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Anti-DEI Legislation as an Unjust Permission Structure: A Critical Discourse Analysis of White Racial Resentment in State-level Anti-DEI Bills

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Abstract: This article argues that state-level anti-DEI legislation, through technical communication texts, deliberately grants permission for white people to enact racial violence. Complicating common understandings of permission structuring, I argue that unjust permission structures target and amplify white racial anxieties, creating a decision-making environment that authorizes social and political harm. Through critical discourse analysis of 16 anti-DEI bills introduced in state legislatures in 2023, I identified three key rhetorical strategies used to yoke white publics toward harmful rhetorical action: White Rage, which challenges pro-Black advancement; White Narcissism, which centers control and surveillance to uphold white power; and Deflecting Histories, which seeks to erase or revise narratives of white supremacist violence. My analysis reveals that these rhetorical tactics achieve two interconnected outcomes: first, they stoke white racial anxiety and fragility; second, they alter the legislative choice architecture in ways that embolden behaviors harmful to DEI advocates, communities of color, and others targeted by the broader "war on woke."

Keywords: permission structures; critical discourse analysis; legal analysis; critical whiteness studies; white supremacy

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> "The white body that refuses treatment rather than supporting a system that might benefit everyone then becomes a metaphor for, and parable of, the threatened decline of the larger nation. Rather than landing a man on the moon, curing polio, inventing the internet, or prompting structures of world peace, a dominant strain of the electorate voted in politicians whose platforms of American greatness were built on embodied forms of demise."
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> **Jonathan Metzl (2019, p. 6),** ***Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment is Killing America's Heartland***

Between 2013 and 2018, Metzl (2019) traveled and interviewed white Midwest and Southern American voters who voted for conservative legislation. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Metzl's interviews revealed that white people who favored conservative policy positions often sided their politics over their health. In effect, these voters' taken-for-granted political dispositions could enact strain, and even demise, to their health. For example, Metzl shares a story from Trevor, a conservative white voter in Tennessee, diagnosed with Hepatitis C, who "would rather die" (p. 3) than support Obamacare, which would save his life. Trevor is an example of everyday white American voters who, in effect, voted for policy positions that would contribute to them dying "in overt or invisible ways" (p. 5). White voters do so by maintaining whiteness as an ideological frame for their political decision-making. Metzl explores how these political positions frequently yoke at white moral panic, leveraging what Metzl calls racial resentment, the "unspoken or overt claims that particular policies [might] defend or restore white privilege or quell threats to idealized notions of white authority represented by demographic or cultural shifts" (p. 7). Such political agendas worked to exert what Anderson (2016) has coined as *white rage* – the covert ways governmental bureaucracies "work the halls of power" (p. 3) to wreak havoc on the fabric of social life. White rage is a historical narrative that appears when white people perceive threats of displacement and disempowerment. White rage is used to reify, loudly and violently, real or imagined power that maintains delusions of racial superiority, frequently as a response to the perception of advancement of Black people.

The story of *Dying of Whiteness* and *White Rage* tells, then, is a soberingly sad one: white supremacist worldviews maintain power as a tool for political violence and, despite what white people may think or are told, inflict a laceration to the white body. Simply put, white supremacist policies kill white people. The sobering reality is that this fact, actually, does not matter: The structure of the white worldview can be so intense and fixed that empty rhetorical performances appeal "to anxieties about white victimhood" (Metzl, 2019 p. 5), frequently targeting both poor people and people of color. However, perhaps more deeply, these stories showcase how the fragility of white anxiety about power and authority are deployed routinely in political campaigns and legislative action as deliberate rhetorical strategies to reify ideological power and willingly maintain social strata along classed and raced lines. In fact, white anxiety in conservative legislative action has long been identified by legal scholars as strategies for preserving conservative political and ideological authority. For example, Bell's (1992) foundational argument in "Racial Realism" demonstrates that legal structures function as "instruments of preserving the status quo" (p. 364). As Bell writes, legislation imposes subjective "personal and moral beliefs" (p. 366), often masked by abstract legal conceptualizations. He

demonstrates that, for example, "equality" is used as a shifting signifier to legitimize worsening legal conditions for structurally vulnerable communities. Bonilla-Silva (2018), in this vein, has argued that the conflation between equity and equality appeals to abstract liberalism. Instead, focusing on individualism as tools for "ignoring the multiple institutional and state-sponsored practices behind segregation" (p. 56). Mistaking subjective interests that maintain legal structures represented in legislation as objective, fixed, and unchanging reflects the foundation critical race scholars have fundamentally critiqued and disrupted. For example, Harris (1992) showed that legal conceptions of property were represented as functions of whiteness. Legal dispositions represented white people as property owners, which reified a set of principles such as rights of disposition, the right to use, and the right to exclude. Rhetorical representations of the law framed "whiteness as racialized privilege was then legitimized by science and was embraced in legal doctrine as 'objective fact'" (p. 283). In this light, critical race scholars have demonstrated the impact of mistaking whiteness as objectivity and the law as objective: they reproduce white supremacy as seemingly natural, always existing performance despite its clear tie to racial onto-phenomenologies. Accordingly, the law should be read as functioning for and by white people to reassert white supremacy through the maintenance of political power.

A contemporary way the law is used rhetorically to reassert white supremacy is the strategic targeting of institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Despite the ways the American right has co-opted the acronym "DEI" as a racial slur (Rahman, 2024), diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in education and the workforce grow from a legislative history following affirmative action policies and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Jaiswal, 2024). Diversity-focused initiatives, then, responded to unchecked white supremacy, both historically and contemporarily, and were designed and implemented as interventions to empower, honor, and support historically marginalized groups of people who have strategically been excluded from education and professional contexts. Recently, anti-DEI legislation[1] was introduced following the Supreme Court's decision to reverse affirmative action and race-conscious admissions (Martinez-Alvarado & Perez, 2023) in *Students for Fair Admission (SFFA) v. Harvard* (2023) and *SFFA v. UNC*s (2023). Martinez and Maraj (2024) historicize the targeted disinformation campaign, "the war on woke," around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and critical race theory (CRT) from conservative news and political outlets. They show a crescendoing attack from the GOP onto associations with critical race theory, citing an early example from *Fox News*'s Sean Hannity's ability to discredit Obama through his associations with one of the founders of CRT, the legal scholar and civil rights activist Derrick Bell. DEI and CRT have been storied as "infections" to the American Republic and have been deployed as deliberate talking points of conservative political ideology for the better part of a decade. Media strategist Christopher Rufo repeatedly misrepresented DEI and CRT as a revolt against traditional American values. As Martinez and Maraj (2024) note, Trump's September 2020 executive order mimics language framing DEI and CRT as a false ideology challenging the fabric of America, insisting instead on tropes of reverse racism. The same rhetoric is deployed in a January 2025 executive order using language to frame DEI as both "public waste and shameful discrimination" ("Exec. Order No. 14,151, 2025)). Such rhetoric, as Martinez and Maraj (2024) note, constructed DEI and CRT as "a villain, the boogeyman waiting for your children at school. It was a manufactured sociopolitical crisis intended to stir up the masses; create havoc and confusion; and promote intentionally deceptive definitions, terms, and concepts" (pp. 8-9).

[1] Access Appendix A for a list of all introduced legislation analyzed.

In this article, I analyze state-level anti-DEI legislation as an unjust permission structure. I read proposed legislation that is designed to scale back DEI initiatives at the state level as a permission structure to allow and authorize racial violence. I advance the argument that such legislation is designed deliberately to enact racial harm by intentionally stressing white people's racial resentment and anxieties, akin to "war on woke" disinformation campaigns. Anti-DEI legislation cultivates an unjust permission structure because it targets elements of the white racial frame (Faegin, 2019). Such permission structuring creates a deliberately distorted decision-making environment that relies on distorted concepts of "fairness," "race-evasion," and "preference" that ultimately yokes white people to deliberately harm communities of color. Analyzing the ways state-level anti-DEI legislation is rhetorically and racially constructed reveals how technical legal information is designed to sow discord and hate. I coded 16 pieces of state-level legislation introduced in 2023 and examined how the permission structures of said legislation target white meritocratic framing, such as (1) white rage (Anderson, 2016), (2) deflecting of white supremacist histories (Sullivan, 2014), and (3) white narcissism (Matias, 2016). These key characteristics deliberately draw a rationale for anti-DEI legislation that authorizes white publics to rhetorically and politically act against communities of color. To this end, I focus my analysis on how the text of introduced legislation communicates technical information to authorize harmful rhetorical action.

Notably, legislation has been studied as an example of technical communication since it communicates complex information and organizes complex social action. Walton et al. (2019) argue that legal frameworks are paramount for scholars of technical communication to engage with and critique. As they note, just because something is legally justifiable does not mean it is necessarily just (p. 49). Moore and colleagues call technical communication scholars to ask questions that contribute to, or upend, multiple notions of justice. As I argue, examining the broader permission structures of white racial panic embedded in the rationale for anti-DEI legislation can empower technical communication scholars to intervene in policy-level choices that upend justice:

If technical communicators want to contribute meaningfully to justice work, we need to identify contexts for the various conceptions of justice: Is it legal? Is it social? Is it political? Our field is not asking these questions, and this gap is limiting our ability to innovate and to productively contribute to coalitions, particularly those involved in creating legislation. (p. 49)

I honor and engage recent scholarship that has examined the tactics of politically conservative legislation as a tool to legitimize and mobilize harm toward vulnerable communities, including engaging peda-parrhesia to invoke "the rhetorical child" (Hubrig, 2024), deploying 21st-century anti-literacy campaigns in Florida (Russell-Brown, 2023), and deliberate deployment of ableism, racism, and heteronormativity in anti-trans panic (Hsu, 2022). Unjust permission structures operate at state-level legislation and offer an important call for coalition and disrupting the white racial frame, and the politics of white racial resentment, as a commonplace in and beyond technical communication.

Permission Structuring of White Racial Resentment

In this essay, I advance the argument that anti-DEI state-level legislation functions as a permission structure that targets and amplifies existing white supremacist belief systems and white fears. In this way, I interpret permission structures in anti-DEI legislation as structuring a decision-making environment that is designed to permit social and political harm. In doing so, I complicate definitions of permission structures that frame them as solely opportunities for behavior *change*. Instead, I suggest that permission structures can reify and intensify existing behaviors that maintain the status quo through establishing a white supremacist decision-making environment. I begin by first defining permission structuring as a rhetorical and environmental system that enables individuals to draw on prior knowledge and belief systems to shift their behaviors or viewpoints. I then draw on *transformative learning* and *nudge theory* as parallel ideas that help deepen how choice-making environments operate, showing that threats to the white supremacist worldviews and anxieties can deliberately enact harmful rhetorical action.

As the introduction to this special issue has noted, permission structuring is a rhetorical process that invites audiences to draw on previous experiences and knowledge to change their behaviors or belief systems. Jackson (2013) traces the popularization of this term to a 2013 news conference where former President Obama used it openly. The term's use in political campaigns refers to how a decision-making environment can be structured to introduce new ways of thinking about a topic or issue. For example, in the context of education, teachers create permission structures to inform a decision-making environment for their students. Imagine a teacher providing three options to complete an in-class assignment: a team activity on the whiteboard, an independent essay, or a pair-based game. These three options could be considered as structuring permission to act, while the decision-making environment consists of the limited choices students can make. By permitting only three options for action, this teacher has structured a decision-making environment for their class. According to *ModelThinkers,* a permission structure "serves as scaffolding for someone to embrace change that they might otherwise reject. An effective permission structure helps someone move to a new point of view in a way that feels rational, justified, and consistent with their existing core values" (para. 4). Returning to the in-class activity example, these three choices set up and incentivize a specific behavioral change. Since two of the options are to work with peers on a more engaging option (whiteboard/game over essay), the choice environment is structured to permit students to work and learn collaboratively. A permission structure relies on engaging an audience's experience, knowledge, or beliefs rather than rejecting them. In this example, the prior experience might be students' histories with independent work and essay writing. In this article, I am complicating and nuancing the use of permission structures by showing how worldviews can be challenged and placed in tension and reified into deliberate action. I approach the concept of permission structuring informed by both transformative learning theory, particularly following the Mezirowian tradition in adult learning, and nudge theory, deployed in change management studies (Canton, 2016). Canton (2016) defines transformative learning as "a process of examining, questioning, validating, and revising our perspectives" (p. 18). Transformative learning was popularized by Mezirow, who called transformative learning a way to make problematic frames of reference "more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (p. 18). Under the umbrella of Mezirowian transformative learning, disorienting dilemmas, where an event shifts their taken-for-granted frames of reference, often serves as the linchpin for the process of interrogating individual perspectives toward inclusive frames of reference. In parallel, these understandings of choice-making can be complicated.

Thaler and Sustein (2008) argue that choice architects are people who organize contexts for humans to make choices, often sometimes without knowing it. For example, they note that administrators, parents, and other actors design situations in which different options and choices can be made. The term "nudge" is "any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behavior predictably without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives" (p. 6). In this way, maintaining or manipulating how everyday choices are made reflects how various agents and actors can impact how behaviors can happen. In particular, Thaler and Sustein are careful to point out that in thinking about choice architecture, humans rarely make choices entirely in their best interest, choices cannot be devoid of external influence, and choice architecture does not always include acts of coercion. Simply put, to understand the ideas surrounding permission structuring, it's critical to elaborate how decision-making environments come to be and are influenced by external forces. For this article, I position legislation as a kind of "nudge" or way behavior can be shifted. It is one of those external factors that can impact how choices are made via choice architecture, which I position as part of permission structuring.

In other words, as applied to these social and legal questions like the DEI legislation, permission structures can and do place worldviews into tension thereby reifying and sustaining white supremacist action. In doing so, permission structures can create a decision-making environment that can intensify behaviors to protect said belief systems. Given these complications, I approach permission structures as ways in which decision-environments target existing audience beliefs and values to potentially intensify and rationalize harmful behaviors. This slightly complicates common understandings of permission structures by showcasing that the choice-making environment can motivate audiences to rhetorical and social action by targeting belief systems. In this article, I am interested in how anti-DEI legislation creates the conditions for a permission structure through the targeting and manipulation of existing belief systems, whose objective is to sow chaos and harm to vulnerable social groups.

In particular, I argue that anti-DEI legislation creates an unjust permission structure by targeting elements of the white racial frame that specifically establishes a decision-making environment to enact harm to vulnerable social groups. According to sociologist Joe Faegin (2020), the white racial frame is "a broad and persisting set of racial stereotypes, prejudices, images, interpretations and narratives, emotions, reaction to language, accents, and well as racialized inclinations to discriminate" (p. 11). Bonilla-Silva (2018) has compared dominant racial framing to the circular path of cul-de-sacs, which "provide the intellectual roadmap used by rulers to navigate the always rocky road map of domination and [...] derail the ruled from their track to freedom and equality" (p. 54). Thus, framing is a powerful political and rhetorical function in which information is ordered and engaged in predictable repetitions. Both Feagin (2020) and Bonilla-Silva (2018) offer related elements of these frames, including historical narratives about race and power, fairness and justice, and control. Faegin explains that contemporary white racial framing insists on ideologies that cultivate racist actions, anti-Black imagery, among others. Bonilla-Silva similarly showcases four main components to this kind of framing: (1) abstract liberalism, focusing on individualism as tools for "ignoring the multiple institutional and state-sponsored practices behind segregation" (2) naturalization, assuming that racism is a naturally occurring social phenomena, (3) cultural racism, relying on "master narratives" to maintain racial

stereotyping, and (4) minimization of racism, implying that discrimination no longer impacts communities of color (p. 56).

For this article, I wish to focus on three categories–white rage, deflecting white supremacist histories, and white narcissism–to specifically showcase how white emotionality directly impacts the white racial frame and how that emotionality impacts social, political, and rhetorical action. I used these three categories as foundations for my coding scheme and offer baseline definitions here, which will be discussed in more depth below.

- **White rage**, coined by Anderson (2016), explains how white people invoke rage in response to the advancement of communities of color, which serves as a tool for both racial control and moral high ground.
- **White Narcissism,** theorized by Matias (2016), explains that white people become obsessed with maintaining fantasies of power and enact control and domination to maintain such fantasies.
- **Deflecting White Supremacist Histories**, described by Sullivan (2014), characterizes how white people "forgive and forget" their racial pasts as white slaveholders and, in doing so, replicate racial terror by this collective amnesia.

By adding these categories to the white racial frame, we can begin to explore a variety of tactics used to maintain its white supremacist worldview through fear, distortion, and control. Ultimately, such a theory of the white racial frame should be read as a permission structuring strategy, intentionally targeting and stressing existing racist belief systems as a tool to incite choices that amplify harmful beliefs and actions toward marginalized communities.

Research Methods

To analyze how anti-DEI legislation engages the white racial frame as a permission structure, I performed a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of anti-DEI legislation introduced in state-level legislatures in 2023. I did so to focus on the specific range of rhetorical and political choices across different states in one year. I also hoped to explore a possible uptick in anti-DEI legislation introduced following Supreme Court decisions overturning race-conscious admissions and affirmative action (Martinez-Alvarado & Perez, 2023).

Research Question

How does anti-DEI legislation engage elements of the white racial frame, including, but not limited to, white rage, white narcissism, and deflecting histories?

Methodological Traditions

My approach was anchored in critical whiteness (Corces-Zimmerman & Guida, 2019; Matias & Boucher, 2023) and critical race research methodologies, which seek to name, critique, and dismantle the rhetorical and discursive ways in which racial hierarchies maintain themselves. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a methodology that examines how language practices constitute and sustain hierarchical social relations, power, and discourse. According to Gee

(1999), discourse analysis is "critical" if it not only works "to describe how language works or even to offer deep explanations, though they do want to do this [and] peak to and, perhaps, intervene in, social or political issues, problems, and controversies in the world" (p. 9). Fairclough (2010) explains CDA must: (1) analyze discourse and other elements of the social process; (2) conduct a systematic analysis of texts; and (3) address social wrongs (pp. 10-11). CDA offers a helpful methodological base for this project since it centers how language impacts and recreates discursive racial hierarchies. Focusing on the text itself through CDA is appropriate for an analysis of permission structuring because legislation forms and operates as a permission structure. Analyzing the textual performances of introduced legislation can help technical communicators and scholars to understand how the text itself stresses white racial resentment and anxieties.

Inclusion Criteria

For this project, I focused on an analysis of anti-DEI legislation as the object of research, analyzing the primary text of introduced bills. Using a Tableau database maintained by EdTrust.Org (Martinez-Alvarado & Perez, 2023), I collected and downloaded introduced legislation between January 1, 2023-December 31, 2023, for analysis. Only documents introduced as legislation in state-level legislatures were included; executive orders and other non-legislative documents, such as boards of regents' reports, were excluded. While I realize these documents are also important to consider, they are not legislative documents that propose new laws. Only publicly available documents were analyzed; those not available were excluded. Furthermore, legislation was included only if it directly referred to DEI as prohibitive; proposed legislation in the context of public education teaching, hiring, evaluation, etc., that included the words and phrases "diversity," "equity," "inclusion," "DEI," "political litmus test," "certain concepts," "certain ideologies," "political activism," "critical race theory," "race," "gender," "sexual preference," or "implicit bias" were included for analysis. The vague language of "certain" to describe "ideologies" or "concepts" were used because they are frequently used as talking points for conservationist political ideology, especially through think tanks like the Heritage Foundation (Cambre 2025).

Of the original 51 documents, 20 were excluded for not being legislation or not being publicly available. Of 31 remaining pieces of legislation, two were excluded for not referencing a prohibition of DEI-related concepts. Due to time constraints, I opted to only include the first introduced bill in 2023 for each state to maintain a manageable corpus of legislation to showcase the range of permission structuring strategies deployed. Through these exclusion criteria, 16 bills from 16 different states were coded (access Appendix A). Such a focus on one bill per state helped me demonstrate the breadth and range of these anti-DEI legislative tactics.
Coding Process. I conducted thematic coding identifying specific language toward one of the three following codes: *White rage,* the rhetorical, political challenges to pro-Black advancement; *White narcissism,* control and/or surveillance to maintain power of whiteness; and *Deflecting histories,* revising or prohibiting concepts that demonize, revise, or distort historical racial terror committed by white people. Codes were limited to specific sections and subsections with direct reference to DEI. 101 references were identified across 16 pieces of legislation from different states.

Based on thematic coding of 101 references in 16 state-level anti-DEI legislation introduced in 2023, 74 were identified as white rage (73%), 25 were identified as white narcissism (24%), and 3 were identified as deflecting histories (3%). Below, I demonstrate how each of the themes illustrate how anti-DEI legislation engages an unjust permission structure by targeting elements of white racial anxieties and resentment. Ultimately, distorted framing of "fairness," "race-evasion," and "preference" engages a permission structure that invites white people to choose behaviors that deliberately harm communities of color.

Distorting Histories

Anti-DEI legislation frequently misremembered, distorted, or miscommunicated histories of the United States. Distorting racial histories, particularly around racial oppression in the United States, is a white supremacist rhetorical action that maintains a choice-making environment and structures permission to act violently against communities of color. Sullivan (2014) observes that white people insist upon rhetorical distance from their slave-holding ancestors and in doing so, recreate the same habits of nineteenth century white oppressive practices. In doing so, she critiques the ways in which white publics demonize antecedent white racial identities and histories:

> The racism and white domination found in the days of chattel slavery has changed, but it nonetheless lives in transformed ways in the practices, habits, and lives of white people today… Contemporary white people only replicate the racist process of othering people who are different from them when they shun their white ancestors (p. 61).

Sullivan's analysis of cycles of histories and identities for white people makes the point that when white people separate themselves from histories of cosigning oppression, they calcify an amnesia of the past and therefore reinvent practices of racial violence, functionally recreating slaveholding behaviors in the 21st century.

Examining how white histories are demonized or othered by white publics becomes intensified when those histories are not only rhetorically distanced between white people of today and the histories those white people grow out from, but also textually denied. For example, Missouri's SB222 explicitly mentions engaging the product of racialized histories as "unlawful." The bill reads:

> an individual, by virtue of the individual's class, bears responsibility for or should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of actions committed in the past by other members of the same class (p. 1).

By functionally banning or engaging in how histories might impact individuals, racially, politically, and economically, the Missouri bill reproduces the amnesia that Sullivan describes, as if to say white people are abstained from the past's cruel disregard for racial minorities. In terms of permission structuring, rejecting the past and history creates choice environments that discredit and displace accountability of the past. This "nudge," in turn, creates choice conditions to enact further white supremacist harm.

In addition to the outright banning of accountability in past actions, legislation analyzed also demonstrated the ways in which legally defined terms, like "fairness" or "preferential," were misinterpreted as a way to subvert the historical consciousness that these concepts grow out of. In other words, the distortion of key phrases like "fairness" seems to be co-opted out of legal doctrine that sought, at least in theory, to reconcile harm of Jim Crow and the transatlantic slave trade. Lipsitz (2006) demonstrates this phenomenon as an example of how white people invest to maintain the system and structure of white supremacy by inverting racial hierarchy and misrepresenting white people being targets of oppression. As he writes, "ambitious politicians demagogically dismantle the anti-discrimination mechanisms established as a result of the civil rights movement, mislabeling antiracist remedies as instruments of 'reverse racism'" (p. 75). Many of the underpinning reasons in bills demonstrate the distortion of history as a way to create a permission structure to reproduce white supremacist action. Arkansas SB71, Iowa HB 1196, and Wyoming HB3503 all make mention of the language around "preferential treatment" as rationale around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion statements during hiring processes. Similarly, Missouri HB 1196 showcases the ways in which this reasoning to pushed to its limit and framed as a "discriminatory ideology" (p. 1). The bill reads:

> An applicant, employee, student, or contractor who is compelled, required, induced, or solicited to endorse a discriminatory ideology or submit a diversity, equity, and inclusion statement or who is adversely affected by an institution's preferential consideration of another for such individual's or entity's unsolicited statement relating to a discriminatory ideology in violation of subsection 2 or 3 of this section may pursue an action for injunctive or declaratory relief against such institution (p. 3).

In this vein of distorting the past and legal doctrine that emerged from the histories of racial strife, language of "non-discrimination" similarly becomes co-opted as part of the conservative regime to reproduce conditions of discrimination through renaming and redefining the characteristics of discrimination to invert historical power structures that inaccurately position white people at the bottom of racial hierarchies in which they have produced and participated in. As evidenced here, anti-DEI legislation creates conditions for harm through the denial and distortion of histories that specifically demand accountability for crimes against humanity undersigned by chattel slavery. Legislation analyzed here also shows how distorting terms to rationalize the rolling back of civil rights and liberties under the guise of "reverse racism" is directly connected to a misremembering and denial of histories of violent racial control under white supremacy. Thus, the choice-environment created through these bills emboldens white publics to justify their violent actions through misinterpreting racial relations, in which they are proudly positioned as victims in a racial hierarchy that was created by them. For example, this practice of distorting the terms of discrimination can be loudly heard in the ways the Florida SB 999 restricts courses that explore histories of power and oppression as "unproven, disproven, speculative, or exploratory" (p. 25).

White Narcissism

The permission structuring of the white racial frame is used in policy to legitimize harm toward communities of color and institutions that promote inclusive, democratic values. The anatomy of the white racial frame does not end with stressing existing ideological positions. White rage

harnesses fear of shifting systems of power in an attempt to reconstitute white racial authority through mechanisms of control and domination. As another permission structuring strategy, white narcissism seeks to maintain racial hierarchy through mechanisms of control and dominance. In her book *Feeling White,* Matias (2016) traces the relationships among whiteness and emotionality, arguing that emotionality for white publics uses emotions, like fear and rage, to calcify a narcissistic individual and systemic structures. Matias (2016) explains that white supremacy maintains narcissistic attitudes about whiteness as a tool for racial control and dominance: "[A] narcissist only feels completely satisfied if his identity is put on a pedestal, and he will go to great lengths to secrete the belief that his identity is superior" (p. 74). This positioning, of course, is not simply rhetorical, but material as well, as "narcissism becomes a powerful controlling element of the emotionality of whiteness" (p. 77). The utility of white narcissism as an element of the white racial frame demonstrates the ways in which whiteness structures itself through control of material items as a tool for manipulation. Through my analysis of anti-DEI legislation, the white narcissism code referred to ways in which control and compliance and material and financial threats were deployed as an incentive to comply in white supremacist fantasies through manipulation of threats of control and compliance.

As an organizing form of permission structuring, then, white narcissism served as a way to control institutions and actors through legislative action. For example, Connecticut's SB279 mandates "transparency" of DEI training materials and "to give parents and students reasonable access to review such materials" (p. 1). This bill places clear authoritarianism through creating pathways for parents and the public to control what is taught. In so doing, bills which argue for a "transparency" of curriculum and training materials create conditions permitting the public to perform authority around concepts and ideas taught in public education. This becomes further worrisome since it directly challenges the expertise of educators and administrators. The call to white narcissism, then, is in the ways in which these bills imply an action to enact authoritarian control over public goods of education.

An additional example of this kind of narcissism relies on the reconstructing definitions of general education core courses proposed in Florida SB 999. The bill creates acceptable standards for what counts as feasible and appropriate in university general education curriculum. The bill states:

> Communication courses must afford students the ability to communicate effectively, including the ability to write clearly and engage in public speaking; Humanities courses must afford students the ability to think critically through the mastering of subjects concerned with human culture, especially literature, history, art, music, and philosophy, and must include selections from the Western Canon; Social science courses must afford students an understanding of the basic social and behavioral science concepts and principles used in the analysis of behavior and past and present social, political, and economic issues (p. 23).

Similarly, the definitional work here is another example of authoritarian control of education through legislation. In effect, this language repositions the narcissism of whiteness through manipulating definitions to distinguish the white conservative legislative body as a way to reassert and recenter fantasies of whiteness. Perhaps the most explicit example of this here is the

specific naming of humanities courses that "must include selections from the Western Canon" (p. 23). No doubt in response to decades-long attempts to open up, complicate, and challenge the Western Canon, the repositioning of definitions showcases how whiteness recenters itself through control and compliance.

Other bills analyzed demonstrated white narcissism in more explicit ties to control, manipulation, and compliance, through specifically naming material and financial threats. In the context of permission structuring, these texts work to reconstitute white racial power through appeals to take away money for education or other social services that promote diversity, equity, and inclusive values. The rhetorical function, then, offers an approach to make choices and decisions about non-white people through explicit threats of material consequentiality and the harm that economic sanctions enact in community sites. For example, Georgia SB261 declares, "Any postsecondary educational institution that violates subsection (c) of this Code section shall be subject to the withholding of state funding or state administered federal funding. Such withholding of state funding shall include funds provided to the postsecondary institution directly as well as funding for scholarships, loans, and grants pursuant to this chapter for students of such postsecondary educational institution" (p. 3). The Georgia bill example here highlights the ways that violation of white-centered narcissistic behaviors will result in financial revocations. Another example of an appeal to financial threats can be found in Florida SB999, wherein the bill proposes relocating funding to establish and fund the Hamilton Center for Classical and Civic Education as an academic unit within the University of Florida. The purpose of the center is to support teaching and research concerning the ideas, traditions, and texts that form the foundations of Western and American civilization (p. 16). Perhaps as a foil example to the Georgia bill, the example of the Florida bill shows that behaviors that coddle white narcissism and can support the ideological project of white supremacy will be supported financially.

These examples help illustrate how, in establishing a choice-making environment for white people, anti-DEI legislation locates control and manipulation, both through definitions and finances. In this way, white narcissism plays a powerful force in legitimizing harm and violence through ideologies of whiteness. These bills construct their appeals to the white racial imagination as last-ditch efforts to recenter whiteness and to punish those who challenge it. Using control, compliance, and manipulation in the bills themselves establishes a permission structure to act violently to maintain and amplify white narcissistic behaviors at both individual and collective levels that undersigns harm in the name of white supremacy.

White Rage

Based on analysis of 16 different state-introduced anti-DEI legislation, about three-quarters of mentions analyzed targeted white rage, in some way. According to Anderson (2016), white rage positions fear and anger from white publics to yoke moral panic and legitimize harm to communities of color. One of the key ways in which legislation invoked white rage was through the ways it defined prohibitive behavior, explicitly targeting concepts that tenet and concepts that challenge conservationist ideologies of meritocracy. Several of the bills analyzed showcased a clear sense to very clearly define what specific ideological position they were targeting. As a

representative example, Missouri SB222's description of discrimination specifically mentions "indoctrination." As the bill states:

> It is an unlawful discriminatory practice for the state or any of its political subdivisions to subject an individual, as a condition of employment, to training, instruction, or any other required activity that espouses, promotes, advances, inculcates, or compels the individual to believe any of the following concepts: (a) members of one class are morally superior to members of another class; (b) an individual, by virtue of the individual's class, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously; (c) an individual's moral character or status as either privileged or oppressed is necessarily determined by the individual's class; (d) an individual, by virtue of the individual's class, bears responsibility for or should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of actions committed in the past by other members of the same class;(e) an individual, by virtue of the individual's class, should be discriminated against or receive; (f) an individual, by virtue of the individual's class, bears personal responsibility for and must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress because of actions, in which the individual played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same class; or (g) virtues such as merit, excellence, hard work, fairness, neutrality, objectivity, and racial colorblindness are racist or sexist or were created by members of a particular class to oppress members of another class (MO SB222, 2023, pp. 1-2).

The Missouri bill "End Political Litmus Tests in Education Act" deliberately connects unraveling the foundation of democracy and specifically deploying white fragility. For example, the mention of "bearing responsibility" for "actions committed in the past" and "discriminated against" distorts concepts and ideas from critical race theory and DEI practice. This language is a deliberate attempt to reassert power and control of stories of the past, and it also draws on language around moral authority and discrimination based in identity politics to distort critiques of "virtues."

Given that this bill mirrors the distortion of concepts from equity-based education, one of the key ways in which this definition functions is by targeting belief systems embedded in white supremacy, an element of the unjust permission structure. It specifically targets and stresses existing belief systems of conservative values, particularly around fairness and merit. For example, "virtues such as merit, excellence, hard work, fairness, neutrality, objectivity, and racial colorblindness are racist or sexist." Here, permission is structured to stoke white rage by making plain how these beliefs are being threatened through DEI work and programming. Perhaps at a more obvious level, this language also calls into question how whiteness gets to set the terms for what has merit and what is fair. As Bonilla-Silva (2018) notes, this is a frame that suggests that racism is a naturally occurring phenomenon and people of color are unable to meet these contrived expectations based on whiteness. Further, the bill deploys objectivity and neutrality, white-centered concepts, into the forefront of the reasoning.

Thus, when read this way, the Missouri bill's definitional work around prohibiting DEI initiatives in education is not necessarily only a response to white rage, but also an instigation of it. The clearly defined principles as exemplified in the Missouri bill demonstrate how the goals of this bill are to disempower the beneficiaries of diversity, equity, and inclusion experiences,

which are constructed here as only for communities of color. This is a resounding example of the point that Metzl (2019) makes that frames this article. The choices that white voters make that rely on white rage, then, translate to disempowerment. This is a key component to white rage, in that white rage is used as a tool for domination when white people feel their power and authority is being challenged by communities of color. Thus, framing these concepts as prohibitive transcends the fact that the DEI concepts can make white people feel uncomfortable. Instead, it works to reassert white racial power by cutting off apparent challenges to it. At the same time, this kind of definition works to reassert whiteness and white supremacy as morally superior and DEI as inherently immoral since it challenges the regime of power and privilege.

Further evidence for white rage being used as a tool to create permission structures to enact violence based on threats of prior experiences is through the deliberate revision of language in several bills. For example, Arkansas SB 71 changed "Equity Assurance Center" to "Equality Assurance Center" and removed race-conscious language such as "Black Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans." Further, in West Virginia's HB3503, language around DEI is structured as an "opinion." The bill states, "No public institution of higher education shall give preferential consideration to an applicant, student, staff member, or faculty member due to any opinion expressed or action taken in support of another individual or a group of individuals on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation" (p. 1). In these cases, white rage works to legislate racial exclusion by delegitimizing social justice work. The underlying appeal in these rhetorical strategies are to focus on rugged individualism and to ensure white publics reject the systemic nature of oppression, which enables legislation like this to divert resources away from "equity" to equality to reassert white racial power, legislate exclusion, and undersign violence against the groups that profit from DEI programming and hiring.

In terms of permission structures, the white racial frame deliberately invokes the white public's reaction against DEI as oppositional to American values, parroting conservative think tank language that frames liberal education as "ideological indoctrination" that "trains them to accept and apply unquestioned ideological tenets" reducing "deeper thought" (Cambre, 2025, p. 2). Pressing on prior conservative belief systems structures permission for white publics to enact violence against public education and public educators. The broader argument against DEI, then, emerges as a structure that incites rage and panic against DEI as a stand-in for change in the social fabric of the socio-political landscapes. In effect, this strategy "has undermined democracy, warped the constitution, weakened the nation's ability to compete economically" (Anderson, 2016, p. 6).

Conclusion

As a way to examine white racial resentment, the white racial frame is a powerful rhetorical and narrative structuring device that specifically permits white people to harm people who challenge their taken-for-granted ideological positions. Legislation often operates within and deliberately works as an unjust permission structure, constraining the available options for how individuals can and should act in a given choice-making environment. As demonstrated in this article, anti-DEI legislation can be interpreted as a permission structuring activity, one that specifically

invokes white rage, empowers white narcissistic tendencies of control, and invites a distortion of history to undersign white supremacist everyday rhetorical action.

My analysis offers a range of examples exploring the structuring of white supremacy through an analysis of policy positions. As technical communication scholars continue to work toward understanding the ways in which technical documents and processes can either be liberatory or oppressive, it's important to continue to examine, critique, and transform everyday dispositions of white supremacy. As I notice above, many unexamined features of this type of legislation represent a deepening of "objective" and "neutral" lore that has constrained technical communication praxis. Furthermore, we must also recognize the ways in which white supremacy invites harmful action by white people and the ways technical communication can aid in the divestment of white supremacist ideology and action. This is critical to examine the context of permission structuring, particularly when these stories are used to invite a change in behavior toward harm and violence as the anti-DEI legislation analyzed does. Stories like this do not appear out of thin air; instead, they emerge from conservative think tanks (Martinez & Maraj, 2024). The narrative strategy of these ideas, ultimately, works within a white racial framework, similar to those analyzed above.

The apparent targeting of the white racial frame as a way to inspire rhetorical action of white publics cannot be understood as a solely intellectual analysis; instead, it reveals and calls for further engagement about the roles of textual lives in everyday social action, particularly around state-level policy affordances and constraints. As scholars of rhetorical genre studies have demonstrated, texts, including policies, contain residues of social action. These highly technical legal genres point out that the social action that is afforded through anti-DEI legislation is to impart violence on communities of color and to placate white racial anxious fantasies about displacement and replacement.

As a final return to Metzl (2019), whose work framed this article, the conservative policies make pawns of the white public imaginary. They are both used to incite harm and violence to protect white supremacy as a violent system of control *and* end up both directly and indirectly harming white people. Politically, however, these goals are deliberate and intentional: to use the white public's anxious imagination as agents to reproduce and maintain the systems of harm that global white supremacy undersigned. Accordingly, this analysis demonstrates the need for further critical interventions to reform and transform white identity politics away from harm and control in and beyond technical communication.

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Appendix A: List of Legislation Analyzed

State	Bill No.
Ark.	S .B. 71
Ala.	H. B. 7
Ariz.	S .B. 1694
Conn.	S. B. 279
Fla.	H.B. 999
Ga.	S. B. 261
Iowa	H. Filing 616
Mo.	S. B. 222
Miss.	H. B. 1196
Neb.	Leg. B. 1077
N.C.	S. B. 364
Or.	H.B. 2430
S.C.	H. 3464
Tex.	H. B. 5001
Utah	H. B. 451
Wyo.	H. B. 3503