“Joyful Warriors”: The Affective Politics of Parental Mobilizations in the US

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Abstract: *This article investigates right-wing parental activism in terms of its structure of feeling—proactive victimhood and pride in collective agency—manifested in contemporary political expe- rience in the United States. Thinking with and beyond scholars of public emotions, including Raymond Williams, Sara Ahmed, and Lauren Berlant, it argues that the affective economy of the parents’ movement, emerging at the intersections of from-below mobili- zations and a top-down orchestration led by lawmakers, policy groups, and media, enables parents to apprehend themselves as a sovereign entity that speaks on behalf of the American people while infusing state policy and civil discourse with categories of feeling.*

Keywords: *Affect, structure of feeling, sovereignty, parents’ movement, Critical Race Theory*

In July 2022, Moms for Liberty (M4L), a prominent nonprofit mobilizing around parental rights, put together a three-day inaugural conference in Tampa, Florida, entitled “Joyful Warriors” and featuring several high-profile conservative speakers, including US Senator Rick Scott, former US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos, and 2016 Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson alongside Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, who delivered the keynote speech.[1] Participants of the conference were able to attend “strategy sessions” on topics such as “A Look Behind the Education Curtain,” “Legal Boot Camp,” “Grassroots Lobbying,” and “Are you Ready to Run,” which offered training exer- cises for parents running for local school boards and seeking change in school curricula, particularly with respect to issues of race, gender, and sexuality.[2] The salient theme of the conference, also captured in M4L cofounder Tiffany Justice’s speech, was “2022 is the year of the parent.”[3] Taking the stage before DeSantis, the other cofounder, Tina

Descovich, set out the objectives of the event and of the organization more broadly: "We are going to train, we are going to learn, and the one thing we are going to do is fulfill our mission at this summit— we are going to empower you to defend parental rights at all levels of government."[4]

Consonant with the wave of prohibitions across the country against teaching "divisive concepts" in classrooms and bans on books exploring race, racism, sexual orientation, and gender identity, the annual "Joyful Warriors" conferences mediate and give expression to affective structures of a family-focused politics that both decides on the exigencies of the present and the mode of citizenship demanded in response. In such politics, parents are imagined as morally responsible citizens, active in the public sphere and taking charge of the future of the nation via their children's education, in defense of the traditional family and national heritage. By going through the school boards; filing petitions to remove certain books from library shelves; mobilizing at the local, state, and national levels; promoting candidates running for office at all levels of government; appearing on traditional media platforms; and organizing through social media, white conser- vative parents, particularly "moms," establish themselves not only as the new face of the Republican Party, but also as a new insurgent sovereign entity claiming to speak in the name of the American people.

Apprehending themselves as authentic defenders of the American nation against what they identify as hateful ideologies and groups, self-described patriotic parents, on one hand, collect pride and plea- sure from their political activism and, on the other, fold the racial undertones of their mobilization into values-based civic engagement. This political practice and publicity draws the contours of a new model parent-citizen intervening in debates about the "meaning of [the] country, its history, and how it should be governed" through a vibrant ecosystem of complaint, resistance, and rearticulation.[5] These interventions, I argue, reconfigure the public sphere by infusing state policy and civil discourse with categories of feeling—such as whether White students, and more broadly White Americans, are made to feel uncom- fortable, guilty, or distressed—and refracting public debate, anal- ysis, laws, and regulations through the (presumed) feelings of White subjects. In this reconfigured public sphere, political activism, I further argue, takes on identities and duties performed by parents in family life, which, as Lauren Berlant insightfully describes, is often fantasized to be "protected from the harsh realities of power."[6] Supposedly unen- cumbered by contestations and conflicts that shape the public sphere, and thus antipolitical, familial relations provide political activism with a guiding reference in its quest to deplete the public sphere—educa- tional settings and beyond—of markers of identity and difference.

To say the least, over the past four years, agitation over curric- ulum materials and library books has become the primary context in which conservative politics is articulated. Since January 2021, a total of forty-four

states have introduced bills or taken other steps that would limit how teachers discuss race, racism, gender identity, and sexual orientation.[7] From July 2021 to June 2022, PEN America reported 2,532 instances of bans on books, affecting 1,648 unique book titles across thirty-two states, with a majority of these titles containing protagonists of color and/or LGBTQ+ themes.[8] Preliminary findings for the 2023– 2024 school year indicate a dramatic rise in censorship: over ten thou- sand instances of book bans, more than double the previous school year.[9] The field of mobilization against discussions of race, gender, and sexuality, however, is not limited to legislative efforts. A network of advocacy groups formed by activist-parents, such as No Left Turn in Education (NLTE), Parents against Critical Theory, and Parents Defending Education, alongside M4L, has also joined the fight against what they call the "woke culture" and policies that "teach Americans to hate each other,"[10] launching protests against and taking over school boards—a national phenomenon that the Heritage Foundation has dubbed "the great parent revolt."[11]

Mobilized and mobilizing, these proliferating parents' advocacy groups embody the core affective attachments and elicitations of right- wing conservatism by directly answering lawmakers and opinion leaders' calls "to stand up for America and defend [the American] way of life" wherever opportunities and challenges may present themselves—"at home, in school, at the workplace."[12] Called on to defend their country's exceptional values and powerful history, ordi- nary Americans are thus able to "imagine themselves as agents in a national event," participating in affectively charged debates about the present purpose and future direction of their nation through collective action.[13] Whether such defensive mobilizations are local uprisings of "concerned parents" or rather nationally orchestrated efforts incited and funded by major Republican donors and party-aligned think tanks, the affective economies of the mobilizations, I suggest, endow local communities with a sense of agency: as authentic protectors and practitioners of the American experiment of self-government.

Taking its departure from this sense of agency and authenticity, this article explores the affective politics underpinning the parental rights movement—more specifically, the mobilization against what came to be labeled "Critical Race Theory" ("CRT"), originally an academic framework employed to study how race operates in American law and culture that has been resignified as a divisive discourse "setting certain communities against others" and "impart[ing] an oppres- sive-victim narrative upon generations of Americans."[14] Thinking with and beyond scholars of public emotions, including Berlant, Raymond Williams, and Sara Ahmed, I study right-wing activism in terms of its structure of feeling—proactive victimhood and pride in collec- tive agency—manifested in contemporary political experience in the United States. In doing so, I shift the focus away from the figure of the

leader or ordinary party rallies to dispersed yet connected popular assemblies of parents and communities, in which individuals not only subscribe to but also participate in the making of patriotic iden- tifications. Such participation, I note, enables ordinary Americans to perceive themselves as protagonists of social change, drawing affec- tive returns from repairing the backbone of US society.

I borrow the concept "structure of feeling" from Williams to artic- ulate affective politics as a form of felt thought, or vice versa, thought feeling: that is, though not as systematic as established value and belief systems, such as ideologies, nonetheless effective in shaping attach- ments to objects, people, values, and ideas.[15] I show the structure of feeling embodied by the mobilization against "CRT"—sometimes also housed under a broader and no less contested term, "identity poli- tics"[16]—to be intensified around particular constructions of oppres- sion, injury, and dissent that have "become part of capacities to act," enabling parents, community members, and ordinary citizens to feel as if their power is augmented and engage in collective action.[17] As these constructions center around the figure of an innocent child who needs state protection from distressing and alienating doctrines—a protection that will ultimately be secured by parents' activism—they repeat what Berlant calls the "familial politics" of late twentieth-cen- tury American conservatism, yet situate such politics not, as Berlant has claimed, in "personal acts and identities performed in the inti- mate domains of the quotidian," but in collective action engaged by informed, agitated, and well-organized citizens in the public sphere.[18] The current trajectory of "familial politics" thus demonstrates a fusion of private citizenship and public parenthood, retaining and carrying over the assigned roles of the family—innocent white children, protec- tive heterosexual parents—into the public sphere, where alternative visions of the nation's future are contested.

To identify the mechanisms and operations undergirding the contemporary mobilizations on the Right, I turn to Sara Ahmed's influ- ential account of the affective economies of "love" and "hate," which provide distinctions for right-wing constituencies between "us," pure and vulnerable victims, and "them," the cause of our injury, in encoun- tering racialized groups.[19] The negative attachment to the Other, in Ahmed's framing, produces the normative subject while transforming hate into a self-affirming cultural pride defined by a shared love for the nation, affectively concealing the racial and political antagonism located at its core.[20] Building on and expanding Ahmed's account, I claim that the accumulation of hatred's affective value is reinforced and augmented by constructions of what I call mirroring hate econ- omies: that is, the normative White subject hates the Other while preconstituting the Other as the original hateful subject; the object of negative attachment becomes reconstructed as the subject spreading hatred. This way, expressions of patriotic love become

mediated by marking various Others—politically active racial minorities, race-con- scious liberals, progressives—as coconspirators in a politics of hatred, and enjoyed for the work of defending the nation from those marked Others.

Altogether, I understand an affective politics in three separate yet interrelated dimensions: first, a shared experience that generates dispo- sitional relations to the world and is analyzable in terms of its socio-psy- chological effects (what Williams calls "structures of feeling"); second, a social economy that organizes intersubjective relations through objects of emotions, in particular love and hate ("affective economies" in Ahmed's phrasing); and third, a politics premised on subjective feelings as the standard for evaluation of public discourse and policy ("sentimental politics" for Berlant). In the next three sections, I unpack these dimensions of affective politics by weaving respective theoret- ical accounts of Williams, Ahmed, and Berlant with the unfolding processes, discourses, and meaning-making frameworks around the "CRT" crisis. The fourth section locates the emotional economy of campaigns against race-conscious education and advocacy at the inter- sections of from-below mobilizations and a top-down orchestration led by right-wing lawmakers, policy groups, and media, bringing into view the making of a new sovereign entity that claims to act on behalf of the American people: American parents. Based on this analysis, the fifth section articulates the particular affective underpinnings of this making—that is the creation of joyful and triumphant subjects out of a moral crisis.

STRUCTURES OF FEELING

While "affect" is a notoriously contested term, my approach to affec-tive modalities of right-wing mobilizations is informed by the accounts developed by scholars of public emotions who treat affect as, in Ann Cvetkovich's words, a "category that encompasses affect, emotion, and feeling, and that includes impulses, desires, and feelings that get historically constructed in a range of ways."[21] Hence, differing from the more specific Deleuzian approach, which articulates affect as an autonomous, precognitive, sensory experience contrasted to emotion, my use of the notion is, like that of Cvetkovich, "generic," motivated less by providing definitions and more by exploiting the ambiguity across various forms of affective intensities and energies, material forces and desires that give expression to collectively shared, circu- lating feelings.[22]

Thus, instead of reinforcing a dichotomy between the cognitive/ rational and the sensory/bodily experience, which has long been contested by feminist thinkers,[23] I follow Williams's understanding of affect as a "structure of feeling," which is to say "not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought."[24] Articulated in art and literature, structures of feeling, Williams argues, are collectively shared by a people of

a certain time period and geographical loca- tion—such as the "pervasive sense of defeat" Welsh industrial workers held in the wake of the failed general strike in 1926—giving certain coherence to "otherwise disparate practices, events or processes."[25] The reason Williams prefers the term structure has precisely to do with the process of organizing and mediating "disperse and distributed" affective qualities, which dispose subjects toward themselves, one another, and the world, setting limits and exerting pressures on how relations and encounters can be felt.[26]

Feelings, both for Williams and Sianne Ngai, are essentially social, much like "institutions and collective practices that have been the more traditional objects of historicist criticism," as well as material, akin to "the linguistic signs and significations that have been the more tradi- tional objects of literary formalism."[27] Irreducible to institutions, prac- tices, and significations, structures of feeling are "social experiences in solution"—that is, a "kind of feeling and thinking" located only at the "edge of semantic availability," even as they remain "analyzable" in terms of their effects.[28] Here Williams notably distinguishes structures of feeling from established value and belief systems, particularly ideol- ogies. "Active and pressing but not yet fully articulated," structures of feeling, in Ben Anderson's reading of Williams, are best understood as emergent affective experiences, "mediated by the realm of 'articulated' thoughts and beliefs" while also presenting "one of the ways in which the 'articulated' is reproduced."[29] They "mediate between the social and the personal" by facilitating and shaping attachments to objects, events, figures, and ideas in ways that are lived, felt, and half-articu- lated—in other words, as Jonathan Flatley puts it, the "way that most of us experience our lives most of the time."[30] Thus, from an ideolog- ical standpoint, right-wing activism can be "partially and provision- ally articulated," at times hosting contradictions, such as demands for both too much and too little governmental intervention, or freedom of speech and censorship, all at the same time.[31] Despite considerable ideological amorphism, however, dispersed individual and collective actors across state legislatures, media apparatuses, and local commu- nities are brought together by a structure of feeling organizing nega- tive and positive affective attachments to objects and ideas in the social order, from children's books to social justice movements, and gener- ating a "collective dispositional relation to the world" with "real and palpable effects" in public life. [32]

This is also to say that if, for Williams, structures of feeling can be found in literary works, which function as media through which authors become conscious of their experience while transmitting it, then popular mobilizations, too, can similarly make social agents aware of their political experience while dispersing, distributing, and height- ening the affective intensities of these experiences and facilitating their transformation into

political action. The public debates, media coverage, and legislative measures around race-conscious education and engagement that I investigate in this article provide infrastruc- tures for defining, producing, and regulating feelings, intervening in the ways that people "think and feel about the world."[33] Not unlike art and literature, the social ecosystem of the parents' rights movement thus registers a cultural change that presents perhaps not necessarily a coherent, complete system of thought, but at least one of the ways in which American conservatism, with its frayed relationship with race, is reproduced.

AFFECTIVE ECONOMIES AND INVERSIONS: THE NEGATIVE BRANDING OF "CRT"

A structure of feeling, for Williams, need not correspond to one emotion or feeling. Instead, as in the case of the middle-class structure of feeling in mid-nineteenth century Britain that anxiously oscillated between "sympathy for the oppressed and fear of their violence," two interrelated and even opposite emotions might be at stake.[34] Thus, Eve Sedgwick is to the point when she describes affects as "attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects."[35] If structures of feeling and affects present themselves always in the plural—"affects rather than the singular affect"[36]— this plurality, inter- action, and vacillation appear most evident in Ahmed's account of affective economies of "love" and "hate." For Ahmed, a striking feature of right-wing "hate" groups is their ability to present themselves as movements motivated by and organized around "love."[37] The White Aryans, Ahmed points out, declare that it is their "love for the nation" that makes them "feel hate towards others who, in 'taking away the nation,' are taking away their history, as well as their future."[38]

Feeling endangered by imaginary others chipping away at Western/Christian cultural customs, disrupting the security and tran- quility of society, and leeching off its wealth, ordinary white subjects claim "the position of the victim" as a predominant structure of feeling, perpetually under threat and failing.[39] Meanwhile, the negative attach- ment to the Other, underwritten by narratives of injury that cause fear, loathing, repulsion, and anger, is immediately transformed into a "positive attachment to the imagined subjects" brought together by their shared hurt by the invasion of others.[40] The affective community of love thus comes into being as an effect of the individual's negative attachment to the Other: "Because we love, we hate, and this hate is what brings us together."[41] In redefining hate as love, the affective commu- nity of patriots transforms negative emotions, such as victimhood and fear or disgust for strangers, into positive ones like pride in the

nation, while also translating these emotional economies into collec- tive identities. These transformations, I would add, might be "ephem- eral and transitory," as far as structures of feeling go, but they nonethe- less provide the "fluid underground of social and cultural practices," containing the nascent elements of change in society.[42]

Ahmed's articulation of economies of love and hate is important because it helps us understand the right-wing nationalist rhetoric in the United States that the parents' rights activists are in affinity with. From the 2021 Proud Boys rally in Portland, Oregon, "Summer of Love," claiming to be "spreading LOVE not HATE,"[43] to former President Donald Trump finding "love in the air" during the violent attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021,[44] love is as much foregrounded as, and often adjoined by, political violence. These examples, albeit seemingly on the far Right, shape the ways that broader swaths of conservative constituencies, including conservative parents, "think and feel" about politics—that is, their structure of feeling—and set the stage for the moral panic around "CRT," both through their implicit references to the wave of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in Trumpist rallies and insurgencies and because members of far-right militia organizations themselves are becoming increasingly active in school board meetings and town council gatherings across the country.[45] Given that the legis- lative and mobilizational momentum banning discussions of race in classrooms avowedly followed from the multiracial protests for racial justice, it is important to grasp the impulses and tones—in Williams's words, the "affective elements of consciousness and relationships"— sedimented in expressive reactions and negative attachments to the protests.[46]

Since these reactionary and negative attachments to BLM coalesce around a certain rearticulation that depicts the movement as organized around and spreading racial hatred, it is also necessary to take a step further than Ahmed and focus on the "affective inversions" that recon- struct racially coded targets as hateful agents and thus redistribute responsibility across survivors and beneficiaries of racial injustice. While renaming hate as love, as Ahmed shows us, is certainly one side of the right-wing cultural agenda, the other is the projection of hateful feelings onto the Other: It is they who are filled with hatred of us. Ahmed poignantly discusses such "emotional reading of others as hateful" in relation to the assumed injury that the Other causes to the ordinary White subject.[47] However, in my view, this is not the only mechanism through which the affective structure of hate produces both a subject of pain and a hateful inflictor of pain. The construction of Others as hateful often takes much more direct and repercussive forms. Beyond fantasies of victimization, which vilify Others by pointing out their alterity, inau- thenticity, and maleficence, a more prevalent way of marking certain bodies is to construct them as always-already hateful. For example, at the height of its mobilizational momentum

in summer 2020, BLM was cast as a "symbol of hate" by President Trump[48]—a sentiment that was also shared by his supporters, who defined the movement as a "Marxist hate group";[49] by media figures, who promoted the view that the activists were seeking "the destruction of the nuclear family" (note the familial politics of race);[50] and by Republican lawmakers, who identified BLM as "antithetical to the American model and patriotism. . . destroying the fabric of [the] nation."[51]

This is to say that, if hate, as Ahmed argues, is "produced as an effect of its circulation," its movement and distribution involve not only associating certain bodies with abjection and threat—the purported causes of hate, on Ahmed's account—but also attributing the very same lived and felt structure of feeling to the "bodies that are encoun- tered as objects of hate."[52] The affective value of hatred, I thus empha- size, accumulates through projection and duplication: Because they hate us—those of us who love this nation—it is our duty to fight against them. As the Other is perceived to be indoctrinating and intoxicating Americans with a divisive politics of hatred, logical consistency therefore requires that patriotic citizens, too, must hate the Other, undertaking a neces- sary moral-political resistance. Along these lines, the anti-"CRT" saga, at its core, can be understood as a concerted effort to flip the script on racial oppression, making racism an attribute of groups that seek to sustain discussions of structural racism and inequality. In this flipped script (a new iteration of reverse racism charges), educational mate- rials on America's racial history, from The 1619 Project to the negative branding of "CRT," become affectively charged signifiers—in Trump's words, a "toxic propaganda," an "ideological poison" [53]—inverting relations of power and resistance and creating a structure of feeling that bridges victimhood and vigilantism.

A self-described "dissident" and the director of the Initiative on Critical Race Theory at the Manhattan Institute, Christopher Rufo explains the operation of the negative branding of "CRT" as follows:

> We have successfully frozen their brand—'critical race theory'— into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.[54]

Exemplified in this statement is the Right's ability, or at least attempt, to "rigidly stabiliz[e]" the meaning of words.[55] Such stabilization is, to borrow from Herbert Marcuse, "prior to all expression and commu- nication, a matter of semantics."[56] At a time when politics and politi- cians are evaluated for their brand attractiveness,[57] the American Right successfully develops a "basic vocabulary of the Orwellian language [that] operates as a priori categories

of understanding: preforming all content."[58] With structures of feeling on the Right articulated through Orwellian signification (as in, using Marcuse's example, "preparing for war is working for peace"[59]), any discussion of racism, prior to delib- eration, is coded as racism; and actors tracing the lingering legacies of slavery, as contemporary representatives of the Confederate cause.[60]

FEELING GUILTY, FEELING ANGUISHED: REVISITING BERLANT'S "SENTIMENTAL POLITICS"

Mediated by resignified signs, symbols, and objects, the emotional economy of the anti-"CRT" campaign emerges from the intersection of a from-below grassroots mobilization and what Berlant calls an "affective orchestration" of crisis.[61] An exemplary implementer of such orchestration and a pioneer in introducing bans on discussions of race, gender identity, and sexual orientation, Florida governor Ron DeSantis seeks not only to alter the state's institutionalized frameworks for classrooms and workplaces but also to intervene in the structures of feeling that dispose the bodies inhabiting those places. Signing the "Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees" ("Stop W.O.K.E.") Act into law, the Republican governor develops a basic vocabulary for legal regulation of feelings as well as tax dollars: "We won't allow Florida tax dollars to be spent teaching kids to hate our country or to hate each other."[62] To be clear, what the text of this and similar anti- "CRT" laws actually prohibits is the kinds of training courses or educa- tional materials that would teach employees or students that "an indi- vidual's moral character or status as either privileged or oppressed is necessarily determined by his or her race, color, sex, or national origin."[63] More specifically, the model law bans training or instruc- tion that would promote the idea that "[a]n individual, by virtue of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, bears personal responsi- bility for… actions… committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, sex, or national origin," and therefore "must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress."[64] In these lines, the ambiguity regarding divisive or dangerous concepts becomes more concretely associated with feelings of guilt, anguish, and distress, affec- tively reconstituting racial and gender relations through legal regula- tion and political discourse.

Predictably, the language of these mostly identical laws has been widely criticized for its nebulous character. However, this ostensible ambiguity is constitutive of, rather than incidental to, these laws, given that they claim to regulate, more than classroom discussions per se, the feelings and sentiments that might arise during those discussions, from discomfort and distress to confusion and doubt. As structural relations of power and domination are

refracted through psychological and affective categories, feelings become not just the "primary field… for experiencing politics" but also the primary medium of political anal- ysis and object of regulation.[65] Measuring the strength of the nation's civic unity and social fabric by whether citizens are made to feel guilty or victimized through their race, the civic discourse steers away from social, political, and economic conditions of racial injustice toward individuals' moral characters and statuses as oppressive or racist. This heightened emphasis on students' feelings and moral characters requires systematic attention because it captures the premise of legis- lative and grassroots efforts against "CRT"—the essential ambiguity of subjective feelings structuring politics and policymaking—distin- guishing these efforts from earlier parental movements.

Far from a recent phenomenon, the mobilization against "CRT" belongs to a rather long lineage of parents' rights activism spanning across decades before and after the Civil Rights Movement. The lineage includes, for example, the textbook censorship campaigns of the 1920s and '30s—to be restaged in the 1950s and '70s—that sought to sustain white supremacy through public education by eliminating Black history, achievement, art, and literature from curriculum.[66] Undertaking a "massive resistance" within and beyond the South, white parents, particularly white mothers, have for decades contested multiracial and multicultural instruction, which they charged with undermining traditional American values and beliefs, while also claiming to "uphold the American 'heritage' against alien 'indoctri- nation.'"[67] In the years after de jure desegregation, their language lost some of its overt racism in favor of "code words," such as "parental authority," "limited government," and "school choice," that rein- forced a hierarchical social order without explicitly advocating it.[68] With the help of these code words, for example, the opposition to busing could be rearticulated as an effort to defend American parents' decision-making powers over "what kind of communities their chil- dren would be raised and what kind of education their children will receive"—questions that resemble the anti-"CRT" discourses today.[69]

An apparent inheritance from these earlier waves of mobilization is the construction of motherhood as civic duty—that is, the "polit- icization of fighting for the soul of 'our children' and the soul of the nation"—and the racialization and of that fight with a "tendency to monopolize and capitalize on [White, feminized] victimhood."[70] An "ugly freedom" in Elisabeth Anker's sense, the parental right to choose, whether in the context of opposition to desegregation or contemporary efforts to ban discussions of race in classrooms, plays out via pursuits and practices that disavow racial exclusion and animosity as a consti- tutive affective force.[71] If these, however, are the historical continuities in racially-charged controversies over public education, the modifica- tions can be found in the restaging of such controversies for

a new political arena that is much more sentimentalized. While it is true that what is at stake has always been the "souls" of the children driven by worries about their faith in the American nation, the heightened emphasis on the personal feelings of white students rearticulates the old battles over public education through privatized sentiments alongside familial duties. Students, accordingly, are presumed to be threatened by an anti-American curriculum that not only makes them less patriotic but also causes mental harm and emotional damage. The insidiousness of the threat lies in its intervention children's inner worlds, to borrow from an educational consultant affiliated with M4L, "destabiliz[ing them] emotionally, psychologically, and cognitively."[72] This transformation can be partly understood in terms of what Berlant describes as the transformation of citizenship into a "privat- ized state of feeling" born in the Reagan era.[73] In Berlant's assess- ment, the New Right downsizes citizenship into a category of feeling which, akin to an advertisement campaign, absorbs popular desires into "brand names," such as "American Dream" or "American Way of Life" grounded in "traditional notions of home, family, and community," while demonizing radical movements for social justice.[74] With its analogues also in the liberal national sentimental contract—a reduc- tion of politics into categories of "feeling good" and "feeling bad" as "evidence of justice's triumph" or failure[75]—conservative feeling poli- tics mediates personhood in a way that transposes structures of power and domination into psychological terms.[76] Accompanying such medi- ation is, as described above, is the effort to make the family sphere "the moral, ethical, and political horizon of national or political interest."[77] While conservative ideology in the postwar period had certainly placed the white, heterosexual, middle-class family at the center of social and political culture, it was not until the Reagan Revolution, Berlant argues, that the future of the nation would be located in "the family and its radiating zones of practice" yielding a "sentimental cultural politics" that operates across zones of privacy.[78]

Berlant's formulation of "privatized citizenship" is helpful because it provides an entry into the "anti-political politics" of the New Right, which continues to disclaim operations of hegemony and normativity as constitutive of everyday life, articulating the usurpation of the public sphere by a politics of sentimentality that reframes citizenship as a question of personal feelings rather than political antagonism.[79] At the same time, it only partially accommodates the current conser- vative "politico-familial mood."[80] On Berlant's account, the pattern of privatization deployed by the conservative coalitions of the '70s and '80s redirected the "critical energies of the emerging political sphere," with its antiwar, antiracist, and feminist struggles inherited from the '60s, to zones of privacy, locating the nation's virtue and value in acts "originating in or directed toward the family

sphere."[81] No longer oriented to public life, peoplehood attained its constricted form: a "nation of simultaneously lived private worlds."[82] In our present moment, however, the familial mode of peoplehood is lived precisely in the mass-mediated public sphere. Political activism and agitation are far from being deemed "ridiculous" or "dangerous to the nation," as Berlant once took them to be.[83] To the contrary, collective action, particularly performed by parents, is not only demanded by conserva- tive lawmakers, opinion leaders, and media figures but also celebrated as the very guiding image of membership in the nation. The presence of the "youthful victim" in need of civil protection notwithstanding, it is instead the adult citizens—namely, the parents of youthful victims— who, with their rights, duties, and patriotic performances, set the parameters of national life, emerging as the publicized face of proper personhood.[84]

Thus, departing from a privatized personhood crafted and enjoyed in the family sphere, which Berlant attributes to the Regan-era New Right, the present-day United States manifests a cross-pollination between public personhood and private family life. Political identifica- tions, while still rooted in traditional family, are performed and realized in public life where parenthood attains its sovereign political agency by engaging in collective action and intervening in local politics and poli- cymaking. Dispersed yet coordinated, parental mobilizations against "CRT" manifest a model of citizenship that is experienced primarily via political activism and agitation in the public sphere. Illustrative of this experience is the very title of a recent legislation passed by Republicans in the 118th Congress, the "Parents' Bill of Rights," which even more directly than, for example, the 1979 Family Protection Act, references the sovereign status of the parent-citizen in charge of the racial, sexual, moral order. Assuming an insurgent sovereign status themselves, conservative parents, too, as seen in their speeches, consider the bill to be their own "Declaration of Independence" at the dawn of a political "battle [that] is just beginning."[85]

Despite its delimiting emphasis on "intimate domains," Berlant's notion of "sentimental politics" is quite apt for identifying the subtle alterations in the long legacy of parents' rights movements that refor- mulate the need to restore children's faith in patriotism as the need to contain, in words of Tennessee Senator Marsha Blackburn, the "mental and emotional trauma" worming its way into American schools.[86] Though the contention about how educators should teach public school students about America's racial history and present America is not likely to be settled any time soon, what is at stake in ongoing anti- "CRT" campaigns is the rerouting of debates about racial reckoning, which have gained a new urgency in the aftermath of the 2020 BLM protests, into the personal feelings and traumas of white Americans who claim to experience, as discussed in the previous section, an organized politics of hatred launched against them. The "analyzable" effects, in Williams's sense,

of this rerouting—that is, the "cultural and discursive dimension" of the moral panic around discussions of race and racism in schools[87]—epitomize a structure of feeling that cuts across distinct actors, practices, events, and processes, reshaping, as we see in the next section, the right-wing political landscape in the contemporary United States.

AN EMERGENT AUTHORIZED AND AUTHORIZING PEOPLE: AMERICAN PARENTS

The disconnect between the anti-"CRT" campaign and on-the-ground educational practices, and thus the resulting productive ambiguity of the presumed enemy, enables the campaigners—conservative lawmakers, think tanks, policy institutes, and donors—to motivate a sense of permanent crisis, instigating a fear that the threat is not only mobile and "woven into the fabric of everyday life," but also opera- tive on our individual psyches, commanding us to feel a certain way: anguished in the face of the responsibility to right a wrong that is not of our making—commonly phrased as: Why do white people need to feel guilty today for what was done in the past?[88] In orchestrating a perma- nent crisis of psychic warfare that is similar to the post-9/11 "War on Terror," as Berlant also analyzed in terms of a "state emotion," DeSantis and others become well positioned to ask citizens—or, more correctly, the anchor of the American family structure, parents—to feel the horror of their children's and their own inner, psychic lives being shaped by state, or state-sanctioned, ideologies, and "to be hypervigi- lant in everyday life."[89]

Though not always signed into law, the intended versions of anti- "CRT" bills often task parents with taking direct action, such as by suing schools and collecting attorney fees if a school district is not following "state standards with respect to history and government."[90] Crucial to the success of the orchestrated crisis is its deployment by individual and collective actors on the ground. With local chapters in each state and an exponentially growing follower base, No Left Turn in Our Education (NLTE), for example, mobilizes parents across the US to become actively involved at schools and in local politics by providing them with a variety of resources available to be edited, adjusted, and replicated. These resources, available on the NLTE's online platforms, include sample letters written by different parents to their local school boards and superintendents, example petitions addressing state gover- nors and departments of education, and model legislation and alterna- tive curricula, all intending to ensure that students are protected from ideological indoctrination at school.[91] The website and webinars of the movement offer useful "civic action" toolkits, motivating parents to be vigilant, contact their local school boards to "ask their stance on critical race theory," and investigate their state and district standards for curricula by periodically conducting an

"automated word search for buzzwords like 'equity,' 'diversity,' 'anti-racism,' 'systemic racism,' 'social justice,' 'oppress,' 'narrative,' and 'bias.' "[92]

Similarly, with more than three hundred chapters in forty-eight states, M4L has its own YouTube channel and podcast, where members of various civil society organizations, congressional candidates, and educational consultants—"experts and those on the front lines of the battle"[93]—give interviews about the issues facing parents today and motivate parents to take action. In addition to regular local workshops and webinars, M4L holds annual national summits ("Joyful Warriors": 2022 Tampa; 2023 Philadelphia; 2024 Washington, D.C.) offering "strategy sessions" to equip parents with a variety of civic skills from "getting flipped school boards to take action" to "navigating legal chal- lenges" to parental rights.[94] In these sessions, parents not only learn about practical strategies to exercise influence over schools and school boards but also affirm and enjoy their political agency, seeing them- selves as "fighting a constitutional war" against those who undermine the constitution by teaching people to hate America.[95]

Notably, the from-below efforts to organize, train, mobilize, and affirm conservative parents are in sync with the expectations and intentions of conservative lawmakers. When he signed the "Parental Rights in Education" bill into law, which prohibits "a school district from encouraging classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity,"[96] DeSantis laid out the motives and objectives of his administration: "In Florida, we not only know that parents have a right to be involved—we insist that parents have a right to be involved."[97] Likewise, New Hampshire's "Right to Freedom from Discrimination in Public Workplaces and Education" bill encourages everyday citi- zens such as students' guardians to file complaints about actions taken against them that they "believe to be discriminatory."[98] Complementing the legislative efforts, soon after the bill had been signed into law, M4L offered a $500 cash reward to the first family in New Hampshire to file a successful report.[99]

All these initiatives demonstrate that American parents are assigned to be the Right's "disciplinary deputies," who not only subscribe to but also participate in state legislatures' patriotic perfor- mances.[100] In turn, they collect the affective rewards of their participa- tion; that is, the pride and pleasure derived from being what Georges Lefebvre calls "the subjects of history"—as in "the year of the parent" or the "Joyful Warriors" fighting a "constitutional war"—who claim to speak on behalf of the American people and thus achieve a heightened sense of agency.[101] In doing so, they perceive themselves "as a people, as a collective agent, a new heroic actor on the stage of history."[102] The architect of the anti-"CRT" enterprise, Rufo, affirms and gives the most pertinent expression to this structure of feeling: "What I have been inspired by the last year is that there is a new group of

people emerging and asserting the authority of the American people: these are American parents."[103] The right-wing political ecosystem reconstructs American parents as the true claimant to the people, whose authenticity is established by way of its defense of the national heritage and tradi- tional family values. The structure of feeling that characterizes this claim to popular sovereignty bridges the private domain of the family and the public arena of civic personhood, positioning white, hetero- sexual parenthood as the exemplary mode of citizenship.

In doing so, it also blurs the putative distinctions, firstly between from-below and top-down mobilizations and, secondly, racial nation- alism and civic nationalism. The latter has been explored also by Daniel Martinez HoSang and Joseph Lowndes in tandem with the "increasing presence of people of color" in contemporary far-right movements.[104] This new multiracial outlook, in HoSang and Lowndes's view, is compatible with the forms of racial hierarchy and white domination endemic to the United States and conducive to advancing authoritari- anism and exclusion that underwrite racist attacks on certain groups.[105] The crucial point in HoSang and Lowndes's analysis, as well as mine, is that the civic nationalist narration of right-wing mobilizations can operate as a quasi-disguise for racial nationalism insofar as it targets a specific set of racial and political groups, such as participants of social justice movements like BLM. The feeling politics pursued by the Right, often employing colorblind tropes that assume an imaginary post-ra- cial America, concentrates not so much on Black Americans in general but on Black activists and their non-Black allies, who, in their efforts to raise consciousness about historic and present challenges of racial injustice, are perceived to be inventing problems and divisions that do not exist in society. Pitting "US patriotism" against "race-obsessed liberalism," the anti-"CRT" campaign can hence sustain racial nation- alism beneath ostensibly value-based appeals.[106]

Moreover, the melodramatic tone of grassroots mobilizations such as NLTE and M4L notwithstanding, the sense of purpose provided by the fight against critical race theory and indoctrination appears to be quite morally and politically fulfilling, so much so that organizing parents liken themselves to Civil Rights movement activists. On NLTE's website, photos of multiracial friend groups and Martin Luther King, Jr. quotations alternate. "MLK NOT BLM" is an oft-used image, with an American flag filling in the letters "M," "L," and "K" and a Soviet flag for the "B," "L," and "M."[107] The resources section of the website opens with a quotation from Frederick Douglass: "Education means emancipation."[108] Possibly because "emancipation," unlike "equity," "diversity," or "social justice," is not yet among the "buzz words" to be looked out for, the Douglass quotation made it into the NLTE program, helping advance the argument that the movement cannot possibly

be promoting racism if it includes people of color—an increasingly prev- alent strategy among far-right groups, such as the Proud Boys, which does not hesitate to borrow language and imagery from African liber- ation struggles to use on its online platform and physical merchan- dise.[109] These instances of selective multiracial inclusion, which rely on sanitized histories of the Civil Rights movement and a romanti- cized arc of racial progress, bolster the sentimental-moral psychology of mobilized parents, granting them the virtues of tolerance, pluralism, and openness.[110]

The use of the Civil Rights language and imagery should not come as a surprise, given that (mis)appropriation of the legacy of the Civil Rights movement and Martin Luther King, Jr., as Hajar Yazdiha points out, has been a common strategy for right-wing movements for a while, "mak[ing] possible a society where citizens can believe that talking about systemic racism oppresses White Americans."[111] This strategy, in anticipation of the widespread anti-"CRT" campaigning and legislation, was also salient in The 1776 Report compiled by an advisory commission that President Trump, as one of the final exec- utive orders of his first term, had established. Largely a response to public conversations on entrenched racial disparities and anti- Black racism revitalized by the BLM protests and the New York Times Magazine's 1619 Project—a Pulitzer Prize-winning effort to bring the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans to the foreground of the American national narrative—the report charges its productively ambiguous and mobile targets ("activists of identity politics," advocates of "group rights," "universities," and "colleges") with "breeding division, distrust, and hatred among citizens."[112] In The 1776 Report's account, social movements and educational practices that grapple with the country's racial history are examples of anti-white racism, whereas mobilizations against these movements and practices are the contemporary incarnations of King's "Dream."[113] As right-wing activists, through inversion and rearticulation, conceive of themselves as the modern-day counterparts to mid-twentieth-century Civil Rights activists, their rage and fear provoked by worries that their children, communities, and nation are being taught to "hate" themselves— whether those worries are genuine is beside the point— transform into collective mobilization, producing a sense of renewed sovereign agency and power.

To sum up, while the affective value of hatred accumulates through its circulation between signs, objects, and figures associated with racial reckoning, it is also amplified by fantasies of a mirroring hate economy that constitutes the Other as the primary hateful subject. This amplification is sustained by a variety of strategies, from the use of a psychologizing language that redirects public attention to the subjec- tive feelings of white Americans to the deliberate (mis)appropriations of the Civil Rights Movement and King's legacy. Moreover, fantasies of a mirroring hate economy are not merely inner, psychic states but material in the sense that they do things by "affect[ing]

what they come into contact with."[114] In the anti-"CRT" mobilizational landscape, emotional economies of hatred, fear, and rage become augmented into an affective energy imbued with a consciousness of collective engage- ment and activism. This affective energy, on one hand, undermines the civic-educational prerequisites of participating in a multiracial democ- racy and, on the other, provides mobilized constituencies with a kind of joy that can only be derived from being part of something eminently historical and transformative. The next section elaborates this joy.

CREATIVE CRISIS: MORALIZING BATTLES, JOYFUL WARRIORS

To be sure, affect is neither the only analytical lens through which the calls to ban "CRT" could be theorized, nor is it unique to right-wing mobilizations and discourses. Indeed, the liberal sentimental contract has its own troubles with issues of race and racism, considering, for instance, the corporate diversity initiatives and symbolic efforts that help only the most resourceful members of racialized groups while sustaining systemic inequalities—a process that Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò describes as the "elite capture" of identity politics, or the "neoliberal alternative to a left," to use Adolph Reed's phrasing.[115] While a materi- alist critique of (neo)liberal sentimentality is certainly pertinent, there is a pressing political and political-theoretical need to understand the mechanisms and forces underpinning the crisis around "CRT," given that, at the time of this article's writing, the crisis is expanding its reach into higher education through state interventions into Advanced Placement African-American Studies programs, forced elimination of DEI positions, and selective reputational attacks on Black scholars, particularly Black women, at elite universities.

The crisis, while felt and experienced as a moral one, pays polit- ical and affective returns. There is, of course, a moral reason that the process of education matters so much: schools are a fundamental means of producing "proper national subjects and subjectivities" that align with the image of who we are as a people.[116] It is also true that, historically, there has been a tacit agreement among American parents that schools are not places for "questioning the past or eval- uating it" but places where the youth is provided with a "'faith in American superiority.'"[117] The stories students encounter in schools are thus expectedly moralizing and redemptive, often replacing skeptical reflection with an overconfidence in certain mythical moral truths that, as James Baldwin once put it, "their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen, or . . . that Americans have always dealt honorably with [their] neighbors or inferiors, that American men are the world's most direct and virile, that American women are pure"—the kinds of moral truths upon which

projects of "patriotic education" are premised.[118]

Moreover, parents demanding curriculum restrictions and book bans are indeed "too confident about [their] judgments and thus too punitive in [their] orientation to others."[119] Thus, their movement might be understood in terms of what Jane Bennett and Michael Shapiro iden- tify as a politics centered around "moralism."[120] Yet, unlike politics of moralizing, what is at stake in efforts to limit conversations about racial history and identity, in my view, is not so much being right or wrong ("I do know what is right, and so am justified in attempting to compel others to abide my sense of right"[121]), but a structure of feeling that is realized through mobilization: a sense of being wronged and enti- tled; a self-conception as manifesting what it means to be an American; a feeling of triumph and jubilance in emerging as a heroic agent on the stage of national history—perhaps best captured by one parent's phrase "The 'Parents Bill of Rights' was really just our Declaration of Independence."[122] This structure of feeling is politically productive as it draws out a new model of national belonging and sovereign agency by identifying the exigencies of the present and providing an affec- tive impetus for actualizing the kinds of visions and priorities those exigencies authorize. While involving an element of moralization, it is not quite reducible to moralism, also because it is concerned less with regulation of behavior according to a "preexisting code of right and wrong" and more with regulation of feelings with respect to what feels good/comfortable and what feels bad/uncomfortable.[123]

Nonetheless, it might be unwise to dismiss politics of moral-izing, for anti-"CRT" mobilizations do seem to be moralizing around parental rights and family values, even if such moralizing pays, above all, an affective affirmation that is tied to sovereign entitlement. Particularly telling here also is the gendered dimension of the Right's family-focused affective formations. From the contemporary activism of Moms for Liberty to Sarah Palin's celebration of "mama grizzlies" during the Tea Party movement and to the earlier textbook censor- ship campaigns of the United Daughters of the American Revolution, White women have repeatedly shown that they were ready and willing to protect the nation from what they considered to be alien and alienating forces.[124] Recalling these earlier constructions of morally pure and dutiful womanhood, present-day parents' rights organiza- tions, led and populated predominantly by women, construe their members as "passionate patriots" whose activism appears as a func- tion of their maternal duties.[125] Blending performances of race, gender, and patriotism, conservative activist-mothers present themselves as "solely organic and naturally arising from American people," and thus representative images of national life and political personhood.[126] These performances enable them not only to make their anger "legible as political anger" but also to constitute

themselves as desirous and jubilant—not simply warriors, but joyful warriors.[127] Patriotic mothers translate their aggression into protection, their political anger into a festive joy.

The efficacy of any moral crisis, after all, depends on the kinds of emotional styles, impulses, moods, and sensibilities it can harness.[128] Reminiscent of Berlant's assessments of melodramatic post-9/11 polit- ical discourse, today state rhetoric, conservative think tanks, and the mass media orchestrate "an emotional style linked to moral claims about truth and justice . . . [that] aim to cultivate an expectation for the heroic triumph of the nation, to feel the injury that wounds all citizens while marking their—and the whole nation's—virtue, and to demand state action because it is already morally justified."[129] In response, increasing numbers of white Americans feel an injury inflicted by what they take to be hateful doctrines and ideologies, turning overwhelm- ingly to the state(s) to demand a correction of the political and affec- tive orders. These demands are notably expressed through the public, patriotic, and triumphant performances of ordinary citizens—above all, parents. As former Trump adviser Steve Bannon once put it on his podcast, "The path to save the nation is very simple—it's going to go through the school boards."[130] Charged with the felt duty of saving the nation in the face of a moral crisis, model parent-citizens claim to act in the name of "the people," analogous to the Preamble to the US Constitution, taking pride in their own popular assembly: "WE THE PEOPLE—WE can save our children, families, communities, and exceptional nation."[131]

CONCLUSION

Within a time span of six months, two mass assemblies, the nation- wide BLM protests, and an insurgent storming of the US Capitol trans- fixed the public, giving expression to diametrically opposed visions of peoplehood and telling conflicting American stories of past, present, and future. Despite their antithetical representative claims and polar- ized receptions by the public, they share something that participants of embodied popular assemblies enjoy: the ability to, as Jason Frank puts it, "experience and feel themselves as…part of [a] mobilized and empowered collectivity."[132] This is the experience and feeling, in my view, that American parents enjoy when organizing themselves in local chapters and national platforms to combat race-conscious educa- tion and racial justice advocacy. By "going through the school boards," American parents apprehend themselves as an incipient people, a self-authorized and authorizing figure endowed with sovereign power. This self-apprehension is important because it not only underscores the existence of competing claims to peoplehood in deeply polarized contexts, but also hints

at mimetic constructions connecting Black Lives Matter protests to Parents Matter rallies in appropriative, if not retrib- utive, ways. Persistent demands from democratic theory to distinguish "democratic" assemblies from "antidemocratic" ones are well taken;[133] still, equally noteworthy is the relationship—the borrowings, projec- tions, and negative attachments—between these assemblies.

Assembled in physical and virtual spaces, "concerned parents" emerge as affective-political collectives, underwritten by imbricated economies of love and hate that subvert historically constituted rela- tions of power; resignify and "stabilize" meanings; and generate emotional-moral frameworks imbuing conceptions of the public sphere and citizenship with categories of feeling, on one hand, and the roles and responsibilities of family life, on the other. Within these collectives, as I have shown, negative attachments are presented to be mimetic—hatred for hateful Others—and organized around patriotic love, charging broader swaths of conservative constituencies with the task of defending the nation against dangerous and divisive ideol- ogies. Structures of feeling linked to this task forge a communion among those who now perceive themselves to be not merely offended and injured, but also on active duty, readily renewing their commit- ment to telling the "remarkable American story."[134] In its retelling, the American story generates new protagonists—"Joyful Warriors"—at once victimized and vigilan.

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