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CRITICAL RACE RELIGIOUS LITERACY: EXPOSING THE TAPROOT OF CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL ATTACKS ON CRT

By Robert O. Smith & Aja Y. Martinez

UNBURYING THE LEDE

Miko was up late that night, sitting in their cozy home office preparing a class PowerPoint and lecture on the history of the Dawes Allotment Act. He was emphasizing his Chickasaw family's experience within the broader experiences of the Five Tribes and Freedpeople of Indian Territory before it was Oklahoma.¹ Alejandra, her course planning for the evening completed, retreated to their bedroom, eager to engage in one of her favorite pastimes: junk T.V. on one of their many streaming services.

When Miko's fitness watch reminded him it was time to stand up and take a walk around the house, he decided to see what version of reality show tripe Alejandra had landed on.

"Whatcha watching?" Miko asked, popping his head into the room.

"Oh my gosh, it's *scandalous!*" Alejandra responded; her eyes lit up with excitement. "It's about some religious guy named Jerry Falwell, Jr., and his wife. Apparently, they had this totally lurid affair with a Cuban pool boy they met in Miami. Have you heard about this?"²

"The Falwells, yes, of course," Miko responded casually, walking into the room. He decided to perch for a moment on the edge of the bed, satisfied by the encouraging "You did it!" displayed on his watch.

"They're an American evangelical dynasty. Jr.'s nothing, compared to his father. Senior founded the Moral Majority,³ which helped bring Reagan to the Presidency in 1980. That was against Carter, who identified as a born-again Christian. The whole thing set the course for conservative evangelical political activism today, including the focus on abortion policy."⁴

Alejandra stared at Miko, her eyes wide and mouth a bit agape. She was continually amazed at Miko's quick-draw knowledge of these topics and the network of people involved. For her, they were just a scary mass of people who hated her opinions and, in some ways, her existence. In general, she tried to give these people as little attention as possible.

Growing up Mexican and Catholic, Alejandra used to serve her church as a Scripture reader during Sunday Mass. However, when church leadership discovered she was pregnant at 18, Alé

¹ For the classic study of the Dawes Act and its broader context, see Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes*, with a preface by Amanda Cobb-Greetham (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022). On Freedpeople, see Alaina E. Roberts, *I've Been Here All the While: Black Freedom on Native Land* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).

² Billy Corben, "God Forbid: The Sex Scandal That Brought Down a Dynasty," *Hulu* 2022.

³ See Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), esp. chap. 10.

⁴ See Randall Balmer, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).

was told it wouldn't be "appropriate" for her to be on full display in front of the congregation with a pregnant belly and an all-too-obvious absence of a wedding ring on her finger. This rejection resulted in Alejandra's disillusionment, pain, and shame in relation to religion. She walked away from the church with no intent to ever go back—especially once her coursework and research in higher education introduced her to the concepts of colonization, sexism, and abuse embedded within her religious tradition. No, Alejandra saw no place for religion in her life or life's work—that is, until she met Miko.

Miko, an ordained minister and theologian, approached it differently. He invested time and energy into tracking conservative Christian politics. He was willing to look directly into the worst of what they had to say, if only to read it from the inside on behalf of people for whom that would be too traumatic. He had been raised in an Oklahoma City megachurch focused on the Rapture and the prosperity gospel.⁵ The latter, which promised worldly blessings if you loved God, could never make sense of his older brother's death from childhood leukemia. So, during high school, Miko "deconstructed" (a concept later coined by cartoonist and former pastor David Hayward)⁶ from fundamentalist Christianity, also with the intention of never going back. But during his university years, Miko was introduced to different forms of Christianity that welcomed his critical inquisitions and his radical politics.

Exposure to Miko's sustained, critical approach to religion as a social force—for both good and ill—had sparked Alejandra's own awareness and reignited interest in religion. But Miko hadn't been aware of the documentary on the Falwells. Pop culture was Alé's department.

"I'd be interested to watch that with you when I'm done with planning for tomorrow," Miko said. Alé agreed to watch something else until Miko had finished up.

"Well, that was really interesting," Alejandra said as she and Miko sat in front of the television, eating what was left of their dessert: microwavable apple tarts.

Pausing the documentary as the credits rolled, Miko responded, "Which part? That it's a documentary about a sex scandal with an evangelical leader, or that they buried the lede about all the political blackmail?"

"That part," Alejandra affirmed with a point of her finger and a head nod, referring to the latter. "Who could have known that the Falwells' sex scandal would pave the way to their political endorsement of Donald Trump's presidential candidacy? I had no clue."

"Well," began Miko, polishing off the last bite of tart, "Trump's 'fixer,' Michael Cohen, caught wind of the scandal. With that inside knowledge, Trump's full acceptance in evangelical circles was all but guaranteed."⁷

⁵ For an overview of Miko's childhood Christianity, see Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁶ See <https://thelastingsupper.com/>.

⁷ See Aram Roston, "Trump's ex-lawyer Cohen links Falwell's endorsement in 2016 to suppression of racy photos," *Reuters* (September 8, 2020), <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-falwell-endorsement/trumps-ex-lawyer-cohen-links-falwells-endorsement-in-2016-to-suppression-of-racy-photos-idUSKBN25Z2S0>.

READING THE THEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

Since 2022, a series of documentaries has highlighted the connection between politically connected conservative religious leaders and their participation in covering up sexual abuse. It's a recurring pattern: the Falwells being exploited even as they exploited others; Brian Houston of Hillsong covering up his own improprieties and the child sexual abuse committed by his father; Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar covering up longstanding patterns of child sexual abuse both by their son, Josh, and their spiritual mentor, Bill Gothard.⁸ The success of these documentaries (all three films are *Rotten Tomatoes* "certified fresh") shows popular interest in efforts to better understand both the sinister underbelly of evangelical abuse and the structures of evangelical social power. Along with drawing attention to the exploitation of vulnerable people and demonstrable commitments to white supremacy, the films focus viewers' attention, in the end, on political influence, whether it is evangelical leaders seeking political offices of their own or enjoying unfettered access to government executives ranging from President Trump to Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee to Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison.

This evangelical focus on how people in the United States learn about race and racism might be surprising. Isn't the Religious Right, the "movement of politically conservative evangelicals that emerged in the late 1970s," concerned first and foremost with abortion? Dartmouth historian Randall Balmer has compiled overwhelming evidence that while abortion was a concern for some evangelicals before the late 1970s, it was by no means the catalyst behind the organization of what would become the Religious Right, including Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority.

If, contrary to what Balmer calls the "abortion myth," abortion didn't galvanize American evangelicals into a conservative political bloc, what was it? The evidence is clear: the defense of racial segregation at private Christian schools. "Despite the persistence of ... the fiction that the movement began in opposition to *Roe v. Wade*," what Balmer calls the "abortion myth," it was, in fact, "the defense of Bob Jones University and other institutions that galvanized evangelical leaders into a political force." While some evangelicals in the 1970s, like Bob Jones, argued that racial segregation was a biblical principle, Moral Majority founders Jerry Falwell and Paul Weyrich "quickly sought to shift the grounds of the debate, framing their opposition in terms of religious freedom rather than in defense of racial segregation."⁹ Balmer, despite longstanding sympathies for the evangelical movement, felt that strong white evangelical support for President Trump's racist rhetoric made it necessary to share this historical narrative. Since then, evangelical contributions to the attack on Critical Race Theory (CRT) have served to prove Balmer's overall point.

As we have researched the current attack on CRT, it has become clear to us that the subject isn't complete without thorough engagement with the intellectual sources and media networks of the Religious Right. To successfully navigate that landscape, to read the map, requires a certain level of religious literacy. It turns out that religious literacy—a methodological approach for

⁸ Stacey Lee, "The Secrets of Hillsong," FX/Vanity Fair (2023) and Olivia Crist, "Shiny Happy People: Duggar Family Secrets," Amazon Prime Video (2023).

⁹ Balmer, *Bad Faith*, 45, 42.

reading religious and political, or theopolitical, contributions to social structures and debates—is an important tool for comprehending both the current attack on CRT and the sources of hope within CRT itself.

British sociologist Grace Davie said in 2015 that “Religious literacy must be engaged in context: getting it right can make all the difference; getting it wrong can make a tricky situation worse.”¹⁰ That scholars can sometimes ignore religion isn’t because college-educated people (including PhD-holding professors) aren’t religious. A recent Pew Research Center report found that while college graduates are less likely (at 46%) to “say religion is very important” than people with a high school education or less (58%), just about every educational level surveyed attended religious services at similar rates, with 36% and 37%, respectively, attending weekly.¹¹ When religion is considered a privatized component of a presumably secular society, scholars may have a tendency to ignore religion altogether. This is especially the case for scholars who, like Alejandra in the story above, have experienced exclusion or abuse within religious communities. But religious commitment is too pervasive a force to analyze societal shifts without taking it into account. In the case of CRT, if we fail to comprehend the theopolitical catalyst and content behind the current attacks, we miss the opportunity to analyze and respond. Religious literacy illuminates connections between theopolitical power structures like the Religious Right, the contemporary attack on public education that has caught both CRT and DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) efforts in their snares.

In some ways, evangelical participation in the attack on CRT helps return analysis of CRT to the movement’s historical roots. We are engaged in a broader historiographic project that extends the historical timeline of CRT beyond the 1980s, back into the 1960s. Our research in Derrick Bell’s archival and published record emphasizes the point that the societal struggle following *Brown v. Board* (1954) is the taproot of CRT. That decision and its aftermath provided the seedbed for CRT’s foundational premises and tenets. Specifically, it was Derrick Bell’s participation in NAACP Legal Defense Fund efforts to desegregate public schools in the US South in the 1960s that led to his articulation, throughout the 1970s, of the critical questions and legal theories that became the foundation of what would later be called CRT. It is also why CRT has found such a strong disciplinary home in the academic field of Education. Much CRT scholarship has focused on why the promises of *Brown* have remained unfulfilled for so many Black Americans. Bell’s experiences in the warzone of Jim Crow Mississippi, the assassinations of heroes and friends like Medgar Evers and Martin Luther King, Jr., his mentorship by Constance Baker Motley and countless other Black women, and his enduring commitment to educational policy all informed the disciplinary field and movement known as CRT.¹²

¹⁰ Grace Davie, “Forward,” in *Religious Literacy in Policy and Practice*, ed. Adam Dinham and Matthew Francis (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2015), vii. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t89c7n>.

¹¹ See Pew Research Center, “In America, Does More Education Equal Less Religion?” *Pew Research Center Report* (April 26, 2017), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/04/26/in-america-does-more-education-equal-less-religion/>.

¹² See Derrick A. Bell, Jr., “Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation Litigation,” *Yale Law Journal* 85:4 (March 1976): 470–516, as well as Bell, “*Brown* and the Interest-Convergence

If Balmer's analysis is correct, *Brown* is also the dynamo energizing evangelical fundamentalist politics. The fight against desegregation has long informed the fight for governmental support of parochial, private, and homeschooling options. The Duggar family's reality television series serves as a promotional vehicle for the Institute of Basic Life Principles and the homeschooling program, the Advanced Training Institute. The result has been a longstanding assault on public education, a cornerstone of Western democracy. Those efforts are bearing results. In its June 2022 decision in *Carson v. Makin*, the US Supreme Court now accepts that tax dollars can be diverted from public education to sectarian schools. From this historical vantage point, direct conflict between CRT and evangelical Christianity was all but inevitable. That conflict has now erupted.

“LAY DOWN YOUR LIVES”

Glenn was flipping through the news network channels, smelling the good aromas wafting in from the kitchen, waiting as patiently as his rumbling stomach would permit before Claire issued her usual call to dinner: “Come and get it!”

Glenn and Claire, neighbors of Alejandra and Miko's, are a cis-white married couple in their mid-70s. They identify as evangelical Christians and conservatives, but they never supported Trump—Glenn in particular really wrote him off once when in 2018 it was reported Trump canceled a visit to the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery near Paris, saying, “Why should I go to that cemetery? It's filled with losers.”¹³

The clicker landed on what seemed to be yet another “Save America” Trump rally, this one in South Carolina.¹⁴ Glenn increased the T.V. volume, squinting a bit to catch the former president's words through the sudden hiss of oil issuing from the kitchen. He retrieved the legal notepad and pen he kept on the side table adjacent to his recliner. Ever since Trump had been elected, he had been in the habit of taking notes nearly every time he caught the man speaking. Glenn found himself continually astounded and in disbelief about the things that came out of this supposed world leader's mouth. He found that writing it down for himself was the only way to maintain some semblance of reality that yes, this country did indeed elect this turkey, and yes, he did indeed say the things he said, because, every time, there were Trump's loony words, plain as day, written in blue pen on yellow lined paper in Glenn's quick yet neat script.

Dilemma” and “A Model Alternative Desegregation Plan,” in *Shades of Brown: New Perspectives on School Desegregation*, ed. Derrick Bell (New York: Teachers' College Press, 1980). For Bell's autobiographical recounting of his years working in Mississippi, see Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹³ See Jeffrey Goldberg “Trump: Americans Who Died in War Are ‘Losers’ and ‘Suckers’” *The Atlantic* (September 3, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2020/09/trump-americans-who-died-at-war-are-losers-and-suckers/615997/>.

¹⁴ See Paul Blest, “Trump Is Now Talking About Critical Race Theory Like It's a Holy War,” *Vice News* (March 14, 2022), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/wxdk55/trump-critical-race-theory-war>, and James Fulford, “Full Transcript of Trump's Speech in Florence, South Carolina,” *VDare.com* (March 19, 2022), <https://vdare.com/posts/full-transcript-of-trump-s-speech-in-florence-south-carolina-good-on-the-border-still-not-up-to-his-2015-performance-on-legal-immigration>.

“Getting critical race theory out of our schools is not just a matter of values, it’s also a matter of national survival. We have no choice. The fate of any nation ultimately depends upon the willingness of its citizens to lay down—and they must do this—lay down their very lives to defend their country,” Trump said.

Lay down our lives? Glenn thought, recoiling a bit at Trump’s audacity.

“That’s rich, coming from *him*,” Glenn said to himself out loud.

“Is it rich?” Claire yelled above the hissing oil fray in the kitchen. “No, no, super light, just a quick stir fry tonight, Glenn!”

“No,” Glenn shouted back, “not the food. Trump’s words. I said it’s rich coming from him—with his non-military record—that *he* has the *nerve* to ask *anyone* to lay down their lives for their country.”

“Ohhh,” Claire mouthed, her head just barely peeking above the kitchen counter separating the sink from the living room.

Glenn rewound the rally footage to catch the next phrases of the speech he’d missed.

“If we allow the Marxists and communists and socialists to teach our children to hate America, there will be no one left to defend our flag or protect our great country or its freedom.”

“What is this madman talking about?” Glenn said, this time quietly to himself.

Glenn was a U.S. Marines Corps veteran who had served two tours in Vietnam as an infantry soldier, a grunt. He still carried shards from a punji stick in his right shin. If there was anyone who had shed years from his life—laid down his life to “defend our flag or protect our great country or its freedom”—it was Glenn. He worked an entire career through to retirement for a national defense contractor, believing wholeheartedly that what he did everyday contributed to making our country a better place—a place we could all sleep better at night. And here again was this false man, this criminal, this draft-dodger in front of yet another crowd, this time demanding they lay down their lives, practically demanding holy war—and on what? Critical Race Theory? Why? What was CRT anyway? And why was Trump so intent on taking it down?

“Come and get it!” Claire trilled.

Shaking his head, Glenn turned off the T.V., placed his notepad and pen back on the side table, rose from his leather recliner, and trudged toward the kitchen. He pointedly decided *not* to talk about Trump over supper.

THE HOLY WAR ON CRT

On March 12, 2022, former President Trump told South Carolina rallygoers that they must “lay down their very lives to defend their country” against CRT. This battle cry extended a culture war theme he had launched in September 2020 with Executive Order 13950, “Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping.” Until the Biden Administration overturned the order immediately upon taking office in 2021, it severely limited diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts throughout the US government. The oft-named target of the executive order was a new/old bogeyman of American racial ideology: CRT. According to the UCLA Law School’s CRT Forward Tracking Project, since September 2020 to the time of this writing (July 2023), a total of 214 local, state,

and federal government entities across the nation have introduced 699 anti-CRT bills, resolutions, executive orders, opinion letters, statements, and other measures.¹⁵

Trump's ongoing attack on CRT was fueled by conservative media, especially Fox News, following the May 2020 police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the resulting street protests calling for structural changes to American society.¹⁶ In his post-administration memoir, Trump's former Chief of Staff, Mark Meadows, detailed how Executive Order 13950 resulted from a September 2, 2020, *Tucker Carlson Show* appearance by journalist Christopher Rufo. Before becoming engrained with the DeSantis political machine in Florida,¹⁷ Rufo was part of several thinktank operations like the Heritage Foundation and the smaller Manhattan Institute.¹⁸

CRT was such a problem, Rufo insisted on Carlson's show, that the President should "immediately issue" an "executive order and stamp out this destructive, divisive, pseudoscientific ideology at its root."¹⁹ President Trump took note. The next morning, Meadows got Rufo on the phone. "In a few days," Meadows later recalled, Rufo was "flying out to Washington to help us fine-tune the wording, along with a few other respected scholars and journalists. It would be done and ready to sign by the end of September."²⁰

In March 2021, Rufo launched a tweet that reverberated throughout the CRT world: "We have successfully frozen their brand—'critical race theory'—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all the various cultural insanities under that brand category."²¹ He continued in an additional tweet, "The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think 'critical race theory.' We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural

¹⁵ CRT Forward, UCLA Law, <https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu/> (accessed May 24, 2023). See also Taifha Alexander, LaToya Baldwin, Clark Kyle Reinhard, and Noah Zatz, "Tracking the Attack on Critical Race Theory: A Report from CRT Forward's Tracking Project An Initiative of the Critical Race Studies Program," *UCLA Law School* (April 6, 2023), <https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu/new-crt-forward-report-highlights-trends-in-2021-2022-anti-crt-measures/>.

¹⁶ See Hakeem Jefferson and Victor Ray, "White Backlash Is A Type Of Racial Reckoning, Too," *FiveThirtyEight* (January 6, 2022), <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/white-backlash-is-a-type-of-racial-reckoning-too/>, and Jacey Fortin, "Critical Race Theory: A Brief History," *New York Times* (November 8, 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/article/what-is-critical-race-theory.html>.

¹⁷ Michael Kruse, "DeSantis' Culture Warrior: 'We Are Now Over the Walls,'" *Politico* (March 24, 2023), <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2023/03/24/chris-rufo-desantis-anti-woke-00088578>.

¹⁸ David Theo Goldberg, "Meet Christopher Rufo—leader of the incoherent right-wing attack on 'critical race theory,'" *Salon* (August 21, 2021), <https://www.salon.com/2021/08/01/meet-christopher-rufo--leader-of-the-incoherent-right-wing-attack-on-critical-race-theory/>.

¹⁹ Sam Dorman, "Chris Rufo calls on Trump to end critical race theory 'cult indoctrination' in federal government," *Tucker Carlson Show / Fox News* (September 2, 2020), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/chris-rufo-race-theory-cult-federal-government>.

²⁰ Mark Meadows, *The Chief's Chief* (St. Petersburg: All Seasons Press, 2021), cited in Bryan Metzger and Jake Lahut, "Trump issued an executive order on Critical Race Theory after seeing a segment about it on Tucker Carlson's show: book," *Business Insider* (December 7, 2021), <https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-critical-race-theory-found-out-from-tucker-carlson-book-2021-12>. This sequence of events is noted as well in Taifha Alexander, LaToya Baldwin Clark, Kyle Reinhard, and Noah Zatz, "Tracking the Attack on Critical Race Theory," *CRT Forward / UCLA School of Law* (April 6, 2023), 10.

²¹ Christopher Rufo, Twitter Post, March 15, 2021, 2:14pm, <https://twitter.com/realchrisrufo/status/1371540368714428416?s=20>.

constructions that are unpopular with Americans.”²² The strategic playbook revealed in those tweets would be enacted over the coming months.

By the middle of 2021, school board meetings across the US were becoming hotbeds of CRT debate. Opponents were resourced by right-wing thinktanks while everyone else was left confused.²³ Information crafted by Rufo was at the center of the effort. In October 2021, CNN covered a school board meeting in Douglas County, Nevada. There, they encountered Bob Russo, who was attending and speaking at his third school board meeting in eight days. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t want Marxist blood in this country,” Russo said to applause from other meeting attendees. Speaking to journalists after the meeting, Russo, a 68-year-old retiree with no children in local districts, shared why he was speaking out: “I’m concerned about kids being taught theories, ideologies that are going to divide them and set them apart from each other. [...] I’m concerned about our freedom.”²⁴

THE KIDS ARE ALRIGHT

On the day Alejandra’s 2023 spring semester CRT course was scheduled to read Richard Delgado’s “Rodrigo’s Chronicle,”²⁵ she invited Miko to guest lecture. The course was a 4000-level literature/rhetoric course and was filled to capacity with 28 bright and eager English majors, all in their late-teens and twenties.

As Miko flipped through his PowerPoint slides, offering the students a general overview of Delgado’s first Chronicle, which functions as a book review of Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*, he asked the students if they had any familiarity with the current attack on CRT.

One student, Zora, a mixed race Asian and white trans woman, shot her hand into the air. Miko nodded in her direction.

“Last class, Professor Prieto showed us that tweet by Christopher Rufo—about turning the brand of CRT ‘toxic.’”

“Ah! Yes, good ol’ Rufo,” Miko affirmed with a nod and smile. “That’s exactly where we’re headed,” Miko said, advancing to the next slide containing a screenshot of Rufo’s infamous tweet.

“Ugh!” said many of the students in unison.

²² Christopher Rufo, Twitter Post, March 15, 2021, 2:17pm, <https://twitter.com/realchrisrufo/status/1371541044592996352?s=20>.

²³ See, for instance, Tyler Kingkade, Brandy Zadrozny, and Ben Collins, “Critical race theory battle invades school boards—with help from conservative groups,” *NBC News* (June 15, 2021), <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/critical-race-theory-invades-school-boards-help-conservative-groups-n1270794>, and Christopher Hooks, “Critical Race Fury: The School Board Wars Are Getting Nasty in Texas,” *Texas Monthly* (November 2021), <https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/critical-race-fury-the-school-board-wars-are-getting-nasty-in-texas/>.

²⁴ Kyung Lah and Jack Hannah, “Discussions of critical race theory, Covid-19 rules whip up school board meetings to the dismay of students,” *CNN.com* (October 31, 2021), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/10/31/us/nevada-douglas-county-school-crt-row/index.html>.

²⁵ Published in 1992, this was Delgado’s first ever counterstory as dialogue involving his now well-chronicled characters Rodrigo Crenshaw and The Professor. See Aja Y. Martinez, *Counterstory: The Rhetoric and Writing of Critical Race Theory* (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2020), chapter 2.

“Yep, we know this one!” announced another student, Nathaniel, a Black cis-man. “It’s amazing that he reveals the entire playbook right there!”

A non-binary white student named Marlene timidly raised their hand so that it was barely hovering above the surface of their desk. Miko nodded in their direction.

“Professor Koiishto,” Marlene began quizzically, “who is Rufo responding to?” They pointed toward the screenshot and the line of text right above Rufo’s words.

Dee, a cis-Latina, who had jumped onto Twitter to look up Rufo and his tweet as soon as Miko displayed it, exclaimed, “Oooh I had the same question! The handle is @ConceptualJames; if you click on it, the link leads to some person named James Lindsay.”

“That’s exactly right,” Miko responded with a laugh, “thanks for being on it Dee, and in fact, let me show you all my next slide...”

CONCEPTUAL JAMES AND REAL CHRIS

This small bit of Twitter literacy—noting that Rufo is responding to *somebody*—has eluded most researchers discussing social media sources for the contemporary right-wing political attack on CRT. Small, but essential. Our 20-something-year-old students, however, possess that literacy in spades. It turns out that @RealChrisRufo was responding to @ConceptualJames in an effort to build an alliance. Earlier that day, Lindsay had tweeted, “Critical Race Theory is falling. It’s [sic] end, but not THE end, is coming.”²⁶ Rufo’s responses show his playbook for attacking CRT; they are, at the same time, an intellectual courting ritual, Twitter bros flirting before moving to direct messages.

By August 2021, Rufo and Lindsay appeared together on rightwing podcast conversations. “James and I have been really tag-teaming on this because James is really the theory expert,” Rufo said in a conversation hosted by podcaster Jack Murphy after a brief excursus on the thought of Hegel and Herbert Marcuse. “I mean James is an encyclopedia of theory connecting all the dots laying out the case making the kind of argument, creating this great content to guide all of us into this world.”²⁷ Although a staunch atheist, Lindsay is the intellectual hub connecting secular and evangelical Christian attacks on CRT.

After earning his PhD in Mathematics at the University of Tennessee, Lindsay published several books supporting the “new atheism” movement²⁸ and then founded a business combining martial arts and massage therapy. Along the way, Lindsay partnered with Helen Pluckrose and Peter Boghossian to perpetrate the 2018–2019 “grievance studies affair,” an attempt to satirize and ridicule what they perceived to be the shortcomings of social science research.²⁹ In 2020, Pluckrose

²⁶ James Lindsay, Twitter Post, March 15, 2021, 2:03pm, <https://twitter.com/ConceptualJames/status/1371537445599244291?s=20>.

²⁷ Jack Murphy Live, “Panel Show on JML with James Lindsay and Christopher Rufo,” *YouTube* (August 3, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCPvsfR2nsI&ab_channel=JackMurphyLive.

²⁸ On the movement, see Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett, *The Four Horsemen: The Conversation That Sparked an Atheist Revolution* (New York: Random House, 2019).

²⁹ See Yascha Mounk, “What an Audacious Hoax Reveals About Academia,” *The Atlantic Magazine* (October 5, 2018), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/new-sokal-hoax/572212/>, and Helen Pluckrose, James

and Lindsay published *Cynical Theories*,³⁰ an attack on the intellectual foundations of the contemporary academy, including postmodernism and critical theory. Pluckrose and Lindsay devote an entire chapter to CRT and intersectionality. This is where, according to Rufo, Lindsay starts proving himself “an encyclopedia of theory connecting all the dots.”³¹

So what dots are connected? CRT and intersectionality are addressed in the fifth chapter of *Cynical Theories*. Up to this point in the book, Pluckrose and Lindsay have sought to delegitimize their construction of “postmodern” philosophy and the “applied postmodernism” manifested in (again, their constructions of) various fields of academic critical theory. Because, in this telling, all critical theory has origins in Marxism, these theories all intend the revolutionary overthrow of the liberal social order and must be resisted. The analysis is remarkably superficial. Focusing on the name coined to sum up the academic content of the movement, they suggest, “The word critical here means that its intention and methods are specifically geared toward identifying and exposing problems in order to facilitate revolutionary political change.” To address forms of racism subtler than Bull Connor’s firehoses, CRT practitioners, according to Lindsay and Pluckrose, “turned to the tools of cultural criticism that were ascendant at the time. This meant adopting critical approaches and, eventually, Theory.”³² By this point in the book, that observation is meant to elicit for readers a dramatic soap opera villain soundtrack. In the same way, CRT’s critique of the colorblindness now instantiated within the liberal social order,³³ forthrightly described by CRT scholars like Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic,³⁴ is indicted as “a form of radicalism” indicating its “illiberal nature.”³⁵ As we will see, Lindsay’s other bedfellows seem to be more deserving of those descriptions.

One of Pluckrose and Lindsay’s chief take-aways is that CRT is a cynically pessimistic and individual-destroying force that ascribes moral failure to all white people. The chief mechanism for the resulting “reverse racism” is Kimberlé Crenshaw’s interpretative tool of intersectionality. In opposition to the colorblindness of abstract liberalism, they charge, intersectionality has reinvested race and gender with social significance. As a result, intersectionality itself is now the chief source of racism in society. That interpretation, of course, relies on an assumption that race and gender had at some point no longer been relevant categories within an idyllic, egalitarian American social order.³⁶ In other words, Lindsay and Pluckrose repeat the broken record refrain

Lindsay, and Peter Boghossian, “Understanding the ‘Grievance Studies Affair’ Papers and Why They Should Be Reinstated: A Response to Geoff Cole,” *Sociological Methods & Research* 50:4 (Nov 2021): 1916-1936. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00491241211009946>.

³⁰ Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone, 2020).

³¹ Jack Murphy Live.

³² *Cynical Theories*, 114.

³³ See Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, Sixth ed. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

³⁴ See Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Fourth ed. (New York: NYU Press, 2023).

³⁵ Pluckrose and Lindsay, 115.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 121, 124–125.

that racism only exists because people of color and their white liberal allies won't stop grousing about it. For Lindsay and Pluckrose, therefore, CRT (along with all forms of scholarship in their broad net of "critical theory") is a threat to the Western, liberal social order. In this construction, echoed in recent religious discourse, CRT is not merely a competing analytical framework: it is an enemy to be defeated.

AN ATHEIST EMBRACED

During the 2019 Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest Protestant Christian denomination in the United States, Messengers (the SBC nomenclature for delegates) approved a resolution titled, "On Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality." The resolution defined CRT as "a set of analytical tools that explain how race has and continues to function in society" and intersectionality as "the study of how different personal characteristics overlap and inform one's experience." While the resolution reaffirmed the Southern Baptist principle that Scripture stands above all earthly theories, it allowed that the analytical tools of CRT and intersectionality could be used to analyze societal realities.³⁷

Despite caveats built into the resolution, it sounded alarm bells throughout the SBC's conservative factions. With the SBC already awash in controversy, including from prominent then-Baptist Bible teacher Beth Moore's advocacy for women in the wake of Donald Trump's presidency, several groups got to work challenging the 2019 resolution and returning their denomination to its conservative moorings. In November 2020, the Council of Seminary Presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention issued a joint statement banning CRT from their institutions: "[W]e stand together on historic Southern Baptist condemnations of racism in any form and we also declare that affirmation of Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and any version of Critical Theory is incompatible with the Baptist Faith & Message."³⁸ The seminary presidents' statement prompted several prominent Black pastors to leave the denomination.³⁹

In May 2021, Tom Ascol, founder of Founders Ministries, released a video inviting participants to an event, called "Be It Resolved," immediately before the SBC's annual meeting in Nashville. The purpose of the pre-conference and the video was to support Founders Ministries' efforts to challenge the 2019 resolution on CRT and intersectionality. The video, interspersed with

³⁷ Southern Baptist Convention, "On Critical Race Theory And Intersectionality," 2019 Annual Meeting (June 1, 2019), <https://www.sbc.net/resource-library/resolutions/on-critical-race-theory-and-intersectionality/>.

³⁸ See George Schroeder, "Seminary presidents reaffirm BFM, declare CRT incompatible," *Baptist Press* (November 30, 2020), <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/seminary-presidents-reaffirm-bfm-declare-crt-incompatible/>, and Yonat Shimron, "Southern Baptist seminary presidents nix critical race theory," *Religion News Service* (December 1, 2020), <https://religionnews.com/2020/12/01/southern-baptist-seminary-presidents-nix-critical-race-theory/>.

³⁹ Charlie Dates, "'We out': Charlie Dates on why his church is leaving the SBC over rejection of critical race theory," *Religion News Service* (December 18, 2020), <https://religionnews.com/2020/12/18/we-out-charlie-dates-on-why-his-church-is-leaving-the-sbc-over-rejection-of-critical-race-theory/>, and Yonat Shimron, "Ralph D. West, Houston pastor, cuts ties to Southern Baptists over critical race theory rejection," *Religion News Service* (December 16, 2020), <https://religionnews.com/2020/12/16/houston-pastor-cuts-ties-to-southern-baptists-over-critical-race-theory-critique/>.

images of burning buildings (a reference to protests in Minneapolis and elsewhere), contained attacks on Beth Moore and Russell Moore (no relation). In 2013, Russell Moore succeeded Richard Land as President of the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, the public policy arm of the SBC. At the end of his term as President in 2021, he resigned from the Commission and disaffiliated from the SBC.⁴⁰ The video also featured snippets of a conversation with Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay borrowed from a feature-film length documentary from Sovereign Nations, a ministry founded by Michael O'Fallon.⁴¹ "Let's end Christianity," Lindsay says. "How would you do it?" Boghossian asks. Lindsay responds: "Make 'em woke!"⁴²

Lindsay wasn't new to the SBC debate. In May 2019, in a series of tweets responding to Beth Moore, Lindsay opined that "The Southern Baptist Convention is about to split into woke and not-woke variants. If you need any more reason to believe that applied postmodernism can undermine almost any organization it infects, you need look no further than this."⁴³

In early September 2021, two months before the SBC seminary presidents issued their statement banning CRT, Albert Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, hosted Lindsay on his YouTube-based video blog, "Thinking in Public." Mohler introduced Lindsay as "a public intellectual, a notable author on a range of subjects" and described *Cynical Theories* as "a tour de force looking at the intellectual landscape that we confront today."⁴⁴ Later, when asked why he allowed an atheist political strategist to influence his thought, Mohler commented that while Lindsay is a "provocateur" with "no intellectual respect for conservative Christians," his "analytical work has been quite helpful."⁴⁵ Mohler's repudiation of "any version of Critical Theory" is evidence of Lindsay's direct influence.

Although an atheist,⁴⁶ Lindsay is now a mainstay of Christian Nationalist⁴⁷ thought leaders. While the description to the YouTube video used in the Founders Ministries promotional video mentioned above describes Peter Boghossian and Lindsay as "the co-founders of New Discourses," public records⁴⁸ show that the organization is owned by Michael O'Fallon, president of Sovereign Nations, a group committed to "the formation of a new, and not just sentimental,

⁴⁰ See Peter Wehner, "The Scandal Rocking the Evangelical World," *The Atlantic* (June 7, 2021), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/06/russell-moore-sbc/619122/>.

⁴¹ Sovereign Nations, "The Trojan Horse - Ep. 1: Deconstructing Communities|Peter Boghossian, James Lindsay," *YouTube* (August 9, 2019), <https://youtu.be/YDFL3xwEEG8>.

⁴² Tom Ascol, Twitter Post, May 7, 2021, 7:40pm, <https://twitter.com/tomascol/status/1390828831234301956?s=20>

⁴³ James Lindsay, Twitter Post, May 13, 2019, 4:28pm, <https://twitter.com/ConceptualJames/status/1128049461370945537?s=20>

⁴⁴ Albert Mohler, "Critical Theory and the Cynical Transformation of Society: A Conversation with James Lindsay," *Thinking in Public* (September 2, 2020), <https://albertmohler.com/2020/09/02/james-lindsay>.

⁴⁵ Bob Smietana, "Why grievance studies hoaxer and atheist James Lindsay wants to save Southern Baptists," *Religion News Service* (May 18, 2021), <https://religionnews.com/2021/05/18/james-lindsay-southern-baptists-crt-al-mohler-hoax-new-discourses-beth-moorerace-ofallon/>.

⁴⁶ James Lindsay, Twitter Post, December 14, 2020, 1:06pm, <https://twitter.com/ConceptualJames/status/1338561019719929857?s=20>.

⁴⁷ See Bradley Onishi, *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism—and What Comes Next* (Broadleaf, 2023), and Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Canon Press, 2022).

⁴⁸ Reported by Smietana (May 18, 2021).

conservative and Constitutional Republic.”⁴⁹ Lindsay’s videos criticizing critical theory and the SBC were posted on the Sovereign Nations website. Lindsay has connections with other brands of Christian nationalists as well. In a February 2023 blog post titled, “Seven Theses on Theocratic Libertarianism,” Douglas Wilson, founder of New St. Andrew’s College in Moscow, Idaho, praised Michael O’Fallon for his “stout Baptist resistance” and, with reference to a C.S. Lewis character who was a scientist and skeptic, named James Lindsay as “our very own MacPhee.”⁵⁰ Wilson, an intellectual leader of the “American Redoubt,” has described himself as “a paleo-Confederate” while defending the institution of slavery.⁵¹

Conservative factions within the SBC succeeded in passing a new resolution rejecting CRT during the SBC’s 2021 annual meeting, the first following the presidency of Donald Trump. Although they could not rescind Resolution 9 from 2019, Messengers passed a resolution titled, “On the Sufficiency of Scripture for Race and Racial Reconciliation.” While the 2019 resolution had allowed that CRT could be understood as a helpful diagnostic tool, the 2021 resolution rejected “any theory or worldview that finds the ultimate identity of human beings in ethnicity or in any other group dynamic,” and also rejected “any theory or worldview that sees the primary problem of humanity as anything other than sin against God.” While not naming CRT directly, the resolution clarified the primacy of individuals rather than systems and structures and minimized any potential influence from academic theorization. The resolution, therefore, was clearly in keeping with Pluckrose and Lindsay’s emphasis on classical liberalism⁵² and traditional American fundamentalist Christian anti-intellectualism.⁵³

⁴⁹ See <https://sovereignnations.com/about-us/>.

⁵⁰ Douglas Wilson, “Seven Theses on Theocratic Libertarianism,” *Blog & Mablog: Theology that Bites Back* (February 20, 2023), <https://dougwils.com/books-and-culture/s7-engaging-the-culture/seven-theses-on-theocratic-libertarianism.html>.

⁵¹ Dale Chamberlain, “Joe Rigney To Join Faculty of Douglas Wilson’s New Saint Andrews College in Moscow, Idaho,” *Church Leaders* (April 11, 2023), <https://churchleaders.com/news/448622-joe-rigney-to-join-faculty-of-douglas-wilsons-new-saint-andrews-college-in-moscow-idaho.html>. On Wilson and the “American Redoubt,” see Jason Wilson, “‘Make it a Christian town’: the ultra-conservative church on the rise in Idaho,” *The Guardian* (November 2, 2021), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/02/christ-church-idaho-theocracy-us-america>, and Nicholas K. Geranios, “Conservatives move to rural Idaho to escape liberal politics,” *Christian Science Monitor* (March 7, 2022), <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2022/0307/Conservatives-move-to-rural-Idaho-to-escape-liberal-politics>.

⁵² Pluckrose and Lindsay, *Cynical Theories*, 9.

⁵³ See Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, Second ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022).

MIKO'S EPISTOLARY⁵⁴ EXCHANGE WITH THE PROFESSOR⁵⁵

From: Koiishto, Miko
Sent: Thursday, March 9, 2023 7:39 AM
To: Professor, The
Subject: CRT Class Update

Dear Professor,

I'm happy to write with a summary and details about the PowerPoint presentation I shared when I guest lectured on Tuesday in Alejandra's CRT class. The main topic was "Rodrigo's Chronicle" (1992), a book review of Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* (1991). The comparison of "stock" book review form vs. that first Rodrigo Chronicle gave me an opportunity to remind the students to read ALL footnotes (many hadn't and had thus missed the review part of the book review).

The presentation really took off with a discussion of who Dinesh D'Souza is, from his early days as a Dartmouth exchange student to his recent failed forays into documentary filmmaking. With all the details we know about him, the challenge is to not simply rely on ad hominem attacks! *Illiberal Education* is linked to current debates as an attack on the possible functions of diversity, equity, and inclusion in US education. The fight has been going on forever.

In a similar way, CRT has never been without critics. So, I switched over to Christopher Rufo and James Lindsay. Lindsay, like D'Souza, has gone full right-wing and anti-woke, recently publishing the subtly titled *Race Marxism*.⁵⁶

That brings us to the evangelical attack on CRT distributed, primarily, through the Salem Media Group. The Christian publishing and information empire, dedicated primarily to American exceptionalism, has published fine titles like Owen Strachan's *Christianity and Wokeness* and, more successfully, Voddie Baucham's *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and*

⁵⁴ Chapter 5 of Aja's book, *Counterstory* concludes with a discussion of pedagogical implications for CRT and counterstory accompanied by counterstory as epistle; a counterstory method inspired by and modeled on Bell's "An Epistolary Exploration for a Thurgood Marshall Biography," and Daniel Solórzano's "Critical Race Theory's Intellectual Roots: My Email Epistolary with Derrick Bell." With particular importance to rhetoric and writing studies, Frankie Condon has explored this genre of antiracist epistolary or "a series of letters to tell a story" (Solórzano, "Critical Race Theory's Intellectual Roots" 48) in an exchange with Vershawn Ashanti Young as the final chapter of *I Hope I Join the Band: Narrative, Affiliation, and Antiracist Rhetoric*. The counterstory as epistle within this article is an exchange inspired and informed by an email exchange between Robert and Richard Delgado, but has been revised to include researched sources and other data representative of the composite counterstory form. Upon reviewing a draft, Delgado gave permission for us to use his character, "The Professor," and permission to publish this exchange as written.

⁵⁵ For background on The Professor, see Richard Delgado, "Metamorphosis: A Minority Professor's Life," *UC Davis Law Review* 53 (2019): 1-32.

⁵⁶ Lindsey, James, *Race Marxism: The Truth about Critical Race Theory and Praxis* (Orlando: New Discourses, 2022).

Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe.⁵⁷ Both of these books were published in time to inform the SBC's 2021 debate over CRT. Salem Media also produced D'Souza's *2000 Mules* documentary detailing how nefarious liberals stole the presidential election from our rightful Führer.

As you might know, Voddie Baucham was accused of both misquoting and plagiarism. We know he misquoted Richard Delgado but it is significant that the plagiarism comes from our favorite massage therapist turned Southern Baptist Convention whisperer, Lindsay.

Like a lot of the evangelical critics of "social justice" and CRT, Baucham puts forth an argument that "biblical justice" is better and that, since Jesus brings unity, "there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female" (Galatians 3.28). Given this biblical logic, there's no need to discuss racism or sexism. Thus, modern liberal colorblindness is reinscribed through the elevation of the Bible against "modern" values, all using a modernist hermeneutic on an ancient text. All very convincing to themselves.

At one point, critics of CRT came primarily from the left.⁵⁸ Now, they have organized from the far right, employing the full force of evangelical media production.

In this changing landscape, I have a question. I wonder, in the current milieu of anti-CRT attacks, as well as in earlier eras, what distinction do you make between critiques from people like Randall Kennedy and those produced by media hacks. We know Kennedy (in)famously published, "Racial Critiques of Legal Academia" in the *Harvard Law Review*, where Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, and Mari Matsuda are the subjects of his seventy-six-page critique, in which he argues the writings of critical race theory reveal "significant deficiencies" as these scholars "fail to support persuasively their claims of racial exclusion or their claims that legal academic scholars of color produce a racially distinctive brand of scholarship" (1749). From that moment forward, Kennedy has remained a stalwart and outspoken critic of CRT. My sense is that students, especially, need to acquire the toolkits necessary for making reasonable distinctions.

Happy to be in league with you as we wade through this latest bog.

Miko (and Alejandra)

From: Professor, The
Sent: Thursday, March 9, 2023 at 4:53 PM

⁵⁷ Salem Books (an imprint of Regnery Publishing, which is a component of Salem Media Group) published both of these titles in 2021. *Fault Lines* was reissued in paperback in 2022, along with a "participants' guide" for congregational study. Baucham is an American-born Southern Baptist minister now serving as Dean of Theology at African Christian University in Lusaka, Zambia.

⁵⁸ From its inception, the attack on CRT has been media driven. As Kimberlé Crenshaw notes in a history of CRT's founding and development, "We learned to anticipate gross distortions of our viewpoints. Through the sometimes vicious attacks we received from the media, especially from liberal spokespeople." Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, "The First Decade: Critical Reflections, or 'A Foot in the Closing Door,'" *UCLA Law Review* 49 (2002): 1343–1372.

To: Koiishto, Miko
Subject: Re: CRT Class Update

Dear Miko and Alejandra,

Sounds like this was a lively class. You certainly taught them a lot about Richard Delgado's critics.

Can you tell me where the quoted line, supposedly by Delgado, came from? I remember distantly seeing something like this in a news clipping some time ago.

Yes, Kennedy is one of the fairer and more rational of CRT's critics, because he doesn't just make stuff up or attribute stuff to us that he heard somewhere. Plus, he has somewhat mellowed with the years and now thinks the crits are OK.

The Professor

From: Koiishto, Miko
Sent: Friday, March 10, 2023 10:21 AM
To: Professor, The
Subject: Re: CRT Class Update

Thanks, Professor!

The class was lively indeed, almost raucous. Alejandra's done a great job introducing the students to CRT in a fresh way, showing that CRT does indeed have a newly interested audience.

I appreciate your understanding of Kennedy. He has certainly come around. One thing we'd like to do in our writing is compare a well-intentioned (if, ultimately, misguided) critique with the intellectual junk we're encountering today.

That junk logic is most prominently displayed in the pseudo-intellectual materials produced through evangelical Christian publications. The quote from Delgado results from an effort to critique that particular segment of anti-CRT discourse.

So where does Delgado come in? In July 2021, evangelical author and blogger Joel McDurmon published a lengthy review of Baucham's *Fault Lines*.⁵⁹ The problematic passages, at least when it comes to misquoting Delgado, come in the book's preface, where Baucham seeks to lay out "four key presuppositions" of CRT, what the "crits" call "tenets." Specifically, Baucham appears to attribute two ideas to Delgado that are, in fact, not representative of his thought: 1) that "whites

⁵⁹ Joel McDurmon, "Voddie's Fault Lines Worse Than Before: Fake Quotations AND Plagiarism," *Lamb's Reign* (July 30, 2021), <https://www.lamsreign.com/blog/voddies-fault-lines-worse-than-before-fake-quotations-and-plagiarism>.

are incapable of righteous actions on race,” and 2) that “Storytelling/Narrative Reading is the way black people forward knowledge vs. The Science/reason method of white people.”⁶⁰

These quotes are attributed to the third edition of *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* written by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (although Baucham neglects to include Stefancic with the added effect of negating a woman’s leading scholarly voice). Beyond misattribution, McDurmon charges that the fabricated phrases were lifted from a video blog (and related notes) produced by James Lindsay.⁶¹ Curiously, *Cynical Theories* includes a section formatted in a very similar way, also dedicated to detailing the Delgado and Stefancic version of CRT’s tenets (119). While that block quote provides greater distinction between the quoted words and the Lindsay/Pluckrose commentary, the format is still highly questionable.

McDurmon’s analysis was pointed enough to draw a response from Baucham and Salem⁶² along with interest from Christian media. Baucham’s publisher, Salem Books, suggested the confusion was about format rather than substance: “The blogger’s ... weak argument is based on his preference for quoting in an academic style of documentation and formatting, rather than the Chicago Manual of Style [sic].... It is unreasonable ... to demand academic documentation in a popular work.” That’s bizarre, since almost all academic writers, including legal writers, will recognize (and potentially loathe) “Chicago style” as a form of academic citation! Lindsay defended his comrade, tweeting, “Voddie allegedly plagiarized me, and I’m not seeing it. They’re just trying to discredit people who are upsetting their racket. Looks desperate.”⁶³ Although Baucham denied the charges in a video podcast conversation with Tom Ascol and Jared Longshore,⁶⁴ fellow anti-CRT evangelical blogger and homeschooling advocate Neil Shenvi concluded that since “‘black people forward knowledge’ is a very unusual turn-of-phrase that yielded zero Google hits prior to Lindsay’s video ... this seems like a clear case of plagiarism.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Baucham, *Fault Lines*, xvi.

⁶¹ James Lindsay, “Saying No to Critical Race Theory,” *The New Discourses Podcast with James Lindsay*, Episode 9 (July 20, 2020), <https://youtu.be/pirjrKmWxmA>, and InvictusPopuli, “Saying No to Critical Race Theory – James Lindsay,” *Invictus Populi Blog* (July 24, 2020), <https://invictuspopuli.wordpress.com/2020/07/24/saying-no-to-critical-race-theory-james-lindsay/>.

⁶² Bob Smietana, “Voddie Baucham’s publisher defends Fault Lines against plagiarism claims,” *Religion News Service* (August 3, 2021), <https://religionnews.com/2021/08/03/voddie-bauchams-publisher-defends-fault-lines-against-plagiarism-claims/>. See also John Reasnor, “Voddie Baucham’s Publisher Doubles Down On Falsehoods,” *Lamb’s Reign* (August 3, 2021), <https://www.lamsreign.com/blog/voddie-bauchams-publisher-doubles-down-on-falsehoods>.

⁶³ James Lindsay, Twitter Post, August 3, 2021, 1:07pm, <https://twitter.com/ConceptualJames/status/1422620109957476353>.

⁶⁴ Tom Ascol, Jared Longshore, and Voddie Baucham, “Voddie Baucham: A Response to Plagiarism Charges from Joel McDurmon,” *Founders Ministries Podcasts: The Sword & The Trowel* (August 5, 2021), <https://founders.org/podcasts/tstt-voddie-baucham-a-response-to-plagiarism-charges-from-joel-mcdurmon/> and <https://youtu.be/su2MsHevrqM>.

⁶⁵ Neil Shenvi, “‘Fabrication’ and ‘Plagiarism’ in Baucham’s Fault Lines,” *Apologetics: Christian apologetics from a homeschooling theoretical chemist* (August 2021), <https://shenviapologetics.com/fabrication-and-plagiarism-in-bauchams-fault-lines/>.

Delgado also had a chance to respond. When contacted by *Faithfully Magazine*, a BIPOC-focused Christian publication, Delgado responded via email, saying, “I think the writer whose work you are referring to was confusing me with someone else or just making things up, either of which is a bad idea when you are writing for an audience that values integrity and truth-telling!” One line in particular—“whites are incapable of righteous actions on race”⁶⁶—drew Delgado’s attention: “I very much doubt I’ve ever said anything remotely like it.”⁶⁷ Delgado went on to name several white people who could disprove the claims, including his own spouse, Jean Stefancic, who is also his research and writing partner [and co-author of the book Baucham was quoting], and legal scholar Alan Freeman, who Delgado characterized as “one of the earliest, and best, of the race-crits.” Moreover, he reminded readers that “[m]any of the early abolitionists were white, as were many of the Freedom Riders, Mississippi Summer volunteers” and that “[h]istorian Peter Irons, author of *Justice at War*, was the one who uncovered the military’s lies that led to Japanese WWII internment and an apology and reparations to the victims of it.”

It’s fascinating that Delgado (and Stefancic’s!) work has become so central to intra-evangelical debates. This is a function of the relatively new conservative media landscape, which is now almost fully overlapped with evangelical media production. This reality poses a crisis for mainstream American Christianity. And one of the curious byproducts of all this is that, at least for now, the online reputation of this otherwise obscure Baptist preacher, Voddie Baucham, is now fully linked with his failed attempts to critique Richard Delgado!

Miko

From: Professor, The
Sent: Saturday, March 11, 2023 at 6:56 PM
To: Koiishto, Miko
Subject: Re: CRT Class Update

Dear Miko,

I’m glad you had a raucous class. Those are, I think, the best kind!

And thanks for explaining where the obscure quote of Delgado’s came from. I can’t say I’m happy his writing is finding a second life in evangelical circles. I know he’s had enough hate mail and death threats from when he lived and taught in the deep South to last a lifetime. Delgado and I are of the same generation and I’m sure he would be happy to glide into boring anonymity for a while, particularly when it comes to excitable nationalist types.

⁶⁶ Baucham, *Fault Lines*, xvi.

⁶⁷ Nicola A. Menzie, “‘Fault Lines’ Author Voddie Baucham Confused or Making Things Up, Richard Delgado Says in Response to Misquote on ‘Righteous Actions’ of Whites,” *Faithfully Magazine* (August 3, 2021), <https://faithfullymagazine.com/fault-lines-voddie-baucham-crt-richard-delgado/>.

The Professor

From: Koiishto, Miko
Sent: Sunday, March 12, 2023 9:50 AM
To: Professor, The
Subject: Re: CRT Class Update

Raucous is always good!

I completely understand any reticence about CRT names being bandied about in evangelical circles. Delgado has surely suffered enough from the toxic brew of religion and politics. In (parts of) Texas, as in other parts of the South, we have pockets of resistance to that form of manufactured stupidity. But it so often isn't enough, especially in this period when Christian nationalists have been emboldened.

Miko

From: Professor, The
Sent: Monday, March 13, 2023 at 10:43 AM
To: Koiishto, Miko
Subject: Re: CRT Class Update

Dear Miko,

What a lot of undisciplined rubbish goes on under the name of evangelicalism. Unfortunately, it seems when piling on lie after lie about critical race theory, they are preaching to the choir. As such they don't have to worry about readers who say, "Wait a minute," and demand that they support their premises.

The Professor

A MIXED MEDIA LOOP

In 2020, the Founders group published an edited collection of essays, *By What Standard?: God's World ... God's Rules*, featuring three contributions by Baucham. The book's concluding essay, situated as an Appendix, notes Aja Y. Martinez as the first source for understanding CRT.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Timon Cline, "Appendix: Identity Politics and the Bondage of the Will," in *By What Standard? God's World ... God's Rules*, ed. Jared Longshore (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2020), 165, n. 35.

The book was a companion volume to a nearly two-hour “cinedoc”⁶⁹ of the same name, produced by Founders Ministries and released on YouTube. The film begins with an extended clip of the above-mentioned conversation with Lindsay, Boghossian, and the Christian nationalist O’Fallon and features a new interview with Lindsay just over halfway through.

The book, *By What Standard?*, features contributions from Tom Ascol, Baucham, and several other conservative Baptist thinkers. Several authors set out to challenge the loose concept of “cultural Marxism”; Ascol insists on the dubious term and Baucham dedicates a chapter to explaining the rise of this “worldview.” Cultural Marxism, they assert, is the source of the “philosophical movement or ideology known as Critical Theory.”⁷⁰ Ascol argues that since the Bible is the source and judge of all knowledge, one can’t use the tools of cultural Marxism or Critical Theory and still be a proper Bible-believing Christian. With the Bible as his guide, Ascol argues that God, in creating the world, ordered it to “include some hierarchies in relationships and distinctions between people.” To be a faithful Christian, therefore, one must accept that God created “human sexuality to be binary” and made “men stronger than women” (thus excluding women from church leadership). All this is beyond critique because, as the book’s subtitle says, *God’s world, God’s rules*. Ascol’s simplistic natural theology thus divinely validates every possible form of social inequality.

The biblicist fundamentalism and simplistic natural theology underlying *By What Standard?* reaches its apex in contemporary support of slavery. In his effort to distinguish “biblical justice” from current notions of “social justice,” widely regarded Baptist historian Tom Nettles argues in his contribution that, according to 1 Corinthians 7.17, 21, “the condition of slavery can be seen as an ‘assignment’ from God.” Nettles notes that Paul’s acceptance of slavery contrasts with the contemporary assumption that slavery is always a moral evil. He concludes his section on slavery by observing that “Jesus did not consider slavery an absolute moral evil or that masters were, *ipso facto*, to be condemned for their position. Perhaps he did not utter a word of condemnation of it because the relation of master and slave was not condemnable.”⁷¹ Nettles’s acceptance of slavery as a biblical given is far from innocuous given Ascol’s deployment of natural law as a validation for social hierarchies. Moreover, Nettles’s sustained defense of his denomination’s slaveholding founders over the objections of Black Southern Baptist pastors should give one pause.⁷²

⁶⁹ Founders Ministries, “By What Standard? God’s World...God’s Rules (CINEDOC),” *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/pFHfa0s1XLM>.

⁷⁰ Tom Ascol, “Hollow and Deceptive Philosophies,” in *By What Standard? God’s World ... God’s Rules*, ed. Jared Longshore (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2020), 12.

⁷¹ Tom Nettles, “Biblical Justice and God’s Justice,” in *By What Standard? God’s World ... God’s Rules*, ed. Jared Longshore (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2020), 67, 68, 69–70.

⁷² See also “Removing Names: Deep Cleansing?” (<https://founders.org/articles/removing-names-deep-cleansing/>), and “Response from a Crooked Stick” (<https://founders.org/articles/response-from-a-crooked-stick/>). For the context of these articles, see Brian Kaylor, “Nettles: Celebrate ‘Providence’ that Brought Gospel Through Slavery,” *Word & Way* (September 11, 2020), <https://wordandway.org/2020/09/11/nettles-celebrate-providence-that-brought-gospel-through-slavery/>.

Acceptance of chattel slavery is a recurrent theme among Southern Baptist leaders. Albert Mohler, president of the seminary from which Tom Nettles retired, has his own record of problematic statements on slavery. Mohler addressed slavery during a June 12, 1998, appearance on CNN's "Larry King Live" alongside Jerry Falwell. While Mohler did not assert that the Bible "endorses" slavery, he opined, "but it does say, if you're a slave, there's a way to behave." King pressed Mohler, asking if Mohler's belief meant he would "condemn those who ran away," like Harriet Tubman. "Well, I want to look at this text seriously, and it says submit to the master," Mohler replied. After King returned from a commercial break, Falwell, who had his own well-documented history of racist, segregationist commitments, distanced himself from Mohler's position: "If I had lived back during slavery, I would have started and operated an underground railway to Canada."⁷³

Voddie Baucham, for his part, willingly facilitates his white colleagues' prevarications around slavery. In his 2021 book, *Fault Lines*, Baucham argues that the "three-fifths compromise" in the US Constitution did not devalue enslaved persons' lives. Anyone claiming so is "ignorant at best" or, at worst, "twisting historical facts" to promote critical social justice. This is how Baucham introduces "one of the leading academic critics of the Critical Social Justice movement," James Lindsay.⁷⁴ In concert with other Christian Nationalist and Southern Baptist leaders, Baucham absolves Lindsay's reputation as an academic hoaxer. In this community of misogynist, anti-LGBTQ+ Christian Nationalists (potential secessionists) who feel no compulsion to critique the institution of slavery, James Lindsay has been anointed a trusted academic source.

Maybe it shouldn't be surprising that people seeking prominence within rightwing Christian discourse would imitate, copy, and even plagiarize their unbelieving messiah. Lindsay, more of a content developer than a serious researcher committed to a line of inquiry, sits at the hub of an ideological wheel while spokespersons like Baucham and Rufo carry his messaging along distinct spokes to specific audiences, religious and secular.

Maybe it shouldn't be surprising. But the apparent inability among men who are profoundly influential within US political discourse well into the twenty-first century to reject slavery as unethical and unacceptable still manages to shock the conscience. Randall Balmer's clear analysis of the Religious Right's beginnings not in opposition to abortion but in defense of racial segregation helps place this discourse in its sordid historical context. What Balmer presents is no mere academic exercise. The current attack on CRT is being perpetrated by the same political organization, now better funded and situated at the heart of political power, that has defended racial segregation and inequity from the late 1970s to the present.

This nexus of evangelical Christian and secular conservative political discourse is currently producing both legislative and cultural effects. State-level legislative efforts to ban the teaching of Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, and non-jingoistic versions of US history, including

⁷³ Jonathan Merritt, "Al Mohler, Southern Baptist leader, says he was 'stupid' to defend slavery in 1998 CNN interview," *Religion News Service* (May 15, 2020), <https://religionnews.com/2020/05/15/al-mohler-southern-baptist-leader-says-he-was-stupid-to-defend-slavery-in-1998-cnn-interview/>

⁷⁴ Voddie T. Baucham Jr., *Fault Lines: The Social Justice Movement and Evangelicalism's Looming Catastrophe* (Washington, DC: Salem Books, 2021), 203, 204.

interpretations of slavery, are informed directly by the discourse outlined in this chapter. The intellectual output produced by James Lindsay—an academic hoaxer praised by theocratic Christian nationalists comfortable with the concept of slavery—has directly informed legislation in Florida, Texas, and elsewhere.

Daniel Eppley, writing about the CRT controversy within the Southern Baptist Convention, identified a Baptist pattern of “mythic history, anti-intellectualism, and unreflective biblicism.”⁷⁵ Many of these same intellectual patterns are present in contemporary US political discourse, which is inundated with endless information and precious little knowledge or wisdom. In the end, what Lindsay has produced and Baucham has parroted (to the point of plagiarism) can be compared to “junk science” manufactured by various businesses, including the tobacco and the fossil fuel industries, to justify or obfuscate the ongoing harm caused by their products and byproducts.⁷⁶ Junk science is also an enduring concern in courtroom forensics, where matters of individual justice are too often resolved through appeal to manipulated data.⁷⁷ Critical Race Theorists have assiduously analyzed the racial dynamics of these discursive fields and many others; these are informed by the harmful effects of the most pervasive form of “junk science,” the pseudoscientific idea of race itself.⁷⁸ The “junk theories” peddled by the likes of Lindsay and Rufo, supported by the same industrialists who fund the production of climate change denial, are efforts to protect profits and property, especially the property right in whiteness itself, a key insight of CRT. The “knowledge” such efforts produce is satisfactory only within their proprietary ideological sphere, a fragile bubble that bursts dramatically when exposed to critical external analysis.

Racism is a permanent feature of the United States, woven into the constitution of the country itself.⁷⁹ In its degradation of public reason, the present attack on CRT, related to efforts to promote conspiracy thinking, presents a new threat to the country’s democratic ideals. Unfortunately, realist attempts to counter this threat will be difficult since the “junk theories” informing the present moment have merged into the ideology of US evangelical fundamentalism, a movement long beset by what evangelical historian Mark Noll has called “the scandal of the evangelical mind.”⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Daniel Eppley, “CRT and the SB: Fights over Racism Highlight Southern Baptist Divide,” *Political Research Associates* (April 29, 2022), <https://politicalresearch.org/2022/04/29/crt-and-sbc>.

⁷⁶ The term “junk science” is hurled on all sides of regulatory debates. Here, we are particularly interested in the industrial production of knowingly falsified yet scientific proofs. See, for instance, Lisa A. Bero, “Tobacco Industry Manipulation of Research,” *Public Health Reports* 120:2 (March 2005): 200–208. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00333549051200021>. Claims regarding “junk science” have policy implications. See Tom Pelton, “New Trump EPA Rule Against ‘Junk Science’ Trashes Real Science,” *Environment in Focus Radio* (January 7, 2021), <https://www.wypr.org/show/the-environment-in-focus/2021-01-07/new-trump-epa-rule-against-junk-science-trashes-real-science>.

⁷⁷ See Kelly Servick, “Reversing the legacy of junk science in the courtroom,” *Science* (March 7, 2016), and, more recently, Sophia Kovatch, Pamela Colloff and Brett Murphy, “Is It Forensics or Is It Junk Science?,” *ProPublica* (January 31, 2023).

⁷⁸ See Angela Saini, *Superior: The Return of Race Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020).

⁷⁹ See Derrick Bell, *Faces At The Bottom Of The Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 2018); for an exploration of the “permanence” thesis, see this edition’s foreword from Michelle Alexander.

⁸⁰ Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, second ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022).