

**Inflating the Monster: The Systematic Co-Optation, Commodification, and Colonization of
Critical Race Theory in the News Media**

A Critical Analysis of CRT News Coverage

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Abstract

(Re)entering the American zeitgeist in late 2020, Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been woven throughout national “debates” concerning race/ism, history, media, politics, children, and education. Introduced in the 1980s, CRT is a framework for unearthing and transforming the systemic relations between race/ism, domination, and power. Employing a Critical Discourse Analysis, this paper investigates how discourse(s) surrounding CRT are laden with ideology and power. This exploration reveals a gross misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and purposive obfuscation of both the theory and its aim in the news media. This paper argues that CRT has been colonized, co-opted, inflated, and commodified, transforming it from a tool for amplifying marginalized voices into an insidious and divisive tactic that threatens the existence of both White people and Whiteness itself. These processes have ramifications pertaining to racial equity in the U.S., while also holding power to influence policy, education, and society at large. While these problematic discourses have proliferated, scholarly analysis has been slow to investigate. This is where this paper commences.

Keywords: *Critical Race Theory (CRT), Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), news media, power, appropriation.*

Introduction

“We were paying people hundreds of thousands of dollars to teach very bad ideas and frankly, very sick ideas. And really, they were teaching people to hate our country, and I’m not going to allow that to happen” (Trump, U.S. Presidential Debate, September 29, 2020).

This was former President Donald Trump’s response when asked why his administration terminated racial-sensitivity and critical race anti-bias training for all federal agencies at the 2020 presidential debate. This utterance set the table for what would become the modern, polarizing “debate” surrounding Critical Race Theory (CRT). Since the leadup to the 2020 elections, CRT, and specifically its relation to U.S. public education, has saturated the mouths and minds of American journalists, self-proclaimed pundits, and citizens alike. Critical Race Theory, thus, possesses irrefutable gravity in our contemporary social, legal, political, and educational (discursive) spheres.

Critical Race Theory was first conceived in 1989 as a way in which scholars cohesively theorized hidden and systemic mechanisms of power and oppression in a society that has historically supported the interests of dominant White society (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2019). The aim was to provide a framework of understanding for individuals to identify and combat structural racism in our institutions and culture (Delgado et al., 2017). Over the past three years, CRT has manifested as a hot subject of debate in the U.S. K-12 education sector, although it’s exclusively taught at the collegiate level and above (Anderson, 2021), and there is no data to support that CRT has been integrated directly into any K-12 curriculum (Harrison, 2021). Nonetheless, misperceptions, combined with empty battle cries for its repeal in order to protect children from the “threat” of Critical Race Theory, have peppered this present “debate.”

We live in an age plagued with various and powerful undue ideologies (i.e. post-race, neo-fascism, White supremacy), carried through our language, that are created and amplified on mediated platforms by both leaders and layfolk. To put it simply, CRT is being discussed and the way(s) in which it's being discussed *matter*. What is being said about CRT has consequences. The ideologies and frameworks discursively and semiotically produced in this “debate” have the ability to procure and fortify racist systems of power-over and oppression (Foucault, 1980). Furthermore, with the increase of audience fragmentation and platforming, anyone can create “news” or contribute to this conversation; we simply no longer exist in a one-to-many information dissemination media vacuum (Weeks, 2022). From a research perspective, the language surrounding CRT is saturated, and, when critically examined, can bring light to greater linguistic ideologies and the power that is held within our language.

Discourse is not simply a tool for sharing ideas; it shapes the world in which we live, our realities, and our values. Discourse, and the ideologies it carries, both make up and are embedded within our societal fabric (Moshin, 2022). Because nothing has inherent meaning, it's only through the intersubjectivity of language that we create and reify what things “mean” and the power those meanings possess (Thurlow, 2009). As will be explored and substantiated upon, there are certain discourses surrounding CRT that reinforce harmful ideas, promoting inequality and violence. Therefore, critically analyzing discourse(s), especially in dominant institutions like legacy or partisan news, is necessary. The cruciality for examining news media is affirmed when navigating through our quotidian socio-political climate, sodden as it is with disinformation and lies (Weeks, 2022).

Throughout this exploration, the goal is to investigate and “make meaning” of what is both explicitly and implicitly produced by the news media as they report on CRT and the CRT “debate.” The questions guiding this analysis are:

1. How/do the discourses surrounding CRT change over time?
2. What ideologies are woven into the language being used and in what ways do those ideologies change what CRT means?
3. What is said about race/power in the U.S. through CRT discourse?
4. For whom does this “debate” benefit?

This study will address the discourse(s) surrounding and encompassing Critical Race Theory by looking at news media articles and transcripts in hopes of understanding how CRT became such a divisive, yet, enigmatic topic of contestation. This paper argues that there has been a systemic co-optation, commodification, and colonization of Critical Race Theory, employed to reinforce hegemonic ideologies that uphold White supremacy, and to maintain the power and status of Whiteness in the United States. The following analysis will address: previous literature upon which this analysis will be substantiated, methodology, the findings/analysis of this investigation, and a discussion of these findings.

Before moving forward, it is necessary to establish, firmly and concretely, that racism is foundational in both the founding and present structures of the United States and injustice has been proliferated as a result of this systemic vessel of oppression. In this analysis, there are neither concrete solutions nor answers; however, it is the hope of this paper to shed light on how we may work toward a more just and equitable world through this research process.

Literature Review

Theoretical Background

As a point of departure, these are the principles, theories, and ideas that will shape and texture this analysis. It's through these postmodern understandings of language, discourse, social construction, power, media panics, and race that this analysis takes shape.

Language, Meaning-Making, Discourse, Language Ideology, and Social Construction

“Language is the medium par excellence through which things are ‘represented’ in thought and thus the medium in which ideology is generated and transformed” (Hall, 1996, p. 35).

Language. Language matters; it is a dynamic vehicle for both communication and representation (Moshin, 2022). Counter to the conception that language is a “natural, neutral, and normal” (Thurlow, 2009, p. 2) passive expression of our everyday lives, language is inherently productive (Hall, 1985). Language is both determinate, being the vehicle through which we create meaning, and relative, shaping our perspective and world views (Badhessa, 2002, Sapir, 1929; Whorf, 2012). Therefore, language possesses the power to shape individuals, societies, and realities (Hall, 1985). Simultaneously, language is informed, constructed, and confined by our world and social practices (Bourdieu, 1991; Moi, 1991), while also being inherited from a historical perspective (Thurlow, 2009).

Language is performative in the ways that it is used to create and solidify identities; it is something we do or enact as opposed to being something we simply use (Butler, 1988).

Additionally, language is polysemic, meaning there are multiple, yet limited ways a text can be “read” or interpreted (Ceccarelli, 1998). This is evident by the intersubjective properties of language, substantiating that we “make meaning together” (Thurlow, 2009, p. 2). Following,

nothing inherently “means.” Meaning is ascribed onto things through language (Hall, 1985) and this relies upon the semiotic relationship between the referent (the thing to which we attach meaning) and the sign, which includes both the signifier (the physical representation of the thing), and the signified (what the thing means to us) (Saussure cited in Chandler, 2022).

Discourse. It’s through this relationship that language intrinsically holds and structures power (Foucault, 1980). In doing so, language is consequential and employed to police individuals and societies. Language forms discourses—systems of words that work together to shape our ideas and perceptions on a larger scale vis-à-vis power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980). Through language and discourse, ideologies are constructed, conveyed and reinforced (Hill, 2009), identities are created and reified (Blommaert, 2005 and Althusser, 1971), and difference is constituted (Allen, 2011).

Encompassing more than language alone, discourse includes, “invitations and clues, the silences, the inferences that the literal content of a text or an utterance invites” (Hill, 2008, p. 33). Concurrently, silence also holds meaning: “the analysis of discourse requires us to examine not only what is said, but what is not said” (Hill, 2008, p. 32). Discourses reflect and produce “common sense” (Bourdieu, 1991) held within our social imaginary, and, according to Foucault (1980), truth is a product of discourse; entirely subjective and dependent on temporal narratives, or “regimes of truth.” Because there are often multiple dominant discourses, this paper will use the stylization “discourse(s)” to express the overlapping and collective nature of how discourses are interwoven together to form (new) meanings.

Ideologies. Ideologies, or dominant narratives and worldviews (Marx cited in Drucker, 1972), are employed politically and morally (Irvine & Gal, 2000), and are enacted and reified

through discourse and language. Language, discourse, and ideology are inherently cyclical; they inform and shape one another. In this way, discourse is inherently ideological because it “establishes and maintains structures on inequality and privilege” (Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006, p. 100), and, like language, ideology is often rendered invisible: “ideology creates and acts in a social world while it masquerades as a description of that world” (Woolard, 1998, p.10, cited in Moshin & Thurlow, 2014). Ideologies are similarly productive, ubiquitous, and dynamic; like discourses, they evolve over time, and continue to constitute or reinforce dominant ideas, shaping every aspect of our lives (Marx cited in Drucker, 1972). Vitaly, ideologies are not innately created to promote justice or equality and often favor the interests of those who hold power (ibid.). Encapsulated by Thurlow and Jaworski (2006, p. 100), “however ‘ideologically innocent’ they may appear, texts and the social practices of which they are a part can still be tremendously powerful in reconstituting substantial areas of social life.”

Linguistic Ideologies. Not only are ideologies transmitted and created vis-à-vis language, there are also linguistic ideologies, or ideologies about language itself, which we inherit and internalize (Irvine & Gal, 2000). Hill (2009, pp. 32-3) describes linguistic ideologies as, “sets of interested positions about language that represent themselves as forms of common sense, that rationalize and justify the forms and functions of text and talk.” Language is, then, linked to, “personal identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology” (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994, p. 56). Irvine and Gal (2000) describe how people constitute “ideological representations of linguistic differences” (p. 37) threefold via: (1) iconization, the process of making a language or style represent a group’s “inherent nature or essence” (p. 37), (2) fractal recursivity, the projection and reproduction of opposition from one social level to other(s), and

(3) erasure, which, “renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible” (p. 38). Linguistic ideologies are sustained because they simply “make sense,” possessing a cultural coherence; a perspective saturated with political and economic interest (Hill, 2009).

Social Construction. Part and parcel of this is that ideologies are, and encompass, social constructions. Language, discourse(s), and ideology(s) are social constructions; non-tangible and often invisible governing structures that make and produce cultural common sense (i.e. race or gender) (see Foucault, 1980; Hall, 1985). Social constructions are created and bought into; things mean because we label and ascribe value to them (Moshin, 2022). Foucault (1980) affirmed that nothing existed outside of discourse and that our worlds take on meaning through language. Importantly, non-tangible products of language and discourse, like socially constructed identities and hierarchies, may be imagined, though are *not* imaginary (Thurlow, 2009). This means that while social constructions may not be tangible or have definite structure (race), there are real consequences (racism).

Power

Power is, and is structured by, social constructions, ideologies, and discourses (Foucault, 1980). Power has been conceptualized in a multitude of ways, though many critical/cultural scholars sought to expand upon the dominant conception of “power-over” that relies on absolute subordination. Power is, instead, alive in the mundane and ordinary (Foucault, 1980). To Bourdieu (1991; Moi, 1991), power is exercised within our quotidian acts, how we perform the *habitus* within different *fields*; power is both dictated and created by our language, and our access to power is reflected by how well we “play the game.” Power is dynamic (Allen, 2011), allowing us to exercise control, create morality, and constitute the dominant, the subjugated, and

the Other (hooks, 1992). Power is not possessed, but rather performed (Butler, 1988) and domination is not generally coercive, but discursive (Moshin, 2022). Foucault (1980) also viewed power vis-à-vis the Panopticon, where people become self-governing just by the internalized potential of being watched or policed by others, and biopower, which is an extension of power through bodies (Taylor, 2011).

Hegemony. Counter to how it is often conceived, power frequently operates with consent (Lull, 1995). Antonio Gramsci (1971) recognized this as hegemony, or when, “subordinate groups (women, workers, or ethnic minorities) willingly participate in practices that are not necessarily in their best interests because they perceive some tangible benefit” (Artz and Murphy, 2000, n.p. cited in Allen, 2011). Hegemony is disguised as a culture’s “common sense” and operates through language, discourses, ideologies, and actions as a way of (re)affirming dominant control (Lull, 1995). When consent is revoked by societal or organizational members as an attempt to “undermine or overthrow dominant order,” it is a resistive, or counter-hegemonic act (Allen, 2011, p. 31). This is a critical component of the theory that substantiates how power is dynamic, always shifting and changing (Gramsci, 1971); the actions that we make can either reinforce dominant ideologies (orthodoxic), or counter those ideologies (heterodoxic) (Bourdieu cited in Moi, 1991). As a result, hegemony fails when social resistance is stronger than a dominant ideology, thus fostering a culture-wide shift (Lull, 1995).

Media and Power. The media have played an irrefutable role in creating, shaping, and transmitting dominant, hegemonic messages along with constituting social identity (Allen, 2011). The media is the medium by which prevailing societal ideals are reproduced (Lull, 1995). One of the most performative displays of the media’s influence and power is via moral panics (Nicholas

& O'Malley, 2013). Based largely on the work of Stanley Cohen (1972), moral panics encompass cultural conflicts and, "arise out of considerable moral disturbances rooted in significant structural and value changes within society" (Young, 2008, p. 4). The media play the role of both conduit and creator in the development of a moral panic (Nicholas & O'Malley, 2013), and the momentum of a moral panic makes it, to some extent, self-fulfilling (Young, 2008). Moral panics are, fundamentally, a struggle of doxa (see Moi, 1991), and often represent an attempt of a dominant group to retain and keep their power through fear-stoking and/or instilling division (Hall, 1985).

Race, Whiteness, and Postrace

Race. Race is a social construction (Hall, 1985) and is not, in fact, biologically-based. Race is what we make it up to be, imagined, yet not imaginary (Thurlow, 2009), and serves as an example of predominant and prevailing ideologies and power (Hall, 1985). Though dominantly conceived of as an expression of phenotypic traits, race is semiotic (ibid.) in that phenotype does not inherently "mean," though we create meanings from it. Race is, to Hall (1997) a "floating signifier," meaning that race is not fixed, but rather, dynamic, contextual/historical, and always-changing; it's akin to the language and discourse which create and reinforce our conception(s) of race. Race is complex; it has served, among other things, as a way of constituting and policing the Other (Allen, 2011), a justification of blatant coercion, domination, exploitation, and as a way to differentiate bodies (Omi & Winant, 2004). Dominant conceptions of race are, like language, inherited and intersubjective; race is a sociohistorical concept (ibid.). Like other hegemonic ideologies, repetition, especially in media, matters and reifies these conceptions of race (Moshin, 2022).

Whiteness. Central, yet mostly invisible, in dominant conceptions of race is Whiteness (Shome, 2000). Whiteness is typically understood through phenotypic markers, though it is also a social construction. Whiteness has been theorized as: property (Harris, 1993), an achievement (Dyer, 2005), and, often, liminal (Moshin & Crosby, 2018). Whiteness is liminal by nature of it, like race, being a social construction; one can be White or “non-White” depending on the context (i.e. the historical transformation of Jewish people from classified as “Black” to “White”) (Moshin & Crosby, 2018). Like race and other social constructions/ideologies, Whiteness is a discursively attained/achieved identity and is enacted or performed (Dyer, 2005). As property (Harris, 1993), Whiteness is exclusive; it is guarded, valuable, and unable to be utilized unless it is possessed. Why would one want to “possess” Whiteness? It’s because Whiteness has benefits and privileges (McIntosh, 1989) that are not afforded to those who are “non-White.” To achieve Whiteness, then, is to possess social power (Dyer, 2005). This makes the “place” of Whiteness so valuable within our societal fabric. Consequently, race matters because of its ability to draw these arbitrary and imagined boundaries.

Postrace. Race is ideological and those ideologies manifest in different ways. Hierarchies and power are protected through a range of discourses for instance, postrace ideology. Postrace is a dominant and pervasive ideology that works to reaffirm the invisibility and power of Whiteness and the White supremacist culture in which we live (Landsburg, 2018). Postrace operates through the hegemonic belief that we, as a collective, no longer need to talk about race or racial differences because we have “attained” racial equity and equality (ibid.). Postracial arguments are often made to counter feelings of “White guilt” or fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), which then, in turn, minimizes the lived experiences of minoritized groups, silences important conversations,

and suffocates the ways in which racism is systemic (Holmes, 2015). Critical Race Theory was created as a means of examining and problematizing unhelpful ideologies like postrace, and, through conversation, acknowledge that there is still work to be done before we can *actually* achieve “postrace.”

Critical Race Theory

This analysis relies upon understanding Critical Race Theory as both a concept and praxis. This section is intended to demystify CRT by defining it, presenting its founding principles and history, exploring the ways in which CRT has been studied or employed in research, and reviewing criticism about the theory.

Definition

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an analytical framework and movement, predominantly in the academic fields of education and law, which seeks to (1) expose and (2) critique the societal and systemic relations between race, racism, and power, and thereby (3) transform them for means of procuring equity and justice (see Delgado et al., 2017; Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2019).

CRT was created by scholars in the 1980s to uplift marginalized voices and validate lived experiences that are often disempowered by the dominant (White) society, advancing its mission of eliminating (racial) oppression (Lawrence et al., 1993). In so doing, CRT posits itself upon a few core beliefs. Race, as we culturally understand it, is a social construction (not biologically-based) and possesses meaning within our day-to-day lives (Gillborn & Ladson-Billings, 2019). Racism is “endemic to American life” (Lawrence et al., 1993, p. 6) and

systemic; it is embedded within the structures and institutions that dictate our individual and collective experiences (Crenshaw et al., 2013).

When doing Critical Race work, dominant claims or narratives of neutrality and objectivity must be subject to criticism and critique, and one must understand fundamentally how history has informed the subjugation and oppression of marginalized voices (Lawrence et al., 1993). Furthermore, Derrick Bell's interest-convergence hypothesis, conceptualized by Delgado et al. (2017) as, "when whites allow breakthroughs for blacks only when it serves whites' interests" (p. 41), and Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, the understanding that our individual experiences are shaped by our unique and intersecting identities, (see Crenshaw et al., 2013) are theoretical pillars of CRT.

History

Critical Race Theory resulted from the critical (legal) studies and radical feminist movements beginning after the Civil Rights era of the 1960s (Delgado et al., 2017). In the summer of 1989, scholars began to lay the foundation for CRT at a workshop outside of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The late American lawyer Derrick Bell is known as the father of CRT and Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic are the most prominent authors of Critical Race theory, discourse, and practices. Additional principal figures of the movement include: Kimberlé Crenshaw, Alan Freeman, Angela Harris, Charles Lawrence, Cheryl Harris, bell hooks, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams (Delgado et al., 2017). CRT largely remained a topic only known or discussed in graduate-level education. Within the past 15 years, authors/activists like Michelle Alexander and Ibram X. Kendi have written influential pieces based on CRT for public

consumption, though, for the most part, CRT had not entered the greater public discursive field until 2020.

During the presidential debate on September 29, 2020, former president Donald Trump was asked why his administration terminated federal racial sensitivity training sessions that included tenets of CRT. This was the first instance where CRT took on a national spotlight. Wallace-Wells (2021) revealed that Trump was informed by conservative activist Christopher Rufo about the “dangers” of such practices (CRT). Rufo gathered recordings and documents sent to him regarding anti-bias training sessions during the pandemic. He then wrote articles where he attempted to uncover the “truth” about CRT, which were scouted by the Trump administration. From there, CRT became a topic of national recognition and infamy, as to be explored in this analysis.

Scholarship

CRT has been studied and theorized in a multitude of ways. Methods range from using CRT as a theoretical means of analysis, primarily examining institutions like government, news media, and education (see Woodson, 2015; Nawaway & Elmsary, 2021; Sleeter, 2017, respectively), to making sense of discourses and practices encircling CRT as a text itself. Most studies use a qualitative approach. A substantial portion of the academic literature is derived from researchers using CRT as a framework for analyzing educational institutions and pedagogy. Furthermore, scholars have used CRT as a means of investigating the contemporary world and major events, principally in U.S. and western culture. Few scholars have studied discourses surrounding CRT or the recent CRT “debate” beginning in late 2020. This research is attempting to fill that gap.

CRT in Academia and Pedagogy. Critical Race Theory has become intrinsically tied to education and pedagogy. It has been used as a way of understanding and investigating the greater educational climate and as a foundation for addressing the historical contexts of race, minoritization, and relations of power within the classroom (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Though originally residing at the graduate level, Critical Race Theory has now been employed and adapted for all educational stages; however, this does not mean kindergarteners are asked to recite Bell's interest convergence hypothesis. Rather, as clarified by Ledesma and Calderòn (2014), CRT has been developed for a range of educational standings that are implemented differently between K-12 and higher education.

For K-12, CRT isn't taught directly, though is employed by educators as a way of informing their pedagogy and praxis (Ledesma & Calderòn, 2014). Beginning at the undergraduate level is when students then learn directly about CRT and how to use it as an investigative framework. They emphasize that, for those using CRT as an educational tool on any level, it is imperative for CRT educators to act in synchrony with the core mission of CRT and the critical legal literature from which it came. CRT educators must be committed to eliminating oppression and CRT scholarship demands accountability and integrity, especially in the face of intense scrutiny (see Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ledesma & Calderòn, 2014).

Media Coverage. CRT has often been used as a framework for analyzing news coverage and other forms of media (television, movies). Using CRT as an epistemic foundation, many scholars have problematized how the media have looked at major socio-political events regarding race, along with how harmful (racial) stereotypes have proliferated (Delgado et al., 2017). A Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the most common methodology for this approach.

Analyzing partisan media coverage of the 2017 “Unite the Right” rallies in Charlottesville, for example, el-Nawawy and Elmsary (2021) used CRT to investigate how their texts framed race and racism in the U.S. They found that the event was narrativized differently depending on the source, though it was often seen through the lens of a postrace ideology. Kil (2019), in a similar study of the “All Lives Matter” movement, referred to this as a “neoliberal newsroom practice,” or unhelpful news coverage that reinforces and upholds a white supremacist paradigm. Both scholars found their sources used polarization tactics (“us v. them”), rendered Whiteness invisible, and ignored the existence of systemic racism.

Discourse(s) Encompassing CRT. This is an area that has been under-researched, likely because of CRT’s new (re)emergence in the public sphere. Different from investigating media coverage through a CRT framework, this is research that has specifically examined media coverage of CRT itself. A Critical Discourse Analysis is the predominant methodology for this work. Through a CDA, Mączyński et al. (2022) investigated biases and representations of CRT in *Breitbart* articles and found that CRT was often conflated with claims of child exploitation and over-emphasis of Marxist origins. Similarly, Benson (2022) proposed that the debate surrounding CRT in American public schools is filled with empty arguments and scapegoating, which is used to instill division and uphold hegemonic White supremacy. Both analyses remarked on the influence of alt-right ideology on the erosion of media and media trust, democracy, and a hallmark of the post-Truth era in which we live (Benson, 2022).

Criticism and Critique

Critical Race Theory has been subject to criticism, skepticism, and debate since its nascence (Crenshaw, 2011). Common scholarly critiques of CRT are that it can inspire a

hyper-focus on race, offers problems without solutions, and does not adequately aid in correcting oppression.

Mainstream legal scholar Richard Posner described CRT as the “lunatic core’ of ‘radical legal egalitarianism” (in Crenshaw, 2011, p.1310). Darder and Torres (2004) claimed that CRT has a “hyper-emphasis on race” (cited in Ledesma & Calderòn, 2014, p. 207) and offers an insufficient conception of race itself within the theory. Additionally, it was suggested by both Rosen (1996) and Su (2005) that CRT helps to address and identify systemic racism, though does not offer sufficient solutions for its combatance. Instead, they contest that it may inadvertently promote cynicism towards potential change. Dixson and Rousseau (2006) similarly agreed that CRT has made advancements in understanding the way race is socially created and enacted, especially from an educational and pedagogical standpoint; however, they make clear that CRT is not a panacea for these larger, systemic problems and there is still work to be done.

Since being introduced over 20 years ago, CRT has undoubtedly advanced efforts toward promoting racial equity through education and activism. Though there is still significant work to be done, CRT has been an integral component for understanding how we may continue to eliminate racial oppression. After a review of previous scholarship, this paper is attempting to substantively explore how CRT has been talked about and (re)created in the news media, which is an area that is both under-researched and under-theorized. Because of CRT’s continued presence in national discussions, its contentious nature, and the varying ways in which it is defined, discourse surrounding CRT is an arena that is ripe for research.

Method

The goals of this analysis were (1) to uncover and examine how certain implicit and explicit messages, ideologies, and hidden power structures are manifested and reified vis-à-vis news media discourses about Critical Race Theory and (2) to understand how dominant discourses surrounding CRT have changed over time.

Rationale

To accomplish these goals, I employed a qualitative Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), informed by McKerrow (1989), van Dijk (1993), and Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000). This method provided a foundation for investigating key phrases in mediated texts, unearthing what those phrases are doing or enacting, and helping to make arguments from these discoveries. To further contextualize, Norman Fairclough (1995, p. 132), a founder of the critical discourse movement, defined CDA as aiming to:

systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power. (cited in Locke, 2004).

Critical Discourse Analysis takes as its guiding principle that there are inherent connections between language, meaning making, and power (van Dijk, 1993). This is the nexus for this discussion and for substantiating how power and hegemony work through and are reified by discourse, à la Foucault (Foucault, 1980), Gramsci (see Lull, 1995), Hill (Hill, 2008), and Hall (Hall, 1985). In other words, there is something “there” in the language surrounding CRT in

the news media, and that something “there” broadly reifies and reinforces dominant, harmful ideologies.

The (news) media play a significant role in disseminating and reinforcing hegemonic messages and ideologies (see Yang, 1999; Lears, 1985). This is because journalists are not simply gatekeepers of knowledge, but duly producers of knowledge (Moshin, 2022). Through language, “journalists construct and portray themselves as those who are worthy of using said language as a semiotic resource not only in a public way, but in a way that conveys truths to others” (Moshin & Thurlow, 2014). Investigating news media, then, is fitting for examining larger cultural “truths” and how they’ve been brought into being. News media texts were chosen because of their cultural significance, historic ability to quickly and easily share information, and transmit ideology en masse (Hall, 1996). Thus, CDA is used here to examine how “we,” vis-à-vis the news media, talk about Critical Race Theory, uncover how discourses surrounding CRT both matter and (re)produce harmful ideologies, and also to demystify CRT as an inflated and enigmatic social construction.

Source Selection

It was important to draw from a range of popular news media sources in order to investigate the ways in which CRT was talked about from different vantage points. Legacy media articles from the *New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, combined with transcripts from partisan outlets—*Fox News*, *MSNBC*, and *CNN*—served as the texts for this analysis. The sources were selected based on their readership/viewership and perceived partisanship; neither reputability nor tendency to report factual information were considered.

Summer of 2021 was when coverage of CRT reached a climax in the news media. During this time, CRT was mentioned almost daily in every major news source and became a quotidian subject of “debate.” This was validated by a graph (Appendix A) derived by GoogleTrends which tracked how frequently the term “critical race theory” was searched for over time. Seeking to examine how the discourse(s) evolved, I chose two date ranges from which to draw articles. The first was September 1st through October 4th, 2020, which included the presidential debate where CRT (re)emerged on the national stage, and May 30th through July 25th, 2021, which was the “peak” of coverage on the subject.

Having identified these date ranges, I then used NexisUni, a subset of Lexisnexis, to aggregate news articles and transcripts from the *New York Times*, *CNN*, *MSNBC*, and *Fox News*, along with ProQuest for *The Wall Street Journal* articles.¹ Because I was interested in looking at the discourse and “debate” on a greater level, I cast a wide net and allowed any article that mentioned, and was not necessarily solely about, CRT.² Therefore, any article that included CRT was fair game to be selected and analyzed. 621 articles populated amongst the five sources with the search prompt: “‘critical race theory’ OR CRT.”³

Sample

With the abundance of available articles, it was necessary to refine the corpus in order to respect the integrity of the CDA methodology by doing close readings of the texts. Though there is no definite way to sample qualitatively, the aim was for the sample to be “rigorous” as a means of ensuring the study’s reliability, validity, and generalizability (Cypress, 2017). I opted for the

¹ NexisUni did not populate results for *WSJ* articles using the same search criteria.

² Articles that were solely about CRT were also considered.

³ To further validate the results from NexisUni, the same criteria were searched using ProQuest, which yielded a similar number of total articles.

“down-sampling” method proposed by Baker and Levon (2015) which validated that an appropriate qualitative sample size may be around 50 texts. With this in mind, I chose to limit the corpus to four articles per source (5) per time period (2) for an even total of 40 articles. With the understanding that this was an investigation in an area without much prior research, 40 articles seemed to be an appropriate starting point.

From there, I sorted all available articles into chronological order and then used a random number generator to select the articles for analysis.⁴ The random number generator yielded a representative (simple) random sample, which helped to bolster the generalizability of the findings.⁵ Having the articles selected, I was then ready to code and analyze the texts.

Coding

To help with the coding process, I used ATLAS.ti, a robust qualitative coding software. Through this program, I was able to upload the articles/transcripts, code, and keep track of the codings. Articles were coded as: supporting/defending CRT, opposing CRT, or “neutral” and then further broken down by: liberal argument, conservative argument, and reporting v. opining. After these preliminary codings, I identified several other discursive and rhetorical strategies such as: battle/war rhetoric, disease/infection rhetoric, conflations, collocations, associations, misrepresenting/false arguments, attributions of blame/villainization, and fear-stoking. Because of ongoing interaction with scholarly materials, more codes were created such as: ideographs,

⁴ If the same number was generated twice, the second result was rejected and only the first article remained.

⁵ Only four articles from *MSNBC* and five articles from the *New York Times* were available in the first date range of September 1- October 4, 2020. Within that selection, two transcripts from *MSNBC* were almost entirely the presidential debate of September 29, 2020. Additionally, two articles from the *Times* were nearly identical, so they were coded the same.

biopower, interpellation, etc. From there, I began to investigate what the text was doing or enacting through the language.

Findings & Analysis

The following section will explore the ideologies and systems of power laden within the news media discourse(s) surrounding Critical Race Theory. This will encompass: how news media discourses surrounding Critical Race Theory have transformed over time, the phenomena of utterance (re)production, and the systematic co-optation, commodification, bodyfication, and colonization of CRT.

The Shapeshifting Nature of Critical Race Theory

Between September, 2020 and July, 2021, the discourse(s) surrounding CRT in the news media transformed, adopting different characteristics, narratives, and ideologies. The articles and transcripts embodied certain timbres distinct to each time period. Through framing and narrativization, the discourse(s), and, subsequently, the nature and meaning of CRT, transformed. Over time, the news media created, transmitted, reified, and inflated both an epistemic “battle” and a monster. This section will serve to give a broad overview of the discourse(s) in relation to each date range. The ways in which this language works to create, disseminate, and reify harmful ideologies and distort CRT will be discussed in later sections.

From Sensitivity Trainings to Indoctrinating Your Children

September-October, 2020. Beginning in September, 2020, the news media began to report about Critical Race Theory in relation to former president Donald Trump’s decision to end federal racial sensitivity/diversity training sessions. Regardless of source and valence, nearly every article or transcript introduced CRT through this frame:

Fox News: “The Trump White House just killed critical race theory training in federal agencies” (2020, September 7).

CNN: “President Trump's administration is taking new steps to end federal agency training programs on race sensitivity” (2020, September 5).

NYT: “A memo sent to agency heads on Friday called efforts that often focus on promoting awareness of racism [training sessions] “divisive” and “un-American propaganda.”” (NYT, 2020, September 4).

WSJ: “Moderator Chris Wallace asked President Trump during last week's debate why he "directed federal agencies to end racial-sensitivity training that addresses white privilege or critical race theory.”” (2020, October 4).

In so doing, CRT was immediately conflated with training sessions about race/diversity and *also* framed in opposition to the Trump administration’s beliefs. Thus, CRT took on a partisan stance.

During this time period, there was a high emphasis on CRT in relation to Donald Trump and the federal government (Fox News; 2020, September 7, September 8, September 15, September 30; WSJ, 2020, September 19, September 25, October 4; NYT, 2020, September 4, September 6, September 17; MSNBC, 2020, September 17, September 18; CNN, 2020, September 5, September 7, September 8, September 30); universities/academics:

“liberals like this, because they saw CRT undermining the soft and hard sciences in academia, they started to infect everything with this ideology of race” (Fox News, 2020, September 7)

“This stuff [CRT] is so obviously poison, fatal to any society that ingests it. It came from the universities, of course, like all bad ideas” (Fox News, 2020, September 8).

These were only two of several examples.

and the 1619 project, an initiative by the *New York Times* that had a similar aim to CRT by recognizing the centrality of race/ism in America’s founding (MSNBC, 2020, September 18).

These associations characterized the first date range and worked to form multiple, unclear depictions of CRT. Generally, CRT had something to do with Trump, sensitivity/diversity trainings, came from universities, and was either political indoctrination for government workers (WSJ, 2020, October 4; Fox News, 2020, September 8), or a political “boogeyman” (CNN, 2020, September 8). In uttering these associations, CRT also became a matter of partisanship; it became attached to anything inherently liberal (universities, anti-racist narratives, etc.) Furthermore, a clear, accurate definition of CRT was not provided in the articles from this date range.

May-July, 2021. As time progressed, the discourse(s) surrounding CRT proliferated, changing shape and texture. In this time period, there were also >130% more articles mentioning CRT than the first (43 v. 578). This shows that CRT, very quickly, became a topic of national concern. What changed? Trump was now only mentioned on three occasions in relation to CRT (Fox News, 2021, June 1; NYT, 2021, July 3; NYT, 2021, July 13) and concern regarding CRT in the government and sensitivity/diversity trainings was now notably absent. Instead, this period was characterized by: (1) a new conservative hypervigilance regarding the threat of CRT in schools, (2) a liberal disavowal of this conservative hypervigilance, (3) the the claim that CRT was rewriting history, (4) associations with President Joe Biden and (5) Christopher Rufo, (6) the ornamental use of CRT in the news media, and (7) a greater focus on the CRT “debate” or “battle.” Here are a few of several examples:

1. “somebody is trying to harm your child ... that's what's going on in these classrooms... What would you do with any predator [CRT] when after your child?” (Fox News, 2021, June 3).
2. “Republican politicians have been hyping critical race theory as a threat to the impressionable minds of America's children” (CNN, 2021, July 7).

3. “[Unidentified Speaker] Don't rewrite factual history or indoctrinate. Just present the facts” (CNN, 2021, July 7).
4. “It's unacceptable and we need to hold the Biden Administration accountable. They are destroying our nation from within” (Fox News, 2021, June 1). “The furor over critical race theory owes its greatest debt to Christopher Rufo” (NYT, 2021, July 13).
5. “The furor over critical race theory owes its greatest debt to Christopher Rufo” (NYT, 2021, July 13).
6. “The heated issue of reparations for the victims of slavery may remain unresolved, but... One need not embrace so-called Critical Race Theory to understand the critical importance of retelling this painful tale” (WSJ, 2021, July 24).
7. “Coming up, the battle over critical race theory” (CNN, 2021, July 7).

To elaborate on the ornamental use of CRT, this refers to when CRT was casually used or referenced by the news media, predominantly without context, though was not the subject of discussion. There were several occasions where CRT was mentioned either with a barrage of other political issues or for seemingly no reason other than it had become a topic of national interest (as a result of these misrepresentations in the news media). The example above (6) was a review published by the *WSJ* for a book about the history of slavery. It was only in the final few sentences when CRT was mentioned in a way that seemingly served no purpose other than to acknowledge it was a popular partisan trope currently being discussed. Thus, CRT was simply “thrown out there,” an ornament, as it were.

Furthermore, the aspect of a public “debate” or “battle” where Americans held a strong opinion about CRT is particular to this date range. In the previous time period, there was no “debate” over CRT because it was ostensibly *new* to most of the public; most Americans had never heard about CRT before the presidential debate of 2020. Instead, it was almost solely the

news media that was warning about CRT itself (Fox News, 2020, September 8) or the ensuing “debate” (CNN, 2020, September 8). With that, the alignment with “for” or “against” CRT was a fairly new concept that developed over the course of a few months. This worked to further conflate CRT with a partisan stance, though inherently it was never aligned with one (Delgado et al., 2017).

What is particularly interesting is that, within the matter of eight months, CRT was revealed to be a “disease” (Fox News, 2020, September 8) that had infected nearly every public school in the U.S.; a liberal effort to indoctrinate (White) children. CRT had *seldom* been associated, or even mentioned, with public schools or curricula before September, 2020; therefore, it was astounding that, within the matter of months, CRT was, apparently, everywhere, in every classroom:

“[CRT] has taken a dominant position in many elite institutions, including public-school bureaucracies and the graduate schools training new teachers and professors. Parents, honest journalists and lawmakers should continue to combat the wave of misinformation, share stories about the damage critical race theory is doing to their communities, and develop a plan to combat it in local institutions” (WSJ, 2021, June 8).

This furor over CRT in public schools was, without doubt, an extension of what had been promulgated and inflated by the news media beginning that previous September. Furthermore, anyone who has worked in K-12 education would validate that it would be an *extremely* rare process to change curricula in only the course of eight months.

The Bigger Picture

Overall, between September, 2020 and July, 2021, the discourses surrounding CRT, and the meaning of CRT itself, changed and transformed. CRT entered the public zeitgeist as (an aspect of) racial sensitivity/diversity training sessions and, just eight months later, became a

partisan monster with the goal of corrupting America and (White) children. Importantly, none of these claims accurately represented CRT, its aim, or purpose. Thus, mischaracterized by the news media, CRT became a divisive and enigmatic monster that was sold to and adopted by the public, who then continued to reproduce these ideologies themselves. This was the process of colonization, and *this* is where the investigation begins.

Utterance (Re)Production

Central to this analysis is a trope this paper will refer to as, “utterance (re)production.” It is the argument that even the *utterance* of a harmful ideology can work to create, reify, and disseminate (produce) that harmful ideology, *even if* the intent of the utterance is not inherently to do so. It’s helpful to visualize this like a bag of tea entering hot water; an actor (an institution like the government or the media) dips a bag of tea (ideology) into the water (the public consciousness or social imaginary) and the tea, thus, disseminates and steeps (reproducing and strengthening the ideology). Additionally, the more an ideology is uttered or repeated within dominant discourse(s), the more real (Hall, 1985) and invisible (Thurlow, 2009) it becomes. This hypothesis is an extension of Gramsci’s (1971) theory of hegemony, Butler’s (1988) theory of performativity, and work by critical/cultural scholars like Thurlow (2009), Hall (1985), and Hill (2008) that focus on the power and reifying properties of discourse and language.

Two crucial components for the efficacy of utterance (re)production are: (1) the lack of contextualization or clarification by the agent and (2) repetition. If an agent transmits a harmful/false utterance without providing the greater context or facts to counter it the ideology becomes repeated, dominant, and, thus, more “real;” the utterance is (re)produced. For example, when the *New York Times* published the article titled, “Trump Calls For ‘Patriotic Education’ to

Defend American History From the Left” (NYT, 2020, September 17) and framed it around how Trump has described Critical Race Theory, without either correcting or contextualizing his claims, the *Times*, then, carelessly reproduced a harmful ideology:

“[Quoting Trump] “Critical race theory is being forced into our children’s schools, it’s being imposed into workplace trainings, and it’s being deployed to rip apart friends, neighbors and families,” Mr. Trump said” (NYT, 2020, September 17).

“The president focused much of his speech on his claim that American schools have become infected with revisionist ideas about the nation’s founding and history, producing a new generation of “Marxist” activists and adherents of “critical race theory” who believe American society to be fundamentally racist and wicked — and who have taken to the streets in recent months” (NYT, 2020, September 17).

In the article, there were negligible efforts to combat or contextualize the disinformation that Donald Trump put forth. Thus, the reproduction of these utterances worked to: (1) spread a mischaracterized and misrepresented ideology of CRT, (2) invoke panic, and (3) reify the belief that CRT is destructive and harmful.

Furthermore, the lack of contextualization also reflects the *Times*’s use of strategic ambiguity (Ceccarelli, 1998), which is when “the power over textual signification remains with the author, who inserts both meanings into the text and who benefits economically from the polysemic [multiple meanings] interpretation” (p. 404). In this instance, the audience has the supposed freedom to “read for themselves” what CRT is. Subsequently, they also are given the liberty to “read” and believe—or not read and believe—CRT to be what Trump describes it as, which is a harmful and false mischaracterization. As a result, the *Times* benefits from not contextualizing Trump’s argument because it can be read in multiple ways to appeal to multiple audiences and ideologies. By not clarifying, adequately defining, or contextualizing CRT, the *Times* reproduces a harmful utterance that becomes reified within our social imaginary.

This is significant to the discussion of Critical Race Theory because it occurred on several occasions. Often the more “liberal” (*CNN*, *MSNBC*) or “moderate” (*NYT*) sources would discuss arguments made by “conservative” sources (*Fox News*, *WSJ*, *Trump*), and would then either forego correcting the misdefinitions and mischaracterizations of CRT and/or simply attack the conservative source. In most instances, the news media rarely made efforts to accurately define CRT, its aim, or purpose. Like the *Times*, MSNBC (2020, September 17) did not resolve Trump’s mischaracterizations of CRT:

“[T]he President made another attempt to focus the campaign away from the virus to what he calls law in order. In a dark theme speech at the National Archives within view of our most cherished founding documents, he warned of what he calls a left-wing agenda hostile to America.

[Quoting Trump] Students in our universities are inundated with critical race theory. This is a Marxist doc holding that America is a wicked and racist nation, that even young children are complicit in oppression and that our entire society must be radically transformed” (MSNBC, 2020, September 17).

Though MSNBC was predominately defensive of CRT (MSNBC, 2021, June 18; MSNBC, 2021, July 5), they still work to reify Trump’s mischaracterization by not countering or clarifying what CRT actually is or does. Thus, their utterance reproduces a harmful ideology.

The repetition of harmful ideologies without context, especially in the news media, is key to their success, survival, and reification. Roth-Gordon et al. (2020) describe how repetition creates and makes real: “Media representations, and the everyday repetitions of catchphrases ... powerfully solidify stereotyped meanings of blackness in the white imagination at the same time that they strip a community of its prized resources” (p. 111). Mischaracterizations of CRT, when uttered and repeated in dominant discourses, *become* what CRT is. In the same way that stereotypes are repeated and then cemented into the (White) social imaginary, misrepresentations

of CRT also become cemented. Furthermore, in doing so, CRT is stripped of its essentiality, aim, and purpose. This is a function of utterance (re)production.

Of course, there are resistive strategies, counter-hegemonic ideologies, and ways in which societies and individuals work to combat the reproduction of harmful utterances (Lull, 1995). This is encompassed by Hall's (1980) encoding/decoding hypothesis, placing autonomy and liberation into the hands of individuals and groups. However, with the passivity in which Americans consume news and the fragmentation of audiences (Weeks, 2022), it can be easy to miss or forgo the contextualization of a harmful utterance, assuming it is provided. As a result, harmful and false ideologies are discursively created vis-à-vis utterances; the utterances, when repeated, continue to spread, and reify these malignant ideologies. It's a continuous discursive cycle that works to maintain power, subjugation, hegemony, and, in this instance, helps inflate CRT as a monster.

Inflating the Monster

“Truth is a thing of this world: It is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its own regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.” (Foucault, 1980 cited in Taylor, 1984, p. 153).

Through discourse(s), Critical Race Theory became systematically colonized vis-à-vis the processes of co-optation, commodification, and the employment of biopower/hegemony. As to be explored and expanded upon in detail, these efforts worked to transform our cultural conception of Critical Race Theory from a tool for uplifting marginalized voices into a political

tactic to indoctrinate children, destroy America and its values, and overthrow the dominant status of Whiteness.

It is through this process that Critical Race Theory became a monster. To dip into metaphor, Critical Race Theory was discursively transformed into a giant, inflatable monster. The dominant news media “picked out” CRT when it was mentioned by Trump in the 2020 presidential debate. From there, through their reporting, they repeatedly mischaracterized CRT as: racist (Fox News, 2020, September 8), rewriting history (WSJ, 2020, October 4), and divisive (Fox News, 2020, September 7) among other things. This made CRT monstrous—threatening—and it was through repetition and commodification of these mischaracterizations that CRT grew larger, more menacing—inflated. This was a process of semiotic restructuring that discursively reproduced and reified CRT as a public threat and the object of a moral panic. Though it’s critical to remember that, at the core of this monster, was just hot air.

Co-Optation, Commandeering, & Hijacking

Both the meaning and cultural understanding of Critical Race Theory have transformed in a process of semiotic “alchemy” (see Thurlow & Jaworski, 2006). Through discourse, Critical Race Theory became subjected to a deliberate semiotic hijacking, commandeering, and bastardization, that alienated, evoked in a Marxist sense (see Horowitz, 2011), the referent from the sign. In so doing, the news media (re)created and systematically obfuscated Critical Race Theory. In other words, CRT transformed— it adopted new meaning(s) dependent on how it was presented, which, in turn, resulted in a fundamental perversion of our cultural conception of what CRT is and does. This was accomplished through misdefinitions, connotations, rhetorical tactics, logical fallacies, framings, and, fundamentally, language.

The Alchemy of CRT. The process of alchemy is described by Thurlow and Jaworski (2006) as “the transformation of seemingly nothing into something” (p. 102). It is a somewhat magical process that reconstitutes meaning through the employment of semiotic alteration. To elaborate and adapt for this analysis, CRT, through discourse(s), transformed from having a determinate meaning into possessing multiple, varied meanings. Though CRT did not begin as “nothing,” its definite meaning was transformed to “mean” what the news media mischaracterized it as.

To mount some of several examples, CRT *became*: “racist” (Fox News, 2020, September 8), “indoctrination” (NYT, 2020, September 17), anti-White (WSJ, 2020, October 4), and anti-American (Fox News, 2020, September 8), etc. through mere utterances. Thus, these mischaracterizations worked to transform CRT’s meaning. Paradoxically, because CRT took on so many, varied meanings, it *also* essentially meant nothing—a process of reverse alchemy. This was evident by the news media’s frequent misdefinitions and ornamental use of CRT.

Can Anyone Please Tell Me What the F*%k CRT Is?

Misdefinitions. Critical Race Theory has arguably become one of the most misunderstood and misconstrued concepts of the past few years. Undoubtedly, this is a direct result of how it has been covered in the news media. Taking form nearly 3 decades ago, scholars have defined CRT in several ways, yet their definitions have largely remained faithful to its essence and core purpose. However, when CRT (re)emerged on the public stage in 2020, it no longer rang to the tune of “a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 3). Instead, CRT was both introduced and defined as:

“the stuff that claims all white people are racist in this inherently racist country” (Fox News, 2020, September 7).

“when your employer hires a lavishly paid consultant to tell half the room they're damned to hell because of the way they were born. In a word, critical race theory is racism” (Fox News, 2020, September 8).

“the view that the law and other societal institutions are based on socially constructed theories of race that benefit white people” (NYT, 2020, September 17)

“a radical ideology that seeks to use race as a means of moral, social and political revolution” (WSJ, 2021, June 18)

Not only are these (mis)definitions deliberately inflammatory (evident through the use of heightened and evocative language), but they are blatantly wrong. Even in the more generous definition provided by the *Times*, CRT is still rendered unclear. The definition evokes a strategic ambiguity (see Ceccarelli, 1998) by not adequately capturing the aim or purpose of the theory. Furthermore, though theories are indeed social constructs by nature of them being intangible and imagined, it would be more appropriate in the context of CRT to clarify that “race” is the object of social construction rather than the theories themselves (see Gilborn & Ladson-Billings, 2019). When the emphasis is put on “theory” opposed to “race” it serves to de-legitimize or invalidate the theories. These (mis)definitions not only mischaracterize the theory and its aim, but, given that language is both relative and determinate (Sapir, 1929; Whorf, 2012), they also hold the power to plant ideological seeds and pollinate a new, co-opted conception of CRT into existence, as discussed in later sections.

Co-optation is theorized by Bell et al. (2019) as a process, “which entails appropriating and reconstructing ... identities” (p. 324). This appropriation is both a priori, evident from the improper use of the term, and epistemic, evident from CRT’s signified reconstruction. Within

this reconstruction, there is simultaneously an alienation of the referent from the signifier. Marxist alienation is defined by Horowitz (2011) as, “a surrender of control through separation from an essential attribute of the self, and, more specifically, separation of an actor or agent from the conditions of meaningful agency” (p. 1). When CRT is (re)defined by the news media, it becomes alienated from its essentiality, its being. In so doing, CRT also loses the ability to “mean” what it is intended to mean; this is the removal of agency. This process can also be referred to as a hijacking (see Harold, 2007), a commandeering, and/or a bastardization of CRT. In these utterances, the news media have taken/appropriated CRT, as an entity with an attached identity/meaning, and fundamentally reconstructed it.

Messing With It—Conflations, Collocations, and Associations. This co-optation was furthered by the news media’s use of conflations and collocations. Across the board, Critical Race Theory was most often associated with, or referred to as being, racial sensitivity and diversity training. Here are some of several instances:

“[Trump is] pushing back on things like critical race theory and racial sensitivity training” (CNN, 2020, September 7).

“trainings in microaggressions... and other critical race theory essentials” (Fox News, 2020, September 8)

“Trump Moves to Cancel Contracts for Government Sensitivity Training” (NYT, 2020, September 4).

“The truth about Critical Race Theory; Trump is right. Training sessions for government employees amounted to political indoctrination” (WSJ, 2020, October 4).

Mounted in these examples, CRT fundamentally *became* training sessions, further co-opting its meaning. With varying frequency, CRT was also conflated and associated with: BLM, protesting, and George Floyd, “critical race theory, defunding the police, their [democrat’s] coddling of

Antifa, and BLM” (Fox News, 2021, June 1); White privilege, “The administration sent a memo to agencies on Friday railing against white privilege and critical race theory” (CNN, 2020, September 5); transgender rights, “school boards are now battlegrounds over cultural flash points like critical race theory and transgender rights” (MSNBC, 2021, July 5); Sharia Law, “And critical race theory is the new boogeyman. It has replaced Sharia law” (MSNBC, 2021, June 18); reparations (Fox News, 2021, June 1); the 1619 Project (Fox News, 2020, September 7; MSNBC, 2020, September 18); and pornography, “whether it's the pornography that's being taught the critical race theory that's being taught, the classroom environment has become predatorial” (Fox News, 2021, June 3).

These conflations and collocations, like the (mis)definitions, were not arbitrary; they were employed pejoratively and hold power by distorting CRT’s meaning. In drawing these connections, the news media (1) grossly mischaracterized and misrepresented CRT, thus, simultaneously (2) co-opted its meaning and identity, and (3) obfuscated CRT through the surplus of conflicting associations that worked to render CRT unclear, enigmatic, and potentially threatening.

The Space Between Myth and Ideology. The use of multiple and varied misdefinitions, collocations, conflations, and associations worked to fundamentally transform both the meaning and perception of Critical Race Theory. As a result, CRT adopted multiple meanings and conceptions within the social imaginary *and simultaneously* came to be a term that held power and could advance a political position through its utterance.

This is a process by which CRT became an ideograph. Theorized by McGee (1980), an ideograph is a theoretical model that accounts for the coexistence of both “myth” and “ideology”

in a rhetorical device; it represents the connection between an abstract word or phrase (the sign) and the word or phrase's cultural symbolic value (signified) while simultaneously revealing the word or phrase's ability to "control "power" and to influence (if not determine) the shape and texture of each individual's "reality.'" (McGee, 1980, p. 5).

In other words, an ideograph is an abstract, enigmatic, yet purposive term that relies on mental conditionings, context, connections, and feelings in order to rhetorically shape and reinforce certain societal and individual beliefs, usually for a political means. They are products of culture and language (McGee, 1980). McGee (1980) uses examples of "rule of law," or, "justice" to illustrate and further characterize ideographs as, "the basic structural elements, the building blocks, of ideology" (p. 7). Ideographs invite both multiple readings or interpretations (polysemy) and multiple ways to feel about or perceive them (polyvalence) (see Ceccarelli, 1998).

In the case of Critical Race Theory, the news media discursively created an ideograph by excessively (mis)using and mischaracterizing the term. This repetition was internalized by the public and, thus made it a cultural product— a shared meaning making experience. Additionally, these co-opted representations evoked certain feelings, certain mental conditionings, and metaphorically "wet the palette" to what may be "underneath" or hidden within CRT. Ideographs can obfuscate through the ways in which they invite the audience to "fill in the blanks," shaped by personal experiences and inherited ideologies. This was well encompassed by critical/cultural scholar Raymond Williams (1977), describing the "creative practice" in which "tensions at the edge of semantic availability . . . active, pressing, but not yet fully articulated", find "specific articulations - new semantic figures in material practice" (cited in Rampton, 2009, p. 170).

Here, Williams (1977) touched on the discovery, creation, and intersubjectivity of meaning making (see Thurlow, 2009). To elaborate, the news media exercised this “creative practice” when misrepresenting and not contextualizing CRT. Through this, they mystified CRT—they manifested these “tensions” that were “active, pressing, but not yet fully articulated,” which invited audiences to engage in this meaning making process. It was almost a seduction; individuals could not help but have been drawn into this enigmatic, potentially threatening, “new” being. The fact that CRT could be so terrifying, hold so much meaning, with knowing so little about it—it was frightening, seductive. This seduction helped reproduce *and also* inflate CRT in the social imaginary. Subsequently, as is the nature of ideographs, this also worked to further political cause(s) and uphold hegemonic Whiteness, as to be discussed.

Bells and Whistles. Returning to the larger argument, CRT’s co-optation and obfuscation was furthered by the news media’s employment of fallacious, misrepresenting, and false arguments. The following section will explore these and how this rhetoric continued CRT’s co-optation and distortion.

There were several arguments, either mounted or professed, by the news media about CRT that were either misrepresenting or blatantly false. Commonly, these arguments were fallacious (weak/unjustified) and the most prominent tropes were: *straw-person* (fabricating an opponent’s argument so it is easier to attack) and *red herring* (bringing up an unrelated issue to detract from the opponent’s true argument). These, like the (mis)definitions and conflation, worked to further co-opt and obfuscate CRT. Here are a few, of many, examples:

STRAW-PERSON:

“It’s the stuff that claims all White people are racist in this inherently racist country” (Fox News, 2020, September 8).

“critical race theory training sessions in public agencies have pushed a deeply ideological agenda that includes reducing people to a racial essence, segregating them, and judging them by their group identity rather than individual character, behavior and merit” (WSJ, 2020, October 4).

“Now remember, their goal is a full on revolution and against the American system. So their playbook is to keep smearing America” (Fox News, 2021, June 1).

“In the classroom, critical race theory-inspired lessons have often devolved into race-based struggle sessions, with public schools forcing children to rank themselves according to a racial hierarchy, subjecting white teachers to "antiracist therapy," and encouraging parents to become "white traitors.”” (WSJ, 2021, June 28).

RED HERRING:

“[CRT] leads to discord in schools, families, and now even work. The top attribute of a great employee, positive attitude, CRT replaces that with grievance and envy, and what you're seeing on America's city streets are its results starting on campus, then leaking into unconscious bias training at work culminating in infant tile rioters who use this ideology to justify violence” (Fox News, 2020, September 7).

“There surely must be leaders in Biden administration who support critical race theory... And that it's very, very concerning. I'm a former teacher and I want to make sure that our kids are very competent in math, and in science, and in reading” (Fox News, 2021, July 22).

“The critical race theorist Richard Delgado, for example, has argued that people should be able to sue people who use racist slurs” (NYT, 2021, July 13).

These fallacious arguments were highly inflammatory and used loaded, emotional words to appeal to fears that one’s livelihood and well-being would be ravaged by CRT. These statements undoubtedly worked to mischaracterize and obfuscate CRT, thus, transforming it into something it was not. Vitaly, these arguments were unfounded; these statements only became “real” because they were uttered. Subsequently, harmful and false ideologies encompassing CRT were transmitted en masse through these co-opted misrepresentations. The news media further inflated the monster.

Whose Sign Is It Anyway? At the heart of this co-optation process was the alienation, or divorce, of referent from signifier. Baudrillard's (1983) theories of hyperrealism and Hall's (1997) "floating signifier" provide greater clarity into this process.

Simulacra. Baudrillard's (1983) simulacra (simulation) is a cornerstone of postmodern thought, and describes how reality itself has become an imitation of the model (a created artifice) *and* how we have lost the ability to differentiate between the two (i.e. artificial intelligence). He argues for three "orders" of simulacra (Felluga, 2002):

1. Initially, the artifice is able to be differentiated from the real.
2. These distinctions, then, break down as a result of the reproduction of the artifice, and the simulation threatens to replace the "real." However, with effort (i.e. political action), one can still differentiate between the two.
3. The "precession of simulacra" where differences between real and artifice are no longer distinguishable.

The simulacra (Baudrillard, 1983) helps to neatly frame the co-optation of CRT. The depictions and (mis)representations of CRT promulgated by the news media show the artifice, the simulation, the false. While this does not capture the full nuance of this process, it is a helpful tool. Below are the orders of simulacra in relation to CRT:

1. In the first order, CRT was created with a set meaning, identity, and aim constituted by its founders (the real).
2. The second order shows the emergence of the fake—when CRT (re)entered the American zeitgeist vis-à-vis the news media. Through misdefinitions, connotations, associations, and false arguments, CRT (the real) became indistinguishable from the mischaracterizations

promulgated by and within the news media (the fake). At the same time, this artifice was sold, or commodified, to the public, as to be discussed.

3. Once “bought” by the society, the third order was ushered in: CRT (the fake) proceeded the original (the real) and the co-opted false conception became the dominant ideology and cultural understanding of CRT.

Thus, the dominant, obfuscated conception of CRT, through co-opted mischaracterizations put forth by the news media, became the simulacra.

Examining the role of semiotics in this process, CRT also became a “carnival of signs” (Sweetman, 1999) or a floating signifier (Hall, 1997). The carnival of signs is Baudrillardian (never written about by Baudrillard himself though is often attributed to him), and described how meanings (signs) became divorced from their referents and, like simulacra, multiple artificial meanings replaced the sign. Sweetman (1999) argued that this also renders the referent meaningless. As CRT was ascribed many multiple, varied meanings it became a carnival of signs-its real meaning suffocated and co-opted. Hall’s (1997) concept of the floating signifier argued similarly in that a term is neither fixed nor stable, and when a sign is separated from its referent the meaning changes. The news media’s co-opted misrepresentations of CRT, thus, came to mean—to be— what CRT was.

How Did We Get Here? In sum, this section has argued that, through discursive mischaracterizations and misrepresentations of CRT in the news media, CRT became co-opted, hijacked, commandeered, and bastardized. Through the employment of misdefinitions, collocations, associations, and false/misrepresenting arguments, CRT took on new, multiple, and

varied meanings which further separated the referent from the sign and ushered in a new fundamental conception of what CRT was.

Commodification

As the news media co-opted and perverted the meaning of Critical Race Theory through discourse(s), they *simultaneously* commodified these hijacked misrepresentations. Building off Marx's (1821) theory of commodification, this was the process by which mischaracterizing and false versions of CRT were "sold" to audiences through the utterance of these misrepresentations and the narrativization of their claims. Given that the news media hold power, shape dominant discourses, and assume a role where they are looked upon to convey "truth," they held the ability to influence societal thought and alarm the public through their language (see Allen, 2011; Hall, 1985; Moshin & Thurlow, 2014). Thus, uttering and narrativizing a co-opted and false version of CRT was "selling," and prompted audiences to "buy in"—to believe these misrepresentations to be what CRT fundamentally *is*. Commodification worked to further mystify, misrepresent, and inflate the CRT monster created by the news media *as well as* initiate the "buying"—the internalization and repetition—of these mischaracterizations by the public. This section will identify how fear was employed to commodify a co-opted conception Critical Race Theory.

Fear. Beginning with fear, this was accomplished through the news media's employment and creation of a moral panic over CRT. The proliferation of a moral panic (see Cohen, 1972) is characterized by the (news) media's excessive, stylized coverage of a topic that serves to amplify and reify societal fears and unrest (Nicholas & O'Malley, 2013). Cohen (1972) also argued that moral panics arise from, often hidden, social tensions: "a situation that must exist before something else is possible" (cited in Nicholas & O'Malley, 2013, p. 2). This aspect is vital

because it highlights that panics ignite more readily when social tensions, such as periods when race becomes more visible (i.e. Charlottesville, BLM, CRT “debate”), are high.

CRT: The Liberal Plot to Destroy America and Corrupt Children. The conservative news media promulgated a dominant (baseless) narrative of CRT, inspiring a moral panic. This narrative served to commodify CRT by packaging it neatly as: a liberal plot to destroy America and indoctrinate children. However, it is a narrative that is also complex, saturated, crafted, and heavily reinforced by (1) the repetition of misrepresentations *and* (2) the obfuscation of CRT. It was created through a multitude of interweaving rhetorical tactics, aside from false arguments/mischaracterizations, such as: scapegoating, villainization/delegitimization, battle/disease rhetoric, and general fear stoking. These will be discussed individually below and will mount some, of several, examples within the articles/transcripts.

Scapegoating, on a broad level, is when one unfoundedly ascribes blame onto a person, group, or thing. When scapegoating CRT, the (conservative) news media often used claims that were riddled with fallacies like straw-person or appeal to emotion. Importantly, all of these claims were either false or misrepresenting:

1. **CRT is about checking boxes:** “As Americans have sought to understand critical race theory, they have discovered that it has divided Americans into racial categories of "oppressor" and "oppressed"”(WSJ, 2021, June 28).
2. **CRT is a cash grab:** “A lot of this has to do with money and power” (Fox News, 2020, September 7); “And by the way, it pays well; not many diversity trainers are going hungry tonight” (Fox News, September 8).
3. **CRT takes taxpayer dollars:** “So, once again, the big orange meanie does something no one had the guts to do before, eradicate a punitive ideology that ruins businesses and lives and it's one that you pay for” (Fox News, 2020, September 7).
4. **CRT indoctrinates children:** “And they want to use the schools to indoctrinate our children” (Fox News, 2021, July 22).

5. **CRT is anti-American:** “[*Quoting Trump*]: This is a Marxist doc holding that America is a wicked and racist nation, that even young children are complicit in oppression and that our entire society must be radically transformed (MSNBC, 2020, September 7).

Through mere language, the news media ascribed CRT to be: (1) a process that reduces individuals to definitive categories, either “oppressors” or “oppressed” (like checking boxes on a demographics form); (2) a ploy for money; (3) a waste of taxpayer dollars; and an effort to (4) indoctrinate and (5) radically restructure the U.S. Through these attributions of blame–scapegoating–CRT was reduced and packaged as a threat; this was designed to incite fear and unrest. This was also one way that CRT was commodified for audiences.

CRT’s commodification, though mischaracterizations which incited fear/panic, was furthered through villainization/delegitimization rhetoric:

1. **Villainization:** “Unfortunately, critical race theory is a lie. From the first word to the last, from start to finish, it is vicious. It is cruel. It divides the country potentially for good. It makes Americans hate each other. It’s a tragedy in that way” (Fox News, 2020, September 8).
2. **Villainization:** “For our incompetent elites trying to cover their tracks, you can see the appeal of this” (Fox News, 2020, September 8).
3. **Delegitimization:** “They’ve been brainwashed to think you’re unconsciously racist, and they’re there to wake you up. Unconsciously racist means even when you say you weren’t racist, the responses no, you just aren’t conscious of it. That’s a cult” (Fox News, 2020, September 7).

Here, through discourse, CRT became villainous, inciting fear that it would divide the country and make Americans hate one another. Additionally, those who supported CRT were both villainized and delegitimized. By ascribing those who supported CRT as “incompetent elites trying to cover their tracks” (Fox News, 2020, September 8), this implied individual dishonesty

and deception, and also that CRT was a front for ostensibly illegal behavior. Furthermore, to proclaim that those who supported CRT were “brainwashed” (Fox News, 2020, September 8) is (1) bullying and (2) inherently to make CRT, and its supporters, look incompetent and unworthy of being listened to. Thus, villainization and delegitimization were employed to invoke fear, fan the moral panic, inflate the monster, *and* commodify CRT as harmful/illegitimate.

Another powerful rhetorical tool was the connection between CRT and battle or disease:

1. **Battle Rhetoric:** “Coming up, the battle over critical race theory” (CNN, 2021, July 7).
2. **Battle Rhetoric:** “you would fight tooth and nail to make sure that they were not exposed to this stuff” (Fox News, 2021, June 3).
3. **Battle Rhetoric:** “Critical race theory is the latest battleground in the culture war” (WSJ, 2021, June 8).
4. **Disease Rhetoric:** “A disease born from the hateful halls of left-wing academia” (Fox News, 2020, September 7).

In describing CRT as a “battle,” it became a matter of politics, partisanship, and created the need for individuals to both “gear up” and defend themselves from it. It would be too simplistic to suggest that disease rhetoric negatively framed CRT. Instead, disease rhetoric evokes an insidious process of spread, takeover, and domination; diseases cause harm by invading the body and multiplying. Thus, creating the narrative (with a false and co-opted conception) that CRT was a “battle” or “disease” incited fear and reified CRT as a moral panic. Simultaneously, battle and disease rhetoric worked to neatly, and simply, package CRT (a commodity).

Though all of these rhetorical tactics worked to incite fear and moral panic, thus commodifying CRT, there were other instances of general fear stoking that further solidified the

narrative of CRT as a liberal plot to destroy America and indoctrinate children. Here are some, of many, examples:

Fear-Stoking:

“So what is this really about? Why are they doing this? Well, of course, **it's about capturing the U.S. military for the political left.** That's what it's about. Nothing else. And it's working” (Fox News, 2020, September 8)

“And **they are trying to take the country down.** And this whole narrative about systemic racism comes out of critical race theory and **Marxism**” (Fox News, 2020, September 15)

“*[Quoting Trump]*: Critical race theory, the 1619 Project and **the crusade against American history is toxic propaganda.** Patriotic moms and dads are going to **demand that their children are no longer fed hateful lies about this country**” (MSNBC 2020, September 8)

“What would you do with any **predator when after your child,** ... You are the parents and you should always make sure that your children are not becoming prey” (Fox News, 2021, June 3).

“**Critical race theory is a dangerous ideology that will take the nation into racial retrograde;** Americans should have no hesitation in opposing it” (WSJ, 2021, June 28).

The creation of this narrative was not arbitrary. The language and rhetorical tactics employed by the news media were deliberate—they grossly mischaracterized and co-opted CRT. Critical Race Theory became easily commodified because these arguments were inflammatory and relied upon false representations, thus, audiences were eager to listen and “buy.” Through discourse, the news media incited a moral panic over Critical Race Theory, which, in turn, “sold” a bastardized misrepresentation of CRT to the public. However, one vital component of this process remains unresolved: *why* did the news media promulgate these false ideologies and incite a moral panic?

The Fundamental Argument: CRT Threatens Replacement. Given the dominant, hegemonic tendency to uphold Whiteness and its power-holding status (Dyer, 2005; Hall, 1985), it followed as to why CRT was so grossly misrepresented as anti-White, racist, and a

transgression of dominant postrace ideology. All of these rhetorical tactics were to reinforce Whiteness and uphold the White supremacist society. CRT, fundamentally, has been a tool for uplifting marginalized voices, uncovering systemic racism, and empowering marginalized groups. Therefore, when marginalized voices began to get (slightly) louder, this induced panic in the White psyche: replacement.

The Great Replacement “theory” is an abhorrent product of White supremacy and White supremacist culture. It is an ideology which makes the erroneous argument that as non-White people have children, move into dominantly White spaces, and attempt efforts to achieve racial equity (CRT), this threatens Whiteness and White people (Garcia-Navarro, 2021). The belief is that, as non-White groups “gain status,” the status of Whiteness is then reduced–replaced. The theory makes explicit that Whiteness holds power in our social imaginary, affording privilege and benefits in our society. This pervasive ideology is reflected within the discourse(s) surrounding Critical Race Theory,

When the (conservative) news media mischaracterized and commodified CRT as racist:

“In a word, critical race theory is racism” (Fox News, 2020, September 8)

“It is racist, it's un-American. It violates our civil rights laws” (Fox News, 2021, June 1)

a transgression of the postrace social contract:

“Because **race is something that, you know, should be incidental to who we are.** But when you make this signature attribute of a person, then you say it's with you forever, no matter how wealthy or privilege” (Fox News, 2021, June 1)

“when I was growing up, **we never talked about color because we didn't see it.** What they're trying to do [with CRT] is systematically program children to see color because they want them to eventually become activists, and they want them to hate one another...If you can teach them to be divided young, then you can turn them into activists and angry people that become Antifa marchers when they're older” (Fox News, 2021, June 3).

and anti-White:

“Virtually every significant corporation, academic institution, or public employer has these types of trainings and are getting much more aggressive, much more anti-American, and much more **anti-white**” (Fox News, 2020, September 8).

“[Unidentified Interviewee]: Schools are embracing this ideology and **forcing white students and white teachers to be ashamed of their own skin color**” (CNN, 2021, July 7).

This was a deliberate, political effort to uphold the dominant status of Whiteness. CRT’s simple acknowledgement of race (Whiteness), privilege, and inequity evoked a swift counter-response from the (conservative) news media who created the false narrative that CRT was, fundamentally, a vicious attack on White people (specifically children) and Whiteness itself. Thus, the discourse(s) that misrepresented and co-opted CRT were fabricated in an effort to obliterate anything (CRT) that would “take away” from the dominant status of Whiteness.

Postrace. The discursive employment and policing of postrace was particularly effective for commodifying CRT as racist and divisive, thus generating support against it. Given that postrace effectively renders Whiteness invisible (Landsburg, 2018), CRT, with the aim of exposing Whiteness, was naturally antithetical to postrace ideology. When the news media professed that CRT reduced all people, especially Black people, to solely their race (a misrepresentation of CRT) and that this was fundamentally against “our values” (the postrace belief that we should not see color), they rendered CRT racist (Fox News, 2021, June 1).

Furthermore, after this claim, they went on to “prove” postrace by talking about how Oprah was a Black millionaire who had “made it” (Fox News, 2021, June 1). These red herrings, which read the same as when Trump infamously said, “look at my African American over there,” are standard in postrace and were used on multiple occasions in this discursive field. Through

this utterance, the news media intended to display that, because a Black person has achieved wealth (or Whiteness), that *every* Black person had no excuse not to do the same. Thus, because a Black individual had “made it,” CRT was only, naturally, taking the U.S. into “racial retrograde” (WSJ, 2021, June 8).

Critical Race Theory *became* an attack on Whiteness in our society because that is what the (conservative) news media co-opted it to be. CRT’s aim to expose (not attack) Whiteness was taken by the (conservative) news media as a threat of replacement. Thus, the news media’s co-optation, purposive obfuscation, and commodification of CRT were in defense and protection of Whiteness and White supremacist culture. This bastardized conception of CRT was also so easily commodified because it connected to existing rhetoric of replacement and White replacement (i.e. Charlottesville, BLM). Anti-Critical Race Theory rhetorics were subsequently more effective because they did not exist in a vacuum. Furthermore, this is also concurrent with Bell’s (1980) interest-convergence hypothesis: because CRT did not align with the dominant, White culture, it was rejected and persecuted.

How Did We Get Here? Through discourse, Critical Race Theory was commodified as the object of moral panic and a liberal plot to destroy America, American values, and indoctrinate children. Similar to satanism and iPhones, CRT, too, was “sold” as threatening and became the subject of a moral panic in the U.S. Ultimately, because moral panics hail audiences (Young, 2009), the (conservative) news media economically benefited by commodifying CRT. Finally, Rose (2008, p. 224) affirms that, “reminding mainstream America about black suffering and its direct relationship to hundreds of years of racialized oppression – not least in its present-day form – is a buzz kill” (cited in Roth-Gordon et al., 2020, 124). The unburdened, true

representation of CRT, thus, could have never been sold for profit—the news media required it to be inflammatory. Thus, they continued to inflate the monster by any means necessary.

Let's Get Physical!

Through commodification, multiple, bastardized conceptions of Critical Race Theory were “sold” to and imposed upon audiences. Upon being “bought,” or received by the public, this constituted the governance and employment of bodies to reproduce and reify these harmful ideologies and mischaracterizations. This is a process this paper will refer to as “bodyfication” and includes a combination of biopower, hegemony, and interpellation. The following section will address the use of biopower, hegemony, and interpellation in the process of colonizing Critical Race Theory.

Biopower. Power that operates on and through bodies at an individual and societal level is what Foucault would call biopower, or *biopouvoir* (Foucault, 1980; Taylor, 2011). Through the policing and employment of bodies, dominant ideologies are (re)created, spread, and reified, which works to further political objectives and reinforce hegemonic power. In other words, biopower is inherently about disciplining bodies and lives, and exercising control through individual and collective means. Consequently, biopower is effective and productive:

Biopower is able to access the body because it functions through norms rather than laws, because it is internalized by subjects rather than exercised from above through acts or threats of violence, and because it is dispersed throughout society rather than located in a single individual or government body. (Taylor, 2011, p. 43)

Biopower is further strengthened when societies and individuals willingly (hegemonically) replicate and reify harmful ideologies themselves. People inherit and reproduce dominant,

generally oppressive, ideologies through a range of discursive and societal practices, which further their subjugation and governance. At this level, it is the individuals, rather than efforts solely by dominant agents, who work to reproduce and disperse these harmful, inherited, and embodied ideologies.

Biopower and CRT. This is precisely what happened with Critical Race Theory. Because dominant media discourse(s) of CRT were grossly misrepresentative, this exercised control over what individuals understood CRT to be and how they felt about it. Thus, (bio)power was exercised to control individuals—their actions, minds, and bodies. Furthermore, individuals then worked to internalize and (re)produce these ideologies for a perceived benefit: retaining the dominant status of Whiteness. The use of biopower and hegemony was a vital component, and the final step in this colonization process, for inflating and cementing Critical Race Theory as a monster within our social imaginary.

To illustrate, Elana Fishbein, a parent who created the advocacy group “No Left Turn in Education⁶,” removed her children from public schools after receiving an email that students would be “learning more about the role of race in American society” (CNN, 2021, July 7). She believed the materials to be racist and an advancement of CRT for “poisoning young minds” (CNN, 2021, July 7). Her statements were nearly verbatim to the misrepresentative claims made about CRT just months before in *Fox News* and the *WSJ*. Fishbein reproduced conflation of CRT with taxpayer dollars, indoctrination, BLM, and children/schools:

⁶Website: No Left Turn in Education (<https://www.noleftturn.us>)

1. "This is my taxpayers' money.	1. "mandatory taxpayer funded trainings on critical race theory" (Fox News, 2020, September 8).
2. I don't want it to go to indoctrinating kids that are then going to hate my kids because of the color of their skin ...	2. "those who demand such indoctrination" (Fox News, 2020, September 7).
3. My kids can be attacked by Antifa kids or BLM kids if they're not black. They're white like my kids, but they are believing.	3. "critical race theory... their coddling of Antifa, and BLM" (Fox News, 2021, June 1).
4. They were indoctrinated and they internalize this philosophy" (CNN, 2021, July 7).	4. "They are political indoctrination sessions" (WSJ, 2020, October 4).

Though causality is indeterminate, there is undoubtedly a correlation between the use of certain language by the news media and the replication of that language by individuals. However, this hegemonic ideology was not unique to Fishbein. The following are other individuals who espoused similarly:

"Critical race theory is the idea that's taught to our nation's youth that the way that you're born contributes to the amount of success that you can achieve in this country. It basically states that white people are born with everything and if you're not white, you're born with nothing" (CNN, 2021, July 7).

"To paint the country as an inherently racist country from its founding, I think is dangerous" (CNN, 2021, July 7).

"The idea that you can succeed based on your race is ludicrous" (CNN, 2021, July 7).

"Don't rewrite factual history or indoctrinate. Just present the facts" (CNN, 2021, July 7).

"They're teaching our kids to be racist" (MSNBC, 2021, July 5). *The individual being interviewed stated that they knew this information about "CRT" because of Fox News.*

This language is laden with postrace and other ideologies about race, racism, educational practices, and privilege among others. Saying CRT is racist, dangerous, indoctrination, and rewrites history is not only false, but it works to inflate CRT as a monster and preserve hegemonic Whiteness. It is also important to note that none of these individuals worked in schools or had been exposed to CRT before hearing about it through the media (CNN, 2021, July 7). Thus, the language is inherited, imposed, and constrained by dominant media misrepresentations, which exposes the control of *bios* (bodies, life). Simultaneously, the willing (re)production of these ideologies, which reified and further disseminated co-opted mischaracterizations of CRT, exposes hegemonic power in action. This is the yield of ideological seeds planted in the co-optation process and suggests the commodified co-optation was “bought” by these individuals. As a result, Whiteness, and dominant mischaracterizations of CRT were upheld *and* proliferated.

Called Into Being. Critical to the success of this individual internalization and repetition is interpellation (Althusser, 1971). This is the process by which individuals are, “called into being,” or constituted as subjects, by ideologies through discourse (Althusser, 1970, n.p.). Althusser (1970) suggests that, “ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all)” (Althusser, 1970, p. 40). Interpellation can be conceived of as when someone says, “Hey, you!” and people turn around; people are hailed, or brought into being, by that utterance (Althusser, 1970). McKerrow (1989) expands upon this, saying that domination requires a subject; therefore, interpellation is a process that can be employed to uphold dominant

power. This paper identifies three levels of interpellation within the discourse(s) surrounding CRT: the individual, the community, and the theory.

Interpellating the Individual. The statements expressed by the individuals above, which describe CRT as a (liberal)/BLM effort funded by taxpayer dollars to rewrite history, indoctrinate and harm (White) children, etc.⁷ (CNN, 2021, July 7), display how they were interpellated by ideologies laden within news media discourse(s). Upon hearing bastardized misrepresentations of CRT, the individuals were hailed on a personal level—called to reject or be vigilant about CRT in order to protect (Whiteness), children, America, and history. This began the subsequent internalization and reproduction of this ideology and framing.

With Fishbein, her decisions to form a group against supposed left-wing indoctrination and go on television to profess how CRT is harmful displays biopower, interpellation, and hegemony in action: the media promulgated a dominant, false ideology that shaped individual thought (biopower), the individual [subject] was called into being (interpellation), and the ideology was willingly reinforced and reproduced (hegemony) for some perceived benefit [safeguarding the dominant status of Whiteness]. This is power both enacted on and disseminated vis-à-vis-vis bodies.

Interpellating the Community. As individuals were interpellated through ideological claims of CRT, there was also, simultaneously, the interpellation of groups. To use Althusser's (1971) concept more liberally, groups were "called into being" through discourse(s), by both the news media and individuals. Moreover, individuals declared themselves members of this community, and reified it, through utterances. First, the news media discursively interpellated

⁷ When using "etc." I am expressing that there are more examples that could be listed though will not for the sake of concision.

individuals, as aforementioned. At the same time, the news media discursively brought a group (“we”) into being, constituted by the shared rejection of CRT:

“we need to lock arms and take a stance against critical race theory” (Fox News, 2021, June 1)

Second, individuals, who were interpellated personally, were also interpellated as members of this collective. This is the case with Fishbein:

“But we are going to stop it. We are. We are the great majority of this country” (CNN, 2021, July 7).

Here, two things occurred. (1) Fishbein was interpellated by the “we”—the group brought into being by the media—and (2) she, then, reproduced the “we,” further calling that group into being. To clarify, this is a group called into being by the news media *and also* by individuals. The news media called both the individual *and* the group into being; the individual was then interpellated by both the news media and the “we” that the news media created. The individual, in turn, replicated and reified this “we,” working to reject CRT at both a personal and collective level. Are we in the gray area yet? Fundamentally, it was through language that this group was created and reified by the news media and the individual. It was also through language that Fishbein declared herself a member of this community.

This is what Nancy (1991) would describe as an enunciated community. Based upon Anderson’s (1983) concept of imagined communities, enunciated communities are discursively created; they are formed when an agent (1) declares a group’s existence and (2) constitutes themselves as a member of said group (see James, 2002). The group is reified by repetition of its existence and through hailing members. Fortun (2001) characterizes enunciated communities as

dynamic, constantly changing and being redefined. These communities, as Thurlow (2009) would say, are imagined, yet not imaginary; they are socially constructed.

Thus, it was through the discursive efforts of both the news media and individuals that this community, based upon the rejection of CRT, was interpellated and made real. This process was inherently hegemonic, displaying how dominant ideologies become created, reproduced, and reified upon multiple levels (see Irvine & Gal, 2000). Furthermore, through the control and regulation of social identity, dominant power shaped and dictated *bios* (biopower).

In these ways, dominant (bio)power was reproduced on a grassroots level; ideologies were inherited, (re)created, disseminated, and reified by individuals to other individuals. This in turn, resulted in a public movement to counter CRT, substantiated upon false claims and misrepresentations of the theory and its aim. This supposed counterculture, created by the “we” espoused by the news media, further cemented that CRT was a dangerous ideology and required collective effort to counter it. As a result, CRT’s enigmatic and monstrous status proliferated and the “debate” was amplified to reinforce the dominant place of Whiteness.

Interpellating the Theory. On a meta level, CRT itself was interpellated. The co-optation and commodification of Critical Race Theory resulted in CRT taking on multiple, new meanings in our social imaginary. Furthermore, it was through biopower that these meanings were imposed upon and internalized by individuals, who (re)produced that CRT was: indoctrination, divisive, harmful, racist, an attack on White people/children, etc. (CNN, 2021, July 7). Thus, through these discursive utterances, CRT was called into (new) being, or interpellated. CRT became fundamentally different, vis-à-vis the fundamental misrepresentations in the news media and subsequent inflation of CRT as a monster within our social imaginary.

How Did We Get Here? Through the employment of biopower, hegemony, and interpellation, the news media were able to exercise control over how CRT was presented, digested, and (re)created within individuals and society. To recap, the steps of this process were:

1. Dominant institutions (the news media) co-opted and commodified false misrepresentations and mischaracterizations of CRT.
2. These dominant utterances were then sold to the public and internalized (commodified).
3. These mischaracterizations governed individual thoughts and actions–bodies (biopower)
4. Individuals were simultaneously called into being (interpellation) to counter CRT.
5. Individuals then internalized, reproduced, and reified these misrepresentations for their own perceived benefit (hegemony).

CRT came to “mean” differently as a result of “a commodity system, an industry, a set of stories, and a participatory culture” (Gamson, 2011, p. 1062). This entire process reflects the colonization of Critical Race Theory within our society and the attempt to uphold dominant, hegemonic Whiteness. False representations and ideologies about CRT, in turn, worked to obfuscate and inflate the theory as a monster.

Colonization

Through co-optation, commodification, and bodyfication, Critical Race Theory became colonized. Using principles from Fannon (1965) and Spivak (1998) as a point of departure, colonization is a process entailing the infiltration, domination, and or exploitation of a group/culture (or something generally sacred or treasured within that culture), which results in a subjugation/erasure of that group. Colonization is the appropriation and reconfiguration of property–bodies and land alike–by a dominant group that often annexes the original owners, a

non-dominant group (see Allen, 2011). Colonization operates through disempowerment, as was the case with Critical Race Theory. This section will explore CRT as property and the process of colonizing the theory.

CRT as Property. Critical Race Theory, in its true, unburdened form, was created to expose and combat the systemic relations between race, racism, and power (Delgado et al., 2017). The theory was conceived by a group of academics and was intended to be used as a means of uplifting marginalized voices, thus, it was the “native” property of both academia and marginalized groups. Moreover, because CRT was non-tangible, imagined, though not imaginary (Thurlow, 2009), it was a property of the mind.

CRT, Colonized. The colonization of CRT included the transformation, sale, and individual reproduction discussed in the above sections. To expand further, CRT, as the property of academics and marginalized groups, was (1) “discovered” by the dominant majority when the term was uttered after the 2020 presidential debate. Subsequently as CRT became more frequently referenced, the dominant majority began to (2) occupy the space that once solely belonged to academics and marginalized groups. Simultaneously, as the term was more frequently used, it became (3) appropriated and reconfigured through co-optation, as the dominant majority now occupied and ravaged more of that space. Then, as a result of this invasion and bastardization of property, the dominant majority (3) capitalized through commodifying the co-opted property and (4) invited others to further this process.

Within this colonization was the annexation of these two “native” groups from their territory. Because this property resided in the minds of these groups, this was also a colonization of thought—a fundamental appropriation of both the theory and the “native” member.

Furthermore, CRT (their property) no longer resembled what it once was. As a result, CRT, and the “native” groups became disempowered.

This colonialist trope is fundamental to our White supremacist society, which has sought to uphold the interests of those who possessed power. Critical Race Theory serves as an example of modern colonization; it was taken by the dominant news media, co-opted, and, in that process, disempowered and used against the “native” groups (i.e. villainization, delegitimization, framing CRT as anti-White, etc.). The aspect of commodification is also characteristic to colonialism. Commodifying a co-opted version of CRT worked to economically and socially benefit the members of the dominant group (through inspiring a moral panic, thus engaging viewers) while continuing to rob the “native” group of its right to property (CRT) *and also* destroying that property. It’s similar to firing holes in a ship so no one can use it—CRT was destroyed because it could not inherently benefit the dominant White society, it could only be exploited.

The colonization of a term robs it of its discursive power. CRT, as a result of colonization, has come to mean nothing— it is widely misunderstood, yet has an overall negative valence in the social imaginary. CRT also reflects a larger trope of dominant White culture taking something sacred, not knowing anything about it, and running with whatever definition is espoused by the news media (à la the fundamental misunderstanding of Islam by White Americans).

In sum, CRT has been colonized through the processes of co-optation, commodification, and bodyfication. This, in turn, worked to fundamentally disempower the theory and those who created and used the theory as a means of achieving racial equity.

Discussion

This paper has argued that, through dominant ideologies and discourses created, (re)produced, and reified by the news media, there has been a systematic colonization of Critical Race Theory and an inflation of a monster. The news media took a tool used for raising marginalized voices and reconstituted it as a plot to indoctrinate children and overthrow the dominant status of Whiteness. Vis-à-vis co-optation, commodification, and bodyfication, CRT was (re)called into being. Unfortunately, this conception of Critical Race Theory held an overall negative, yet enigmatic, valence within our social imaginary.

This hijacking and reconstitution matters. It is also remarkably effective. CRT (referent) became divorced from its greater, shared cultural meaning (sign) as a result of dominant discourses (employed to achieve ideological and political means) professed by the news media. As a result, most Americans struggle to accurately define Critical Race Theory, likely because of the frequent and persistent misdefinitions and mischaracterizations promulgated by the news media. Subsequently, this means that CRT has become fundamentally disempowered—meaningless; a framework designed for uplifting marginalized voices now lacks public legitimacy and trust.

Consequently, efforts to achieve racial equality have been rendered harmful (Fox News, 2020, September 7), destructive (Fox News, 2020, September 8), and anti-American (WSJ, 2020, October 4). Because of these misconceptions, people have rejected something fundamentally designed to make a more tolerable and open world. Furthermore, these discourses surrounding CRT reflect and shape larger discourses and ideologies about race and racism overall. Because

CRT is so interconnected and semiotically bound with race, what is said about Critical Race Theory matters and becomes consequential—especially for marginalized groups.

Of course, it's important to recognize that there has, indeed, been good journalism that has accurately defined and contextualized Critical Race Theory; however, of the 40 articles in this analysis, only three provided accurate definitions of CRT (CNN, 2021, July 7; NYT, 2021, July 13; WSJ, 2021, July 2). Additionally there were some journalists that attempted to call out the co-optation and obfuscation of CRT: "There's certainly some material that critics lump in with C.R.T. that strikes me as ridiculous and harmful" (NYT, 2021, July 13).

Overall, this colonization reflects the hijacking of power/knowledge: the news media possessed the power to shape knowledge (Foucault, 1980), thus, the news media ushered in a new, co-opted conception of CRT. Additionally, this mounted the news media's power and ability to create and shape both identity and being. Through discourse, CRT was recreated, individuals and groups were called into being to counter CRT, and CRT was reduced to a matter of political partisanship. Furthermore, the "debate" over CRT was never really about "protecting children from indoctrination" (CNN, 2021, July 7) as much as it was a preservation of dominant, hegemonic Whiteness.

It has been largely through efforts of the conservative media to reconstruct and bastardize CRT. However, when journalists reproduced these utterances without clarifying, this also served to co-opt CRT in the social imaginary. In addition, arguments that worked to mischaracterize and misrepresent CRT were riddled with fallacious reasoning. This is, as Benson (2022) would put it, a hallmark of the post-Truth era in which we live. Ultimately, this boils down to the continuous inflation of a monster. As the news media worked to further co-opt, commodify, and employ the

use of bodies to reproduce these co-optations, the monster—the terror—surrounding CRT proliferated. CRT became, thus, a cultural product; we as a collective worked to (mis)define CRT and constitute its meaning.

In the larger political context of a nation that has never been more divided, this is yet another way in which we have furthered division and doubt. It is through the selling of fear, and the consumption of this fear by the public, that CRT has come to mean essentially nothing, *yet also still* a dangerous and divisive ideology. These misconceptions are steeped in ignorance, and all has been done in the name of preserving Whiteness.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has sought to shed light as to what is going on in the discourse(s) surrounding Critical Race Theory and the CRT “debate” in the news media. Like all explorations, this study has limitations and could be improved upon in future research. Beginning with methodology, it may be useful to employ other methods in conjunction with CDA in order to triangulate findings, as suggested by van Dijk (1993). For this, a quantitative content, or qualitative analysis of tone/inflection, analysis could serve well to improve the study's validity and trustworthiness. A quantitative approach may also help to reduce research bias that can manifest in qualitative analyses.

Additionally, CDA narrows the amount of texts a researcher could feasibly analyze over a given time because of the close reading and attention to detail this method requires. Therefore, it would be beneficial for future researcher(s) to analyze more than 40 articles and explore other date ranges. It also may be of interest to look at other news sources (*Tucker Carlson Tonight, Breitbart, New York Post*) to bolster one's research corpus.

Because of low trust in the news media (Weeks, 2022), it would be advantageous to analyze other mediums (Twitter, TikTok) that may present a larger perspective of how people and groups are talking about CRT. Furthermore, with the niche communities formed on these platforms, it would be interesting to investigate how CRT is talked about and (re)created outside of the news.

A topic of interest that can be explored in future studies is how this discourse may lead or contribute to educational injustice. Because of CRT's proximity to education and children, it could be profound to investigate how presenting CRT as indoctrination may impact politics, education, and, consequently children.

Conclusion

To conclude, this paper has argued that Critical Race Theory has been colonized through a process of co-optation, commodification, and the employment of biopower and hegemony. This process has fundamentally changed CRT's meaning within our social imaginary and worked to inflate and mount Critical Race Theory as a divisive, destructive monster.

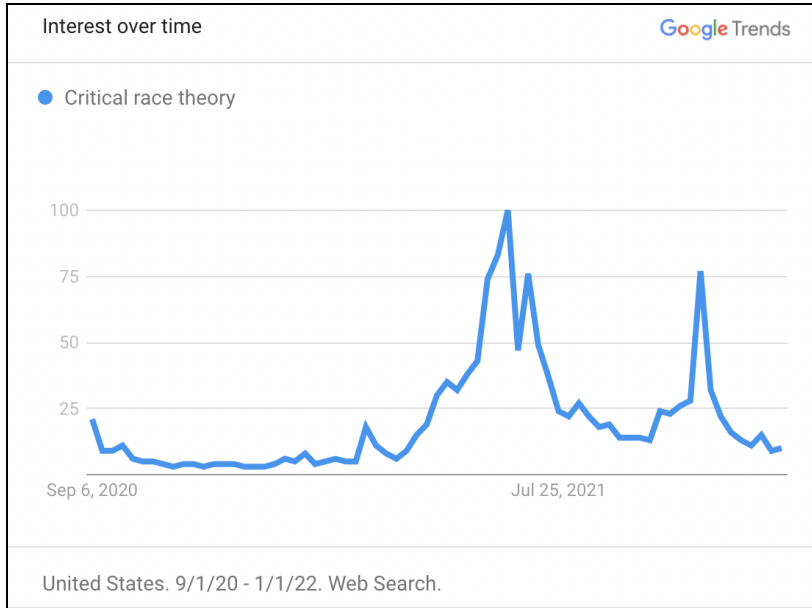
This paper has also attempted to provide scholarship into an area yet to be sufficiently researched or theorized by scholars. Between September 2020 and July 2021, CRT transformed from a tenet of racial sensitivity/diversity trainings into a plot to indoctrinate children and destroy America. This proliferation displays how CRT has been discursively created, transmitted, and reified. It is through discourse that CRT came to "mean." This is an important etymology and ethnography because the language used to talk about Critical Race Theory is both saturated and consequential—it does not exist in a vacuum—and shapes larger discourses and ideologies about race, power, and identity. Furthermore, the media, vis-à-vis discourse has brought CRT

into being, and the discourses surrounding CRT worked orthodoxically to reinforce the hegemonic values that furthered White supremacy and the continued oppression of minoritized groups.

Language and discourse, therefore, are remarkably consequential. It is through these seemingly “natural, neutral, and normal” (Thurlow, 2009) processes that our lives are fundamentally shaped and structured. Language is what transformed CRT from “a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (Delgado et al., 2017, p. 3) into “a Marxist doc holding that America is a wicked and racist nation, that even young children are complicit in oppression and that our entire society must be radically transformed” (Trump cited in MSNBC, 2021, September 7). The need to recognize and combat disinformation and deceit is exigent. As co-opted conceptions of Critical Race Theory persist in political, parental, and individual discussions, such as Ron DeSantis’s recent plea to end “the state-sanctioned racism that is critical race theory” (DeSantis, 2021), it is, now more than ever, a time to deflate monsters.

Appendix

Appendix A



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