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Paneling to Avoid 'Deer in the Headlights' Moments in Class: Critical Race Theory Counterdialogues in a Seminar on Percival Everett's Novel *James* (2024)

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ABSTRACT

There is much anxiety swirling around when three forces meet on the first day of class in a new semester: a new topic, a new group, and a new educator. "Paneling" is a guided group-work teaching tool that counters this uncomfortable atmosphere. It also equips every student with expertise within an academic framework at the very start of the semester, which can be helpful if a course addresses sensitive topics.

This article describes paneling in a literary studies course that considered Percival Everett's 2024 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *James* as a Critical Race Theory (CRT) counterstory to Mark Twain's 1884 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, hypothesizing that Everett's novel equips the character James with the agency he is deprived of in the original text. This assessment is underscored by Twain's extensive use of the n-word and the complexity of navigating it in classrooms today.

A CRT reading of both novels, and particularly dealing with the unspeakable word, necessitated that students have an astute understanding of the concepts of structural racism and sexism before engaging with coursework. Therefore, the panels were (1) The Magical "Negro" Trope, (2) CRT and The Deconstruction of DEI, and (3) The N-Word and Bookbanning. By the end of session four, the students were well prepared to engage with the course subject after actively participating in group work and in plenary presentations about the concepts surrounding systemic intersectional oppression, while being aware of fragile and defensive reactions that may characterize such discourses in a predominantly White space.

KEYWORDS
CRT, structural racism, n-word, counterstory, group work

"When shall we three meet again in thunder, lightning, or in rain?
When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won." (Shakespeare 7)

Silence and Anxiety on the First Day of Class

As educators, we all know the feeling of anxiety swirling around the classroom on the first day of class in a new semester: a new topic, a new group, and a new lecturer. The students do not know each other yet, they are not sure of the lecturer's expectations and style, and they are generally concerned about not being "good enough." The most common reaction to such anxiety is silence. However, awkward silences are contrary to teaching objectives that include eliciting, pair and group work, or plenary discussions; instead, this silence creates "deer in the headlights" expressions on many a student's face starting from the first session. This is especially true when the topic of a course might additionally prove personally and emotionally taxing for students. An example of such a topic is the discourse around structural racism, which was central to a literary studies course I taught in the winter semester 2024/25 at the University of Passau, Germany. This is a small university located approximately 200 kilometers from Munich, near the borders of Austria and the Czech Republic, and the majority of its students hail from rural Bavaria. The course was part of the English teacher training program at the American studies department, which meant that English was mostly the students' second or third language; additionally, there was no native English-language speaker in the classroom except for me. The classroom was predominantly White[1]; I am a German woman of Color. The students in this course were early academics in their second or third semesters.

In a majority White rurally-coded young class setting in a majority White university, the students' intuitive awareness of the centrality of race and racism in Percival Everett's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *James* in this classroom was immediately tangible when the students understood that *James* is literally a "counterstory" to Mark Twain's 1884 *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the perspective of the Black enslaved protagonist Jim (aka James). The term counterstory here means the Critical Race Theory (CRT) method of using storytelling to "name a type of discrimination" (Delgado and Stefancic 51) for minority communities that has been overlooked or left out of the dominant narrative. Since the novel by the White author Mark Twain is

[1] "White" is capitalized in this article in line with capitalizing the terms "people of Color" and "Black." All three refer to racial groups.

often still labeled as one of the great American novels despite its frequent use of the n-word, a literary studies course on the counterstory to this epic by an African American author was bound to unpack just how intrinsic structural racism can be to canonic storytelling.

To my mind, traditional, lecture-based approaches are often insufficient for teaching sensitive and complex topics such as structural racism; therefore, this article proposes the teaching tool of "paneling," a structured and guided creative group work tool that reduces student anxiety, encourages participation, and builds the critical competencies required to engage with racialized literary discourse. This is supported by the conversational tone adopted in this article, an intentional methodological and pedagogical choice grounded in three key considerations. First, it reflects Aja Y. Martinez's 2020 trailblazing scholarship that added several tenets to the six CRT principles established in the 1980s. In them, she emphasizes the importance of accessibility and seeks to resist overly elitist academic language in order to engage broader audiences beyond the academy. Second, the teaching tool of paneling is effectively a guided group exercise that fosters the in-class creation of conversations in the respective panel groups, which are then "performed" in front of the rest of the class. The task, therefore, being inherently dialogic, centers conversation as a means of knowledge production, and the chosen informal tone, in turn, reinforces this epistemological stance. Third, given the article's practical focus on classroom implementation, the conversational register enhances clarity and usability, making the pedagogical strategies more readily transferable to teaching practice. A memory log of one such "conversation" in a panel from the *James* course is provided as an example at the end of the article. This conversation, authored by the students in the panel, focuses especially on fragile and defensive reactions that are often part and parcel of a racism discourse, particularly in a White-majority context. In this case, the conversation structure highlights MAGA rhetorical tactics.

My assumption going into the *James* course was that most students had probably not yet practiced critical thinking while exploring a racialized text, and that there might be a lot of insecurity about appropriate terminology for discussing structural racism in a literary text. This is why I chose to introduce key concepts needed to understand the systemic nature of racism early in the semester. Paneling in this way channels students' creativity in a playful manner. This type of group work allows for a creative student-centered guided exercise in sessions two through four, replacing the traditional lecture format and enabling students to exchange ideas and practice arguments in a relatively safe space as they get to know each other. It allows every student to acquire some expertise in at least one academic framework necessary to begin grasping the notion of structural racism early on.

In the first session of the course, the students are divided into groups of four or five, which I call panels, and each panel has a name.[2] The readings I assign in this session are mandatory, with the objective that the second session begins with every student having prepared a different text. The second session, then, is a guided in-class panel-preparation session in which the educator assists each panel group individually. This second session has two objectives: (1) The students individually summarize their texts to each other and critically position them. (2) The students come up with a creative way to present the concepts they have read about to all the other panels in a presentation of about ten minutes in plenary. These presentations take place in sessions three and four. This way, the students become consciously and oftentimes playfully aware of the scope of knowledge needed to navigate a critical discourse and analysis of structural racism in a literary text while acquiring a solid set of cross-racial social skills that they can practice throughout the rest of the semester. They also get to know each other, which is an additional boon to all other pair work and group work in the course.

James, the N-Word, and Critical Race Theory

When *James* was published in 2024, against the backdrop of Donald Trump's second presidential run against Kamala Harris, a woman of Color, it felt like a pertinent moment to investigate Twain's prolific use of the word "nigger" in the novel, used all of 211 times. This frequency is significantly different from his use of the racial slur in the novel's prequel, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, published in 1876, in which Twain used the word only nine times. Some scholars, among them Shelley Fisher Fishkin, argue that Twain recognized that the term "embodied and enabled society's racist norms" and that he "makes those norms the object of his lacerating satire in order to push the reader to recognize and reject them (vii–viii). And yet, argues this article, even if students today were to understand both Twain's satirical objective and the fact that Huck does not *intend* to be racist in the novel, this does not lessen the *harm* the use of such a term can cause in a classroom. In this context, I consider it important to reflect, especially from a pedagogical perspective, on whether a novel that uses the n-word so often should continue to be considered one of the canonical novels required to teach the history of slavery and to critically assess this aspect of US history at all. The question that I ask as an educator and as a woman of Color is whether we should continue to insist that a novel be read in courses, when, at the same time, readers will not be able to speak about what they are reading, simply because the n-word *is* unspeakable and distressing to hear in a classroom, not only but especially for people of Color. If we are really interested in Jim's voice in the

[2] In the *James* course, we had three panels: (1) The "Magical Negro" Trope; (2) CRT and the Deconstruction of DEI, and (3) The N-Word and Bookbanning.

world Twain created, maybe it is time to reconsider focusing on the voice Everett gave this character 140 years later instead.

Everett's expansion of Twain's character Jim in *James* gives the character Jim/James a voice in a story that centers his (Black, grown-up, enslaved, male) experience in a way that Twain's characterization of Huck's "friend" Jim does not (as this narrator is a child). *James* follows the original story for a long time before it takes a most compelling turn. In Everett's novel and in contrast to his character in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, James' language also comes replete with a different set of grammar and vocabulary, depending on whether he is talking to White or (enslaved) Black people; he is a complex literate and knowledgeable character; he calls on the writings of Locke, Montesquieu, and other enlightened thinkers; he is a philosopher, a friend, a father, a husband, and also a man who endures the physical mistreatments and the horror of being a pawn in his own life that being an enslaved person meant.

Two things are true about *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*: For one, it was controversial from the moment it was first published, albeit for different reasons than now. And secondly, while it remains controversial in our day, it has also retained a high rank among the recommendations of what should be taught in high school over the past 40 years, as observed by Leonard and Tenney in the 1990s ("Introduction" 1) and Fishkin in 2025. In a statement on her website around her new book *Jim: The Life and Afterlife of Huckleberry Finn's Comrade* (2025), Shelley Fisher Fishkin points out that "Jim . . . is viewed as an emblem both of Twain's alleged racism and of his opposition to racism; a diminished character inflected by minstrelsy and a powerful challenge to minstrel stereotypes; a reason for banning Huckleberry Finn and a reason for teaching it" ("Events and News"). This continued controversy over the decades, along with the reception of the novel in spaces of learning, made it obvious to me that there was no question that teaching *James* in a classroom would have to include extensive knowledge of terminology regarding the racism discourse and the systematicity of structural racism, not only in contemporary US society but also in our own European social contexts.

Robin DiAngelo argues that talking about racism often triggers defensive reactions in predominantly White spaces, which classrooms in Austria and Germany generally tend to be. She explains that White people who had not been taught cross-racial skills lack "the ability to sit with the discomfort of being seen racially" (7). They are just not practiced in it, being, as they are, usually part of dominant society. The triggers, she argues, can be found in the good/bad binary frame in which discourses around racism often take place. Becoming triggered around the racism discourse happens when we do not see racism as structural and built into the systems of our society that we navigate every day, but as "simple, isolated, and extreme acts of prejudice

[that are] intentional, malicious, and based on conscious dislike of someone because of race" (71).

In my experience, the vast majority of students who sign up for an English language course, the description of which cites the investigation of the novel *James* by the African American author Percival Everett as a counterstory to *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by the White author Mark Twain, will be interested in the topic from a specifically *not-racist* point of view as opposed to a racist point of view.[3] Even so, this is still indicative of a tricky situation as DiAngelo argues that, viewed through a good/bad binary lens, the common assumption is that racists will be seen as "bad" (72). On the other hand, "not racists" will probably be linked to terms such as "progressive, educated, open-minded, well-intentioned, young" (72).

Students in a course that negotiates the perception of structural racism in a literary text, such as *James*, but who do so through a good/bad binary lens and not with an awareness and understanding of structural racism, might, therefore, be operating from one or more of the following claims or their paraphrases recorded by DiAngelo:

- "I was taught to treat everyone the same" (77);
- "I don't see color" (77);
- "My parents were not racist, and they taught me not to be racist" (83);
- "I lived in [Nigeria] and was a minority, so I know what it is like to be a minority" (78);
- "Focusing on race is what divides us" (86);
- "My family is multiracial" (78).

While people's – and by extension – students' intentions might be good when uttering such phrases, doing so can perpetuate a colorblind attitude.[4] This is problematic in a discourse on racism, even if the claims are true, because the key point is not whether they are true or not. DiAngelo points out that "all these claims ultimately function in a similar way: they all exempt the person [talking] from any responsibility for or participation in the problem. They take race off the table, and they close (rather than open) any further exploration" (78). If this is pointed out to a student who has not yet internalized the systematicity of racist structures but is working from a good/bad binary perspective, it will naturally lead to a defensive reaction in a person whose self-perception is that she/he/they/* are *not racist*. This is especially true for someone who is not skilled in navigating situations in which they experience racial discomfort. And being critically challenged on a well-intentioned claim as described

[3] The term "not-racist" is in line with Ibram X. Kendi's scholarship. He uses it to describe someone whose *intentions* are not meant to support or who is not in favor of racist structures. His definition of being "anti-racist," on the other hand, means to take part in pushing back against systemic racism through one's *actions* (10–11).

[4] The term "colorblind" means the idea of dealing with racism by treating every person in the same way, regardless of their race (Delgado and Stefancic 170). Acting this way can "lead . . . to negating the existence of systemic disadvantages" (Vollmann 30).

above surely counts as a situation in which one is prone to feeling discomfort. The problem here is that the defensive energy "will go . . . to deflecting the charge, rather than reflecting on [one's own] behaviour" (72). This then, argues DiAngelo, "makes it effectively impossible for the average white person to understand – much less interrupt – racism" (72).

In a course with fifteen to twenty-five new students who know neither each other nor their lecturer, this dynamic is posited here as particularly counter to an engaging, open discussion culture. Quite the contrary, it leads to awkward silences. This is often simply because students are just too scared to say the "wrong" thing. Sometimes it is just a matter of clearing up terminology in a frame that does not feel threatening or accusatory. In the first session, some students simply do not know what the "right" word is to call a Black or Brown person and have trouble navigating the question of how "bad" the n-word really is. On the one hand, people do not want to feel language-policed; on the other hand, nobody wants to be considered a racist either – except racists, of course. But it is nonetheless possible that students might use racist language or claims if they are not equipped with the appropriate terminology and scholarly tools.

One recurring example illustrates this point: In most English-language courses on racism that I have taught at German-speaking universities, there has always been at least one student who insisted that the course (and I, most importantly, as his educator) understand that, when *he* uses the German word "Neger," it is not *meant* in a "bad" way.[5] I consider this a great opportunity to teach how the *intent* of the person wielding inappropriate language does not trump the harmful impact of the term he is insistent on using. This usually leads to a fruitful discussion in the classroom.

The complexity of teaching about structural racism in a predominantly White space also marked the atmosphere in the first session on *James*. In my experience, it is nearly impossible to confront students openly with this complex topic and introduce guidelines, frameworks, or definitions to support them in their quest without triggering fragile reactions. The traditional teacher-centered approach, which this article counters, would have been to introduce the concepts of CRT and "Intersectionality" in the first session and ask students to read about them in their first reading assignment. On their own, they would therefore have had to engage with the six complex CRT tenets that scholars developed in the 1980s to better understand how systemic racism and sexism are entrenched in US legal, social, and political structures, among them intersectionality. This would surely have led to an awkward silence during the session following the reading.

[5] In my experience, this point has only ever been brought up by students whose pronouns are he/his.

Another way to teach critical thinking through a CRT lens without eliciting fragile reactions or awkward silences is to forgo a teacher-centered approach altogether in the first few sessions. In smaller groups, it is often easier for undergraduate students in their early semesters to openly address any insecurities they might have in grasping the *systematicity* of structural racism as opposed to individual offensive racialized acts. Also, the concept of intersectionality is quite challenging to grasp in and of itself, as it speaks to how every person has a set of parameters, some of which carry social privileges and some of which carry disadvantages. Some students might not be aware of their own privilege or lack of it at the beginning of this course. Another reason they might feel triggered is that the subject of racism is so sensitive that the concepts of "structural racism" may be considered common knowledge in the mainstream cultural and social discourse. And yet, based on what students over the years have shared with me, the assumption that "one should know this" is so widespread that most students are reluctant to admit the limits of their knowledge and awareness and, as a result, stay silent. It is only once they have established that it is "safe" to share any such "lack" with their peers and their educator that a discussion has a chance of becoming fruitful and effective. This is why creating a safe space where making mistakes is not a concern needs to be a top priority.

The in-session panel work in the second session of my *James* course was based on Aja Y. Martinez's scholarship, in which she proposes to use CRT both as a methodology *and* as a method. She uses critical race methodology to challenge "master narratives" of White privilege (26). Regarding the format of paneling in this seminar, this master narrative is considered to include not only racial privilege but also such structural advantage that is based on gender, namely "male privilege." In a patriarchal society and a predominantly White setting, "master narratives" at the intersection of race and gender continue to be the default starting point even for critical discourses. As this course reflected critically on Everett's *James*, it was Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that was considered the master narrative.

To counter such a perspective through a CRT lens, Martinez posits that the additional tenets of "accessibility" (18) and "experiential knowledge" (15) are needed. "Accessibility" means taking the ideas of critical thinking out of the academic ivory tower and making them available to both those who are systemically affected and those who are oblivious to systemic structures of domination because they belong to the privileged and advantaged group and might not even be aware of it. By "experiential knowledge," she means that it is important that literary texts relating the experience of racism through CRT counterstorytelling should also be created *by* POC, who live the experience, rather than only *about* POC by people who do not experience racism personally, as they are not people marginalized by their racialization – i.e., White people. The pertinence of this is underscored by the fact that much of the civil rights

and antidiscrimination scholarship predating the birth of CRT in the 1980s was dominated by White and male scholars, as Richard Delgado so aptly points out (46).

The method by which Martinez challenges male and White master narratives is with the CRT tool of counterstory. By writing counterstories, she argues, we can tell "stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (26). Here she draws on Plato's dialogue structure and creates composite characters. Composite characters are fictional figures who speak to one another and unpack complex topics in an accessible format. For example, one of these characters could be a mentor figure with expert knowledge on the matter, who engages with a mentee figure, answering questions and rebutting or accepting challenges in a rhetorical back-and-forth. This is where the idea of Martinez's CRT expansion and the tool of paneling to avoid "deer in the headlights" moments and silences in class come together: The students create fictional characters in their respective panels, and these characters talk to each other. This is also where Martinez's "experiential knowledge" tenet is addressed: In a predominantly White classroom, the students in the panels can invent composite characters who are POC and/or women and then push back against dominant master narratives about these characters. By the end of the fourth session, each student will not only have acquired some expertise in a concept through their own engagement but will also have been exposed to their peers' thoughts and the educator's feedback on that work. All this creates a student-centered, safe environment in which students feel less insecure about making racist or sexist "mistakes" but instead openly ask their peers or their educator about terminology or even conceptual understanding.

Understanding that racism does not mean "simple, isolated, and extreme acts of prejudice" (DiAngelo 71) but refers to a "system of privilege based on race" (Wellman qtd. in Tatum 87) is not easy and will require repeated explanation and discussion. It is my experience that only when students feel safe enough to make mistakes without running the risk of being condemned as a racist or a sexist, do they actually ask the questions that might feel uncomfortable or even divisive. In fact, it can be helpful for the conversations between the composite characters that one or two are designated racists or sexists (with a disclaimer) and act out these (fictional) roles to underscore an argument.

It is here that some points of ethical soundness need consideration when it comes to having students roleplay racist, sexist, racialized, or gender-based characters or having predominantly White students (also) play the role of a Black or Brown person or a male student that of a woman. There is, of course, a near-unavoidable risk that students base their roleplaying on reductive stereotypes. I address any such infractions openly during the feedback session held in plenary right after the panel presentations. In the very relaxed atmosphere, it no longer triggers fragile reactions when I point out the use of harmful stereotypes – the session is usually very receptive, and the discussion is open

and respectful. My sense is that perhaps mistakes are indeed unavoidable learning experiences that are made in the actual experience of *practicing* abstract concepts.

To my mind, because the students are obviously not playing themselves and have put forward a disclaimer, they are able to critically assess how "their" character perpetuated racist/sexist tropes while at the same time formulating an informed and reflected academically and ethically sound position against the fictive composite character they created. In the few instances in which a student is clearly placing racist and sexist stereotypes in a panel presentation to offend other participants in the session, I have asked the student to leave my classroom.

Panel Assignments in Session One

In session one, I explain to the students that they will all be assigned to a panel. My experience is, as students have often later told me, that this terrifies them because they have not heard the term before and, as early academics, felt they should have. When I point out that all they have to do for the moment is divide the texts assigned to the panel among themselves, they tend to relax for the most part. In my experience, this first mandatory reading assignment should not exceed 10–15 pages[6], as it helps ensure that most students have read their respective texts by session two, fostering a qualified exchange of views that keeps students engaged and not overworked at the beginning of a semester, "hooking" them into the course. This is especially important at my university, since the American studies department does not mandate attendance. We follow a modular system, which means that students need to pass four modules to pass the course. In my courses, paneling is the first module, making up 20 percent of the final grade and effectively ensuring attendance at the beginning of the semester. In our system, "*not* hooking" students in the first session can lead to empty classrooms all semester.

At this point, I ask students to indicate which panel they are interested in taking part in with a show of hands, ask them for their names, and sign them up. Sometimes the panel of their first choice is already "full" by the time it is their turn, but I have never yet experienced pushback when I ask them to fill up another panel instead. When everyone has been assigned a panel, I ask the students to physically group in their panels to figure out who will be preparing which text. At this stage, the students

[6] The reading assignments can also be videos or podcasts that have been uploaded to the session's online learning platform. For the *James* course, they included Fabio Cineas's "Critical Race Theory, and Trump's War on It, Explained," Kimberlé Crenshaw's "The Urgency of Intersectionality," Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, Trip Gabriel's "He Fuels the Right's Cultural Fires (and Spreads Them to Florida)," Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham's "The Power of Black Magic and White Salvation in Film," Tyler Austin Harper's "A Bloody Retelling of *Huckleberry Finn*," James S. Leonard and Thomas A. Tenney's "Introduction: The Controversy over *Huckleberry Finn*," Avi Selk's "The 'N-Word' Makes *To Kill a Mockingbird* a Favorite Target of Bookbans," and Olivia B. Waxman's "Why Toni Morrison's Books Are So Often the Target of Book Bans."

do not yet know how panels work or what they will be doing in class in the next session. What they do know is that they will work with the other students assigned to their respective panels and that they need to come to the session prepared, i.e., have read their assigned text, or else they will not be able to participate in module one. In this way, paneling is one method of ensuring that, at least in their respective panels, they have learnt each other's names and most probably exchanged contact details with at least three or four other students in the first session, which is especially helpful for introverted or shy students who might otherwise go through an entire semester without exchanging a word with the person sitting next to them. My experience is that the original panels end up sitting next to each other for the remainder of the course and form quite a tight-knit connection by the end of the semester. To my mind, this is connected to how intense the work in session two is and how much fun they eventually have with their presentations in sessions three and four – even the very shy students often end up speaking up.

Panel Objectives and Presentation Options in Session Two

In the second session, I explain that every panel will present a specific academic framework in class. Two classrooms for a group of twenty are ideal for this session; this allows panels not to sit too close together and enjoy enough privacy to talk freely about their panel projects. Weather and setting permitting, one or two of the panels might even venture outside after the educator has introduced the panel objectives. The main task for each panel is to find a way to bring information about its topic closer to the rest of the class, because what they work out in session two will be presented to the rest of the respective class in the sessions three and four.

Following Martinez' concept of CRT counterstorytelling, the students develop the composite characters who will then present their topics as a "story" in a way that the audience remembers them. Most importantly, in setting up the panel work, the educator needs to reiterate that students should try not to be themselves and underscore how it is often easier to talk about a complex subject if they make up a personality. The students are instructed that they can be super creative or that they can decide not to be creative at all if it suits the mood of the panel best. They can use music and pictures, but they do not have to. It is important to stress that this will not influence their grade. Often, students in their panels seem overwhelmed at this point of the introduction to panel work, so it is imperative for the educator to remind them that, because they have done the required reading, they all have some expertise they bring to the table, and this expertise will probably differ from the knowledge the other students have as they have each engaged with a different text before coming to class. The educator is there to guide them through this session, the majority of which the panel will spend deciding how exactly they are planning to present.

Panel presentations can have a variety of forms – they can be a presentation, a roleplay, a scripted panel discussion, a debate, or an easygoing conversation between fictive friends. In my experience, students rarely give a presentation, but if they do, they can narrate and moderate the presentation as a group. A more creative option involves putting together a roleplay. One simple possibility I always suggest here is to use the format of a talk show, e.g., *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* One of the students serves as the moderator introducing the format and issues disclaimers that might be necessary, one is Jimmy Kimmel, and the remaining students are his guests who then engage in a controversial discussion.

In one session, a few semesters ago, a panel "invited" the critical race and legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the concept intersectionality in critical thinking and is one of the founders of CRT, to the show. The other guest was the conservative US journalist activist, Trump loyalist, and CRT critic, Christopher Rufo. The discussion between the fictionalized Rufo and Crenshaw characters was about whether his interview on *Fox News,* which aired on 2 September 2020, had led to Executive Order 13950 (22 September 2020) issued by President Trump that "banned" CRT. In the interview, Rufo had called out Trump to issue an executive order about the abolishment of CRT from diversity training. Executive Order 13950 was based on a Memorandum dated 4 September 2020. In this Memorandum, CRT was framed as "being an integral part of diversity training at all levels of government-funded measures focused on gender and race equality" (Vollmann 9). In fact, CRT had never been that but had always only ever been taught at a graduate school level to investigate structural racism in an academic framework. Highlighting the coincidence of the correlating dates of Rufo's interview, the Memorandum, and the Executive Order made the discussion on the divisiveness of anti-CRT measures very accessible and easily retainable to the other students in the room. In this way, discussing CRT and using it as a framework for their final papers became quite popular. The students in this panel expressed to me that it had allowed them to engage with a highly complex and controversial academic lens in a space that had felt safe enough for them to develop their own thoughts and implement them in their academic work.

A panel presentation can also be a scripted panel discussion in which a moderator asks questions, and the different characters act out their roles. Of course, the roles depend on the panel topic. I often introduce another of CRT's counterstorytelling tools, namely, a time machine. This allows students to not only "invite" contemporary guests to our classroom but also gives historical voices from the past a space to speak their truths, especially in cases in which they were silenced in historical storytelling. In a literary studies course in the winter semester 2023/24, in which we were investigating Maryse Condé's 1992 *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem,* a panel used this format to present individual "witches" who were accused in the 1692 Salem Witch Trials.

This meant a student in the character of the historical Tituba came to class to tell her version of the story. As Tituba was a Black woman, this allowed the introduction of a distinction between the terms "sexism" and "misogyny" based on Kate Manne's scholarship (78). It was also a frame to introduce the students to Moya Bailey's concept of "misogynoir" (1), which refers to misogyny that only women of Color are affected by at the intersection of race and gender.

In a panel debate in the *James* course, the beginning of which is included as a memory log in this article, students discussed the necessity of upholding DEI measures to counter systems of injustice that are based on structural inequalities in US society. This led to a robust debate that became highly entertaining when two students from the audience joined the discussion – they were "undercover" panel members. One of the undercover panelists was someone who identified as being a White male, financially privileged legacy student from an Ivy League university – the demeanor of the student in character was entitled, loud-mouthed, and rude. This character stated that he was "fed up with the woke indoctrination of liberal ideology." After he was not able to "convince" the Black female scholar who was a guest on the show through his bullying language, he began insulting her personally in a loud voice. In this way, he was mimicking rhetorical strategies used by DEI critics in the MAGA movement.

The setting of a panel presentation can also be a coffeehouse or a bar. In a course about Toni Morrison's 1987 *Beloved* and Sue Monk Kidd's 2001 *The Secret Life of Bees* in the summer semester of 2023, one panel explored the concepts and systemic structures of the legacy of slavery and segregation at the intersection of gender. The students went into character as a group of women who were meeting for a cup of coffee. While the characters they portrayed were all women, they represented differently privileged members of society at the intersection of race. One was a rich White woman who cried and thought Black women were just always "too aggressive," which led to a discussion of Bailey's misogynoir stereotype of the "strong Black woman" (2) and Robin DiAngelo's concept of "white women's tears" (131). This panel, too, had been instructed to consider how to increase their peers' understanding of intersectionality and was very successful in doing so.

The "Six Thinking Hats" Technique

After the educator has explained the objectives and options the students have regarding the creation of their panels, they have thirty minutes for brainstorming using Edward DeBono's "Six Thinking Hats" method. The metaphor of six different conceptual hats is introduced by the educator through a visual on a slide, and the students spend five minutes per hat discussing their topic, guided by the concept of the respective hats:

- The White Hat (facts): Students gather facts and information about their topic. “What do we know?”
- Yellow Hat (positive thinking): The panel focuses on the positive aspects of the ideas. They discuss potential benefits, advantages, and opportunities for each concept. “Why is it a good thing to talk about this?”
- Black Hat (critical judgment): They start critically evaluating the ideas on the table. They identify potential risks. They weigh the pros and cons of each idea and highlight any drawbacks or challenges. “How might this go wrong?”
- Red Hat (emotions and intuition): This is where everyone openly expresses their gut feelings and emotional responses towards the topic at hand. They discuss their personal inclinations and share their enthusiasm or concerns about specific concepts. “This concept makes me feel …”
- Green Hat (creativity): The students share creative ideas without criticism. They generate diverse ideas, such as viral videos, interactive social media campaigns, and experiential knowledge.
- Blue Hat (process control): Panels summarize the key insights and guide the discussion toward the most promising ideas.

The six thinking hats technique is helpful for creative problem-solving and decision-making. The lecturer guides the panel work, provides (creative) input where it is needed, and answers questions for about thirty minutes. This is the most intense phase of the session for the educator who rotates between panels, giving input, answering questions, and pitching suggestions where and when needed.

In the next (and final) thirty minutes of the session, the panel groups make decisions on how they are going to bring their thoughts on the subject into a format that one can present, who will be doing what and when, and actually start scripting the project. In this phase, the educator needs to assess which group needs more guidance, and which group has come up with enough creative ideas and is happy to be left to their own devices. There are always slight differences in how engaged the participants in each panel become with each other and the topic, and it is sometimes a good idea to offer concrete advice by reminding them of the different options available for their presentation to help them make a decision.

When approaching a panel group that feels “stuck,” the educator can sit down with the students and ask what they have so far; sometimes it might even be necessary to make a specific suggestion as to different characters they could invent for a roleplay, for instance. Once the facilitator has given the panel an extra nudge, they usually pool their academic resources, draw on the reading they have prepared, and figure it out. In all the times I have been teaching using paneling, I have never yet come away from this session without a panel having figured out how creatively or not creatively they will be presenting their topic. After about sixty minutes, each group has a solid

structure for its presentations. Students then have the rest of the week to finish their panel presentations.

A CRT Quartalogue from the *James* Seminar

The creative text below is my memory log of a presentation in the panel "CRT and the Deconstruction of DEI Measures" by students presenting to their peers in the third session of the *James* course in the winter semester 2024/25. In this way, it is considered a counterstory in accordance with Martinez's scholarship on CRT.

The students put up three chairs in front of the class. Sitting in the middle chair, the student representing the composite character of the moderator of a talk show introduced herself and then her guests, who represented other fictive composite characters. The other students in the room and I were this fictive talk show's audience. Two other students were also part of the panel, but they were "undercover" in the "audience."

"Welcome, everyone," says the moderator, "to our special edition of *Make America Diverse Again*. Today, we are thrilled to have on the show the journalist and activist Christopher Rufo and Prof. Kerry Smith from the Liberal Arts College X. Christopher Rufo is an ardent supporter of deconstructing DEI measures. He has been an activist and writer about this topic, also regarding the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. We all know him from his many appearances on *Fox News*. Welcome, Christopher. It's great to have you on the show."

"Thanks for the kind introduction, it's great to be here!" nods Christopher Rufo to the audience.

The moderator looks to her left and introduces her second guest. "I'm also so pleased to welcome Prof. Smith from the University of X, which is a Liberal Arts College in Texas. Prof. Kerry Smith teaches Critical Race Theory in a graduate program there and is likewise an activist writer. As a queer Black woman, she is critical of any policies that thwart social justice initiatives. Welcome, Kerry, it's great to have you on the show. And thank you for taking the time to travel from Texas to our studio here in Washington."

Smith nods and smiles, "It's great to be here. Thanks for the invite!"

"Right, then," says the moderator. "Let's get started. My first question goes to Kerry–"

"Can I say something first?" interrupts Rufo. "It's just that I think before we start asking questions, we should make our standpoints clear–"

Kerry Smith raises her eyebrows at this rude interruption.

The moderator retains her composure and says to Rufo with a confident, steady, stern voice, "Actually, it's my job here today to decide how this discussion is set up.

Please wait your turn." She pauses and faces Smith, "Prof. Smith, could you share your thoughts on why you believe DEI measures should not be dismantled, and in what way you think teaching Critical Race Theory to children cannot be considered reverse racism or ideological indoctrination?"

"Sure," nods Smith. "Happy to clarify. Critical Race Theory is a methodology that is *never* taught to children. It's like saying that a children's book with a moral message is teaching Aristotle. Some newer children's books deal with the injustice of racism, but this has nothing to do with CRT–"

"Sure, it does!" shouts Rufo. "It should be considered illegal to brainwash children with the idea that racism exists everywhere. It only serves to make children ashamed of their heritage. That's not okay. You, as a mother and a woman, should know better!"

"Please let Prof. Smith finish, Christopher. You will have your turn in a minute. Prof. Smith?"

"Yes, thank you," sighs Kerry Smith. "Critical Race Theory has its roots in Critical Theory, based on the Frankfurt School of thought from the 1930s. These scholars were investigating the power structures that led to the empowerment of the Third Reich. In the 1980s, legal scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw applied this investigation to the legal system in the US, which was still perpetrating legal injustices, although the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s had happened, and the equality of all men and women regardless of their races, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, and ability was considered equal before the law. So–"

"Exactly!" shouts Rufo. "If everyone is equal before the law, why the hell do we need DEI measures? That's exactly my issue! Let's get rid of all these unfair measures! It's making it super hard to be a White man in America these days. This wokeness is destroying our society!" Rufo has raised his voice again.

"Well," counters Smith calmly, "we need DEI because, due to the history of America, there is no such thing as a level playing field when it comes to systemic privileges. We need people who have been structurally excluded to become more included. That's what Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion – DEI – means, after all. How can anyone be against that?! It's based on the idea that not everyone has the same set of privileges and disadvantages from the get-go. And those are just facts. And this has to do with our history, with the legacy of slavery and segregation under Jim Crow laws–"

Rufo throws his hands up in the air. "Not slavery again. It's not always about race, *professor*!" Rufo's emphasis on Smith's academic title is indicative of the disdain he feels for liberal education. He continues in a loud voice, "And slavery ended over 150 years ago, get over it. You people always make everything about slavery and segregation. There are poor White people in the US, too, you know!"

Smith raises her eyebrows and takes a deep breath. "Ignoring these legacies is just revisionist history. There is a reason the average African American household has less access to wealth. It's not because people have worked less hard. It's because the system was set up for centuries to benefit them less. An example is the historical subtly racist loan practice, in which loans, for instance, in the 1950s were either offered to African Americans at different rates or banks simply did not loan money to African Americans, period. It was not written in the bylaws anywhere, but this was a legacy that – at least in the South – was part and parcel of the modus operandi of most bank executives. Who, by the way, happened to be predominantly White men. That's structural. And that is only one example of a racially motivated structural financial disadvantage that has repercussions to this very day. Think of access to generational wealth like home ownership, for instance–"

"To me, that is just a lot of ideological bull," interrupts Rufo. "This idea that America has always been racist is the most unpatriotic thing I have ever heard. You are trying to destroy the very idea of America, professor. It's what institutions like yours do. It's not about learning anymore. It's about teaching ideology!"

A voice from the student body audience pipes up. "Yes, exactly! Finally, someone is speaking the truth. I've just had it with you people who are wasting American taxpayers' money. DEI *is* reverse racism!"

The moderator signals to the interrupting character (who is part of the panel), "Excuse me. This is not something we do here on the show. Please let the guests talk, and there will be time for questions later."

"You know what, lady?" shouts the interrupter. "I'm done with people telling me what to say. This is America. We have freedom of speech. Do you even know who I am? My name is Max Hall Jr. III. You all know my father."

The audience reacts with a murmur. They have understood that this disruptive "audience member" is actually part of the panel. Students smile at each other and the teacher (me), who was also not aware of this setup. From their body language, it becomes clear that the student audience understands that the panel is acting out an overbearing, entitled, and aggressive expression of White male privilege.

"Sir," says Prof. Smith. "There is no such thing as reverse racism!"

"Of course there is," shouts Rufo. "Black people can be racist, too!"

Kerry Smith shakes her head. "Let's be clear on definitions here. It's important to make a difference between prejudice and racism. Beverly Tatum teaches us that "people of color can and do have racial prejudice. However, if one defines racism as a *system* of advantage based on race, the answer is no. People of color are not racist because they do not *systemically* benefit from racism" (90, emphasis added). So reverse racism does not exist–"

"Oh man," cries Rufo, placing his face into his hands. "You university people – always about the definitions! Let's not forget America is a meritocracy. Seriously, you need to be fired. Do you even love your country?"

In a demonstration of MAGA rhetorical tactics, the disrupting figure and the fictionalized Christopher Rufo figure then drew the attention of the moderator away from the subject altogether in the final moments of the presentation.

The panel demonstrated successfully how, in contemporary political debates, facts and expertise are often no longer effective when brute force and bullying take the upper hand over a respectful exchange of opinions. When the panel presentation finished, a smattering round of applause was evidence of a convincing "performance." As a result, the class discussed in more detail the concepts of misogynoir, CRT, fragility, and privilege in a critical analysis of the individual roles of the characters until the end of the session, fifteen minutes later. Even when we had to vacate the classroom for the next session, the discussion continued in the hallway.

Student-Generated Knowledge and Comfort in the Classroom

Paneling fosters a secure pedagogical environment in which students can articulate and critically debate controversial perspectives, particularly on sensitive subjects such as structural racism. It equips them with appropriate terminology and foundational expertise, enabling sustained critical engagement with the course material going forward. Notably, the effectiveness of this format does not depend on explicitly introducing its meta-objectives.

Because panel presentations are integrated into sessions three and four, students engage with source materials collaboratively before presenting in plenary early in the semester. This shared vulnerability and close interaction enhances group adhesion and preparedness. Consequently, by the end of session four, students are well equipped to navigate the complexities of sensitive discussions, replacing initial uncertainty, the "hurlyburly," with productive inquiry and dialogue.

In a period in which critical thinking itself has been increasingly contested – particularly under the second Trump administration and with CRT as a focal point – its instruction seems more urgent than ever. This urgency applies equally to educators from minority backgrounds working within predominantly White institutional contexts, as well as to their White colleagues in similar environments. Paneling, as a pedagogical approach, facilitates the establishment of a relational proximity between educators and students, thereby fostering trust within what is often a sensitive discursive space. Simultaneously, it enables educators to articulate their own positionality in relation to the subject matter, which in turn strengthens their perceived credibility and supports an engaging classroom atmosphere for the rest of the semester.

Moreover, the creation of learning environments in which students are permitted to make mistakes while developing their critical thinking skills has become increasingly important. This need is further amplified by two intersecting developments: the rapid proliferation of AI tools in academic settings and the heightened public discourse around so-called "wokeness," alongside growing right-wing opposition to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. In this context, my experience interacting with students is that they often feel pressure to produce fully formed, linguistically precise responses to complex questions. Paneling mitigates this pressure by offering a space in which students can explore and articulate their perspectives on critical issues without the immediate apprehension of evaluation or judgment. Such opportunities for open-ended intellectual engagement are central to the aims of the humanities, where the cultivation of reflective, dialogic, and exploratory thinking remains foundational, after all.

About the Author

Vanessa Vollmann holds a doctorate in American studies and master's degrees in international relations and English studies. She teaches literature and cultural studies at the University of Passau, Germany. In her work, she analyzes power structures in US society, examining how social narratives emerge and are suppressed at the intersection of race, gender, class, and history through feminist and Critical Race Theory lenses. Her most recent research focusses on the Broadway musical *Hamilton*, the history of witch hunts, the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*, the politicization of Taylor Swift and Beyoncé's art, Percival Everett's *James* as a counterstory to Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the history of violence in the US, and the country music genre as a cultural practice.

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