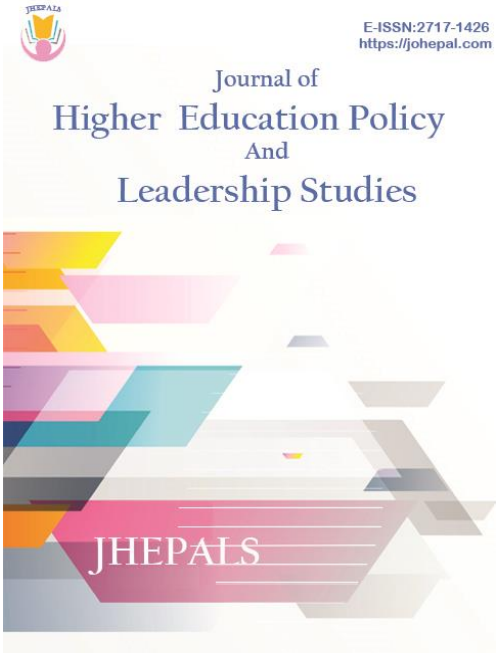
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# Anti-Critical Race Theory Movement in Postsecondary Education: Faculty Expectations Confronting Emotionalities of Whiteness

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## Abstract

This self-narrativization study investigates two university faculty members' perceptions of their online classroom in the context of the anti-critical race theory (CRT) policies in the United States. After one semester of data collection and analysis, three thematic narratives emerged showing faculty perceptions of online students' behaviors in a graduate course where anti-CRT sentiments had an influence on student learning: (1) Sense of white victimhood; (2) Race deflections, control, and emotional detour, and (3) Faculty response to students' ideological echo chambers. Faculty perceptions suggest that these patterns of online learning were the consequence of emotionalities of whiteness, where White anti-CRT students actively resisted the course curriculum in an effort to default into an emotional state of race-neutrality, reinforcing the racial contract as the basis for their preparation as future PK-12 school principals. Leaders of postsecondary education must confront the emotionalities of whiteness. Inactions to stand firm on antiracism can embolden racism deniers to weaponize CRT to arbitrarily stop intellectual pursuits related to social injustices.

**Keywords:** Faculty of Color; Online Education; Politics of Education; Racial Contract; Race Deflections; School Principal Preparation; University Teaching

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## Introduction

In September 2020, President Donald Trump issued the Executive Order 13950 under the guise that "all men are created equal" in the United States (U.S.). This executive order reinforced the belief that discussing racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression should be considered divisive and anti-White, and thus effectively banned Federal contractors from using public dollars to "promote discrimination" in the workplace (Executive Order No. 13950, 2020). Such order was issued during the time of the global outcry against systemic racism and police brutality that resulted from the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Daunte Wright, and other people of color. Moreover, sweeping anti-Chinese sentiments had led to escalating hate crimes committed against Asian Americans (Tessler et al., 2021). As many Americans sought out books and support groups to learn more about race and racism, Trump's Executive Order sent shockwaves through the public school system. Some families emerged to voice their opposition to many schools' diversity initiatives and began protesting their concerns of the use of critical race theory (CRT) in PK-12 curriculum and professional development in schools at board meetings.

In reality, CRT is a theoretical framework, methodology, and praxis used to challenge assumptions associated with race neutrality by illuminating systemic racism and other intersectional forms of oppression in education, law, and society (Dixson et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Solózano & Yosso, 2002). However, recently CRT has been conflated as a catchall phrase to weaponize against school-based curriculum focused on fostering justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (López et al., 2021). In the fall of 2021 in Texas, books related to diversity were banned and some teachers were instructed to teach opposing views to issues such as the Holocaust and slavery to avoid offending families in favor of those views (Hixenbaugh & Hylton, 2021). These dynamics alleged teachers were implementing critical race theory to indoctrinate students, despite evidence showing the majority of U.S. schools are not teaching such curriculum (McCausland, 2021).

Since then, twenty-two states have introduced or passed laws banning CRT (McCausland, 2021). In Arizona, the anti-CRT legislation was an expected phenomenon given its previous policies banning bilingual education, ethnic studies, and other race-conscious policies in PK-12 schools (Cammarota, 2017). At the same time, Arizona is also a space of grassroots resistance given its history of having a successful ethnic studies program in Tucson (Cabrera et. al., 2013), anti-deficit teaching inclusive guidelines (Douglas et al., 2017), and the Red for Ed movement that fought for better funding in schools (Carrillo, 2021). Even though the anti-CRT legislation in Arizona was intended for PK-12 schools and has since been overturned by the state supreme court (Pendharkar, 2021), there is a pressing need to examine how these efforts eliminating any analysis of race and racism in classrooms impact institutions of postsecondary education.

Prior to becoming law in Idaho, Boise State University suspended 52 diversity course sections due to allegations that a White student had been degraded during classroom discussion (Flaherty, 2021). The university later concluded that no such incident had occurred after investigating the matter (Flaherty, 2021). In fall 2021, a Black faculty member at the University of Florida filed a grievance through the faculty union alleging the university has threatened administrators and instructors to not use words associated with antiracism in curriculum so it could avoid compromising the university's relationship with the state

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(Brady, 2021). The Florida legislation brings about particular challenges because the law applies to its systems of postsecondary education. In the U.S., fields such as education, ethnic studies, LGBTQIA+ studies, and women's studies continue to be underfunded without recognizing their important role in combating race and racism in society.

At the time of the study, the matter is more complicated in Arizona as the law does not pertain to colleges and universities, and yet this has not clearly been delineated in the messaging around the CRT ban. As an example, Arizona public officials have frequently referred to the law as impacting "public schools and state agencies" (Lardieri, 2021), inferring that it may apply to systems of postsecondary education. Some university administrators we had corresponded with considered the ban a human resource issue while others admitted to being confused on whether the law applies to colleges and universities. The anti-CRT movement brings unique challenges to college classrooms, especially in faculty's abilities to establish expectations that are conducive to civil debate, fostering better understandings of society, and exploring solutions to issues such as race and racism. Leaders of postsecondary education should be alarmed as the social contract thesis of academic freedom is once again at stake. Inactions to stand firm on antiracism can embolden racism deniers to actively weaponize an academically sound theory to distort history, legally and arbitrarily stop faculty from teaching about the truth.

## Research Questions

Therefore, the purpose of this self-narrativization (Rojas & Liou, 2020) is to explore whether the anti-CRT political climate is directly influencing postsecondary education classrooms, and how instructors interact with students' anti-CRT talking points while upholding historical accuracies, research, and evidence-based practices through their expectations for teaching and learning. We contend that classrooms are a microcosm of the university and can serve as an indicator to discern the campus racial and gender climate. Further, we consider denying LGBTQIA+ populations, Students of Color, and women of their ability to learn about their histories and lived experiences a violation of the declaration that "all men [and women and nonbinary populations] are created equal." The university classroom should be a safe space for identity development, intellectual exchanges, and interrogation of facts and potential solutions related to race and gender-based inequities. Colleges and universities have a significant role to play in shaping the future social contract in societies. Thus, expanding safe spaces for students to recognize their participatory roles in remedying social injustices is an essential mission of postsecondary education. This self-narravitization is guided by the following questions, with a focus on two faculty members' perceptions of their online classroom in the midst of the anti-CRT legislation:

1. According to university faculty members' perceptions, how do students' emotionalities associated with the anti-CRT movement influence their expectations to prepare prospective school leaders for antiracism in an online Arizona college classroom?
2. How do university faculty members engage and counteract online classroom dynamics associated with students' anti-CRT emotionalities to uphold their expectations for preparing antiracist school leaders?

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### *Anti-Critical Race Theory Movement in HE*

As a point of clarification, the study's focus on faculty perceptions is not intended to investigate specific aspects of students' emotions or their motivations for making particular comments in their online assignments. Rather, we consider students' behavioral patterns, such as online communication and interactions with colleagues and faculty, as reflective of the emotionalities of whiteness, particularly in the consequences of students' expressions of dissent against curriculum related to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. That is, the study looks to understand how patterns of online behaviors associated with these emotions had landed for the faculty as consequential for classroom dynamics. We consider these questions urgent and relevant to systems of postsecondary education for creating policies to safeguard learning environments and supporting faculty members in developing pedagogical tools to facilitate sound intellectual debates, affirming factually-grounded knowledge, and upholding standards for academic freedom.

## Background Literature

In the U.S, postsecondary education institutions have consistently encountered policies and politics aiming to ban efforts regarding justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. As a backlash against the civil rights movement, opponents of racial justice have mounted legal pressures, repackaging laws and policies to eliminate race-conscious measures aiming to reduce race and gender-based discrimination in education and employment (Thompson Dorsey & Venzant Chambers, 2014). As such, anti-affirmative action policy makers often prey on White Americans' fears in an imaginary zero-sum game, wherein their entitlements to high paying jobs and prestigious colleges and universities would be at stake (Omi & Winant, 2014). Invoking such insecurities, conservatives recycle anti-equity talking points such as quotas, reverse discrimination, and preferential treatment to elicit white emotionalities, contending that corrective antiracist governmental measures are discriminatory by reassigning racial advantages to historically marginalized peoples (Omi & Winant, 2014).

As the "silent majority" (conservatives who do not publicly engage in civil rights discourse) are often activated by politicians who use White nativist dog whistles such as forced busing, welfare, immigration, criminal justice reform, and Make America Great Again to galvanize public support for racist policies (Omi & Winant, 2014). In the anti-CRT context, these political messaging such as "anti-racist is a code word for anti-White" or "diversity is a code word for white genocide" have become highly visible on billboards and other public places (Kendi, 2021). These targeted political messaging often evoke particular emotionalities among Whites, especially those who believe pluralism is diminishing their social standings and way of life in a hierarchical society. Lassiter (2007) describes the emergence of race-evasive ideology among the silent majority as a political and emotional defense against race-consciousness, as more White Americans opt into the idea of a social contract that refuses to see race. Such belief insists that ending racism should be driven by individual choice, self-interest, meritocracy, and free market consumerism (Lassiter, 2007).

### Emotionalities of Whiteness

As an ideology, individualism has allowed for some Whites to use their class advantages to maintain white racial status while deflecting social problems from economic prisms to evade the reality of racism. Steele (1990) was one of the earlier scholars to write about the existence of white emotionalities. He describes "white guilt" as intersubjective between

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races in the post-civil rights era, wherein the Black-White dialectic operates on the contingent of guilt in reinforcing race as a paralyzing force to maintaining society. In Steele's (1990) work, he believes that White Americans are victimized by their guilt for racism, and that such guilt is necessary in helping them psychologically alleviate and reconcile with their conflicting oppressor-oppressed consciousness.

Steele (1990) states that these emotionalities ultimately surrender power to Black Americans, emphasizing that the civil rights movement would stratify Whites among a spectrum of winners and losers. Steele (1990) suggests that the fear of losing power is self-perpetrated by White Americans' own logic of guilt, which has led to the initial support for race-conscious policies in government and institutions such as postsecondary education. Conversely, Steele (1990) considers the leveraging of white guilt to be detrimental to communities of color, as such guilt is based on moral pity and racial deficit instead of an authentic form of equity. Although we disagree with Steeles' assumption of a power transfer and that Whites and people of color operate in an equal playing field in co-constituting guilt as the basis for race relations, we also consider how his work may inform nativist ideologies in its insistence on a race-neutral as opposed to a race-conscious America.

In contrast, Matias (2016) contends that emotionalities of whiteness are not solely based on guilt, but includes deflections, denials, anger, frustrations, and anxiety which are politically constructed. These defensive reactions consist of a range of discomforts when White people engage with knowledge about racism and perceived reverse racism (Crowder, 2021). Beyond guilt or altruism, these emotions can translate into multiplicities of responses when Whites perceive their race as being undermined, devalued, or questioned (Hikido & Murray, 2016). Emotions are not simply psychological states, but they are operative as social practices (Ahmed, 2015; Cardona, 2020). Together, these sensibilities serve as forms of investment in whiteness and protective factors to seek control over policies and civil dialogues involving racial justice. In the minds of some White Americans, they have already given concessions to people of color by "providing" them the ability to vote, attend college, and live in white neighborhoods. Therefore, there is a psychological reluctance to the point of reactionary resistance to further advance antiracism and reject Whites' own psychic and material benefits of whiteness (Harris, 1993).

Matias and Allen (2013) describe the importance to interrogate the emotional dimensions of whiteness that unite a people who self-identify as White,

> To better understand whiteness, it is essential to venture into this emotional world of whiteness, for ir/rationality alone cannot explain its persistence. Reason[s] detached from feeling cannot adequately tell us why whites emotionally labor on behalf of the white race to produce not only tangible laws, policies, and systemic advantages but also an en-whitened structure of feeling [and domination] (p. 286).

From this vantage point, we consider the anti-CRT movement the new iteration of the same old racist rhetoric, believing that racial equity and White existence are inherently incompatible, and cannot be transformed through antiracist efforts. We posit that these emotions inform societal expectations regarding race relations, with the idea that we live in a post-racial society where racism is understood through the lens of false equivalences, individualistic behaviors, and victim blaming (DiAngelo, 2018; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020).

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## The Challenge of the Racial Contract in Postsecondary Education

The emotionalities of whiteness bring upon the question of the social contract for U.S. society, where there can ultimately be a collective agreement in defining policies and governance in ways that are just, equitable, and universally beneficial (Rousseau, 2018). The centrality of whiteness in the U.S. already places people of color in a racialized bind wherein their experiences often obligate them to teach White Americans about racism and attend to Whites' discomfort (DiAngelo, 2018). Given the overwhelming whiteness in teacher and principal preparation programs in colleges and universities (Sleeter, 2017; Tanner & Welton, 2020), there is a significant need to pedagogically respond to these emotionalities and effectively prepare educators for equity and excellence in PK-12 schools. Therefore, it is important to discern the ways in which white emotionalities influence college classrooms from the perspective of the racial contract (Mills, 1997).

Rousseau's (2018) social contract theory suggests people form governments under a set of explicit and implicit agreements that establish social cohesion and acceptable behaviors. These explicit (governance, taxation, political representation, education, etc.) and implicit (social etiquette, rituals and traditions, dress, forms of communication, etc.) agreements are based on a set of expectations and moral values that are presumed to universally benefit all citizens. In comparison, Mills (1997) argues that such narratives of coexistence and cooperation fail to account for a history of exploitation and exclusionary practices, where white supremacy is central in organizing the U.S. society into racial categories in the ranking of one's humanity. In stating this, Mills (1997) contends that women, people of color, and LGBTQIA+ populations were never authors of their own social contracts, but rather were given a subordinated racial contract that treated them as second-class citizens. Such subordinated contract instills societal expectations about one's superiority and inferiority, rights and entitlements, and a sense of importance based on their assigned membership in society (Mills, 1997).

As such, colleges and universities are vital for upholding the ideals of a more just and equitable antiracist social contract, especially in their roles in contributing to the intellectual health and social cohesion within a society. Since postsecondary institutions do not operate in vacuum, the racial contract is salient in setting the terms of one's expectations in the educational context (Leonardo, 2013). For instance, on college campuses, whiteness is central to curricular expectations and erases people's ancestral knowledge through Eurocentrist settler colonial knowledge structures (Keet, Sattarzadeh, & Munene, 2017). At the same time, these postsecondary education institutions utilize their land-grant status in claiming ownership and financially profit from indigenous lands (Ahtone & Lee, 2021; Nash, 2019).

To date, some university faculty continue to hold negative perceptions and expectations of women and people of color (Liou et al., 2019; Liou et al., 2021). Such dynamics are often accompanied by a lack of curriculum and systems of support designed to reinforce the histories, contributions, and knowledge systems of racialized populations. This epistemic violence is closely connected to a negative campus racial climate, students' experiences with racial and gender microaggressions, and an overall lack of representation in many academic disciplines at the intersections of race and social class (Solórzano et al., 2000). In the classroom, Students of Color are often exposed to research about them and their communities, but seldomly research that comes from researchers who reflect their

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background and life experiences. Normative approaches to support diversity have been individualistic instead of communal, where student integration utilizes an assimilationist paradigm that conceives White bodies and white knowledge systems as the standard for success (Tinto, 1975).

In colleges and universities, faculty are contractually assigned to teach a set number of courses as a part of their scholarship. However, the racial contract is operative in differentiating faculty's experiences with their teaching assignments. As a part of the racial contract, white emotionalities often set the terms of engagement between faculty of color and White students. For example, white pre-service teachers have been found to actively reject equity-oriented curricula and the teaching of faculty of color (Evans-Winters & Hines, 2020). Researchers also finds that White students exercise power and privileges to avoid such curriculum in principal preparation programs, which then leads to similar avoidances in PK-12 schools where they report emotionalities of fear and insecurities when confronting race and gender inequities (Diem & Carpenter, 2013).

Conversely, faculty of color must account for white emotionalities in their classrooms as a part of their responsibilities for teaching content and safeguarding the learning environment for all students (Pittman, 2010). Faculty have to manage White students' silences, discomfort, and outright resistance when reading peer-reviewed articles from researchers of color and helping them navigate their perceived lack of relevance with the topics at hand (Diem & Carpenter, 2013). Hikido and Murray (2016) underscore that these emotionalities can be dualistic and contradictory, where some White students may celebrate diversity but still cling onto ideologies associated with white supremacy on racially diverse campuses. Their findings suggest white emotionalities can be fluid in navigating diverse and inclusive spaces such as multicultural student centers. These unseen forms of whiteness can reproduce racial hierarchies as an acceptable part of the social contract on college campuses.

Adding to the problem, we see the notions of justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion being considered by some faculty, department chairs, and deans as a niche or a topic instead of a set of foundational thoughts and approaches to education. Structurally, such dynamics create the following four emotionally laborious challenges for faculty teaching these courses. First, a lack of support from other faculty members who may teach in the same program from deficit and contradictory perspectives (Young & Laible, 2000). Second, many students come into class having to learn and unlearn about the truths and fictions concerning the political constructions of race and other intersectional markers of difference (Rusch, 2004). Third, students' learning experiences regarding justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion being reduced to one single course prior to graduation (Hawley & James, 2010), reproducing existing racial contract in society with a majority White teachers and White school principals go into schools underprepared to work effectively with culturally and linguistically heterogeneous PK-12 populations (Rusch & Horsford, 2009). Fourth, these aforementioned dynamics often result in negative course evaluations, disproportionately impacting faculty at the intersections of race and gender (Pittman, 2010).

These enduring efforts of planning, teaching, and responding to students challenging their authority with white emotionalities often go unseen and unacknowledged, negatively impacting faculty's satisfaction for university teaching (Pittman, 2010). Given that systems of postsecondary education are still largely white institutions, faculty-student classroom

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relationships and expectations are often manifested by White students' humanization and the dehumanization of faculty of color (Pittman, 2010). Such power dynamics are consistent with societal values and beliefs about race, knowledge, and authority, and therefore, the salience of the racial contract is upheld in postsecondary education.

## Methods

### Study Context: Sonoran University

This one-semester self-narrativization study took place at Sonoran University (SU) (pseudonum), a public research-intensive university in Arizona serving a total of 120,000 students. The university has several campuses and offers both online and in-person courses for its undergraduate and graduate populations. The study focuses on two instructors' experiences teaching two sections of a course called, "Family-School Partnerships" (pseudonym) within the university's Sonoran Leadership Academy (SLA). SLA is a standards-based graduate-level program that offers both in-person and asynchronous online coursework designed to prepare full-time educators for administrative licensure in PK-12 schools across the U.S. (Liou & Hermanns, 2017). With the approvals of district superintendents, school principals, and community leaders, SLA has historically operated with a strong commitment to equity and social justice. Program faculty meet monthly to weave concepts associated with transformative leadership, anti-deficit thinking, and culturally responsive practices across its curriculum (Liou & Hermanns, 2017). The program design and all course syllabi went through a process of university approval prior to implementation.

This study focused on the online version of "Family-School Partnerships'' for the following five reasons: (1) the Covid-19 pandemic, (2) its large student population (n=62) comparing to in-person courses (n=25), (3) a combination of students who live within and outside of Arizona, (4) students' likelihood of communicating their dissenting opinions more often and persistently in online settings (Gladwell, 2002; Meyer, 2006); (5) students' eventual leadership in counteracting racism in their PK-12 communities. The course was fully asynchronous, using a university-approved prescribed curriculum to ensure students in all sections have the same experiences with the course.

Before the start of the semester, the 62 students enrolled in the class were randomized and assigned to the three sections where each was led by an instructor. The three faculty members met weekly to strategize the next module. Each new weekly module would start on Wednesday, students would finish their assignments by Sunday, and receive feedback from the instructor before the next module. In this course, ninety percent of the students were White and working full time in schools and community organizations. The first section was taught by an Asian American male faculty, the second section by a Latina female faculty, and the third section by a White female faculty. There were no complaints from students about CRT in the White female faculty member's section, which led us to just focus on the two sections taught by an Asian American and a Latina faculty.

For context, the first author is an Asian American, tenured faculty at SU and was the lead instructor for the course. At the time the study was conducted, he had been teaching in SLA for eight years. The first author has expertise in this subject as he was previously an award-winning administrator responsible for strengthening family-school partnerships for

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the bilingual program at a large comprehensive high school in California. The second author is an award-winning Title I and Title II Latina administrator responsible for family-school partnerships for the state of Arizona. She is a parent and has more than a decade of experience as a teacher and administrator in PK-12 schools in Arizona, California, Maryland, Texas, and Washington D.C. This was our third time teaching this course, so we came into this class knowing the course materials. Our separate and collective experiences teaching this course enabled us to ascertain students' general attitudes toward the course materials versus dynamics that were unique to the anti-CRT political climate.

## Research Design

The methodological approach to this paper, self-narrativization, draws inspirations from three justice-based approaches to social science inquiry: (1) counter-storytelling (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002); (2) memory studies (Keightley, 2010), (3) bearing witness (Fine, 2006). Such an approach starts with the understanding that faculty of color come with racialized and gendered experiences, and their observations and participation in systems of postsecondary education position them as sites of narrativity (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012). Despite their educational attainment and expertise, the voices of faculty of color are often undervalued in white neoliberal institutions while they create knowledge through scholarship and subjectivities as the racial Other in the academy. For the authors, their classrooms are a part of the intellectual project for which they and their students explore topics and knowledge systems from the margins to challenge normative logics and move towards alternative ways of knowing and being.

Self-narrativization focuses on the most significant memories, experiences, and points of reflection to make meaning of oneself and their relationships with those around them (Rojas & Liou, 2020). From this vantage point, self-narrativization can serve as a counternarrative to the logic of race-neutrality, pseudo-science, and the racial common sense. It allows for one to speak truths and create knowledge that have long been considered empirically thin and lacking objectivity. Instead, self-narrativization is informed by long histories of oral traditions of storytelling in communities of color that allows for one to see the world through another person's eyes. As Duster (2019) illuminates, "when you scratch a theory, you find a biography" (p. 308). The perspectives of faculty of color allows for theoretical and empirical investigation into what they have witnessed, to identify human possibilities within limited situations, and to draw on one's reflexivity to inform praxis (Freire, 2018). These biographical and autoethnographic accounts allow us to gain a level of clarity and answerability in how we navigated the academy, and to subjugate our writings, teaching, and actions to interrogation, criticism, and growth.

In this study, the process of self-narrativization involved two stages of documentation on the life experiences of two university faculty members. The first stage of data collection involved a semester-long documentations of our accounts of teaching the course, Family-School Partnerships. These sources of data included our daily correspondence with each other about the course, weekly zoom meetings and phone conversations to identify classroom dynamics, students' needs, and strategies for moving forward. This study is intended to illuminate our experiences interacting with anti-CRT sentiments in the classroom and not aiming to reach generalizability. We also acknowledge that the online platform was a barrier to our ability to discern students' body language, attitudes, and focus, especially when these interactions did not occur in real time. The authenticity of our

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memories is supported by a trail of writings, videos, and correspondences with and between students throughout the semester, as well as the anti-CRT talking points that were reverberating through the news media, public officials, political think tanks, and legislative policy making.

Once the semester was over, the second stage of data collection included weekly two-hour zoom meetings to further document and theorize our teaching experiences through retrospective accounts of the class. Dialogical in nature, the narration process involved one narrator and the other serving as the listener and a critical friend to make meaning through questioning, thinking out loud, and story sharing. This is to help us understand the whos, whats, hows, and whys in specific situations, and each of our reactions and interactions that were salient to the study.

### Data Analysis

Once patterns within our narratives started to emerge and repeat from one session to the next, we identified codes to make comparisons and linkages with specific aspects of these narrative sessions to our secondary data (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). This data included the behavioral patterns associated with anti-CRT sentiments in students' weekly assignments, their self-recorded videos, participation in weekly discussion threads, weekly email correspondences with the instructors, and students' course evaluations. We also reviewed our own self-made videos posted online each week to remember our framing of the new topics covered, and responses to students' previous assignments. This process helped us to elaborate on the analytic themes that emerged from our narratives (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011).

We consider regularities in these behavioral patterns (communication, reflection, and interactions) as reflective of the emotionalities of whiteness, particularly in the consequences of students' expressions of deflections and dissent against curriculum related to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (as opposed to identifying students' emotional intent or specificities of particular emotions). We then organized, compared, and corroborated these multiple forms of evidence to ensure quality control, and build categories and themes through our analytic frameworks to achieve trustworthiness and our joint narration (Flick, 2018). This process guided us to move from specific instances of the classroom to progressively move towards more precise and focus analysis, and further find interconnections between phenomena (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Bringing these stages and processes together, we construct our joint narrativization into text, and shed light into how anti-CRT sentiments influenced our preparation of graduate students for PK-12 antiracist leadership.

## Findings

In the following, we present three thematic narratives using emotionalities of whiteness (Matias, 2016) and the racial contract (Mills, 1997) to deconstruct patterns of the online behaviors and interactions associated with the anti-CRT political climate: (1) Sense of white

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victimhood; (2) Race deflections, control, and emotional detour, and (3) Faculty response to students' ideological echo chambers. Specifically, we utilized the notions of emotionalities of whiteness to deconstruct the influence of anti-CRT emotionalities in the classroom. We then accompany our analysis with the theory of the racial contract to describe the power dynamics that manifested in the classroom, and how such phenomena impacted faculty expectations and these students' subjectivities with their sense of responsibility as future PK-12 school principals. We posit that there is no one singular experience among our White students in the course of family-school partnerships. Rather, the thematic narratives are the results of a combination of our interactions with individual students and a pattern of behaviors that were observed in our analysis.

## Sense of White Victimhood

The first major theme that emerged from our narratives was the appearance of students' sense of white victimhood with a curriculum that centered on populations that were negatively impacted by issues related to family-school partnerships. As the first author and lead instructor of this class, I came into the semester excited about the instructional team we have put together for the students. The purpose of this course was to support current and future school principals develop mindsets, systems, and practices for strengthening their connections with PK-12 students and their families. All three instructors were once effective practitioners and have intimate knowledge on the topic of family-school partnerships. We were also pleased with the geographic diversity of our students, who live and work in a variety of educational contexts within and outside of Arizona. In similar ways, as the second author, I was excited to teach this course because many principal preparation programs in the U.S. do not devote an entire course to the topic of family-school partnerships. In retrospect, my initial excitement immediately turned into doubts about how to move forward once students started to voice their oppositions to the curriculum, which detracted them from deeply engaging with the course content.

On the third day of the course, a White female student contacted us (first and second author), alleging the entire course was based on CRT, and was disappointed that a public university would allow for such a theory to be taught under state law. We then referred her to our introductory video for the class, where we had expressed the importance of cooperation and collaboration among students, and that we expect them to critically engage the course materials, and to bring their personal and professional experiences to co-create knowledge with us. The student then responded by alleging that our invitation to critique the reading assignments was not sufficient as a disclaimer. Rather, she considered these course materials a violation of the Arizona legislation, which she believed applied to state agencies like universities. This student also contested the curriculum by suggesting that postsecondary education should be based on factual information and diversity of ideas. She conflated all course assignments related to race as CRT, even though there was a range of readings that utilized different frameworks to make competing arguments about the racialized experiences of families when partnering with schools.

As faculty, we began communicating with each other to process the information and were relieved to find that our administration was willing to support us for teaching this course. For the administration to issue a statement, we had to submit our syllabus to prove and disprove whether multiple perspectives were presented, and whether we were strictly teaching CRT. Fortunately, we had an administrator who is a woman faculty of color. She is

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familiar with the work of CRT, able to assess and speak to the merit of the curriculum, and directly responded to the White female student's concerns. Previously at SU, there had been precedents to unconditionally support students which concerned us of the potential to immediately reconfigure this course. We felt a sense of relief of not having to consider such a request from the administration but were increasingly concerned about our class being placed under surveillance by anti-CRT supporters.

We followed up on the administrator's correspondence with the White female student and invited her to a zoom meeting to further discuss her concerns. She did not respond to our repeated invitations, but instead took her dissenting opinions onto the online class discussion boards. Also, during this time, some other students had negative reactions to the first week assignments that asked for a brief self-introduction with a reflection and writing about their positionality. In response, one student submitted the assignment with a link to an anti-CRT segment on Fox News that considered such an assignment as propaganda. Someone else wrote that writing a positionality statement always portrays him, a White male, as inherently sexist and racist. In the positionality statement, he made equivalencies of being discriminated against in equity-oriented professional developments and activities that placed all sorts of blames on White males. We also encountered another White male student's entry, who suggested U.S. laws are not racist, and America cannot be racist. We quickly went online to review the instructions for this assignment. The designer of the course (a White female faculty) clearly explained in the instructional video that one's positionality is not fixed, and that one's identity is not an indictment of who they are but is fluid, ever-changing, and transformative over time.

Since the entire class was required to read and respond to each other's assignments, we noticed a number of White students started to gravitate towards each other in sharing their anti-CRT and anti-equity sentiments. For one assignment, a White male student posted anti-CRT related materials on the platform, which led some students to explore viewpoints that were not research-based, triggering emotional responses that gave credence to such disinformation. In reviewing students' weekly entries on the discussion boards, all it took was for one student to post a dissenting view such as "all lives matter'' as a response to a study about Black families in a school district in Michigan to escalate the online conversations. Many of these comments all resulted in the same analysis of white victimization by alleged "Marxist" and "CRT" ideas and "people who do not love America." As the semester progressed, there was an increase in using anti-CRT talking points when students' resistance to the course materials intensified. In looking back, these emotionalities seemingly signify these students were declaring their own victimhood by seeing themselves as oppressors in these peer-reviewed articles.

I (second author) saw that there were more students willing to contest materials they deemed as CRT, and they believed others in class should not have to experience these forms of indoctrination. This was the first time where students have voiced their opposition to the curriculum. In the previous times we have taught this course, people may stay silent or disagree based on the content of the materials, but these students did not take issue with basic concepts such as justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Prior to the anti-CRT movement, these concepts were assumed to be shared values and a vision for developing an antiracist social contract. As signatories of their own racialized contract, these beliefs are now considered as anti-White.

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## Race Deflections, Control, and Emotional Detour

The second thematic narrative was the ways in which anti-CRT White students appeared to exert control over online discussions and written assignments by actively attacking or avoiding race-based analysis of family-school partnerships, taking the class onto an emotional detour that detracted themselves and other students from focusing on content learning. I (second author) believe that some students were already primed by the anti-CRT movement, which influenced their expectations before coming into the class. At the beginning of the semester, I was contacted by some students who wanted modifications and accommodations to assignments that were directly related to race and racism. Instead of following the syllabus, these students wanted a different contract for them to complete this course without having to think or discuss the salience of race in family-school partnerships. In the back of my mind, I was wondering whether these students (who were also PK-12 teachers and administrators) were enforcing the CRT ban in their own school. The fact that these students felt entitled to reject the course materials and attempt to negotiate their own course is a manifestation of the racial contract wherein White students hold racial and gender power over faculty of color.

While being subjugated to white emotionality, I (second author) became upset because I know how these ideas can limit the ability of PK-12 students to learn about their own histories, which reproduces the racial contract. While some students attempted to renegotiate the syllabus, they actively resisted the race-conscious curriculum by challenging the salience of race in education. For example, one of the first readings assigned in this class was a literature review conducted by a group of scholars of color on the topic of family-school engagement. The article was published in one of the top peer-review journals in the entire field of education. On the discussion boards, we found most students did not discuss the core ideas within the article, which was the evolving definitions of family-school partnerships and ways these ideas were enacted over time. Instead, we saw many students questioning the salience of race in the article on the discussion boards, which was an indication to us that they were sensitized by words such as “race” and “racism” instead of how families’ experiences working with schools have brought social meanings to these terms. Some students became defensive by suggesting that the occurrences of racism captured in these articles do not apply to their school, another group defended the White teachers in their own school by calling them “good people,” while others referred to these cases as inadvertent or due to people’s ignorance.

As a result, some students did not have accurate interpretations of the readings because they did not read the entire article. This was clear to us because the reflection assignments were full of comments related to the articles’ introduction and literature review instead of the research findings. Others appeared to express emotionalities in equating articles that focused on people of color as anti-White. As time went on, some students started to suggest White people can have similar experiences with discrimination while others proceeded to draw equivalencies by comparing people’s racialized experiences with issues of gender or social class. In subsequent discussions, some of the students questioned the reasons these readings would specifically focus on Black Americans, Latinx, or other racialized populations. Some students were becoming fixated with questioning the credibility of the authors who were mostly women scholars of color instead of learning about the core issues related to family-school partnerships. Without elaboration or scientific

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justification, one male student questioned the racial background of a Latina scholar and considered her groundbreaking work rudimentary. For us, these reading assignments were clearly challenging the racial contract of schools and society, which led us to interpret these students' comments as cues that the absence of whiteness in these texts were undermining them as White individuals.

We noticed some students who had obviously read the material but refused to complete the assignment because the content did not correspond with their beliefs. For example, one White female student submitted a reflection paper suggesting that reading about a national study on PK-12 school climate for LGBTQIA+ populations was against her religious beliefs. In writing, she admitted her refusal to complete the assignment was because she believes children are too young to make decisions on their sexuality and gender. She cited the Arizona law that prohibited classroom conversation regarding LGBTQIA+ issues in PK-12 school, even though the longstanding law was repealed in 2019 with a similar bill rejected by the governor in 2021 (Pietsch, 2021). Despite citing the outdated law and describing the assignment as a form of left-wing indoctrination, this student proceeded to write about her experiences converting young female students so they can stop making the "wrong choices" about their sexuality. Her assertions and refusal to attend to the reading assignment negated her ability to understand federal equal protection laws related to PK-12 students' access to safe learning environments regardless of how they identify themselves (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Since anti-CRT sentiments oppose all efforts towards diversity and inclusivity, including an equitable social contract for LGBTQIA+ populations (Brundin, 2021), several other students also made these linkages and said they would not follow through with the policy recommendations mentioned in the national study.

Once we started to demand that students accurately interpret text before providing their analysis of the readings, we started to notice a pattern where students' race-based analyses were missing in their reflection papers. Instead, there was a pattern of responses where students suggested that problems associated with family-school partnerships would be resolved if everyone could be treated the same. In students' assignments, they wrote about their commitment to looking at everyone the same way because "we are all humans." Such forms of race deflections decontextualize the populations that were negatively impacted by racialized pathologies of family disengagement. Through race deflections, we saw students' written assignments recentering white-centric notions of family-school partnerships, and thus contradicted the articles assigned to help them change the existing paradigm to community-centric partnerships. Such dynamics associated with the emotionalities of whiteness appeared to place a de facto gag order to enable students to deflect instead of reflecting on the core messages in the text. At times, we also saw a few students of color defaulting into the anti-CRT rhetoric when communicating ideas in their writing assignments, which reminded us (the instructors) of the importance of this course. We noticed that other students, including some Whites who were race-conscious and receptive of the course materials, were also being silenced if not overwhelmed by anti-CRT sentiments. Such deflections took a toll on our efforts to scaffold the course material and prepare them for asset-based, community-centered frameworks of partnering with families. From teaching this course, we learned that race deflections are subtle and overt acts of

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emotional detours for one to disengage while neutralizing others' expectations and ability to discuss issues related to race and racism.

In retrospect, these weekly emotional detours influenced our grading process as instructors and noticed that at times we attended to students' anti-CRT emotionalities more than their ideas associated with family-school partnerships. Without students critically engaging with the data presented in research, it was challenging to provide feedback and have intellectual exchanges with students based on research and facts. When reviewing these students' assignments, we suspected that some were personalizing the texts with the mindset of "is this about me'' rather than "is this happening in marginalized communities and what can I do as a school leader to improve the situation?"

Upon reflection, we believed some students' deflections of race were based on their fears of being racist for considering that race and other forms of identity have any role in education. Instead, we felt they were more focused on equalizing opportunities and individual actions to achieve meritocracy. It was emotionally laborious to constantly have to anticipate and respond to the overt and subtleties of white emotionalities resonating in students' work. Their decisions to opt-in and out of assignments based on personal beliefs appeared to give them control over what knowledge was valued and how it was going to be produced. It was difficult to advance the conversations and scaffold students to where they needed to be when some (to varying degrees) were consumed by white emotionalities. To us, there were clear assumptions from some of these students that an antiracist social contract would lead them to an imaginary zero-sum game, because in their minds they have already decided that "all lives matter."

## Faculty's Response to Students' Ideological Echo Chambers

Throughout the course, students were expected to respond to peers on the discussion boards and self-select peers to review and edit their final paper assignment. We noticed that students were more likely to opt into conversations with like-minded peers, and there were minimal exchanges across the spectrum of beliefs. There were a few White students who posted diplomatic responses to clarify ideas in the readings while pushing their peers to reconsider their anti-CRT postings, but the occurrences of those exchanges were rare as time went on within the course. The anti-CRT movement had clearly shifted the context of our work as faculty in this course, so we had to instantaneously figure out how to uphold our expectations and integrity for teaching and learning. At the same time, we were also aware of the pressures that universities face in maintaining and increasing student enrollment during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was another pressure for us as faculty to navigate throughout this course.

The first step that we took to counteract students' white emotionalities was to explicitly state our expectations for the final paper assignment. The final paper required students to interview parents, teachers, and administrators about their experiences with family-school engagement at their PK-12 school, using anti-deficit frameworks to develop a strategic plan to strengthen the connections between families, the school, and the surrounding community. For the purpose of the final paper, we also communicated to students, who may disagree with the reading assignments, that they may utilize alternative perspectives that are asset-driven and evidence-based to create policies, systems, and practices to support PK-12 families and communities. For us, we still wanted these students

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to be successful school principals, and not use PK-12 families and communities as scapegoats for the lack of student success.

To counteract lingering disinformation on the discussion boards, the second step we took as faculty was to steer students' attention back to specific reading assignments that were relevant to their ability to successfully complete the final paper. As the online platform splintered into ideological echo chambers, we noticed a qualitative difference in students' writing assignments leading up to the final paper. Since many of the anti-CRT White students did not have accurate interpretations of the reading assignments, these collaborative echo chambers became major barriers for them to fully develop and connect ideas into a sound academic paper. As faculty, our strategy for upholding our expectations while supporting anti-CRT students was to provide continuous feedback on their assignments. One of our strategies was to shift their focus to the topic of family-school partnerships instead of CRT. Thus, requiring students to demonstrate that they have read and accurately interpreted the materials, as a pedagogical move to uphold our expectations in this course.

To further counteract the anti-CRT learning environment on the discussion boards, we developed and posted a series of instructional videos aiming to support students with their academic writing and review the expectations for the final paper. We then provided three rounds of line-by-line comments on students' papers, asking for clarifications on their writing, and providing open-ended questions to help them interrogate their assumptions and develop ideas and arguments based on evidence and facts. Once we were able to establish this with individual students, we then provided additional feedback on their papers to help them construct their arguments and encouraged them to look deeper into the reading assignments or find alternative perspectives that were anti-deficit and have been researched. Thereafter, once these students gained a better sense of the articles, they started to see how they could utilize these concepts to analyze their interviews, making connections between the ideas to justify their arguments. Since students had to successfully complete their final paper assignments to make progress in SLA program, we found students much more open to our questioning and feedback, and able to discern the concepts and arguments in the readings. As a result, a few students began to adopt more nuanced perspectives on their research topics. Our correspondence showed that these students were reconsidering the perspectives in the readings, while others realized that these readings were actually not too far off from their own beliefs.

Next, we wanted the students to view us as resource to guide them through their final paper assignment. As we built agreements around some of the central ideas with the students, we encouraged them to meet with us virtually to advance the conversations about their approaches to connecting with PK-12 families. We saw some openings that led us to take the approach of calling people "in" for civic dialogues and reestablishing the online classroom for exchanges based on research and evidence. By the end of the semester, we had several students who wrote to us sharing, "I have never seen it that way," "I am taking the time to read your response," "I am questioning things on my own," and "I am taking the time to read." To us, many of these students are still reachable, and we are hoping that all of the students will continue to evolve with their ideological clarity, expectations, and sense of responsibilities for the schools they lead.

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## Conclusion

There was not a perfect ending to our narrative, by any means. At the end of the semester, both of us as instructors received a lot of negative feedback on our course evaluations. Juxtaposed to previous iterations of this course with the same syllabus, where we received very positive feedback and course evaluations from students. From our perspective, this demonstrates the impact of the anti-CRT political climate in activating white emotionalities--even in spaces where the law does not apply. Our self-narrativizations reveal several implications for postsecondary institutions in terms of their interactions with public policy and the ideals of academic freedom. First, leaders of colleges and universities need to be more proactive in helping faculty navigate public policy, allowing for continuous discussions about how policies such as anti-CRT legislation may impact their classrooms. By bringing these conversations to the surface, university leadership could provide faculty with some early warning signs and ways to respond to external threats collectively and pedagogically on academic freedoms, scientific facts, and students' learning environments.

Deans and administrators should also learn more about the emotionalities of whiteness and support faculty members in developing pedagogical tools for facilitating sound intellectual debates, affirming factually-grounded knowledge, and upholding higher standards of conduct by standing firm on antiracism in the face of assault against CRT and intellectual pursuits related to social (in)justices. These forms of support must pay close attention to the needs of faculty of color, as white emotionalities have shown to disproportionally impact the teaching evaluations of faculty at the intersections of race and gender. Since Author 2 was on a short-term contract when teaching this course, it would be an imperative for colleges of education to develop strategies to alleviate these stressors and systems of marginalization that often lead to issues of inequitable workloads for faculty of color. All of these issues related to the challenges that faculty of color face with regards to retention, promotion, and mental health.

Lastly, there needs to be more research examining the expectations resulting from white emotionalities and the influence of race deflections on campus initiatives related to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion. Given that white emotionalities can manifest in unexpected ways and in spaces espouse to have social justice commitments, more research should look at ways to address these power dynamics, with policies, strategies, and resources to ensure that such political forces do not impede minoritized students and faculty of the rights to teach, learn, and excel.

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