that I previously discussed.

Conservatives, who lump C.R.T. in with a nebulous “liberal agenda,” fail to recognize all of the ways that its tenets resist the assumptions of liberalism. Crenshaw’s articulation of C.R.T. as a recognition of the racism baked into the legal system makes clear that the theory, by definition, questions the limitations of liberal initiatives’ ability to genuinely eliminate racism.\textsuperscript{77}

In Derrick Bell’s opinion, “racial progress had occurred mainly when it aligned with white interests—beginning with emancipation, which, he noted, came about as a prerequisite for saving the Union” and continuing through busing and school integration.\textsuperscript{78} He found this to be true even up through Obama’s election to the presidency, which he described as another liberal event that “‘promised much and, in the end, signified nothing except that the hostility and alienation toward black people continues in forms that frustrate thoughtful blacks and place the country ever closer to its premature demise.’”\textsuperscript{79} This flattening of C.R.T.’s radical valence completely ignores the work of influential figures such as Bell and Crenshaw, who believed that a full-blown rethinking of American legislative structures was necessary to genuinely effect antiracism. But this isn’t the extent of the damage: conservatives have somehow both underdefined and overdefined C.R.T. They’ve ignored its origins, falsely collapsing it into liberalism, but they’ve also turned it into a “‘monstrous evil’” with “many legs” including, according to Kendi, “the Black Lives Matter


\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
demonstrators, cancel culture, the 1619 Project, American history, and anti-racist education.”

Kendi argues that because conservatives are attacking not the actual tenets of C.R.T., but their own unfounded distortions of these tenets, “There’s only one side in our so-called culture war right now.”

The result of this feedback loop is that conservative bans on “critical race theory” in K-12 classrooms are actually bans on any pedagogy that, as Jonathan Zimmerman describes the 1619 Project in a 2021 article, “do[es] not simply add diverse people to the old American story of freedom and liberty; [but] instead…question[s] the story itself.” In this case, acknowledging systemic racism is what it means to “question the story.” As my exploration of the history of the culture wars has shown, this campaign, like many others before it, stems from white people’s anxiety about the disappearance of the insidious structures of power that privilege them. The current moment throws into even sharper relief the reality that, as ever, the culture wars are a smokescreen for white supremacy.

**Interview Analysis**

**Teachers React: Teaching History in the Current Climate**

I and my research assistants interviewed many White teachers who taught in schools located in urban areas that predominantly served students of color. In general, these teachers were not faced either with anti-C.R.T. legislation being actively enforced by their school

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81 Ibid.
administrations or with high levels of parent pressure. This was, surprisingly, the case even when these urban areas were located within conservative states, suggesting that defining the conflict only at the statewide level, as most C.R.T. trackers do\textsuperscript{83}, may be reductive. Teachers who felt supported by parents and administrators did not seem to feel the immediate stress of their jobs being in jeopardy.

Sam, a 12th-year white male “leftist” teacher in New Orleans, Louisiana, characterized his school’s administration as non-confrontational but generally supportive: “They do encourage us to teach what we want to teach today…So as long as our test scores stay up, they pretty much leave us alone.” Jake, a white male “leftist” in his 8th year of teaching in Louisville, Kentucky, felt similarly: “They're very hands-off…Mostly. I feel I'm doing my own thing until they [somebody] ha[s] some issue…[and] brings their attention to it.” Overall, Sam and Jake felt that their experiences with administration were positive because they both had very strong convictions about teaching antiracist history, and were able to do so without much trouble from superiors. Caroline, a white “liberal” female teacher from Kansas in her 5th year of teaching, felt lucky to have an actively supportive administration, despite two bills having recently been introduced by Republicans in the statewide legislature:\textsuperscript{84} “The climate at my school is very supportive of…addressing the systemic issues. [They believe that systemic racism is] a fact, it's not an opinion.”


White teachers working at schools with predominantly POC student bodies in urban areas generally did not receive much—positive or negative—input on their curricular choices from parents. Caroline attributed this to a larger issue with parental engagement—“A lot of [parents] are working multiple jobs, or just culturally education is not as valued as getting a job or taking care of your family…if they have an issue with what we're teaching, they don't really say it.”—while Sam attributed it to his ongoing communication with parents: “I’ve taught thousands of students and I never had one parental complaint about any of the content that I teach, but I also am very upfront about it.” Caroline, who in her teaching philosophy placed a particularly high premium on making sure her students felt that they could see themselves in history, expressed that “when [parents] do figure out what we are doing in class, they're very appreciative of it and they really like it.” Overall, then, the teachers I spoke to in these areas either did not receive much parental feedback at all, or received support from parents who appreciated that marginalized perspectives were being valued.

The relative sense of security resulting from sympathetic administrations and parents led to these teachers having high levels of confidence that they could teach honest history and would continue to do so even if a ban was passed. As Sam bluntly put it, “I will never change my curriculum to appease racists or people that are reactionary. So, no…it wouldn't impact me.” Jake agreed, stating that changing his curriculum wouldn’t be “tolerable” because it would mean “establish[ing] a pro propaganda class…further marginaliz[ing] students and hid[ing] their own history from them.” “I wouldn’t be able to sleep at night,” he added. These bold statements reflect both strong convictions to teach honestly and, in Jake’s case especially, a great sense of responsibility to do right by students of color. Caroline felt similarly, stressing that due to the combined effects of the pandemic and the constant stream of false and hateful media, she felt “a
big responsibility…to my students to affirm who they are and to validate their experiences.”

Thus, although these teachers certainly felt a heavy burden on their shoulders in such a politically divisive and overall traumatic moment, this burden only heightened their commitment to teaching what they recognized to be historical fact.

Still, despite their confidence, these teachers had a heightened awareness of how their approach to and feelings about teaching might change if they were located elsewhere. As Caroline put it, “There are times where I wonder if…I were teaching in a different district with white middle-class to upper-middle-class students, if I would still be teaching the same way. And I hope…that I would be, but I know there would be more pushback…if I were to potentially lose my job over it, I would maybe consider it differently, because who’s going to replace me?”

Caroline’s comments suggest that, if she were immediately threatened with losing her job if she taught certain topics, she might prioritize keeping her job and being able to be present for her students over proceeding with a completely unmodified curriculum. Marsha, a Black woman from Georgia in her 10th year of teaching, currently in a predominantly Black school, felt as confident as the white teachers in demographically similar areas in being able to teach about topics such as systemic racism. However, she noted that “I can see how this can be an issue in [other] schools” given her own longtime teaching experience: “where I teach it is probably 60, 70% black, so it's easier to have this conversation than maybe 10 years ago. It wasn't 10 years ago [because then], my school was 70% white.” Despite being relatively secure in their own situations, many of the interviewees working in predominantly POC schools perceived the urgency of the C.R.T. debates even as close as in neighboring districts.

In addition to the lack of parental and administrative pressure, some teachers’ confidence seemed to stem from a feeling that the standards for history education already in place in their
states would be able to back them up. For example, Marsha asserted: “Anything that I teach, I'm going to tie it back to a standard.” The conservatives making the new legislation, teachers like Marsha and Caroline argued, didn’t seem to be concerned about overturning these existent standards, which at least nominally required an honest reckoning with history. On one hand, this was encouraging because teachers were able to defend themselves with standards and find workarounds within them, but I also sensed that even the most confident teachers were on the defensive, waiting for something to go wrong. As Caroline put it, “We're always kind of prepared to back up what we do and support what we do in case anybody comes at us…We're teaching the constitution and in the constitution, you have the right for freedom of speech, freedom of press.” Jake agreed: “That fear [of being less versed in content] is legitimate, because then you are more open to not having a response when questioned or challenged. I don't say something unless I know the answer…I feel like, especially right now, that's very important to counter everything that's going on in the media.” Jake’s response contains a similar level of preparedness to Caroline’s, but also the troubling idea that in the current moment, preparedness is important not primarily because it leads to effective teaching, but because it will help defend against “challenge[s]” from poorly informed parents. Emily, a white “liberal” teacher in New Hampshire in her 25th year of teaching, overtly voiced a similar frustration applied to lawmakers: “It's so frustrating [when] there's [been] no [history] standards…and then [they] come in with this law saying, ‘Oh, by the way, you can't do this, that and the other.’ And I'm like, ‘you don't care about it until all of a sudden you care.’” After a long career in teaching, dealing with vacuous standards and what she perceived as a lack of concern for history education in New Hampshire, Emily suddenly felt limited by lawmakers who had refused to pay attention for years. In sum, even when the teachers we interviewed didn’t feel that C.R.T. bans were
actively being enforced—formally, by administrators, or informally, by parents—they felt, in the current climate, a sudden imperative to be prepared to defend their decisions to less knowledgeable outside parties.

Teachers in schools with predominantly white students in suburban and rural areas, on the other hand, told a different story: while they were no less committed to teaching about the realities of systemic racism, they felt somewhat less assured in their ability to continue to do so. As Gregory, a white male “left-leaning” teacher in North Dakota who has been teaching for 24 years, put it, “Every time I teach Black history, I feel on edge.” Emily from New Hampshire agreed, and concretized Gregory’s sense of being “on edge”: “All of us are worried. None of us want our credential pulled by the D.O.E., and our Commissioner of Education has not exactly proven himself to be a friend to teaching.” Emily’s mentions of the D.O.E. and Commissioner of Education reveal that in her area, worry amongst teachers stems not from a general sense of needing to be on the defensive, but from a very real threat of losing their jobs. Emily continued to describe how this looming threat caused problems in the classroom: “When teachers are nervous, they're not authentic in their dialog and they're concerned about what they can and cannot say.”

Although some teachers in predominantly white areas, especially those who had been in the profession for a long time, were not particularly concerned for themselves, they were concerned about what the C.R.T. controversy meant for the teaching profession more broadly. Many veteran teachers expressed concern about younger teachers leaving due to a lack of preparation to handle the surplus of angry parents and administrators in the current climate. Alan, a white male “leftist” teacher in a conservative California town who had been in the profession for 35 years, cited the lack of tenured positions at his school due to high levels of teacher
turnover as a particular concern. He was deeply worried for young teachers in this position, stating that “We tell them flat out: ‘Until you get tenure, you keep your mouth shut.’ And just keep your head down. Stay out of the line of fire. You do not have any protections whatsoever.” On top of the lack of protections that exist for any untenured teacher in more conservative areas, Emily from New Hampshire spoke of an added sense of alienation that her colleagues of color felt teaching personally resonant history in this sensitive time: “It can be very hard to be a person of color in New Hampshire, teaching these subjects when there are very few…kids who have this connection. Some kids feel they don't even want to talk about it. That gets awkward, that kids look at them and think, ‘this is your history, not mine.’” It is easy to imagine that a teacher in this position would feel less empowered to address the issue, explaining to students the importance of learning marginalized histories regardless of our personal backgrounds, with the threat of parent intervention hanging over his or her head.

On the point of parent intervention, the higher levels of worry that parents in whiter, more conservative areas felt seemed largely to be grounded in increased parent critiques (although teachers did seem to feel more equipped to field these complaints when they felt supported by their administration). Emily spoke of dealing with one parent “who is very open in his view that if anybody utters one word of C.R.T., he's filing with the DOE.” Although she acknowledged that the child of this parent might not “even recognize what [C.R.T.] was if it were to be said, and it's not [even being said],” she still felt concerned that the parent would label a lesson on racism or a related topic as C.R.T., thus placing her job in jeopardy. William, a “moderate left” teacher in Vermont in his 15th year of teaching, described a particularly troubling call from a parent: “I ask [students], ‘OK, now you know what imperialism is and what it looks like, is America an imperialist country today?’...I didn't necessarily say America is an
imperialist country, I'm asking them to come up with their own thoughts, but just the fact that I asked the question: *Boom, I get a call.*” William’s quote reveals that a key aspect of his pedagogy is teaching students to use the study of history to formulate their own opinions on the current moment; thus, parental concern interfered with his ability to teach according to pedagogical commitments informed by 15 years of teaching.

Although William contextualized his discussion of complaints like this one by describing these parents as “a vocal minority, even in our pretty conservative area”—he stated that he “still feel[s] mostly supported”—teachers voiced that attacks from parents aren’t always negligible: they can have tangible effects. Emily lamented the fact that “currently in New Hampshire parents can excuse their child from any part of the curriculum they want. I've never had that happen, but they can.” The threat hung over her head, coloring the way she felt about her ability to do her job effectively. Similarly to teachers in areas with fewer parental complaints, teachers in these areas considered how to defend themselves and their teaching. However, due to the more concrete nature of threats to their work, they tended to focus their energy on finding and actively implementing workarounds rather than simply preparing to respond to ill-informed parents. Emily stated that “Despite thinking ‘this is crap and we don’t teach [CRT].’ ...I did..go out and remove the phrasing ‘systemic racism.’ I can talk about it in plenty of other ways because I think that phrase is a hot-button catchall.” Emily picked up on the fact that while parents weren’t likely to look into the actual content of her teaching, they could easily become fired up over a term that has been villainized in right-wing media. Although eliminating the word from her lessons may seem like a minor alteration, the fact that Emily was forced to avoid a word that accurately described the content she was teaching in order to dodge parent complaints is sobering.
Similarly, Stephen, a white “Green Party/Democrat” teacher in Texas in his 12th year of teaching, resolved to cram instruction about the C.R.T. debates—which he felt was crucial for helping his students navigate the media firestorm—into three weeks at the beginning of the school year, before a C.R.T. ban went into effect. He recalled, “I had several parents call my principal because I had done that. And I happily responded to the parents that because we had started school three weeks early, the law didn't go into effect for three more weeks, so I was legally fine.” As a teacher, needing to defend oneself in this way strikes me—and struck many of the teachers—as frustrating: a teacher’s primary responsibility and labor should be to educate students, not to appease parents.

Again differing from teachers working at predominantly POC schools, some teachers in whiter areas also struggled with school districts and administrators who bought into anti-C.R.T. and related rhetoric. Terri, a white politically “moderate” woman in her 30th year teaching in Texas, described a situation in a nearby district: “An administrator…was doing a [teacher] training on critical race theory and the law that had passed. And…she was reported saying…that you had to teach an unbiased view of the Holocaust, so you had to teach both sides.” Terri was appalled that this had happened, stating that “it’s important that everybody…understand what’s a controversial topic and what’s a fact…There are historic[fal] facts that you cannot argue with.” Although Terri did not mention prioritizing radically antiracist teaching in her interview, and is herself politically moderate, she found this administrator’s comments deeply troubling. This fact alone challenges the claim of conservative activists, like Christopher Rufo, who label teachers committed to teaching about racism and other difficult histories as “Marxists.”

involvement, his school district “is prohibiting that students are required to understand the 1619 Project. It's a really odd way to word that, basically they're saying we can't push that on them...We can't say that someone is inherently racist based on their race, that people are responsible for the actions of people in the past based on their race. Basically, what they said was, we're not going to really address it. We're not going to deal with that.” Benjamin saw the district’s prohibitions as forcing teachers to avoid uncomfortable elements of history entirely rather than responsibly engaging with them, which, similar to Terri, he had no respect for. He felt that the goal of this confusingly worded legislation was to inhibit honest teaching.

Although these interviews reveal extreme differences in how teachers in schools with different demographic makeups, even within states that are actively debating C.R.T., are experiencing the current moment, all teachers felt that the current debate had little to do with what they were actually teaching. Regardless of their beliefs about how much the C.R.T. bans were materially affecting them, and of their political affiliations, teachers were perfectly certain that what they were teaching was not C.R.T. Teachers that prioritized teaching about systemic racism acknowledged that this was a priority, and that it might be different from the inclusive history of the past, but stated that they were not teaching the actual legal framework of C.R.T. or the “identity-based Marxism”86 alleged by the right. As William, “moderate left” teacher from Vermont, put it, “Race is an important construct that we should understand and it has an enormous influence on the history of the world and in our present society. We want students to understand those things. But not...through that specific label or lens or approach or legal framework or whatever it is of CRT.” William’s use of the phrase “or whatever it is” reveals that he is hardly familiar with the academic framework of C.R.T.—and doesn’t think he needs to be

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in order to teach about systemic racism, which he clearly prioritizes doing. Marsha, “conservative Democrat” from Georgia, characterized “critical race theory” as discussed in the news as “a political move that was made up by the right,” boldly stating that “in my school, it’s not a major topic, and you want to know why? We don’t teach critical race theory.” She felt—and luckily felt that her school administration and fellow teachers acknowledged—that the C.R.T. bans were designed to limit teachers’ ability to “have a real honest conversation around the topics of inclusion, equity and diversity in a class. [They’re] making teachers nervous about teaching the truth.” The bans, according to Marsha, encourage less rigorous history, not less actual C.R.T., because C.R.T. isn’t happening in the first place! Caroline from Kansas (“liberal”) and Emily from New Hampshire (“Democrat”) agreed, focusing specifically on the question of bias: “I just don't see what they're trying to argue or what they want me to teach instead. Like, you want me to teach the white supremacist view? I just teach the facts.” (Caroline) “I think it is so disingenuous. [They’re saying:] ‘As a teacher, you only focus for our students on where the United States has done well.’” (Emily) Far from their advertised goal of attempting to eliminate bias in history classrooms (as posters with slogans like “Critical Rac-ist Theory” suggest), teachers felt that the C.R.T. bans were attempting to implement a biased view of America as a purely heroic nation. All of these teacher perspectives suggest that teachers are being put in the crosshairs of political manipulation of a term that, in both its true and distorted meaning, has little to do with their classroom work but greatly affects that work.

Teachers Theorize: Diagnosing the Problem

The high school American history teachers to whom I spoke tended to see today’s C.R.T. debates as motivated by a variety of intertwining factors, including but not limited to a vote-
consolidation strategy on the part of Republican politicians; a long history of attacks on public education and on teachers; the 2016 election and its aftermath; the pressures of the pandemic; and blatant racism. However, they identified an overarching theme that seemed to speak to many of these individual factors: an incomplete or absent understanding of history on the part of (usually) older, White, middle- and working-class Americans. Ironically but not coincidentally, it is precisely this limited understanding of history that the bans on so-called C.R.T. are seeking to impose on today’s students, as well.

Sam from Louisiana opined that “one of the ways that the power structure in the United States is upheld is via telling myths and lies about our country” to get people “to continue to support an economic and power structure that's beneficial for [only] a few.” Caroline from Kansas identified a similar problem. In her view, these “myths” have such a strong hold over Americans because of public education’s failure, until recently, to teach a more honest history. “History has usually been taught from the story of the victors. And so now when we're saying, ‘Hey, actually, no, we need to be teaching the systemic issues,’ I think there's just that natural reaction to ‘this is different and different is bad.’” Sarah from Texas agreed: because of the recent shift from inclusive to antiracist history, those who didn’t become “curious as adults” haven’t had the chance to learn history that “question[s] the story,” as Zimmerman puts it.87

Marsha from Georgia’s husband, for example, who chimed in from the background of the Zoom call as his wife was talking, felt he “missed out on things” 20 years ago in his predominantly white high school that Marsha now prioritizes teaching to her students. In both Sam and Caroline’s view, much of the backlash against critical race theory can be explained by, in

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Caroline’s words, “a fear of the unknown” resulting from an education skewed to privilege American exceptionalist rhetoric. As Gregory from North Dakota put it, this kind of historical narrative is powerful in the minds of most Americans because “history defines who we are…what story do you want people to think of with your country? One of glory? One of tragedy?”

Jake from Kentucky focused his diagnosis of the current moment on conservative politicians’ strategic choice to seize on the “powerlessness and confusion and frustration” of White, mostly middle-class and rural Americans. In this way, his argument resembled Olson’s, but his unique perspective as a history teacher gave him a different understanding of why this demographic is so easily manipulated: “Those feelings of powerlessness are…connected to the powerlessness of feeling like you don't understand what's being taught in schools, like it's different from what you learned.” Like Sam and Caroline, and Zimmerman in his 2021 article, Jake understood the backlash against C.R.T. as a panicked response to a long-buried historical narrative being brought to the fore in today’s classrooms. Thus, it is not, as many conservatives argue, today’s teachers to blame, but past generations’ failure to reckon with the less flattering elements of American history. In addition to panic and confusion, this failure can also lead to a genuine misunderstanding of crucial concepts such as white privilege. Sharing a personal anecdote about attempting to talk to her family about white privilege, Caroline noted that “I don’t think we realize how many Americans live in small, rural, white communities who work very hard for their living and who face economic difficulties. Farming is hard. Life is hard and they’re very proud people.” Americans like these, Caroline argued, might hear “white privilege”

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as an invalidation of their own struggles because they haven’t learned history in a way that how these struggles are compounded for people of color: “[H]istorically, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps didn't work for black people because they were literally denied…a home loan.”

Emily from New Hampshire added an interesting dimension to this argument, opining that adults may have incomplete understandings not only of what students are learning, but of how they’re learning: “I don't think parents understand the modern classroom.” In her view, parents’ lack of understanding of the kinds of pedagogical techniques that she and her colleagues use might encourage them to be fearful of any mention of viewpoints that challenge the typical American story. “I don't think parents understand what a student-centered classroom looks like and that the resource[s] and primary sources are provided for students [to] investigate. They're making connections and taking from that. It's not me telling them ‘this is what you think’…students feel comfortable having divergent opinions.” Notice that Emily, who is herself “liberal,” does not expect her students to have liberal viewpoints, countering the popular idea circulating amongst right-wing media outlets, activists and parents that teachers are “indoctrinating” students simply by engaging with topics such as systemic racism. This might, in Emily’s view, be something that parents used to a more outdated, teacher-centered model of education struggle to grasp.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, interviewees’ unique positionalities as both historians and teachers not only allowed them to illuminate public understandings of history (or lack thereof) as fuel for the C.R.T. debates, but also public opinion of teachers. Sam from Louisiana, in line with education scholar Dana Goldstein’s thesis in her book The Teacher Wars: A History of

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America’s Most Embattled Profession⁹⁰, identified the public’s readiness to assume negative intent from teachers as part of a larger pattern: “public education has always been under attack. Teachers' unions are still some of the most powerful unions in the country.” To Sam, the idea that teachers have the ability to advocate for themselves through unions makes them a threat, and thus encourages the public to be skeptical of their work. Caroline from Kansas agreed with Sam’s main point, but primarily attributed the problem to “a lack of respect for the professionalism of teachers,” another point that Goldstein makes in her book in connection with the early characterization of teaching as a feminine profession.⁹¹ Caroline found this issue deeply frustrating: “as a parent you have to know what is being taught…I draw the line [there] though. You have to trust…that what I’m teaching is appropriate for your kid’s age, developmental level and skill level…I don’t go to the doctor and say…I clearly have a broken arm’ when actually my foot is bruised.” Sam and Caroline were just a few of many teachers who pointed to distrust and lack of respect for teachers as key components of the C.R.T. debates, suggesting that the fact that the conflict centers both on history and on teaching makes it an especially powerful hot-button issue.

Speaking of hot-button issues, almost all teachers identified C.R.T. as a catch-all term that conservative politicians lump in with other buzzwords, thus creating an uproar and weaponizing the resulting fear as a way to consolidate the vote. Many teachers attributed the efficacy of this tactic to political and media polarization (à la Hunter’s original culture wars argument); they felt this polarization had drastically increased since Trump’s election and was

being further enabled by the C.R.T. debates. Teachers from Vermont to North Dakota to California identified other issues being lumped in with C.R.T., such as mask mandates and vaccination requirements. Harry, a white male “Independent” teacher in Iowa in his 13th year of teaching, connected the CRT debate to debates over masks in his area, coming from the same politicians and activists supporting school privatization and vouchers: “This whole controversy is just part of a bigger push against public education in general…people just aren’t as supportive of public education” as they were when he was growing up in the same area, he said. Alan from California agreed, arguing, like Ibram Kendi, that C.R.T. was simultaneously overapplied and under-defined towards politicized ends: “We are engaged in a culture war. And this C.R.T.…is a hot-button, ‘Let's pick something that nobody understands so we can tell them what it is without having to be accurate…and drum up all sorts of anger and frustration.’ And let's use this as a wedge to limit what can be taught. Let's get our people on the school boards.” Stephen from Texas pointed out that this kind of political school board interest predated the C.R.T. debates: “[In Texas], There's a board that's a subcommittee of the Texas Education Agency that's all elected membership, has never had a historian on it or a college professor. It's all evangelical ministers and stuff that got elected in these niche elections, and they are the people that revise the [history] curriculum. And you can read the curriculum standards and you can tell which interests wrote which standards.” Overall, teachers argued, politicians lump these unrelated and poorly understood terms together in order to serve their own political interests in education.

Additionally, many teachers felt that, when C.R.T. is used as a fear-provoking buzzword in elections that are not explicitly education-related, its purpose is to support a broader political interest: conservative vote consolidation. As Harry put it, “Policy-wise, [conservatives] don't have a lot to motivate voters to turn out, and so they're relying on these cultural wedge issues like
masks and the way history is taught and abortion and LGBTQ rights…to drive voter participation and activism.” Annabeth, a white female “moderate Democrat” in her 10th year of teaching in Virginia, agreed, and highlighted a reason that C.R.T. might be particularly effective in consolidating the vote: “I think part of it is trying to capture a voting base that has a history of being socialized to believe in ideas of white supremacy…they may not recognize it as such, but I think that's what it is and they want to maintain their power and privilege within society. And I think there are certain candidates that try and stir that up to…win elections.” Annabeth’s argument about political mobilization of fears about the loss of white identity resembles Olson’s, and suggests that, while C.R.T. is badly defined and frequently grouped with other terms, its presence in the conservative zeitgeist is not an accident, and is particularly powerful. Finally, Stephen from Texas soberingly commented on just how dangerous this fear-based political strategy is: “The present fear is obviously manufactured. Fear is the most useful of all emotions when it comes to policy. And it's also the one that yields the worst policies.” In sum, teachers made powerful arguments that the misinformation conservatives spread about C.R.T. not only poorly defines the term and still effectively turns out more voters, it leads to tangible and poorly informed policies that actively interfere—or attempt to interfere—with teachers’ ability to do their jobs honestly and effectively, as they have been trained to do.

**Teachers Theorize: Envisioning a Solution**

Although teachers’ diagnoses of the current moment seem quite bleak, the majority of them were not without hope. The understanding that many interviewees shared of how our nation arrived at this contentious moment also brought them to a shared conclusion about how we might escape it. I gathered from their insights that in their view, using the thoughtful, honest teaching of history as a model for conversation—countering the polarized media firestorm that enables
politicians to weaponize fear—might be our greatest hope of sowing connection rather than division.

The first element drawn from effective history teaching that some teachers proposed as a way to move forward is, as Sam from Louisiana phrased it, “the human aspect” of history. Sam noted that “a lot of times, people who believe those things aren't believing facts or statistics or evidence…but you can always bring the human aspect to the forefront…In history, we tell stories about actual people and what they went through. And I think that could be important, these anecdotal stories.” Here, Sam is picking up on the fact that, for example, attempting to convince an anti-C.R.T. protester that systemic racism exists by pointing to a well-researched New York Times article might not work given the extreme political polarization we are dealing with in the media: those watching FOX News are quite literally receiving different “facts” than those watching CNN. But describing how individuals of color struggle to get jobs or home loans—or even better, directing skeptics to places where those individuals are telling their own stories—might help. Teachers themselves who are being villainized, Sam argued, could take a similar approach: “It's tough to say, you know, ‘Hey, that lady down the street who has been teaching for 30 years has been a propagandist your entire life, hell bent on destroying white America.’ Like they might hear these things on these websites, but they know the lady down the street and…it doesn't seem like [that]…When teachers embed themselves in communities and form relationships and are very honest about what they do, I think that's where most progress happens.” Teachers getting to know parents person-to-person is a powerful challenge to media efforts to lump teachers under labels, like “racist,” “Marxist,” or “elite,” that do not necessarily capture their true identities. Sam's recommendations for how to make “progress” also reflect an understanding of the study of history as much more than facts and dates. In his view, good
history education prepares us to relate to people very different from us, which is one of his main goals working with students: “You're building empathy when you teach the story of humans and how things could impact others.” This empathy, he believes, is something many adults must learn in order to cut through the present division.

Marsha, another teacher who cited “build[ing] empathy” as a main goal in the classroom, also found honest, human-to-human interaction to be an effective tool to fight misinformation and prejudice. As one of the few Black teachers in her department, she found that her presence was valuable in terms of educating her colleagues: “especially [for] the ones that I'm close with in the social studies department, [me being there has] really opened their eyes and caused them to have empathy. You know, it's one thing when you're dealing with something and it's on TV or somebody that you don't know, but it's another thing [when] they've gotten to know me and they trust me.” She felt that, simply by being willing to engage with those whose views on sensitive issues might be misguided, she was making a difference in how her fellow teachers thought about, and therefore taught about, race. Marsha told a story about a Republican colleague whose change had been particularly remarkable: “[At one point], I was like, ‘I…know that you are not racist. But some of your thoughts need to be challenged.’ So to see his growth from there to where it is now is just amazing. Even to hear him today [saying] ‘we're not teaching critical race theory, we're teaching history, and if they want us to teach anything else, that's a lie.’” Emily from New Hampshire and Caroline from Kansas agreed that connecting person-to-person with other teachers could be helpful in figuring out how to responsibly navigate this highly stressful moment. Emily pleaded, “Let us connect together because right now when we get stressed, we go into silos every time. It's easier to be an island to yourself than to take the time to work with people. We need that time.” In addition to highlighting the importance of connection, Emily’s
point speaks to the problematic lack of time dedicated in most schools to teacher professional
development. Caroline echoed Emily’s point with a spin towards students, stating that
collaboration with other teachers helps with “making sure what we're teaching and how we’re
teaching is affirming to [students].” Although it might seem like a drop in the bucket, all of these
teachers found that intentionally investing time in the “human aspect”—of history and of life and
general—could make a valuable difference in dehumanizing times.

The second component of effective history teaching that teachers believed could be a
powerful tool for change was transparency (a value that, not coincidentally, teachers found the
C.R.T. bans to be attacking in the classroom). Teachers across the country emphasized making a
point to, in the current moment, be radically transparent about what and how they are teaching in
order to counter media narratives that are completely out-of-touch with the classroom. Sam from
Louisiana, Terri from Texas, and Kristin from North Carolina all described using transparency as
a tool when dealing with direct attacks or accusations in a variety of settings:

Sam: “At the end of the day, if [parents’] concern is based on a myth about critical race
theory…we have to be very honest and [say]...obviously that's not true. We're not
teaching academic theories that you usually find in a law school class, or, you know, a
graduate course or whatnot, but here's what we are teaching and here's why we're
teaching it.”

Terri, describing a conversation with her mother: “So we were talking about critical race
theory, and her belief is that somehow that we are in a classroom teaching little white
kids that you should be ashamed of being white because you're automatically racist. And,
and I said, ‘I don't know anybody who's teaching that. I know people who teach that
America has a long history of racism, that there are still racist things that happen in
America.””

Kristin: “If a parent asked us if we were teaching critical race theory, we would
ask…‘What do you think that means? And I'll tell you [whether or not] I’m doing that.’”
Although all of these uses of transparency seem effective, I find Kristin’s tactic of asking a question back to a hypothetical parent particularly powerful. By requiring the parent to elaborate on their understanding of the phrase “critical race theory,” this question would move the conversation from the realm of buzzwords to substantive points, likely clearing up misconceptions and giving the two parties a chance to connect. All three teachers, however, used or planned to use transparency to demonstrate that what they were actually doing in the classroom was far less terrifying, far more grounded in historical truth, than the right-wing media alleges.

In addition to using transparency as a tool to address live C.R.T. complaints, many teachers described taking pre-emptive measures towards transparency given the volatility of the current climate. Sam from Louisiana noted: “I welcome people to my classes all the time.” Sarah from Texas and Emily from New Hampshire both posted online and/or handed parents their entire curricula. Sarah said, “They're making it sound like it's a secret, but what I teach isn't a secret. It's public knowledge,” and Emily recalled telling parents: “I can give you one document that has everything in it. You go through it.” And when Harry from Iowa decided to use an article about capitalism and the plantation system in his 8th grade U.S. government class, he sent a letter home to parents explaining: “Here is what we’re doing, this is the educational value of doing this,’ and I maybe heard back from 10 parents, all supportive.” In this way, Harry prevented a reactionary attack on his teaching by planning in advance, and simultaneously invalidated any accusation that he was attempting to brainwash children and hide it from their

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parents. Thus, teachers demonstrated that transparency is an effective way to move forward both inside and outside of the classroom; with students, parents, and other members of the public.

Many teachers cited validating or uplifting students’ lived experiences as crucial pedagogical commitments for them—especially in the study of history. As Marsha from Georgia put it, “I want students to see themselves in history.” In line with this, they described using validation coupled with education outside of the classroom as well, as a way of leveling with parents and other citizens who might be genuinely fearful of C.R.T. and its implications. Despite expressing frustration throughout his interview at the prevalence of ignorance and misinformation in the current climate, Sam from Louisiana took care to acknowledge that “Parents are coming from places where they definitely have the feelings there regardless of the motivations.” Rather than assuming negative intent from parents, countering their attacks with attacks of his own, Sam felt it was best “to be clear and give our sense of what's going on and add to this narrative.” Caroline from Kansas agreed, and her approach artfully combined acknowledging a concerned person’s personal struggles with helping them to understand the struggles of others: “I think we need to validate sometimes when people are fearful…‘You have worked hard, your family has had disadvantages. [It’s just that] your skin color has never been one of those.” Here, Caroline picked up on a point she made earlier in the interview: that some white people might genuinely misunderstand concepts like white privilege, assuming the term to be a denial of other ways (such as socioeconomic status) in which they might be underprivileged. Along these lines, Caroline felt it was important to—just as she does for her students—give the concerned person a chance to feel seen. She believed that this would then make them more receptive to learning, hearing their experiences contextualized within a broader societal context.
William from Vermont made a particularly interesting point along the lines of validation—parents’ fears, he argued, may not always be entirely misguided. “Parents are not wrong when they say most of [their] children's teachers are liberals…but they are much more fearful than they need to be. I still consider myself deeply patriotic…There's so many good things [in America] I think we should learn from and successes that I think…you can be critical and patriotic.” I find this point quite powerful on many levels: first, if teachers—or any of us—start by asserting that a conservative person’s opinion is all wrong, we may lose them entirely, playing into the existent sense of cynicism that the polarized media has created. Just as it is evident that history classrooms criticize America more now than they did 50 years ago, it is a fact that most teachers in the U.S. are liberal—and it’s possible to acknowledge this fact without buying into misguided extrapolations.93 Second, William asserted that validation could be a way of entering into an honest discussion—a teachable moment—about the potential for love and criticism of one’s country to coexist, something that Americans who have only been exposed to exceptionalist narratives may never have previously considered. In sum, these teachers made strong arguments for refusing to enter onto the culture warriors’ angry battlefield, instead valuing a gentler approach informed by their understanding of the importance of validating lived experience.

Finally, many teachers believed that one of the most hopeful signs for how we might move forward from this moment was right in front of them: their students. These teachers offered a window into how their students are reacting to difficult conversations about systemic racism and other sensitive topics; in so doing, they identified thoughtful reckoning with student perspectives as a gap in media representations on both sides of the conflict. Sam from Louisiana

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recounted that the C.R.T. situation “has been impactful because it has heightened the conversations and interest in my classroom, which is somewhat odd compared to what the actual goal was from the people that were creating a lot of this legislation. And I have talked to other history teachers and they said the same thing.” He added: “None of the issues have ever come from my students in regards to this. Even when I taught in this working-class conservative suburb, I never had any pushback from students…they can have these conversations much better than adults, I've noticed. I had students that had Confederate flags on the back of their trucks and whatnot, and they would walk into my classroom and we would have really productive conversations.” It’s important to note that only is this kind of “productive conversation” across ideological differences “odd” compared to the goals of anti-C.R.T. legislation, but it is rendered nearly impossible wherever these laws, which attempt to place a moratorium on conversations that might cause “psychological distress,” are enforced. For this reason, looking at how students are eagerly engaging in these challenging conversations—exercising their citizenship rights—could support a powerful argument opposing anti-C.R.T. legislation. Caroline from Kansas and Jake from Kentucky’s students were similarly eager to engage on sensitive topics, especially because they encounter them on social media every day: Caroline noted that “our kids are really appreciative of [discussing current events] because they hear about the issues, but they sometimes only hear…the sound bite, they don't hear the full everything, and so we have the opportunity to dive into the full everything and give them more information.” Jake agreed, citing an almost radical impulse in his students: “There is a level of willingness [among students] to engage with difficult ideas…to not accept the old rhetoric and standards.” These accounts lend further credence to the idea that students are ready to engage with these sensitive ideas and do

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94 Bill SB0623, TN State Legislature
not need to be sheltered from them, as anti-C.R.T. legislation implies; students’ openness and willingness to sit with differences of opinion can also serve as a lesson for many adults.

It is crucial to note that not all teachers felt that their students started from this same place of openness, especially in predominantly white areas. However, rather than discouraging teachers, this reality seemed only to make them more inclined to help their students build the skills to question reductive conservative representations of C.R.T. and build awareness of those different from them. As Emily from New Hampshire put it, “My kids will overwhelmingly tell you they don't see racism in our community. Well, they're not people of color, for the most part. I try to tell them, ‘Just because you [don’t] have an experience, [that] doesn't mean it isn't happening.’” Because she sensed that her students were unaware of the C.R.T. debates in general, Emily was also planning on talking about a new anti-C.R.T. bill proposed in New Hampshire when we spoke on Zoom.

Overall, the fact that many teachers described their students as willing to engage across differences on difficult topics is encouraging. It can serve as inspiration for us to chart a path forward from these inflammatory debates, as well as spark optimism about the potential of the next generation more broadly. It is also inspiring that, even when students’ home or community experiences may not have prepared them to understand certain systemic realities, some history teachers are helping students reach towards more empathic knowledge. This impulse—and the others I’ve described in this section—falls in line with what history teachers view as the purpose of history education, and what they believe it looks like to teach good history.
Conclusion: What is History Education For?

When I and my research assistants asked the teachers we interviewed what they saw as the purpose of teaching history, their responses fell into five major categories: building empathy; giving their students the chance to see themselves in the past; molding critical, independent thinkers; molding thoughtful, brave conversationalists; and molding empowered citizens. Below, I share one response from each category that particularly resonated with me:

Marsha from Alabama on empathy: “Gentrification is a topic we talk about…so…I take this a step further and show [students] the effects of gentrification on poor communities…do these standards require me to do that? No, but…even in [an] economics [class], I'm trying to fathy.”

Sam from Louisiana on students seeing themselves in the past: “[My goal is] to keep the students' identities front and center and ensure that their perspectives are heard and seen.”

Jake from Kentucky on molding critical, independent thinkers: “[This is the] absolute opposite thing that the people trying to pass these laws want to hear, but to me, a history class needs to teach you…analytical skills and the framework to find, analyze, and then produce information that allows you to make real arguments about the world around you.” The opposite, he said, of “postage-stamp history.”

Sam from Louisiana on molding thoughtful, brave conversationalists: “I think the history class is a wonderful place for students who are trying to grow and figure themselves out to come and have really tough conversations about what they believe, and hear other perspectives as well.” If students’ views are never challenged, “many of them won't take a history class ever again.”

Harry from Iowa on molding empowered citizens: “I'm really trying to teach my students that…if it looks bleak, if it looks like you can't do much to change anything, act locally. Because at the local level, you definitely can make a difference. I mean, we got a BLM activist elected to the city council. That's a lot.”

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95 Marsha teaches economics as well as social studies.
I find these words important to highlight for two reasons: first, because they reveal how incredibly hard teachers are working to teach history thoughtfully and honestly, and how deeply they care for their students. Knowing this about these teachers, and especially after having spoken to them face-to-face, I feel great pain when I consider this quote from Sam: “It's almost a cyclical effect of when you see a school not doing so well, it's easy to put blame [on] teachers…as opposed to knowing that most of them are in the profession because they really care about students and are doing everything that they can with the resources that they have. Instead of addressing the actual systems that harm people, it’s easy to create scapegoats, and teachers were already a scapegoat.” Despite their intense emotional and intellectual labor, teachers are too often underpaid and undervalued, especially when working in high-need areas. They are positioned as villains in an inequitable education system in which they are, undoubtedly, victims. This problem is simultaneously visible in, and much larger than, the critical race theory debates.

Second, hearing what teachers prioritize in teaching history—their professional opinions on what constitutes a valuable history education—is impactful because it reveals just how much is at stake with anti-C.R.T. legislation. It is an unavoidable fact that wherever these bills are and will be enforced, teachers are unable to achieve any of these goals to their fullest potential. Experts in history education are being stifled and stymied by politicians who know little to nothing about—or if they know about, do not seem to value—the dynamism of history and its relevance to the present, the power of feeling personally represented in a historical narrative, the importance of learning to feel for those whose experiences may look nothing like one’s own. Most importantly, they know nothing about the day-to-day work of being in a classroom with students who are counting on you: the love, the pain, the joy. We must, therefore, resist these
unjust laws in every way possible, and continue consulting teachers at every possible turn. The work I have started is not complete.

I will conclude this capstone with a quote from James Baldwin that I believe captures the urgency of the present moment, and the power of history education:

“We are the strongest nation in the Western world, but this is not for the reasons that we think. It is because we have an opportunity which no other nation has of moving beyond the Old World concepts of race and class and caste, and create, finally, what we must have had in mind when we first began speaking of the New World. But the price for this is a long look backward whence we came and an unflinching assessment of the record.” - James Baldwin, *The Creative Process*, 1962

If you are a teacher, I hope this work will help you find community as you navigate this otherwise lonely moment. If you are a scholar, I hope it will enrich your theories with on-the-ground perspectives. If you are a policymaker or politician on either side of the partisan divide, I hope it will bring you closer to a knowledge of what is actually going on in schools, of how legislation affects real humans. And if you are a student, I hope it will help you realize how important you are, to the teachers who care for you and to the future of the world. Finally, I hope my capstone will help all of us prevent Baldwin’s words, spoken so many years ago now, from going to waste. I hope it will help us find a path out of this division and towards a country in which all students can learn a history that is true; representative of their identities and experiences; and, as Caroline put it, ‘empower[s] them to be empowered citizens.’”
Acknowledgements

As I sit here in the Branford library at one in the morning after hours of work, I can’t believe I made it here. I can’t believe I have written something 53 pages long. I especially can’t believe that I got the incredible chance to speak and engage with the words of so many thoughtful, brilliant, inspiring American history teachers—I am forever grateful, and inspired to begin my career.

I would, without a doubt, not have this work in front of me without the help of my deeply kind, unflappably encouraging, crazy-smart adviser Talya Zemach-Bersin (known to us Ed Studies students as tzb). Tzb not only believed that I could do this work even when I didn’t believe that I could do it myself, but made it constantly evident that she cared about me as a human first—and cared a whole lot. I cannot express my gratitude enough. (You should also know that tzb is unfathomably skilled at making cute little felt animals.)

Next, I would like to thank Mira Debs, who not only has provided me with support and encouragement throughout my Ed Studies journey and agreed to serve as second reader for this capstone, but took me and a fellow Ed Studies student ice skating on a REAL LAKE in February! It was so fun, obviously, and a great way to celebrate coming towards the end of our time in Ed Studies.

Now, onto my fellow Ed Studies students: first, to the students in EDST 261, I can’t believe I was lucky enough to have all of you working with me on this project! I quite literally couldn’t have done it without you. I deeply appreciate your work in interviews as well as your insights after the fact, which guided crucial parts of my analysis. To my senior cohort-mates: you have made Yale feel welcoming, inspiring, and simply good when no one else has because of how much, how honestly, you all care about the world. Witnessing the incredible work you have
done on your deeply personal, deeply important capstones over the course of this year, and
witnessing your commitment to education over the course of all three years I’ve known you, has
been nothing short of astounding. I will forever sing your praises, and I will miss you dearly.

I would like to thank my dearest Branford friends, my favorite humans ever, who
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going me through ever since. I love you all.
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Tweets from Jessica Piper


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Other


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Language from bill SB0623 that passed in the TN State Legislature in the Spring of 2021, effective July 1, 2021.


Appendix

Email template sent to contacts to share with teachers:

Dear X,

My name is Edie Abraham-Macht, and I’m a senior at Yale College in the Education Studies program completing a senior capstone research project.

I’m reaching out to see if you might be interested in speaking to me as part of my study looking at teachers’ experiences with the “critical race theory” debates that are currently taking place in schools. I’m looking to speak to history teachers in states that have enacted or are considering enacting laws limiting teaching about topics including systemic racism and white privilege.

If you are interested, your involvement in the project would consist of a 30-45 minute Zoom interview in January. Interview participants will be given pseudonyms to protect their identities, and identifying information will be removed from Zoom transcripts and recordings.

Thank you so much for considering this request, and I hope to have the privilege of learning from you!

Best wishes,

Edie