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## The Long War on Black Studies

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It would be a mistake to think of the current wave of attacks on “critical race theory” as a culture war. This is a political battle.



Aaron Galleries

Cliff Joseph: *Blackboard*, 1969

We fell under the leadership of those who would compromise with truth in the past in order to make peace in the present and guide policy in the future.

—W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*

It is strange...that the friends of truth and the promoters of freedom have not risen up against the present propaganda in the schools and crushed it. This crusade is much more important than the anti-lynching movement, because there would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom.

—Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro*

On January 20, Florida’s education commissioner, Manny Diaz Jr., tweeted out a chart justifying the state’s decision to ban schools from teaching a newly created advanced placement course in African American Studies. The graphic singled out the curriculum’s inclusion of Black queer studies, intersectionality, Black feminist literary

thought, reparations, and the Movement for Black Lives as “obvious violations of Florida law.” It also identified scholars whose work was included in an earlier iteration of the curriculum as radical propagandists bent on smuggling “critical race theory” (CRT), Marxism, and deviant sexuality into high-school classrooms.

Despite the fact that the College Board had not yet released the final curriculum to the public, Diaz and the state’s governor, Ron DeSantis, claimed it violated Senate Bill 148, better known as the “Stop Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees Act,” or the Stop W.O.K.E. Act. Sponsored by Diaz and signed in April 2022, the law prohibits teaching anything that might cause “guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress” or “indoctrinate or persuade students to a particular point of view inconsistent...with state academic standards.” In other words, introducing and teaching race, gender, sexuality, and anything remotely resembling critical race theory was strictly prohibited.

When the College Board released the final curriculum eleven days later, it had changed substantially. Most of the material the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) found offensive was removed or downgraded from mandatory to optional. The revised 226-page curriculum eliminated queer studies, critical race theory, mass incarceration, and a section titled “Black Struggle in the 21st Century,” made the Black Lives Matter movement and reparations optional research projects, and added a project topic on “Black conservatism.” The names of all the offending authors—including myself—were removed.

The College Board insisted that it had not bowed to political pressure, despite a trove of email exchanges with the FDOE discussing potentially prohibited content and a final letter from the FDOE thanking the board for removing topics the state had deemed “discriminatory and historically fictional.” The fact is that the College Board stood to lose millions of dollars if Florida canceled its AP courses. Although a federal judge blocked portions of the Stop W.O.K.E. Act that restricted academic freedom in public colleges and universities, the law still applies to private businesses and K–12 education.

Rather than accept a watered-down curriculum bereft of the theories, concepts, and interdisciplinary methods central to Black Studies, students, teachers, scholars, and social justice activists fought back. On May 3 they organized a nationwide day of action calling out the College Board and defending the integrity of Black Studies. Apparently it worked. A week before the national protest, the College Board announced plans to revise the curriculum yet again. As of this writing, however, no specific changes have been announced.

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The right's vehement opposition to Black Studies is predictable. Black Studies has been under attack since its formal inception on college campuses in the late 1960s, and repression of all knowledge advancing Black freedom goes back much further. Most state laws prohibiting enslaved Africans from learning to read and write were introduced after 1829, in response first to the publication of David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*—an unrelenting attack on slavery and US hypocrisy for maintaining it—and then to Nat Turner's rebellion two years later. Back then the *Appeal* was contraband: anyone caught with it faced imprisonment or execution. Today it is a foundational text in Black Studies.

The historian Jarvis R. Givens found that during the Jim Crow era Black school teachers often “deployed fugitive tactics” and risked losing their jobs in order to teach Black history.<sup>1</sup> In Mississippi, organizers with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) taught contraband history in “freedom schools,” while the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) established “freedom libraries” throughout the state stocked with donated books—many on Black history by Black authors. Between 1964 and 1965, white terrorists burned down the freedom libraries in Vicksburg, Laurel, and Indianola.<sup>2</sup>

Who's afraid of Black Studies? White supremacists, fascists, the ruling class, and even some liberals. As well they should be. Not everything done in the name of Black Studies challenges the social order. Like any field, it has its own sharp divisions and disagreements. But unlike mainstream academic disciplines, Black Studies was born out of a struggle for freedom and a genuine quest to understand the world in order to change it, presenting political and moral philosophy with their most fundamental challenge. The objects of study have been Black life, the structures that produce premature death, the ideologies that render Black people less than human, the material consequences of those ideologies, and the foundational place of colonialism and slavery in the emergence of modernity. Black Studies grew out of, and interrogates, the long struggle to secure our future as a people and for humanity by remaking and reenvisioning the world through ideas, art, and social movements. It emerged as both an intellectual and political project, without national boundaries and borders. The late political theorist Cedric J. Robinson described it as “a critique of Western Civilization.”

A chief target of this critique has been the interpretation of history. Battles over the teaching of history are never purely intellectual contests between ignorance and enlightenment, or reducible to demands to insert marginalized people into the curriculum.<sup>3</sup> Contrary to the common liberal complaint that schools “ignore” the history of slavery and racism, Black and Native people have long occupied a place in school history curricula. Generations of students learned that white people settled the wilderness, took rightful ownership of the



land from bloodthirsty Indians who didn't know what to do with it, and brought the gift of civilization and democracy to North America and the rest of the world. During most of the twentieth century, students were taught that Negroes were perfectly happy as slaves, until some conniving Republicans and carpetbaggers persuaded them otherwise. Leading history books by Ivy League professors repeated the myth, and in the first epic film in the US, D. W. Griffith depicted the "great and noble" Ku Klux Klan redeeming the South from rapacious, ignorant Negroes and shifty carpetbaggers, obliterating all vestiges of the Black struggle to bring genuine democracy to the South and the nation.

Black scholars and their allies consistently contested these narratives. In "The Propaganda of History," the last chapter of his epic text *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935), W. E. B. Du Bois called out the ideological war on truth masquerading as objective scholarship. He believed in reason but came to see its futility in the face of white supremacy, colonial rule, and "one of the most stupendous efforts the world ever saw to discredit human beings, an effort involving universities, history, science, social life and religion."

Du Bois wasn't out to make a name for himself in the field of nineteenth-century US history. He was trying to understand the roots of fascism in Europe and in his native land. He saw the battle over the interpretation of history play out in the streets, statehouses, courts, and newspapers for decades—often with deadly consequences. The rise of the second Ku Klux Klan was inspired in part by a national campaign to erase the history of Reconstruction. The chief catalyst was Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915, the same year the renowned Black historian Carter G. Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.

Respectable white supremacists such as the Ladies Memorial Associations and the United Daughters of the Confederacy, founded in 1894, waged their own soft power campaign, building monuments to the defenders of slavery in the region and around the nation's capital. The movement to erect statues celebrating Confederate war heroes took off in the early twentieth century rather than immediately after the end of Reconstruction because it took over three decades of white terrorism, political assassination, lynching, disfranchisement, and federal complicity to destroy the last vestiges of a biracial labor movement, ensuring that white supremacy and Jim Crow could reign supreme.

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What the right demonizes as CRT bears no resemblance to actual critical race theory, a four-decades-old body of work that interrogates why antidiscrimination law not only fails to remedy structural racism but further entrenches racial inequality. Racism, these theorists argue,

isn't just a matter of individual bias or prejudice but a social and political construct embedded in our legal system. Taking a page straight from the anticomunist playbook, the right has reduced CRT to an incendiary dog whistle, turning an antiracist academic project into a racist plot to teach white children to hate themselves, their country, and their "race."<sup>4</sup>

The chief architect of this strategy is Christopher Rufo, currently a senior fellow at the archconservative Manhattan Institute, who in the wake of the mass protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd declared that the spread of critical race theory was behind the unrest. By his own admission, Rufo sought the "perfect villain" to mobilize opposition to the antiracist insurgency and had no qualms about distorting CRT to do it. Ignoring the scholarship while naming the scholars, notably Kimberlé Crenshaw and the late Derrick Bell, he presumed that these three words "strung together" would signify "hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, anti-American." As he explained to his Twitter followers in 2021, the plan was to rebrand CRT and

eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category. The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think "critical race theory." We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans.

Rufo's ploy soon became White House policy. He helped draft Trump's now-rescinded Executive Order 13950, issued on September 22, 2020, which warned of a left-wing ideology threatening "to infect core institutions of our country" by promoting "race or sex stereotyping or scapegoating." The document pitted this invented ideology against the principles of "color blindness" derived from a distorted reading of Martin Luther King, Jr. to justify eliminating workplace diversity and inclusion training in federal agencies. It helped spawn a wave of anti-CRT legislation. According to a recent study, released by UCLA's Critical Race Studies Program, from the start of 2021 to the end of 2022 federal, state, and local legislative and governing bodies introduced 563 anti-CRT measures, almost half of which have been enacted or adopted. At least 94 percent of the successful measures target K–12 education, affecting nearly half of all children in the country's public schools.

These measures target not just CRT but liberal multiculturalism and, more pointedly, Black Studies, Ethnic Studies, Gender Studies, and any modern academic discipline that critically studies race and gender. (From here on I will refer to this scholarship collectively as "critical race and gender studies," make specific references to Black Studies or CRT when appropriate, and use "we" occasionally when explaining what scholars in these fields do.) Most of these bills allegedly intended to protect education from politics share identical language because

they derive from model legislation drafted by well-funded right-wing think tanks, including the America First Policy Institute, the Heritage Foundation, Citizens for Renewing America, Alliance for Free Citizens, and the Ethics and Public Policy Center. Stanley Kurtz, a leading critic of the African American AP course who masquerades as an investigative journalist for *National Review*, ironically named the model anti-CRT legislation he drafted for the Ethics and Public Policy Center “the Partisanship Out of Civics Act.”

Some of the text of that legislation was lifted from the section of Executive Order 13950 prohibiting the teaching of “divisive concepts.” These concepts include the idea that one race or sex is “inherently superior” to others; that the US “is fundamentally racist or sexist”; that a person, “by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive” or “bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex”; that “meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist, or were created by a particular race to oppress another race”; and that some people “should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex.” The assumption here is that confronting the history of American racism would provoke feelings of guilt and shame in white kids and their parents. Such legislation never considers the psychological distress Black, brown, and Indigenous students frequently endure as a result of whitewashed curricula, tracking, suspensions and expulsions on the slightest pretext, even abuses by law enforcement inside their own classrooms.

Such allegations against critical race and gender studies strain credulity. No serious scholar believes that someone is “inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously,” solely “by virtue of his or her race or sex.” We teach the opposite: that race is neither fixed nor biological but socially constructed. Modern categories of racial classification were Enlightenment-era European creations that relied on a false science to claim that discrete “racial” groups share inherent traits or characteristics. We reject such claims as essentialist and recognize that behaviors and ideas attributed to race, gender, class, and sexuality are not inherent but ideological, and therefore dynamic and subject to change. We use evidence-based research to show that policies that further racial, class, and gender inequality need not be intentional, and that anyone can be antiracist, regardless of their race.

The belief that hierarchies of race and gender are based on “inherent” characteristics is the basis for white supremacy and patriarchy. Such ideologies have been used to justify conquest, dispossession, slavery, segregation, the exclusion of women and Black people from the franchise, wage differentials based on race and gender, welfare and housing policies, marriage and family law, even the denial of women’s right to bodily autonomy. Many conservatives backing anti-CRT

legislation do subscribe to the idea that certain differences, especially regarding gender, are “inherent”—that is, fixed and immutable. CRT and Black Studies do not.

Likewise, to accuse CRT of teaching that “meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic” are racist is to turn its interpretation of US history on its head. What Black Studies and critical race theory reveal is the extent to which wealth was accrued through the labor and land of others. The foundational wealth of the country, concentrated in the hands of a few, was built on stolen land (Indigenous dispossession), stolen labor (slavery), and the exploitation of the labor of immigrants, women, and children.

Finally, critical scholars of race and gender categorically reject the claim that any individual “bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex.” The language is intended as an attack on the idea of reparations, but advocates of reparations hardly claim that all present-day white people are “responsible” for slavery. Rather, they acknowledge that enslavement, land theft, wage theft, and housing discrimination resulted in extracting wealth from some and directly accruing generational wealth to others. Slavery and Jim Crow—more precisely, racial capitalism—suppressed wages for white workers, and the threat of interracial worker and farmer unity compelled the Southern oligarchs to pass antilabor laws and crush unions. The result was the subjugation of all working-class Southerners, including whites.

The right-wing movement to remake education is not limited to K–12. Nearly a fifth of the 563 anti-CRT measures introduced and 12 percent of those enacted target colleges and universities. In Florida, DeSantis has launched a successful coup against the administration of New College, replaced a majority of the board of trustees with handpicked allies, and begun to totally overhaul the curriculum, wiping out all vestiges of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The latest attack on Florida’s state university system, Senate Bill 266, which DeSantis signed into law last month, is a flagrant attack on academic freedom and faculty governance. The Board of Governors is charged with reviewing state colleges and universities for violating the Florida Educational Equity Act, which forbids teaching “theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, or privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States and were created to maintain social, political, or economic inequities.” The law also prohibits faculty or staff from advocating for diversity, equity, and inclusion, promoting or participating in political or social activism, or granting preferential treatment “on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, or religion.” And it gives boards of trustees the power to review the tenure status of any faculty member on demand, which means that even tenured professors are subject to arbitrary dismissal.

Buried in this law and shrouded by the state's "anti-woke" rhetoric is another agenda: transforming the state college system into an engine of market fundamentalism beholden to business interests. One of its objectives is "to promote the state's economic development" through new research, technology, patents, grants, and contracts that "generate state businesses of global importance," and to create "a resource rich academic environment that attracts high-technology business and venture capital to the state." In 2020 the governor and the state legislature established and lavishly funded the Adam Smith Center for Economic Freedom at Florida International University, tasked with promoting "a better understanding of the free enterprise system and its impact on individual freedom and human prosperity around the world, with a special emphasis on the United States and Latin America and the Caribbean." SB 266 further elevated the Adam Smith Center by giving it all the powers of an academic department, including the ability to hire tenure-track faculty and offer majors and minors.

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A matter of days before issuing Executive Order 13950, Trump announced the formation of the federally funded 1776 Commission to promote "patriotic education" and portray the US in a more positive light. Advisors for the commission blamed colleges and universities for distorting history and promoting "destructive scholarship" that sows "division, distrust, and hatred among citizens.... It is the intellectual force behind so much of the violence in our cities, suppression of free speech in our universities, and defamation of our treasured national statues and symbols."

The commission issued its first and only report less than two weeks after the insurrection at the Capitol building on January 6, 2021. It denigrates popular democracy, whitewashes the history of slavery, says nothing about Indigenous peoples or dispossession, and claims that "progressivism" and "identity politics" are at odds with American values, not unlike communism and fascism.

Perhaps its most egregious fabrication is turning Martin Luther King Jr. into a colorblind libertarian. The report recasts the civil rights movement as a struggle for individual liberty and equal opportunity that, with the death of King, lost its way when it embraced "group rights," "preferential treatment" for minorities, and "identity politics." This is the same King who in his book *Why We Can't Wait* (1964) supported "compensatory or preferential treatment for the Negro" because "it is obvious that if a man is entered at the starting line of a race three hundred years after another man, the first would have to perform some incredible feat in order to catch up"; the same King who called on the federal government to divest from the war in Vietnam, invest in the war on poverty, recognize racism as a source of inequality, and acknowledge "the debt that they owe a people who were kept in slavery 244 years."



The stunning distortion of King's ideas should surprise no one, King least of all. He knew something about the politics of history. On the occasion of Du Bois's hundredth birthday in 1968, King delivered a speech at Carnegie Hall on the significance of *Black Reconstruction's* challenge to the "conscious and deliberate manipulation of history." Du Bois, King observed, proved that "far from being the tragic era" of misrule and corruption, Reconstruction

was the only period in which democracy existed in the South. This stunning fact was the reason the history books had to lie because to tell the truth would have acknowledged the Negroes' capacity to govern and fitness to build a finer nation in a creative relationship with poor whites.

Multiracial democracy, or what Du Bois called "abolition democracy," represented the greatest threat to the classes that ruled the South and the nation. It still does. DeSantis, Trump, Governors Greg Abbott and Kim Reynolds, the 1776 Commission, the Center for American Freedom, the American Enterprise Institute, the Ethics and Public Policy Center, and their copious allies all claim that their war on critical race and gender studies aims to present US history in a "positive light." Why then not teach the history of movements that tried to make sure every person enjoyed freedom and safety and fought to end slavery, Jim Crow, patriarchy, and sex discrimination? If "patriotic education" embraces the principles of freedom and democracy, why not introduce students to courageous people—like Benjamin Fletcher, Claudia Jones, C.L.R. James, Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Johnnie Tillmon, George Jackson, Fran Beal, Barbara Smith, and others—who risked their lives to ensure freedom, democracy, and economic security for others? Why not create a curriculum centered on the abolitionist movement; on Indigenous nations as early models for US constitutional democracy; on the formerly enslaved people who crushed the slaveholding republic, tried to democratize the South, and fought the terrorism of lynching, the Klan, and the Black Legion; on the suffragists and labor organizers who expanded our democratic horizons and improved working conditions?

But in our current neofascist universe, this is "woke" history. The right masks its distrust of multiracial democracy by calling it "progressivism" and its opposition to antiracism by labeling it "identity politics." According to this logic, antiracism has sullied America's noble tradition. *Ruby Bridges Goes to School*, books for young readers on Martin Luther King Jr. and the March on Washington, Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*, and his children's book, *Antiracist Baby*, have all been targeted for bans as subversive literature. There is no commensurate movement to ban books that promote racism, like Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785), which asserts frequently that Black people are innately inferior to whites—physically, intellectually, and even imaginatively; Edmund Ruffin's defense of slavery, *The Political Economy of Slavery* (1857); or

books and articles by Samuel Cartwright, Josiah Nott, George Fitzhugh, Louis Agassiz, Herbert Spencer, Madison Grant, Lothrop Stoddard, or Daniel G. Brinton, the eminent anthropologist who in his book *Races and Peoples* (1890) wrote, “That philanthropy is false, that religion is rotten, which would sanction a white woman enduring the embrace of a colored man.”

The point of these attacks is to turn antiracists into enemies and the people identified as “white” into victims. Marginalized white working people, who are victims of stagnant wages, privatized health care, big pharma, and tax policies that redistribute wealth upward, are taught instead that they live in what was once the perfect country until woke forces took over and gave their hard-earned income to the Negroes and immigrants who are now trying to take their guns. It would be a mistake to think of such rhetoric as a “culture war.” This is a political battle. It is part and parcel of the right-wing war on democracy, reproductive rights, labor, the environment, land defenders and water protectors, the rights and safety of transgender and nonbinary people, asylum seekers, the undocumented, the unhoused, the poor, and the perpetual war on Black communities.

As I write these words, the predominantly white Republican Mississippi state legislature is stripping the predominantly Black city of Jackson of political authority and revenue. Many of the same states adopting anti-CRT laws are also passing anti-trans bills and extreme abortion bans, and relaxing gun laws. The Tennessee state legislature expelled two young Black representatives, Justin Jones and Justin Pearson, for joining protesters demanding stricter gun laws after a mass shooting at a Nashville elementary school. And Texas governor Greg Abbott is planning to pardon Daniel Perry, who was convicted of killing the antiracist activist Garrett Foster during a Black Lives Matter protest in 2020.

Colin Kaepernick, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, and I put together a new anthology, *Our History Has Always Been Contraband*, to respond not only to these right-wing lies and attacks but also to an ill-informed mainstream discourse over the meaning, purpose, and scholarly value of Black Studies. Despite the claims of even well-meaning and sympathetic pundits, Black Studies courses are not designed to serve Black students alone but all students. The point is not to raise self-esteem or make students feel guilty, nor is Black Studies merely a diversity project. The essays and readings we gathered make clear that Black Studies sits not at the margins of social inquiry but at its very center. As we face a rising tide of fascism, we must remember how we got here: by protest, occupation, rebellion, and deep study. As long as racism, sexism, homophobia, patriarchy, class oppression, and colonial domination persist, our critical analyses will always be considered criminal.

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A version of this essay appears in *Our History Has Always Been Contraband: In Defense of Black Studies*, edited by Colin Kaepernick, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, available now from [Haymarket Books](#) as a free ebook and

to be published in hardcover and paperback July 4.

## Robin D. G. Kelley

Robin D.G. Kelley is the Gary B. Nash Professor of US History at UCLA. His books include *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* and *Thelonious Monk: The Life and Times of an American Original*.

- *Fugitive Pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the Art of Black Teaching* (Harvard University Press, 2021), 15.
- Karen Joyce Cook, *Freedom Libraries in the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project: A History* (PhD dissertation, University of Alabama, 2008), 305.
- For an excellent account written by combatants in what have come to be called “the history wars”—the founders of the National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA, which came under fire from conservatives in the 1990s when it sought to change the national history standards—see Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (Knopf, 1997). See also Jonathan Zimmerman, *Whose America?: Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (Harvard University Press, 2002).
- Henry Giroux is the leading scholar and critic of this right-wing war on schools and public education. See, most recently, *Insurrections: Education in an Age of Counterrevolutionary Politics* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

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