Online Knowledge Production in Polarized Political Memes: The Case of Critical Race Theory

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Abstract

Visual culture has long been deployed by actors across the political spectrum as tools of political mobilization and has recently incorporated new communication tools, such as memes, GIFs, and emojis. In this study, we analyze the top-circulated Facebook memes relating to critical race theory (CRT) posted between May 2021 – May 2022 to investigate their visual and textual appeals. Using image clustering techniques and critical discourse analysis, we find that both pro- and anti-CRT memes deploy similar rhetorical tactics to make bifurcating arguments, most of which do not pertain to the academic formulations of CRT. Instead, these memes manipulate definitions of racism and antiracism to appeal to their respective audiences. We argue that labeling such discursive practices as simply a symptom of "post-truth" politics is a potentially unproductive stance. Instead, theorizing the knowledge-building practices of these memes through a lens of political epistemology allows us to better understand how they produce meaning.

Keywords

online social platforms, political epistemology, CRT

Introduction

Critical race theory, a once-esoteric legal theory, came to mainstream politics in the United States at least partially through the 2021 Virginia state gubernatorial campaign (Barakat and Rankin 2022).[*] Republican hopeful Glenn Youngkin vowed to ban CRT from public education on his first day in office, a promise upon which he delivered with an executive order –an order which can be unilaterally declared and approved by a governor in the U.S.– after his election. Though there was little to no evidence of CRT even being taught in K-12 classrooms, let alone its deleterious effects on the youth, campaigning on the idea that children were being indoctrinated into this "radical" theory gained traction. We lack sufficient information to verify whether campaigning on the abolition of CRT is what actually won Youngkin the election. However, there is no doubt that it was a major platform stance that picked up public attention and support both in the state and across the nation (Beauchamp 2021).

Various manifestations of anti-Black racism have long been studied as tools of conservative political rhetoric in America (Delgado and Stefancic 2023; Mendelberg 2001), and the manufactured panic over CRT stands as a contemporary example of this pattern (Wallace-Wells 2021). From Youngkin's gubernatorial campaign, a flurry of public debates surrounding CRT have ensued in political speech, policy proposals, and social media discourse.

Digital social media platforms have been a hub for this discussion where users often share their opinions, beliefs, and concerns about CRT through memes. For this study, we collected 5,662 CRT-centered memes which circulated on Facebook from May 2021 – May 2022, clustered them using image hashing, and qualitatively analyzed the 27 top-circulated, rhetorically pdistinct memes. We aimed to gain insights into the discourse surrounding CRT and examine how visual means are deployed to influence the public by analyzing the images shared by users. Our findings suggest that it is erroneous to mark memes that get the definitions of terms like CRT "wrong" as simply artifacts of a post-truth society. Instead, we advocate for a more critical look at the ramifications of such visual cultural artifacts through the lens of political epistemology. We posit that these memes are rhetorically complex units of sensemaking and sensegiving that perform significant political work for both supporters and opponents of CRT. In so doing, the memes' constructed definitions of racism and anti-racism become a technology through which racism continues to be perpetuated.

Background and Related Work

The literature at the intersection of race and social media is well-developed. Researchers in the field have investigated a range of pertinent topics, including how conversations on race and racism circulate online as well as the interpersonal and social effects these discourses have (Noble 2018; Moody-Ramirez et al. 2021; Cestone et al. 2022). The current study aims to contribute to this literature by analyzing the rhetorical tools through which critical race theory was defined and circulated in Facebook memes, and ends in a discussion of the sociopolitical significance of this process.

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[*]Critical race theory, as a term, also gained traction in general public discourse in the early 2020s through the efforts of conservative journalist Christopher Rufo, as outlined by Benjamin Wallace-Wells for *The New Yorker* (Wallace-Wells 2021).

What is Critical Race Theory?

Critical race theory (CRT) was established in the 1970s when a group of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars began questioning why the constitutional victories of the civil rights era were stalling, or even seemingly being disintegrated (Delgado and Stefancic 2023). In response to these concerns, CRT posited that the legal system, specifically, but political institutions at large are designed to support whites while marginalizing non-whites in both obvious and coded ways. As Cornel West defines it, CRT is "the historical centrality and complicity of law in upholding white supremacy (and concomitant hierarchies of gender, class, and sexual orientation)" (West 1996, p. xii). Taking law as a political agent rather than a neutral power structure, critical race theorists investigate how social institutions create and uphold racism, and with a strong activist dimension, they also seek to change these conditions.

While Governor Youngkin may have helped bring critical race theory into public consciousness, it is evident in our data that the socio-legal conceptualizations of CRT are not the same as those that were causing political upheaval during our data collection period.

How Communities Make Sense of Things: Knowledge-Building and Epistemology

Communities build knowledge through a shared understanding of the world and often a shared value system. However, in the current U.S. political climate, this shared knowledge-building is often not based on credible fact, which has led scholars to develop notions of "post-truth" societies and "fake news" (Rose 2017). Ways of knowing, or epistemologies, are one lens through which we can discuss the construction of community-built knowledge, and in this case, bottom-up understandings of critical race theory.

"Political epistemology" is a growing area of research that brings together scholars who are interested in the intersections of political philosophy and epistemology. This juncture provides fertile space to investigate topics such as misinformation, polarization, and the "epistemic virtues (and vices) of citizens, politicians, and political institutions" (Edenberg and Hannon 2021, p.1). The moment we are analyzing –one in which critical race theory is being politicized– lends itself well to theorizations of how political "ways of knowing" materialize and what stakes these epistemologies may have.

Of growing interest in studies of political discourse is what is referred to as the "post-truth" age. Crowned "word of the year" by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016, they defined it as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Braun 2019, p. 433). The conception of post-truth is directly tied to conceptions of political epistemology because many scholars argue that ways of knowing have been complicated by rising disregard, disbelief, or lack of interest in truth, or "objective facts" (Braun 2019; Rose 2017). Of interest for the present study, post-truth is a well-established analytical frame for meme-based research. From theorizations of how post-truth era memes have affected the day-to-day functioning of politics to the post-truth power of memes in election results and social movements, this lens is a popular one to take in social media research (Hannan 2018; Kien 2019). In a related vein, "bullshit" has also been theorized as a contemporary way of doing politics and can range, discursively, from rambling on about topics that one knows nothing about to crafting complex lies with specific end goals in mind (Cohen 2002; Frankfurt 2005; Lackey 2020).

However, Cassam (2021) argues that the ideas of "post-truth" or "bullshit" as tools of political epistemology hold far less weight than others suggest and likely do justice to neither the complicated rhetoric deployed by politicians nor to the public's reaction to these techniques. He questions their effectiveness as tools of true description or explanation of phenomena in political discourse, with "description" and "explanation" being the two most important functions of politico-epistemological tools, in his view. As such, he argues that rhetoric which is usually described as post-truth or bullshit is often far better captured through the lenses of hate speech or propaganda analysis. He writes, "It is a travesty to describe hate speech as mere bullshit since this does not even come close to capturing what is wrong with it and why it works" (Cassam 2021, p. 62). To be sure, Cassam (2021) does not suggest that post-truth and bullshit are not useful concepts. His argument is merely that it is difficult to fully understand *why* mis-/disinformation "work" under a post-truth umbrella. This is because, from an epistemological standpoint, post-truth lacks the ability to describe and explain the powerful rhetorical tools of mis-/disinformation which often tap into long-held political myths and values.

For the purposes of this study, we extend this notion to not only politicians but to those who are disseminating politicized information, as well. We question how useful it is to write off the mis-/disinformation provided in the memes under study as yet another manifestation of bullshit or post-truth politics.

Political Memes as Objects of Sensemaking

Memes, as defined by Limor Shifman, are "units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience in the process" (Shifman 2013, p. 367). They are a visual medium that often integrate "intertextual" relationships between image and text, and are produced in order to be highly transmissible online (Crawford et al. 2020). However, memes need not always contain images. Crawford et al. (2020) argue that "long form" memes –those that contain longer strings of text, but are formatted as a shareable image– have been "made popular within specific online subcultures" (Crawford et al. 2020, p. 20). We find extensive engagement with these long form memes, and included them in our study as they support Shifman (2013)'s definition of memes: shared units of cultural experience.

Political memes often work to make complex arguments more digestible for a broad audience. They are thus valuable to study for their ability to "[connect] the political to the popular" (Burroughs 2020, p. 192). In what Lankshear and Knobel (2019) deem the "second wave" of online memes, the use of memes as political sensemaking tools, which are often weapons in sociocultural wars, looms large. Recent works have investigated a broad range of relevant topics, including political memes' abilities to affect partisan in-group dynamics (Ross and Rivers 2018), alt-right online

communities' acceptance of ever-intensifying extremism via memes (Woods and Hahner 2020), and the use of memes to construct competing senses of reality during the George Floyd racial justice protests of 2020 (Moody-Ramirez et al. 2021).

As objects of sensemaking, the question of why memes are ripe sites for deepening political divides is pertinent. According to Dean (2018), memes can consolidate political allegiance, entrench antagonisms, and shape political discourse due to their punchy, shareable nature. Askanius (2021) agrees, noting that the visual aspect of memes makes them highly transmissible because images have the capacity to cut across cultural and linguistic barriers. This easy access can "foster a sense of community and belonging...allow[ing] a target audience to be 'in' on the joke and self-identify with the message of that meme" (p. 116).[†] In the case of fringe ideologies, this sense of belonging can serve as a "gateway" to deeper radicalization and divide (Askanius 2021). Perhaps most importantly, memes' fungible, interpretive affordances mean that they can stand in, almost metonymically, for larger social stories (Literat and Van Den Berg 2019; de Saint Laurent et al. 2021).

The current study contributes to this literature through its attention to the sensemaking functions of memes following the political eruption of CRT in the early 2020s. Through a mixed-methods approach, we claim that these highly-circulated pro-CRT and anti-CRT memes compete for validity by using parallel rhetorical tools to define what CRT is, but ultimately land on vastly different definitions in order to accrue in-group approval and make sense of this political flashpoint.

Methods

Data Collection

As part of a larger project, we had been tracing the timeline of discussions about critical race theory on Facebook. We found that there had been multiple spikes in mentions of CRT on Facebook temporally in line with offline events, such as the Virginia Gubernatorial Election, from May 2021 to May 2022. Thus, in this work, we focused on the most popular public Facebook memes about critical race theory during this time span.

We used CrowdTangle (2022), a tool provided by Meta that enables searching and analyzing public content from Facebook. We collected all posts from Facebook that contained the term "critical race theory" and had a minimum of 100 interactions, as we were interested in analyzing the images with the largest reach. We did not include the term "CRT," a popular abbreviation of critical race theory, in our search query as our early sampling and search results review indicated a high false positive rate for that term (e.g., related to CRT televisions). This gave us 5,662 posts during the period May 2021-May 2022. Since a majority of the posts (around 70%) contained memetic images, we decided to focus on memes. The final dataset consisted of 3,906 images that were accessible and downloadable.[‡] Responding to the ethical concerns that surround collecting the social media data of people who likely never thought their public posts would be included in a research analysis, we ensured our data were in aggregate form (Fiesler and Proferes 2018).

Clustering

Once all the images were collected, the next step was to identify the popular images among them. We defined an image's popularity as the number of times an image appears in our dataset. We borrowed Zannettou et al. (2018)'s method of using image hashing, specifically pHash (Monga and Evans 2006) values to identify similar images. pHash is an algorithm for perceptual hashing (Farid 2021) which returns a random string ('hash') for any given image. The property of this random string is that perceptually similar images (e.g. images that are slightly cropped, or have a watermark but are otherwise the same image) have similar pHash values. Given the pHash values for two images, we can compute the distance between them to infer if the two images are similar.

Clustering is a technique to identify and group similar objects based on a specific property into the same cluster. We used DBSCAN (Ester et al. 1996), a density-based clustering algorithm to group identical images. DBSCAN considers clusters to be dense regions of data points, handles well the clusters of arbitrary shapes and is also robust to noise and outliers. We performed clustering based on the distance between the hashes, which gave us 190 clusters. Each cluster had multiple images in it, with the cluster size ranging from 3 images to 28 images.

Coding & Critical Discourse Analysis

Qualitative Content Analysis Because we undertook an iterative image coding process, we included enough images in the analysis to reach thematic saturation (Low 2019), which was 35 clusters. Within this set of 35, several clusters/images were so rhetorically similar –for example, two memes containing text that were only one or two words off from one another– that we collapsed them into one category, leaving us with 27 distinct images for analysis. Initially, images were considered apart from their contextualizing captions and comments for analysis, but in cases where it was not particularly clear which code an image should be given, we considered the surrounding text/captions on the Facebook post where the image was shared to get a better understanding.

We carried out the analysis in an iterative manner. First, we decided on the categories/dimensions for which the images should be coded, the most basic being a binary categorization of pro-CRT or anti-CRT. Then, we began qualitatively coding for emergent themes. Through discussion at weekly meetings, these codes were refined over multiple iterations until we finally grouped similar codes together to create organized parent codes (McDonald et al. 2019). Though we created parent codes for multiple image categories (e.g., "type," "origin"), we primarily focused on the "role" of images. The set of role codes captures how the image is deployed and the message/intent the image is attempting to convey, with thematic categories such as "CRT as Anti-American," "Equating CRT with U.S. History," and "Risks of Adopting CRT."

[†]As noted in Gal et al. (2016), early studies of memes focused primarily on their humorous functions. However, as meme culture has evolved, humor is no longer necessary as the central purpose, logic, or rhetoric of memes, and they can focus on strictly serious topics.

[‡]We will share a link to this dataset after the peer review is completed.

Critical Discourse Analysis After coding these memes to better understand their rhetorical functions, we finally engaged critical discourse analysis (CDA) in order to introduce questions of power into our analysis. In this methodology, language is never read as neutral and is instead analyzed for its ideological underpinnings. This feature of CDA was important for us in understanding how these memes were rhetorically working within pre-existing social stories in liberal and conservative discourses. According to Fairclough, CDA "provides a methodology 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" (Fairclough 2018, p. 93).

He theorizes discourse as a "three-dimensional" structure which is made up of discourse events, discursive practices, and social practice. Discourse events, he posits, are the actual "text" to be analyzed –"text" meaning any culturally-situated object of study– and these discourse events are composed of both discursive practices and social practices (Fairclough 2018).

In the case of the present study, memes are the discourse events which we analyze for their discursive practices –what the text and image, together, are discursively creating and reflecting–and for their social practices– how these discourses are tied up in sociocultural contexts. The content analysis allowed us to see trends in the discursive practices of these memes, and situating these trends within the social contexts of political and hegemonic power relations allowed us to make our ultimate argument: understanding the rhetorical tools of these memes, even if they are spreading incorrect information, is an important step toward uncovering their political capital.

Limitations Though this sample is robust, there are limitations to this work. In analyzing only the Facebook data, we cannot make claims regarding memes that circulated on other platforms. Additionally, our one-year sample time frame was chosen purposefully, but it limits a full understanding of how CRT memes operated beyond this time period. Finally, our choice to focus only on images that gained the most traction means that we are missing a complete understanding of knowledge-building around CRT.

The Tools of CRT Meme Production

After iteratively coding each meme, we were left with 21 unique codes which could be subsumed under one or more of the following major rhetorical tactics: 1) struggles over definition, or how the meme makes sense of what critical race theory is; 2) constructing "anti-racism," or the ways in which the meme's ideologies are coded as definitively not-racist to its intended audience; and 3) appeals to authority, or the ways in which the meme uses people or symbols to appear correct. These strategies, then, appear to be the most salient paths through which both pro- and anti-CRT arguments within these memes are built, and the undercurrent of appearing anti-racist (in whatever definition of "anti-racism" the meme seeks to curate) seems to be the organizing principle.

Defining CRT

With two exceptions, neither the pro- nor the anti-CRT memes analyzed appear to be concerned with disseminating the "real" critical legal studies definition of critical race theory. Because CRT was not generally circulated within public discourse prior to the early 2020s, as mentioned above, there was a wide berth for political and epistemological work to be done in the construction of this definition in the public consciousness. Our analysis reveals that these memes do just that: while both pro- and anti-CRT memes provide a technically incorrect definition of what CRT actually is, the politics of sensemaking unfolds within these memes. Their consumers are left with bifurcating conceptions of the bounds, risks, and benefits of critical race theory that ultimately serve to re-define the bounds and values of the communities in which these memes circulate.

Within pro-CRT memes, the aggregated definition reads something like this: *critical race theory means 1) accurately teaching the often-unspoken role of race and racism in U.S. history, and 2) not being a racist and/or a Republican.* These memes went to far fewer lengths than anti-CRT memes to define what CRT actually is, and relied instead upon defining it against other things: racism, Republicans, and/or the erasure of history. The top-circulated meme in our analysis is a prime example of this. In this meme, artist Jonathan Harris stands alongside his now-viral artwork entitled "Critical Race Theory," which depicts the literal whitewashing of Black history (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Pro-CRT meme of artist Jonathan Harris with his painting entitled "Critical Race Theory"

While this does not define what critical race theory is, it certainly defines what it is not: the erasure of America's violent, racist past. In a different manifestation of definition-by-negation, Figure 2 is a computer-generated text-heavy meme that reads, "Republicans are not afraid of critical race theory. They don't even know what it is. They're afraid of theories critical of racists. They know who they are." The irony, of course, is that this meme also does not offer a real definition of CRT, or an indication of "knowing what it is" – it simply defines CRT against racists and Republicans, both of which believers in CRT cannot be.

In contrast to this strategy, anti-CRT memes often utilize quite specific points of definition. Take, for instance, cluster 22 (Figure 3). In providing a six-point bulleted list, this meme
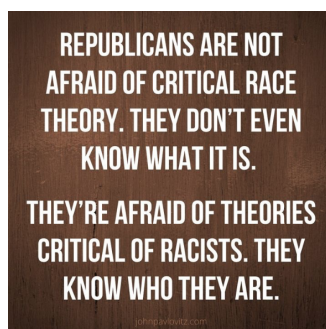
Figure 2. Pro-CRT meme accusing Republicans of being racist and ignorant

Figure 3. Anti-CRT meme outlining CRT's alleged values

Figure 4. Anti-CRT meme connecting CRT to Marxism

Figure 5. Anti-CRT meme suggesting a connection between "wokeness" and school shootings

Figure 6. Pro-CRT meme which indicates issues around defining CRT

lays out, in no uncertain terms, how its consumers are meant to understand CRT. It frames CRT as against its intended audience's beloved institutions (e.g., 'America') and values (e.g., 'free speech,' 'hard work'). These definitional strategies, however, are not always as concrete as a bulleted list. Anti-CRT memes sometimes worked to define CRT by conflating it *with* other "anti-American" ideas, such as Marxism (Figure 4) and straying from Christianity (Figure 5). In other words, anti-CRT memes often tied CRT to other "woke" ideologies in order to define it, even as "wokeness," as it has come to be constructed on the U.S. political right, lacks definitive boundaries.[§]

In all, anti-CRT memes essentially define critical race theory in the following way: *CRT is a racist idea that makes people believe that race matters more than it should, and it is yet another way that "wokeness" is destroying America.* This conceptualization is starkly different than that of the pro-CRT memes, and both are far from the "real" legal studies definition, as outlined above. As such, there is obvious political struggle in the fight to win the hegemonic, accepted definition of critical race theory — a definition which has little to do with its origins in critical theory and law.

Metadiscourse on the Stakes of Defining CRT In this discussion on the political struggle over defining CRT, one particularly interesting meme to highlight is shown in Figure 6.

In this meme, a screenshot of a quoted tweet, two people are explicitly naming this struggle and pointing to its risks. The original tweet author is indicating that The Heritage Foundation–a conservative think tank known for its right-wing ideologies–is a top hit in search results for online information on critical race theory. By doing so, she is pointing out that knowledge acquisition via the internet is deeply politicized,
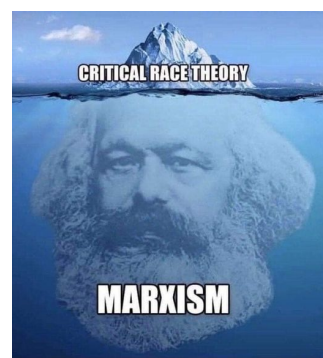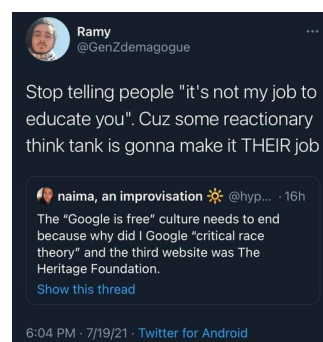
and without critical consumption habits, people can be easily misled by seemingly authoritative information. The quote tweet, agreeing with this view, further interpolates into an ongoing debate in the U.S. culture on whose "job" it is to educate on topics surrounding race and racism: people of color, who are potentially exhausted by confronting this responsibility every day, but are also the people who have actual experience with racism; or white people, who are the ones who should be expending energy into acquiring

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[§]"Woke" has largely lost a bounded cultural definition. As such, it has become a term often misappropriated by the political right. When utilized in this way, "woke" generally points to engagement with progressive political projects which the right rejects (Allen 2023; Madigan 2023) Thus, "Marxism" and secularism, as noted in the example above, would fall under this umbrella, along with a host of other progressive values.

knowledge to better educate themselves, without needing to further exploit the time and energy of people of color to do so (see, for example, Zheng (2021)).

Both Twitter users, "naima, an improvisation," and "Ramy" land in the same place: passing this responsibility to educate over to the internet is dangerous territory in a politicized information environment. If "some reactionary think tank" such as The Heritage Foundation is where people are gaining their knowledge because "Google is free" and no one else is providing this information, the struggle over defining these words–words which have actual policy impact, as seen through Youngkin's executive order–is of utmost importance, and it appears that memes are one avenue in which this epistemological struggle occurs.

Defining "anti-racism"

These pro- and anti-CRT battles over definition, and the recognition in the metadiscourse that this is, indeed, a battle, are almost exclusively fought on the same grounds: that of signalling anti-racism. While there are some other nods to bigotry in its various forms, for example, transphobia as displayed in Figure 5, race and racism are unsurprisingly the main sites upon which definitions of critical race theory and its risks and/or benefits, are built. However, in a similar fashion to how "critical race theory" was defined to meet community needs rather than to reflect a "real" definition of the term, "anti-racism," too, is made into a fungible ideal constructed to meet the dire need of both sides of this argument to appear not-racist: a near necessity in contemporary America (Bonilla-Silva 2006).

According to Ferguson (2022), anti-racism has suffered from a lack of coherent and accessible academic definition. Thus, she proposes a paraphrase of Black author and activist Ijeoma Oluo's tweeted definition: "the commitment to eradicate racism in all its forms," with a noted special interest in recognizing the difference between systemic and interpersonal racism (and working toward eradication of both). However, the tension we encounter in the analysis of these images is that all of these memes signal performances of being "not-a-racist"–a situation in which performing distance from racism operates as a type of social currency–and are thus able to easily masquerade as true anti-racism to the undiscerning eye. In this way, the memes' constructed definitions of anti-racism become a technology through which racism continues to be perpetuated..

Liberal performances of anti-racism can be difficult to parse. While it is critically important, as a society, to work toward anti-racist ends, the pro-CRT memes in this study often fall short of advocating true systemic and interpersonal dismantling of racism, and instead signal their distance from racism by a) declaring that the main structural issue regarding racism in America is that the true, racist history of the United States is not taught to children properly, and b) indicating that liberals/Democrats/those in favor of CRT inherently cannot be racist. This particular construction of ideologically progressive signaling of "anti-racism" failing to actualize true anti-racism is often studied by scholars who theorize the style of (neo)liberal and/or progressive racism(s).[¶] The current article reflects yet another case study in which these constructions play out.
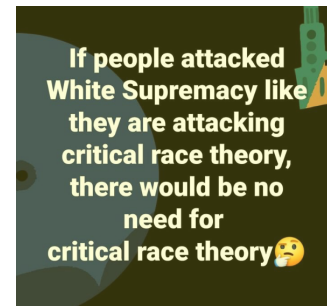

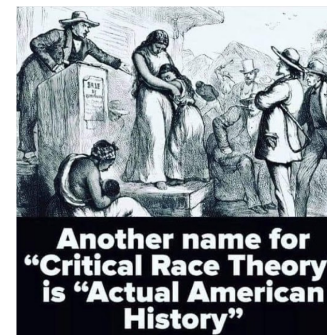**Figure 7.** Pro-CRT meme which critiques White Supremacy

Figure 8. Pro-CRT meme equating CRT to true understandings of America's race-based history

To be abundantly clear, pro-CRT memes come far closer to achieving the anti-racist ends they purport than their anti-CRT counterparts. Despite this fact, the liberal ideologies in these pro-CRT memes are still limited in their capacities to both recognize the far-reaching systemic structures of racism (and particularly to recognize how these structures persist today), and to understand that liberals, too, hold racist beliefs. By advocating that only others can be racists, they are abdicating liberals' personal responsibilities to unlearn deeply held racist cultural narratives, often referred to as implicit racism (Payne and Hannay 2021).

An example of this failure to recognize liberals' interpersonal responsibilities in continuing to develop their anti-racist lenses can be seen in Cluster 4 (Figure 2). The deflective "they" indicates several things all at once: first, that "we," those who identify with this meme, are not like "them," the racist Republicans; and second, that the stakes of this argument on critical race theory reside at the individual, interpersonal level. Each of these two implications constructs racism as something that happens within the hearts and minds of individuals, rather than at the structural level, and further, it absolves those who resonate with the meme from racism: "I am not a racist, because I support critical race theory." Thus, though this meme signals anti-racism by calling others the "real" racists, it forwards a positionality that is not reflective of true anti-racism.

However, there were several instances of pro-CRT memes attempting to acknowledge structural racism, such as in Figure 7, which reads "If people attacked White Supremacy like they are attacking critical race theory, there would be no need for critical race theory." In another instance, Figure 8, the meme

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[¶] See, for example, Bell (2019); DiAngelo (2021); Esposito and Romano (2014).

states that critical race theory is equivalent to teaching "actual American history." Though this is not quite correct and fails to address the contemporary persistence of racism, it is, at least, attempting to define an institutional issue: the suppression of knowledge around America's violent, racist past.

On the other hand, anti-CRT memes wholly fail at forwarding true anti-racism, and they fail in many different ways: through rhetorics of racial neoliberalism, colorblind racism, and post-race racism. Importantly, each of these tools of racism are constructed as "doing" anti-racism, and sold to audiences as such. While this signalling of anti-racism presents a bit differently on this side of the aisle, the main takeaway is meant to be rhetorically the same: "we" are not the racists, "they" are. For instance, Figure 3 reads, in part, "What does critical race theory teach?...The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination." This swiftly both dismisses anti-Black racism as in the "past," thus ignoring its structural persistence, and it constructs those that support critical race theory as the "real" racists. This is a particularly strong example of what Squires (2014) refers to as the "post-racial mystique," or a cultural narrative which positions the U.S. as steadfastly post-race: if we are post-race, then those who continue harping on about race-based issues are the "real" racists.

In these ways, both pro- and anti-CRT memes usually fail at enacting true anti-racism, often performing what Blake et al. (2019) call "anti-racist appropriation," or a strategy that is "primarily concerned with deciphering who is a racist and who is not, rather than working to dismantle racism's socially shared institutional and affective structures" (p. 23). By forwarding this claim, we do not mean to engage in an uncritical false balance (Rietdijk and Archer 2021) analysis. There is clearly one group that is getting closer to actual anti-racism than the other: the pro-CRT memes. It is important to note, however, that even pro-CRT memes are not fully accomplishing an anti-racist agenda.

Appeals to Black Authority

Though using appeals to authority is not a groundbreaking rhetorical strategy and is, in fact, one of the pillars of Aristotelian rhetorical philosophy, the ways in which this ethos appears within these memes present an interesting finding: equally often, both pro- and anti-CRT memes deployed the imagery and/or quotes of Black people. Through circulating these images widely, those captured in these memes essentially stand in as Black spokespeople for each side of the argument, lending credence to the meme's ideology–no matter the side of the argument–through the color of their skin.

Anti-CRT memes that used this rhetorical strategy–all of which, notably, were produced and originally disseminated by the conservative Media Research Center (MRC)ǁ–constructed these Black spokespeople as both authoritative in their experience and authoritative in their Blackness. Alveda King, Civil Rights Leader; Dr. Ben Carson, M.D. and former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development; and Dr. Carol Swain, Ph.D. and professor of political science and law appeared in these memes, each in visage and in quote (see Figure 9 for an example of these memes, each of which followed this aesthetic template). The embodied Black professional positionalities which these people inhabit make

Figure 9. Anti-CRT meme which depicts Professor Carol Swain as a Black woman critical of CRT

it difficult for pro-CRT advocates to argue against their claims –claims which invariably speak to the sure pitfalls of socioculturally adopting critical race theory– and thus a comfortable space of disseminating racism through the rhetorics of anti-racism opens up.

Using Black spokespeople to deliver implicitly or explicitly racist information has been a tactic used for decades to make news reporting (Entman and Rojecki 2007), campaign strategy, and political policy (Mendelberg 2001) appear not-racist. The implicit rhetorical suggestion is that if a Black person indicates something is not racist, it must not be. This, then, "bolsters [whites'] denials that racism still impedes the lives of African Americans" (Entman and Rojecki 2007, p. 106) and invites a level of assurance that they, too, are not racist. In the context of the memes analyzed for this study, these Black spokespeople are consistently reflecting a well-established space of Black conservative thought which taps into individualism, self-help, and egalitarianism as answers to discussions on racism (Lewis 2005).

Critical race theory –the "real," institutional one– actually warns against this very scenario: CRT argues that constructing Black spokespeople as people who can speak for the entire race is both essentialist and ignorant to the importance of intersectionality (Delgado and Stefancic 2023). However, this fallacious rhetorical tool was used by constructing Black spokespeople through memes –Black spokespeople who are made to appear as *the* reasonable "Black voice"– as a way of building authority and "assurances" for those against CRT that they were not thinking in a racist way.

The pro-CRT memes' authoritative appeals to Blackness largely took on a different function and meaning. Whereas anti-CRT memes were curating quotes from a very specific set of Black spokespeople, seeking out those who have said something condemning CRT, overlaying these quotes on an image of the Black orator, and circulating that image, those on the pro-side of the issue are more often amplifying already-existing media that Black people created for the purpose of commenting on this topic. For example, the image of artist Jonathan Harris (Figure 1) was an organic, pre-existing photograph of the artist posing with his work –not a computer-generated, curated message created without his

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Figure 10. Pro-CRT meme of critical race scholar Michael Eric Dyson's tweet

knowledge or consent (such as in Figure 9). Similarly, the meme featuring Michael Eric Dyson's thoughts (Figure 10) is simply a screenshot of a tweet he chose to write and publish on the internet–again, not something that an outside entity needed to create.

Knowledge Production in a Post-Truth World

Memes are an excellent vehicle for making hot-button political issues digestible to the average person. However, almost none of the CRT memes we analyzed actually got its definition "right." Instead, it appears that the most salient rhetorical tools across all 27 of these highly-circulated memes revolved around creating the most convincing definitions of both critical race theory, as that was the topic at hand, and anti-racism, as convincing others that an opinion is distant from racism is the only socially-palatable way to speak on race in the US in the contemporary context (Bonilla-Silva 2006). That said, what does this lack of attention to institutional definitions mean, and what should we do about it?

Political epistemology allows us to theorize on the importance of these memes as sensemaking and sensegiving tools for the public, and lets us question the importance of community-based political knowledge versus "real" institutional knowledge. In the context of CRT memes, the institutional definition of critical race theory *does*, of course, matter in a general sense. The work flowing from this definition has produced massive change at institutional and individual levels, and scholars, writers, and activists use these ideas to dismantle oppressive systems globally (Delgado and Stefancic 2023). However, that definition is not the one doing political work within these memes, and we would be missing the nuances of power struggles herein entirely if we critique these memes only through the lens of a post-truth society. In a fact-checking sense, all of these memes, both anti- and pro-, are largely false, but this technically false information is filling an information void for people who have likely heard very little about critical race theory before. That means it is these definitions –not the institutional ones– that are doing political work and motivating publics to think, feel, and potentially vote accordingly. The discourse is not actually about CRT; CRT simply became a catch-all phrase to hold discourse about race. In reality, the discourse revealed in these memes is about how the US should handle race moving forward, and how we define what is racist and what is anti-racist.

The rhetoric within these memes presents another point of interest: despite research that suggests overt racism has become more acceptable in a post-Trump America (discussed below), explicit appeals to racism were not present at all, even in anti-CRT images. After the election of Donald Trump as the US President, several studies have indicated that explicit (Gantt Shafer 2017) or nearly-explicit racism (Schaffner et al. 2018) became a usable mechanism for Republicans in ways that it has not been since the 1950s and 60s (Mendelberg 2001). These studies argue that the president's rhetoric ushered in a new era of acceptability of overt racism. However, in the case of the highly-circulated CRT memes we analyzed, this does not appear to be true. While we would argue that anti-CRT memes *are* forwarding a racist agenda, none of those collected use overt racism in the rhetorical style of far-right bigotry. Instead, they trend toward the more traditionally-palatable implicit rhetorics that have been successful among conservative voters in the past (Mendelberg 2001), this time using CRT to forward a larger political project which seeks to denigrate and dismiss discourses around structural racism. This is, perhaps, a surprising outcome of this analysis, and may indicate that there is still wider-spread conservative appeal toward implicit rather than explicit racism.

While these implicitly racist appeals follow a long tradition in political rhetoric, the context in which they operate has changed. Following the election of Donald Trump and the ushering in of the post-truth era, we argue that implicit appeals to racism (which are often constructed to appear as anti-racist to their respective audiences), in particular, run the risk of being classified simply as mis-/disinformation. It is disinformation, for example, to posit that CRT teaches that "the only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination," as Figure 3 does, but it is also much more than that: it is a tapping in to white supremacist understandings of anti-racism. Rather than understanding these rhetorics as an epistemological formulation of far-right political thought, post-truth as a lens for understanding our current political moment could misconstrue this type of rhetoric as disregard for truth rather than a calculated dog whistle.

Cassam (2021) suggests that we can question the relevance of bullshit or post-truth as politico-epistemological tools by assessing whether they can "[provide] a helpful *description* of these [rhetorical] tactics and a promising *explanation* of their effectiveness." (Cassam 2021, pp. 57-58) In this case, we argue that neither bullshit nor post-truth can adequately perform these functions. For these lenses to describe and explain the rhetorics present in these memes, there would need to be a fear, dismissal, or lack of regard for truth/reality central to the memes' claims. Given the many strategic ways in which these memes play into conservative and liberal cultural narratives, these memes displaying an offhanded disregard for reality seems difficult to imply. In fact, even memes such as Figure 5, which heavily rely upon Christian-based opinion, are not disregarding reality, in a sense: they are using "data points" which their consumers believe to be true in order to build arguments. The uptake of these memes, then, cannot be easily understood through assumption of a disregard or fear of the truth. Instead, as Cassam (2021) asserts, we might better understand these rhetorical tools, particularly for anti-CRT memes, through propaganda or hate speech analysis. That is to say, to truly understand the *descriptive* and *explanatory* powers of Figure 5, we need to understand why appeals to

an ethno-Christian State work in particular communities –not just how, if, or why these claims are indifferent to reality or false. The politico-epistemological tools of propaganda and hate speech far better capture the power and danger of these utterances, and even pro-CRT memes are not free from the pitfalls of propaganda.

As such, our first major takeaway is that in the case of CRT-related memes, bullshit and post-truth do not adequately describe the knowledge-building practices that are occurring within this rhetoric, *even though these memes are spreading mis-/disinformation, which is a clear hallmark of bullshit/post-truth epistemologies*. We assert that both of these things can be true at the same time: bullshit/post-truth can lack sufficient analytical power even when the information under analysis is, in reality, false. The second, related takeaway: while it is obviously important to assert truth in a misinformation landscape, it is perhaps more important to understand what the actual issue at the heart of the political discourse is, what the stakes are, and what the use-value of the term being wielded is in order to disrupt oppressive practices and support emancipatory ones appropriately. If we rely too heavily on bullshit or post-truth as organizing principles of contemporary political rhetoric, we run the risk of trivializing the particular nefariousness of subtly racist arguments –in this case, in the form of CRT-based memes– under the guise of mis-/disinformation. And finally, the third major finding: institutional definitions *do* matter, but they have little material meaning if the public is defining terms otherwise, especially through highly transmissible and easily digestible artifacts such as memes.

Conclusion

This study entices us to continue asking how we might confront racism and race-related mis-/disinformation in our current moment. It becomes especially urgent as we encounter the fact that much of the information circulating through highly transmissible media, such as memes, is not only incorrect but is also fungible: in the case of CRT-centered memes, CRT and anti-racism could "mean" almost anything race-related to forward each camp's agenda, and seemingly very few people care to engage with an institutional definition. When politicized definitions are a practice in power assertion, the discursive work that these definitions do –"correct" or not– is more necessary than ever to understand.

There are several fruitful routes that we can identify for further work around the production and consumption of these memes as they relate to knowledge-building practices. In the space of production, contacting those who created these media objects would potentially lend useful insight about how they, as creators, gained their own understanding of CRT, and why they chose to disseminate this information in these particular ways attached to these particular visual formats. The Media Research Center would be an interesting first place to start, as they crafted each of their anti-CRT memes in the same aesthetic format with the same rhetorical appeals to Black spokespeople. Additionally, study of those who consume these memes is warranted to uncover how users' encounters with these media shape their understandings of CRT and their opinions on it. While we have performed a critical discourse analysis from the "outside" in this study, better

understanding the conscious decisions that went into creating these cultural objects–as well as their audience reception– would tie back to core questions that animate this study: What are the reasons behind creating these memes? How does *public* understanding–rather than institutional understanding– of a term such as critical race theory affect its discursive power? And how do memes such as these operate, rhetorically, as tools of sensemaking and sensegiving to audiences?

Further, we argue that platforms, too, have some responsibility to contextualize memes such as these through content moderation practices. We acknowledge that this is more than a simple technical issue: filters for racist material, for example, would not flag memes as nuanced as these, and indeed, platforms would likely encounter pushback if any of the memes included in this study were removed. However, there are ways to approach this information landscape through socio-technical solutions, such as by providing the public, experts, and other cultural gatekeepers the ability to contextualize information on social networking sites (**?**). By adding "notes," or otherwise interacting with the information in such a way that its complex relationships to institutional facts are immediately evident to users who may encounter that information, platforms could greatly diminish the power of partisan information masquerading as fact.

Finally, educational curricula and the students who learn from them would deeply benefit from incorporating critical media consumption practices into their core goals and outcomes. It is no longer possible to separate learning from media consumption in the everyday lives of the vast majority of students in the U.S., and we all suffer when there is a lack of commitment to creating critical media consumers who are trained to think before believing –and even more importantly, re-circulating– a politicized meme. Training young people on how mis-/disinformation and hate speech are disguised as fact and/or humor in memes is an important step forward in strengthening our information landscape and democratic future. Teachers are extraordinarily overburdened already, but a curriculum that integrates media literacy as a guiding principle would partially shift the burden from teachers directly and instead task those who guide the direction of school districts nationwide with creating pathways to teach this skill in all subject areas.

As our analysis shows, knowledge-building through CRT memes, especially those opposed to CRT, can serve to dismiss the current societal challenges of racism. There is no simple solution to curtailing the circulation of visual media which may be harmful to marginalized populations (Jhaver et al. 2022), as it is neither a purely tech issue nor purely a lack of education: this is a social issue that can only be resolved through the engagement of a wide variety of actors. It is incumbent upon all of us to recognize memes' social impact and what they reveal about current ideological trends. In doing so, we can move beyond a deterministic conception of post-truth politics, which generalizes disregard for truth, and instead explain the construction of politicized "knowledge" as a sustained process of highly nuanced rhetorical decision-making with real-world effects.

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