



CARROLL C. ARNOLD
DISTINGUISHED LECTURE 2022

ANTIRACISM AND THE COMPLEXITY OF WOKE POLITICS

RONALD L. JACKSON II, UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI





ON OCTOBER 8, 1994, the Administrative Committee of the National Communication Association established the Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture. The Arnold Lecture is given in plenary session each year at the annual convention of the Association and features the most accomplished researchers in the field. The topic of the lecture changes annually so as to capture the wide range of research being conducted in the field and to demonstrate the relevance of that work to society at large.

The purpose of the Arnold Lecture is to inspire not by words but by intellectual deeds. Its goal is to make the members of the Association better informed by having one of its best professionals think aloud in their presence. Over the years, the Arnold Lecture will serve as a scholarly stimulus for new ideas and new ways of approaching those ideas. The inaugural Lecture was given on November 17, 1995.

The Arnold Lecturer is chosen each year by the First Vice President. When choosing the Arnold Lecturer, the First Vice President is charged to select a long-standing member of NCA, a scholar of undisputed merit who has already been recognized as such, a person whose recent research is as vital and suggestive as their earlier work, and a researcher whose work meets or exceeds the scholarly standards of the academy generally.

The Lecture has been named for Carroll C. Arnold, the late Professor Emeritus of Pennsylvania State University. Trained under Professor A. Craig Baird at the University of Iowa, Arnold was the coauthor (with John Wilson) of *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art*, author of *Criticism of Oral Rhetoric* (among other works), and co-editor of *The Handbook of Rhetorical and Communication Theory*. Although primarily trained as a humanist, Arnold was nonetheless one of the most active participants in the New Orleans Conference of 1968 which helped put social scientific research in communication on solid footing. Thereafter, Arnold edited *Communication Monographs* because of a fascination with empirical questions. As one of the three founders of the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Arnold also helped move the field toward increased dialogue with the humanities in general. For these reasons and more, Arnold was dubbed "The Teacher of the Field" upon retirement from Penn State in 1977. Dr. Arnold died in January of 1997.



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■ **RONALD L. JACKSON II, Ph.D.** ■

RONALD L. JACKSON II is Professor of Communication at the University of Cincinnati, Ohio. He was awarded the 2020 Distinguished Scholar Award from the National Communication Association in November 2020, a prestigious lifetime research achievement award. He is Past President of the National Communication Association, Dean Emeritus of the College of Arts & Sciences at University of Cincinnati, Past Co-editor (with Kent Ono) of *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, and previous winner of the coveted Comic-Con International's Will Eisner Award for Best Academic Scholarly Work. His research explores empirical, conceptual, and critical approaches to the study of race, masculinity, identity negotiation, whiteness, and Afrocentricity. He is author of 17 books, including his most recent book (with Amber Johnson, Michael Hecht, and Sidney Ribeau) entitled *African American Communication*, and the well-received anthology *Gladiators in Suits: Race, Gender, and Politics of Representation in Scandal*, with Simone Adams and Kimberly Moffitt. He also is co-writing (with Tina Harris) a public speaking book to be published by Oxford University Press.



ANTIRACISM AND THE **COMPLEXITY OF WOKE POLITICS**

LECTURER'S NOTE: The following is not a precise transcript of my oral address. The speech contained a number of ad lib remarks, and this transcript includes comments that have been elaborated or clarified. My lecture included a performance at the beginning that cannot be duplicated in this medium. When necessary, I transcribe or describe the content of a slide in brackets. References omitted from the oral delivery, as well as material that was cut for time constraints are also included here.

THANK YOU FOR THE GRACIOUS INVITATION and thank you for joining me today to discuss a topic that reflects the pulse of our nation. I am grateful for so many of you here in this room today. I am humbled by the invitation, honor, and opportunity to deliver this year's Carroll C. Arnold lecture. Thank you, Walid Afifi, for entrusting me to speak life into our colleagues, to share my perspective, and to hopefully inspire a kind of radical love that permanently emplaces continued social justice efforts within NCA, within our college and university campuses, and within our own lived communities. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my wife, my family, and my closest friends and colleagues who added to my life at a time when I had to endure at my home institution a vicious attack of racism. It was a time when I felt besieged, depleted, and betrayed.

Thank you to my family who knew intuitively when to love on me and hold me in their tight embrace when the tears seemed too much, when the bystander silence seemed inhuman and deafening, when the suffering seemed to never subside. I am grateful to all of you who taught me to love through the pain, to not lose sight of God's purpose for me and my life, and to learn to trust again those who say they are here for me, but do not always show up. Finally, I am grateful for the ancestors, those predecessors who boldly fought for freedom, and who had the audacity and courage to put their bodies on the line so that we could be here today sipping on lattes talking about freedom and liberation!

Caveats

Let me begin with a few caveats.

First, I begin with a trigger warning.

TRIGGER WARNING: This presentation will discuss the disgusting, vile racial violence in America. For those who experience this violence emotionally, psychologically, personally, and perhaps even professionally, this presentation may reintroduce that trauma.

Second, don't get me wrong. I would love to be able to provide you with a riveting exposition that leaves you breathless and energized by my capacity to deliver an awe-inspiring, intellectually stimulating, and seemingly gymnastic rhetorical message (smile). My fear is that in doing so, I will satisfy a voyeuristic impulse to see the notion of race as a performance of the other, to see me as the other, to see the political project of antiracism as ancillary to a feel-good imperative that makes us all feel comfortable about our unattendance to racist actions such that we are lulled back to sleep. No, I need you woke! I need you awake to actively participate in dismantling racism, to push back against all attempts to contravene the recognition and valuation of our collective humanity, to resist educational policies that attempt to reframe historical truth-telling as instilling self-hatred in our children.

The risks are too high and the burden too weighty to relegate my lifelong work around antiracism to a space of recreation. So, instead, I stand here today to tell the hard truths, to speak the unspeakable, to compel us all to immediate action as if we are confronting a social emergency requiring us all to move swiftly without delay, as if our lives depend on it, because they do.

There is no easy way to say what needs to be said in a speech like this. While there is a necessary shifting between theory and emotion as I unravel a range of narratives, let there be no confusion that a lecture on racial trauma from the standpoint of one who has experienced racial trauma first-hand comes with a necessary re-traumatization. In fact, that is why it has taken me over six months to prepare this lecture. I do not relish the thought of reintroducing trauma; yet the stories herein need to be told; the experiences need to be understood. I will speak from my own positionality, so you will hear me talk a lot about African Americans or Black identities, but please understand that racism in America extends far beyond Black and White people. Black identities have just become the world's primary racial target, a foundational part of the manufactured social logic upon which racism rests.

What you will witness today is an unveiling of my truth, the interspersing of my voice with others in order to get at my experience. To be clear, that is essentially what all scholarship tends to be at the end of the day—a reflection of our own individual interpretations of our social realities. The approach is phenomenological and the work you will see may be characterized as counter-disentanglement, a neologism I am defining as an intentionally defiant process of not losing one's voice while trying to disentangle enough information to share a larger grand narrative about structural inequalities.

To put it plainly, I ain't just telling you what I heard. I'm telling you what I know!

The point of this lecture is to unpack the trauma of *antiracism and the complexity of woke politics*, and although that sounds like something that is played out in public, let's not lose sight of the fact that there are very real ways in which dealing with racism in America is also a deeply personal and private experience. There are two other objectives of this lecture: To address the controversy concerning critical race theory; and to rethink antiracist advocacy within the context of U.S. democracy.

There is a creeping cynicism of social justice work." Movies like *Hidden Figures*, *Collateral Beauty*, *Black Panther*, and even *Don't Worry Darling* help us do the work of social justice by shifting the imagination. We can't arrive at social justice as a collective unless we can imagine ourselves equally as humans. Humanity presumes a premium is placed on human dignity, respect, and value. In the absence of humanity, we are lost. To preserve humanity, we must control myths, lest we suffer a characterological stunting of our growth.

“ There is an existing hegemonic social impulse to relegate Blackness and therefore Black masculinities to a position of non-normativity... We are taught he is not to be treated equitably. This interferes with our imagination. It interferes with our ability to recognize his humanity.”

In this presentation, I will deconstruct the debacle circulating critical race theory while attending to the sociopolitical dynamics that have facilitated a complicated set of standpoints around racial marginality in the United States and around the globe. I do so by addressing the following:

1. My path to antiracism;
2. The origins and nature of woke discourse;
3. The fictions of Florida’s Stop WOKE Act; and
4. My immediate challenge to antiracists.

■ MY PATH TO ANTIRACISM ■

Letter to Self: Racing to Live ‘Fore I Die

Dated November 1, 2022. Letter begun in May 2020.

As protestors shouted in unison—“I Can’t Breathe!”—my heart sunk, as it has seemingly one thousand times before. With my eyes glued to the television, as if my well-being depended upon it, I was devastated to be here once again meditating on the cycle of despair ignited by racism and xenophobia. A mother is interviewed by a news reporter and with tears lingering between every other word, she explains that the deceased could have been her son. She speaks of her exasperation before telling the reporter that something must change. She is right. Something must change.

As I watch one billionaire executive resign his board seat and another promise to invest dollars in Black suppliers, and another commit to training employees on implicit bias, I am struck by the sudden urgency. Did a Black man have to die to get their attention? Why was this not a priority previously? On May 25, George Floyd was apprehended for allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill. Officer Derek Chauvin, along with several other officers, showed up on the scene. In order to detain him, Officer Chauvin decided to place his knee on Floyd’s neck and did so for eight minutes and 46 seconds, despite Floyd telling him that he could not breathe. By the time he moved his knee from Floyd’s neck, Floyd was dead.

Have we really made racial progress?

The fact is, there is an existing hegemonic social impulse to relegate Blackness and therefore Black masculinities to a position of non-normativity. In the case of race, we as social beings are taught distinct lessons about Black masculinity and the public. We are taught Black masculinity is bereft of intelligence, competence, honor, dignity, productivity, safety, concern for others, responsibility, and civility. As a result, Black masculine persons are to be feared in public, no matter whether he is confronted via a routine traffic stop or is seen at a retail store, park, school, business, etc. He is dangerous, ignorant, lazy, irresponsible, and altogether inferior no matter where he is seen. So, the presumption is that he must be handled like an animal or treated like a hopeless individual bound for the prison system. We are taught he is not to be treated equitably. This interferes with our imagination. It interferes with our ability to recognize his humanity.

PAUSE. Within this lecture we will now take time to read the names of a few individuals who in recent years have either lost their lives or been severely affected by senseless anti-Black racist brutality.

Names of some of those affected by racial violence:

1. Dreasion Reed
2. McHale Rose
3. Ahmaud Arbery
4. Breonna Taylor
5. George Floyd
6. Eric Garner
7. Sean Monterrosa
8. Rayshard Brooks
9. Andres Guardado
10. Romain Brisbon
11. Akai Gurley
12. Ezell Ford
13. John Crawford
14. Hakim Littleton
15. Dijon Kizzee
16. Daniel Prude
17. Deon Kay
18. Ricardo Munoz
19. Deja Stallings
20. Jonathan Price
21. Alvin Cole
22. Marcellis Stinnette
23. Walter Wallace Jr.
24. Kevin Peterson Jr.
25. Casey Goodson
26. Benie Edwards
27. Andre Hill
28. Dolal Idd
29. Ma'Khia Bryant
30. Daunte Wright
31. Adam Toledo
32. Andrew Brown Jr.
33. David McAtee
34. Winston Boogie Smith
35. Jason Walker
36. Amir Locke



Somehow, we as people of color must figure out a way to get beyond the racist trauma, reconcile it, and determine how we might be able to negotiate a sense of ourselves as equal citizens in this wildly combative and racist society.”

James Baldwin’s insightful declaration about race remains relevant today. According to Candace Jordan’s 2020 Berkeley Forum review essay, “In 1961, when asked by a radio host about being Black in America, novelist James Baldwin responded, ‘To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost all of the time.’”

I find myself going through cycles of hope and despair, joy and sadness, optimism, and challenge as I find myself caught between two distinct worlds. Perhaps W.E.B. DuBois said it best in his masterfully written book *Souls of Black Folks* when he stated, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”

Prior to the advent of grit as a theoretic notion, DuBois captured the complexities of resilience, hybridity, and identity gaps within that singular statement about identity negotiation. Somehow, we as people of color must figure out a way to get beyond the racist trauma, reconcile it, and determine how we might be able to negotiate a sense of ourselves as equal citizens in this wildly combative and racist society.

Far too often I find myself watching a television drama series or movie about the atrocities of racism and discover I am bumrushed with raw emotions. I become burdened all over again with the trauma of racism.

Floyd’s death reminds me of how I felt in October 2022 when the movie *Till* was released. This film about a 14-year-old African American boy named Emmett Till who was brutally killed in 1955 for whistling at a White woman, still brings me chills. This was not the first time I’d seen the filmic portrayal of Emmett Till and the depiction of his mother’s bold courage to have her son’s body displayed in an open casket at his funeral in order to show the whole world the savage violence of anti-Black racism in America. Emmett’s body had been beaten almost beyond recognition, mangled and brutalized. Although I knew what to expect when I bought a ticket to see this movie, I had no idea how traumatized I would become. I cried profusely, trying not to let my family members see me emote in this way, trying not to detract from their own psycho-emotional experience of the movie.

I had so many questions. Why didn’t White citizens stand up and hold each other accountable for this horrific violence? Why didn’t someone say something or do something? It was clear that there were so many individuals who knew the truth about who killed him, and yet White citizens went to trial with smug grins on their faces acting as though this teenager deserved to be murdered. Some might read this manuscript and think, ‘That’s just the way it was back then.’ There is never an excuse for inhumanity.

I have no idea what it feels like to experience this kind of loss up close and personal. I have no experience with brutal physical violence against my body or that of anyone that I love. I cannot imagine going through that personally. Yet, in that moment, I was triggered. Personally, I don’t know any member of a racially marginalized group who has successfully avoided some experience of racist trauma.

We, the socially marginalized due to no fault of our own, need healing. Some of us are unable to heal ourselves, so we find healing in many other places, both healthy and unhealthy places. In a society that tries to convince those on the racial margins that we are paranoid, over-exaggerating our traumas, or undeserving of empathy, we do all we can to find inspiration, hope, and love, realizing all along that we absolutely cannot count on validation from a society that categorically rejects us on a regular basis.

As I was being triggered, I recalled that nine years earlier I endured the most traumatic racist experience of my career, one that has cost me over \$1 million in lost wages and future salary potential. Many of my African American colleagues still refer to the rapid-fire series of racist incidents as a public lynching. I have never referred to it this way, especially given the well-documented history of thousands of lynchings in the United States alone.

NOTE: If you are unfamiliar with lynching history, please visit the Equal Justice institute's National Memorial for Peace & Justice in Montgomery, Alabama.

Without explaining all the specifics of my situation, I will say that after being represented in a racist cartoon, and seeing how I, as the first Black dean of the largest college of the university, was left to deal with this alone...

while the lies told against me remained unaddressed by the administration who
knew they were directly responsible for the things of which I was being accused

while the university covered its behind and tried to avoid a lawsuit

while the university president called to tell me, "I hope you don't think this is the way
the university is. I, as an Asian administrator, have never been discriminated against.
"Strangely, a week later, he gave a public address where he told the audience he
experiences racism all the time. It was a tough week I suppose

while the author of the false news report published in the large metropolitan newspaper
admitted privately that he knew he had lied about me in the newspaper article,
then unremorsefully asked me if I wanted him to write a new story about some
other matter as consolation

while some of my White colleagues privately messaged me to remind me how vile
and disgraceful the cartoon was

while other colleagues remained silent as though I was in an accident on the side of
the expressway and they just didn't have time to stop

while some covered and buried their heads in the proverbial sand, believing they
might risk losing their jobs if they said something to defend me

while students organized protests about things unrelated to my situation

while one associate dean who directly reported to me called to tell me, "Well, congratulations,
you had a good run. You did all the right things in your career. You almost made it.
You should be proud."

while I was suddenly beginning to be treated like a leper no one felt safe to touch

while my direct supervisor, the provost, informed me that my White colleagues thought
that while I was ill-equipped to be dean, they thought I'd be good at diversity work;
so, without questioning the implications of this racist suggestion, the person offered
me a diversity leadership role instead

while the faulty whispers about me doing something untoward were reverberating
throughout the country, attempting to hold me accountable for things I did not do

while all the things I was able to do well gradually faded to the background so much
so that now people only remember the racist cartoon and me stepping down as dean

Again, I asked myself, like I did when watching the movie *Till*: "Why were there so many bystanders? Where were the allies? Where were the well-meaning colleagues who experience themselves as non-racist? Why didn't anyone stand up for me when they witnessed racial injustice happening right before their eyes? There were so many individuals who knew the truth about a budget deficit the university incurred prior to my arrival;



I have become adept at taking the blame, and shielding the perpetrators from responsibility... Every time I do this, I feel re-terrorized by the racist violence. I am re-traumatized all over again. We, as people of color, didn't ask for racism and we don't deserve it."

yet I was being publicly and falsely accused by a large city newspaper of running the college's deficit in the ground within the first six months. The university even knew the culprit of the racist cartoon that depicted me. There was an eyewitness who saw the individual post the racist cartoon. All of this was swept under the rug. Why was there so much silence?

The fact is, research has proven again and again that no matter how educated, competent, savvy, classy, well-dressed, or successful one becomes, Black and Latinx people in the United States never outgrow racism or racial bias and stereotypes. This onslaught may come from a police officer, neighbor, stranger, co-worker, or inadvertently through some mass mediated act of racial injustice. The reason it has not been dismantled thus far is because we have collectively lacked the bold courage, empathetic understanding, sheer will, sustained commitment, and communication strategies for effective dialogue.

Social justice and racial healing require more than charts and graphs, more than social critique, and more than shallow efforts to temporarily invest in personal and/or institutional equity until no one is paying attention. It requires genuine, fundamental respect and value for others' humanity. That is only possible when we see one another as equal extensions of ourselves.

When I reflect on my experiences with racism, I return to the thought that I didn't ask for any of it. Admittedly, I was "green." I was a newly hired dean who had never been dean before. I was making rookie mistakes like charging several college-level strategic planning subcommittees and waiting until their work was done before I awarded research and teaching incentive monies, since I wanted to tie these dollars to the new strategic plan. There are other ways I was not as effective as I could have been, but to be clear, none of those shortcomings warranted either the racism I experienced or the deafening silence with which that racism was met.

I had no idea of the long-term effects these racist acts would have on me and my career. Since then, I have attempted to pursue deanships at different universities, and each time the hiring committees ask me to explain what happened. I am always taken aback by the question. It is not that I have not anticipated it, but rather it is as though they are asking me, "Would you explain the racism you experienced, what did you do to elicit it, and how has it made you a better person?" In many ways, this is an impossible set of questions to answer satisfactorily. The fact is, I have no idea why someone thought I deserved this racist violence against me, my career, and ultimately my family and our collective well-being. Instead, I have become adept at taking the blame, and shielding the perpetrators from responsibility while attempting to unpack the ways in which I was able to effectively and competently "move the needle" forward in the college during my time as dean. Every time I do this, I feel re-terrorized by the racist violence. I am re-traumatized all over again. We, as people of color, didn't ask for racism and we don't deserve it.

Although our skin color is an obvious marker of disprivilege, people of color in the United States have far too often been rendered invisible. Seventy years ago, Ralph Ellison (1952) wrote in his book *Invisible Man*:

"I am an invisible Man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe, nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber, and liquids, and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."

Again, much of how we understand and experience racism in America has to do with the refusal to see non-White people's humanity. The fact that Elon Musk bought Twitter and immediately removed filters that reduced hate speech, then offered amnesty by reinstating previous violators of Twitter's civil code of conduct,

effectively opening up the floodgates that yielded tens of thousands of racial epithets and slurs against trans people and people of color, reminds us that we are in a state of moral crisis.

It would be unwise for us to think that this is simply an American problem. Recently, I was invited to be a distinguished visiting scholar at a university in Austria. I taught a class full of students living in different countries throughout Europe. In conversations during class, we discussed a game children played at school on the playground, similar to freeze tag, that was called “who’s afraid of the Black man,” or alternatively “beware the Black man.” This game is played in Switzerland, Germany, Finland, Austria, and Slovenia, among other countries.

Here is how it is played: One player is named the hunter or the Black man. The goal is to get from one side of the room or the playground to the other without the Black man touching you. The game begins with the designated hunter yelling, “Who’s afraid of the Black man!” The players shout, “Nobody!” The hunter says, “But what if he comes?” The players reply, “Then we run!” This final exclamation starts the game and all the kids run to avoid the Black man. When speaking with my students about this, each of them indicated that although it might look bad on the surface, it has nothing to do with skin color. It is pretty scary to think about how implicit messages embedded in this children’s game can be totally disregarded as innocent, non-racist discourse. Students tried to convince me that this game was never meant to hurt anybody or to teach children to dislike or fear Black people. It doesn’t take much imagination to conjure what might happen if we substituted “Black man” in the title of the game with another identity. I am worried that we commit the same egregious errors and an irreversible injury in our classrooms, on our campuses, and in our everyday lives with varying degrees of harm and obvious racist intent.

There are those who will hear or read this speech and presume that because the non-White middle and upper class is expanding that we ought to all be grateful, or that we have no basis for any claim that racism persists. Those who feel that way clearly are not watching the news, or they are dismissing what they see as indicative of a certain kind of person of color.

The sociopolitical machinery that we call race and racism manufactured this I–Other dialectic that continues to confound the social reality of racially marginalized groups. We, as people of color, sit on the margins not because we are inherently incapacitated, intellectually incapable, or ineludibly incompetent as the social fantasy suggests, but because the manufactured stereotypes about non-White people have inhabited our imaginations. It has literally taken up residence in our minds such that we struggle to see non-White people as equally human.

The trauma that has become the residue of racist violence is absolutely devastating. It has globally produced a kind of blues ontology. Jerry Watts, in his book *Heroism and the Black Intellectual: Ralph Ellison, Politics, and Afro-American Intellectual Life*, describes the blues as “an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.” Unlike the standard blues song where an individual tells the story of how they made poor choices that led to them losing their wife, job, car, house, and ultimately their dog, the kind of blues racially marginalized groups experience is often tied to a set of structural realities, sociopolitical conditions, and stereotypes they don’t control. To be clear, I am not suggesting that individuals have no part in their own destiny.

I am suggesting, however, that we live in a society that has a way of scripting Black and brown bodies, and that the tendency to do so facilitates a collapse of both our community and our collective capacity to imagine non-White people as equally human. I am being intentionally redundant. The recognition of our collective humanity is the root of the problem and needs to be at the core of the solution. We are in desperate need of steady and persistent anti-racist action.

I am reminded of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* in which there is a dialogue between Brutus and Ligarius. Brutus states, “A piece of work that will make sick men whole,” to which Ligarius responds, “But are not some whole that we must make sick?”



I often wonder what kind of life experience one must have as a person of color to completely sidestep the trauma of being Black in America.”

In the 1965 debate between James Baldwin and William Buckley, Baldwin turns to Buckley and asks, “Why do you need me to be so deformed for you to feel normal?” It is a sad and harrowing question, although not that surprising given that, as Cornel West once stated, “Black people’s humanity is a relatively new discovery of the West.”

I often wonder what kind of life experience one must have as a person of color to completely sidestep the trauma of being Black in America.

I read with keen curiosity an article about Clarence Thomas’ wife, Ginnie, who asked the mayor of a very small town of Clifton, Virginia, William R. Hollaway, to remove a banner in the middle of the town that says, “City of Clifton where Black Lives Matter.” The newspaper article reported that she demanded that the sign be taken down because the banner signified they had been duped by Black Lives Matter rhetoric. She says directly in the June 24, 2020, issue of *The Washington Post*, “Let’s not be tricked into joining cause with radical extremists seeking to foment a cultural revolution because they hate America.”

Wow! Now that we have had a January 6 Capitol riot, those words ring differently. Listen to her sage advice again, “Let’s not be tricked into joining cause with radical extremists seeking to foment a cultural revolution because they hate America.”

We are at a moment when cultural revolution is being defined differently depending on one’s standpoint. If there is a cultural revolution, I want to be on the side of social justice. I want to be aligned with those individuals who didn’t just stand by and watch racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism happen, but did something about it. Although none of us knew what we were saying when we were initially introduced to the Pledge of Allegiance, now that we are adults, we fully understand the promises inherent in that incantation we repeated every morning before school. Let’s repeat it together (audience repeats together).

As an adult, I take seriously the idea that there should be “liberty and justice for all.” That requires a shift in how we think about the legacies of racially marginalized groups. This discussion of “alternative” instruction, that includes multicultural American legacies and tells the truth about the long-term implications and sustained violence emanating from American colonialism, is what conservative individuals have most recently pejoratively labeled “woke indoctrination.”

■ THE ORIGINS AND NATURE OF WOKE DISCOURSE AND CRT ■

In 2021, “Woke” was chosen as the word of the year by the trendsetter *Socialnomics.com*. In the context of civil debates about public monuments, critical race theory (CRT), educational praxis, a global racial pandemic, the January 6 capital riots, and the Black Lives Matter movement, it is a word that has come to mean so much to so many in such a short period of time. Some have attributed the word to a 2008 song titled “Master Teacher” by R&B singer Erykah Badu, however, the term has been used by Black activists since the 1940s to refer to social justice awareness. It has since been adopted for many different causes by many communities. No matter the origins or the ensuing complexity, the definition “woke” is rather rudimentary. It simply refers to a level of social and cultural consciousness after having been awakened by the unquiet noise of privilege, which consistently disturbs and distorts the identities of marginalized group persons.

Let's be clear. There are lots of people who imagine themselves as kind, well-meaning individuals who would never commit an act of discrimination against another human being. Their kindness does not constitute them being woke. There are also individuals who would be generally considered culturally conscious but who fall short of doing anything with that consciousness. I don't want to minimize the significance of social consciousness. The first step to being an antiracist ally is awareness.

That requires quite a bit of labor because contrary to what the Stop WOKE Act and other anti-CRT discourse suggests, there is quite a bit of misinformation about the contributions of people of color to the history of the world. So, educating oneself about the underlying truths within historical fictions can be challenging. For example, many social studies courses in elementary, middle, and high school are essentially a composite study of a series of battles and wars. It is a meditation on colonialism without calling it that. As suggested previously, American citizens starting at an early age have learned to celebrate American victories against foreign bodies without clear awareness of how we have savagely overtaken the lands of first nation peoples, pillaged indigenous communities, forced slave labor, and emplaced social policies that have cemented structural inequalities for people of color in this country. It is the seldom-told story that has effectively disregarded the tremendous contributions people of color have made to this world.

That is what makes the debacle around critical race theory so dangerous and undemocratic. We are a nation of immigrants, and we are also a nation that has not always told the truth about its history. Critical race theory attempts to correct that injustice.

One of the easiest ways to confuse citizens is to mix truth with fiction. We have already seen the effects of this with fake news and memes that have littered social media. As a result, it has become difficult to distinguish what is true or false about critical race theory. The Florida Stop WOKE Act (House Bill 7) suffers from the same problem.

What is Critical Race Theory?

Let's start with the truth. Critical race theory emerged in the scholarly literature with the publication of Harvard Law professor Derrick Bell's article in *The Yale Law Journal* entitled "Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation Litigation." He argued that U.S. case law often ignores the sociopolitical conditions that gave rise to the law in the first place; hence any attempt at social reform is flawed in that it simply recycles and/or reinvents facets of the same sociopolitical problems of structural inequality it is trying to resolve. Professor Bell's article prompted a paradigm shift that is now known as critical race theory, but first stemmed from a critical legal studies perspective. After organizing a conference on critical race theory with one of his students, Kimberly Crenshaw, the concept became widespread in academe in the late 1980s.

Critical race theorists generally agree upon the following tenets:

1. The social and legal construction of race advances the interests of White people at the expense of people of color." (Wikipedia)
2. Social inequality is intentionally predicated on social conditions supported by laws that are falsely conceived as neutral.
3. Racism is the result of social presuppositions about racially marginalized groups and structural inequalities are inherent in the social system rather than any one individual.
4. The erosion of civil rights afforded to racially marginalized groups is a result of an inequitable distribution of power.

In 2022, it seems ordinary to acknowledge that colonialism facilitated xenophobic and racist social conditions throughout the world. None of us are surprised that race is an imagined construct that has been sustained by those who are invested in its continuation. It is a tool that has been used to propagate racial division and maintain social inequality. Yet, in 2020, after the tragic death of George Floyd, some were surprised about how the world reacted. There were racial protests throughout the world. No longer could any one country claim that racism is merely an American problem. Protesters demanded action, suggesting that America needed to re-educate its children, teaching them to be better citizens and not repeat the violence of its colonial past.

“ I want to be on the side of social justice. I want to be aligned with those individuals who didn’t just stand by and watch racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism happen, but did something about it.”

Subsequently, President Donald Trump sent a memo to federal agencies noting the divisiveness of critical race theory. He then issued executive order 13950 on September 22, 2020, an order that was designed to “combat offensive and anti-American race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating.” This executive order suggested that many American heroes, including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., worked toward making America a place of freedom; yet, falsely asserted that there are critical race theorists who are claiming America is an “irredeemably racist and sexist country,” and that White people are inherently racist or contributors to racism.

The fact is critical race theory does presume that racial inequalities within American institutions preserve White racial privilege and perpetuate racial division. Although I have heard individuals say they believe that all White people are inherently racist, that is not a postulate of critical race theory. I am inclined to agree with Maya Angelou who once stated, “To say that all Whites are racist is to say that all grass is green and everything that’s green is grass.”

Clearly those who have fought so hard to establish legislation against “woke indoctrination” have misconstrued what critical race theory really is. This is best evidenced in Governor Ron DeSantis’ Stop WOKE Act.

■ THE FICTIONS OF FLORIDA’S STOP WOKE ACT ■

On December 15, 2021, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis introduced HB7, the Stop Wrongs to our Kids and Employees (WOKE) Act (also known as the Individual Freedom Bill), which bans workplace diversity training and K-12 teaching of course content that suggests individuals should take personal responsibility for historically racist behavior. Six months earlier in June 2021, Gov. DeSantis signed three other education bills into Florida law indicating that any public educational institution in Florida will be at risk of losing performance-based funding if it is discovered students are receiving “indoctrination” via classes that suggest White students are “inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.” He argued that he would not support any institution that attempts to use taxpayer dollars to teach children to hate America or each other. He also wanted to provide a vehicle for parents to vindicate their rights and grieve racially hostile pedagogy directed toward their children.

It was not until a few months ago on August 18, 2022, that a Florida judge issued an injunction blocking the private employer provision of the law calling it unconstitutional and overly vague. The educational provisions were unaffected by the injunction. Gov. DeSantis did not stand down. Just a couple of weeks ago on November 3, 2022, The *Orlando Sentinel* reported that university tenure review could be tied to the Stop WOKE act.

The state had been considering requiring tenured professors to undergo post-tenure reviews every five years, but now it will be tied to what has been named “woke indoctrination.” Within the review, one of the seven major criteria will be assessing whether the tenured professor has complied with race-related instruction law. In revising the civil rights law in the state, the Stop WOKE Act suggests that so-called “woke indoctrination” constitutes discrimination. If the faculty member is found to have violated the law, then their performance will be considered unsatisfactory, and they will face termination. Although the United Faculty of Florida have issued a statement strongly opposing the race-related instruction law, it remains a clear and present threat to faculty members’ freedom of speech.

Around the same time Gov. DeSantis introduced the Stop WOKE Act, in January 2022 the governor of Virginia, Glenn Youngkin, established an anti-CRT hotline for individuals to report indoctrination in the classroom. After eight months, in September, he deactivated the hotline after receiving very few leads. In fact, most of the activity on the hotline were complaints about special education violations or concerns about academic rigor. Some of the hotline reports were ones that praised the quality of teachers in the school, hoping to gain favor with the governor.

After learning about Gov. Youngkin's hotline, I fantasized for a bit about how wonderful it would be if there was such a hotline for individuals committing acts of racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc. Imagine how affirming it would be if there was immediate reporting followed by investigations and sanctions levied against those violators. Gov. Youngkin inadvertently proved the point of critical race theorists that our systems are used to provide protections for certain populations our society cares about the most.

There are at least two primary fictions exposed within the Stop WOKE Act and the surrounding discourse.

Fiction #1: CRT Distorts Historical Events and Teaches Self-hatred

The first fiction is that CRT distorts historical events and teaches self-hatred. The argument here is that CRT forces a kind of guilt as it pertains to race and racism. In May 2022, a *Newsweek* article published that the Florida Department of Education has forbid any public school from using any social justice or critical race theory content in K-12 classrooms. As a result, Florida has banned 54 out of 132 math books deemed in violation of the state's instructional standards, the highest number of rejected textbooks in the state's history. Gov. DeSantis was quoted saying, "Instructional materials should not attempt to indoctrinate or persuade students to a viewpoint inconsistent with Florida standards." Florida HB7 explicitly censures any curriculum that suggests that privilege or oppression is tied to race, color, sex, or national origin. The law further posits that any mention of such privilege legally constitutes discrimination. White House Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre responded to a WOKE act proponent by saying, "We should teach our kids the truth. America is a great country, but there have been some dark chapters in our history."

It is ironic the year after the federal government officially recognized and celebrated Indigenous Peoples' Day that we would feel the slightest need to justify whether it is necessary to teach kids the truth about colonialism. Shear et al (2015) explain that the curriculum about indigenous peoples is antiquated. The authors claim that 87% of U.S. history curriculum concerning indigenous peoples is taught within a pre-1900s context, relegating their significance to the "distant past."

School children have the right to know about how the history of American colonialism has facilitated present-day racial privilege, structural inequalities, and social division. The tactic of rhetorically reversing how we consider distortion of truths and notions of privilege is fascinating. For generations, U.S. social studies curricula have taught that Christopher Columbus sailed the ocean and independently discovered America. In fact, that is the reason teachers give for celebrating Columbus Day. In no other domain of social life is it acceptable to arrive some place where someone else lives and tell them they no longer live there and claim you were the first to discover their space. The narrative of Christopher Columbus has been an obvious point of distortion within social studies curricula for decades. The HB7 is not concerned about those communities affected by colonial action, only with the celebration of violence, as students are taught that American history is about victories within a series of battles and wars.

A culturally responsive pedagogy takes into account the tragic impacts of American colonialism to multiple cultures and seeks to explore the contributions those cultures have made to America. There is no room for self-hatred. The goal is never to teach White children that they personally are to be held responsible for this horrid past. Instead, the objective is to teach the rudiments of our Pledge of Allegiance, an assurance of freedom and justice for all. The intent is to teach how the bedrock of the American ideal is to live ethically with a firm commitment to our "unalienable right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness." In the absence of our collective freedom, and the capacity to equally enjoy our right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness, we have failed.



In a country that embraces the pillars of moral citizenship, freedom, justice, and equality, CRT ought to be celebrated everywhere.”

The banning of textbooks that merely mention privilege or offer a multicultural set of standpoints on the respective curricular content is shameful.

Fiction #2: CRT Overly Fixates on Race & Minimizes Personal Responsibility

Another fiction advanced by opponents of CRT is that CRT overly fixates on race and minimizes personal responsibility. This is another straw argument that oversimplifies the purpose of CRT while also exposing a fear about the slippage of White privilege. Gov. DeSantis has indicated that CRT is “an instrument of division” that tells kindergartners they are the racial oppressor based on what happened over 100 years ago.

This allegedly exaggerated fixation on race was further elaborated in the context of corporate training. On September 1, 2020, conservative journalist and researcher Christopher Rufo went on Fox News to decry the anti-bias training happening in federal agencies as an example of critical race theory. Rufo described CRT as a radical ideology sowing racial division through education. “Conservatives need to wake up,” Rufo told Fox News. “This is an existential threat to the United States.” On Rufo’s website, he has listed several diversity trainings where participants were taught that “America was founded on racism,” and told to write apology letters to women and people of color. Rufo has indicated that he and others see these trainings as a threat to national security.

Three days after Rufo’s September 2020 comment, Republican President Donald Trump’s administration directed federal agencies to cease such training, which it called “divisive, un-American propaganda.” Trump later expanded the ban to include federal contractors. Democratic President Joe Biden has since overturned that executive order.

The truth is *America* itself is overly fixated on race, and that CRT is a tool for understanding how that fixation can be deconstructed and understood. In a country that embraces the pillars of moral citizenship, freedom, justice, and equality, CRT ought to be celebrated everywhere. The rejection of CRT does make sense, however, in a capitalist context where President Trump has unapologetically stirred angst, defended xenophobia, promoted fearmongering, and instilled a fear of a loss of privilege among conservatives. His toxic conspiracies about election tampering, immigration, environment, abortion, education, welfare, healthcare, etc. have turned our country topsy-turvy, leaving the United States more divided than it has been in decades. The desecration of the Capitol building during the January 6 riots is the residue of his shameful administration. It is clear the false construal of CRT has been used to stoke the fire of the conservative agenda, suppress free speech, and demonize the embrace of democracy.

It is false to presume CRT jettisons personal responsibility. It critiques capitalism, which is amoral; hence it has no regard for morality. CRT scholars assert that capitalism is an economic system that reinforces hierarchy and rugged individualism. We, as citizens, agree to the terms of capitalism because we have been taught that the American dream is available to everyone. That is largely true, however, there are obstacles and structural inequities that inhibit the advancement of marginalized groups of people. An important step toward achieving social justice is to move citizens from margin to center by interrogating systemic privilege, and that is the work of antiracists.

■ MY IMMEDIATE CHALLENGE TO ANTIRACISTS ■

I conclude my remarks with a challenge to antiracists. The great 20th century writer Ralph Ellison once proclaimed, “The end is in the beginning, which lies far ahead.” We can’t even start the work toward freedom until we admit our liabilities, our faults, our frail insecurities, and our collective unwillingness to truly engage the radical progressive change necessary to shift the discourses and actions that fuel racism, sexism, and heterosexism in the U.S. and beyond.

Today, I come to you with a spirit of caring and hope. I care that power as a form of dominance has raided our epistemologies and left us naked with only one garment of epistemological singularity. I care that how we practice effective pedagogy routinely ignores, most of the time, theoretic contributions from non-White scholars; and therefore, provides students with partial stories, partial truths, and non-progressive training. I care that as I speak to many educators about culturally progressive pedagogy, their eyes glaze over, and they issue a battery of excuses and rationales why they cannot give serious consideration to a multicultural pedagogy. And most of all, I care that the legacy we are preparing to leave our children is rife with political, cultural, and social unfreedom.

Today, I come to you with hope —hope that we will once again rise to a challenge put to academics many centuries ago. The challenge was to consider assembling academic institutions that would train students to bind themselves to a creed of global civic participation, to prepare our students to engage with a world before them that is constantly changing, and to equip students with the kind of moral integrity and independent thinking that will interrogate wrongdoing, reconcile poor judgment, and embrace all forms of social difference.

The challenge is to engage in a paradigm shift. This is the crux of antiracism. I want you to walk away grappling with your current intellectual and antiracist practice, considering new paradigms, and being willing to work toward radically progressive change.

Our principal challenge, as Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren put it, is to “rupture disciplinary boundaries, decenter authority, and rewrite institutional and discursive borderlands so that politics becomes a condition for reasserting the relationship between power, agency, and struggle.” In the classroom, one does not need to be a cultural studies scholar, but instead a caring, open-minded, individual who is unafraid to address topics that get at the social and material privilege that symbolically mark our epistemologies. We, as progressive scholars, must equip our students with tools to self-interrogate. This is a freedom in and of itself. Students must feel it is okay to do this kind of work, all the while understanding that this is a form of resistance. Society wants to tell us who we are. We are not racial beings. Race is a manufactured construct. We are human beings. In order to reassert the value of our collective humanity, we must recognize and stop the violence in racial hegemony.

Audre Lorde maintains in her essay titled “Scratching the Surface” that racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia are forms of human blindness. So, if we are to address this gap in our pedagogy, we must first turn to the obvious forms of difference that get overlooked in most of our classrooms. How, might you ask? We can do so by changing the way we introduce theory, literature, and methods. Be intentional about diversified theorists and worldviews you discuss in class. The fact that you’re asking the question is great, but let it not come from a position of impossibility or a form of escapism masked as bold and prudent skepticism.

If we as citizen-scholars are the citadel of intellectual integrity, moral aptitude, and civic preparation, and if it is true that our legacy is inscribed on our children’s souls, then we must avoid this slippery slope of divested morality or else we will find ourselves repeating the same conditions of incivility with which we are currently confronted. It has been said that “doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results, is the prescription for insanity.” It has also left us stuck in a routine of injustice.

At this historical juncture we are experiencing a kind of social paralysis, one that has led to our collective incapacity to recognize why social justice even matters.

Isn’t that the crux of the debate about critical race theory being taught in schools?
Isn’t that the bedrock of political action regarding abortion, immigration reform,
indigenous services, LGBTQIA rights, voting rights, and educational equity?



We must find a way to retrieve custody over the epicenter of our humanity. We must find a way to facilitate and sustain the radical possibilities of liberation. We must rediscover who we are amid this experiment we call democracy.”

Regardless of where you stand on these issues, both our humanity and our citizenship are at stake.

I am afraid we may be stuck. We have been stuck for a long time, seemingly calcified bones in the cemented structure of a neoliberal economy. According to Henry Giroux, the faulty logic of Neoliberalism “imagines human agency as simply a matter of individualized choices, the only obstacle to effective citizenship and agency being the lack of principled self-help and moral responsibility.” It is a fiction that has been propagated to hold structural inequalities intact.

Thus goes our country. Let’s not pretend that Donald Trump is the mastermind of parochialism, anti-intellectualism, and privileged folks’ hegemonic musings of the underclass. He is merely emblematic of a larger problem, a runaway totalitarianism that enjoys frequent contributions to racial unfreedom and moral collapse.

We antiracists are tired of fighting for social justice when we have been promised equality.

We are tired of the public fantasies of postracialism that have wreaked epistemic and very real physical violence on marginalized bodies! We are tired of the dismissal and devaluation of marginalized persons by people who claim to be oblivious to the mere presence of inequality in the classroom, in the boardroom, in public, everywhere!

The very active resistance to what political officials have named “critical race theory” is dangerous. At present, my fear is that the average student who we consider the best of our most progressive children graduates with a set of social conditions they must learn to resist, a set of promises they must learn to tune out, and a set of ideals they must learn to cling to for dear life hoping that some of it will save them.

If we continue to move at a snail’s pace toward social justice, we do so at our own peril. Let’s run toward valuing and loving one another’s humanity and remember Cornel West’s proclamation that “social justice is what love looks like in public!”

We must find a way to retrieve custody over the epicenter of our humanity. We must find a way to facilitate and sustain the radical possibilities of liberation. We must rediscover who we are amid this experiment we call democracy. We must nourish non-market values like hope, love, civility, and joy, and we must do so by holding ourselves and others accountable for the kind of nation, society, community, profession, and association in which we want to live and work.

When I think about the convention theme “Honoring PLACE: People, Liberation, Advocacy, Community, and Environment,” I am reminded of a story I once heard. There was a priest and a rabbi at a boxing match. At the beginning of the match, both boxers were introduced, and they took the center of the ring. One of them kneeled and crossed his heart. The next one kissed his gloves and pointed them toward the sky. The rabbi leaned in and asked the priest, “What does it mean when he kneels and crosses his heart?” The priest replied, “It don’t mean nothin’ if he can’t fight.”

I have witnessed a recent surge in excitement about diversity and inclusion. I’ve seen some phenomenal taglines, mission statements, diversity statements, initiatives, and diversity plans. I have been energized by the acronyms and the amount of time committees have taken to meet countless hours, devise public statements, distribute climate surveys, and pull together recommendations.



We cannot wait for someone else to show up to do the work.
We have no other choice but to be the change we want to see.
I am counting on each of you!”

All of that is extremely impressive and gives many of us hope that perhaps one day we will be free of the rampant discrimination and exclusionary practices that confound the academy.

And yet I find myself concerned that perhaps we are like the boxer who has crossed his heart. It appears we are operating on a wish and a prayer and yet it may be the case that we don't really know how to fight. Fighting for social justice requires action, not just thought. As countless books like Ibram Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*, Terri Givens' *Radical Empathy*, Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*, and Carol Tonge Mack's *Being Bernadette: From Polite Silence to Finding the Black Girl Magic Within* have shown, it begins with individual readiness to act.

If you feel the need to apologize for mistreating people or for being uncivil toward one another, then use what Communication professor Amber Johnson calls the rules for how to apologize:

1. State the harm caused
2. Acknowledge the historical context and contemporary ramifications of said harm
3. Eliminate excuses
4. State plans to correct behavior
5. Correct behavior

Let's make it our business to stand up for our colleagues when we see them being marginalized, because in many ways we are not just standing up for them, but we are also standing up for ourselves. Let's prioritize developing curricula that reflect multicultural populations. Let's go beyond antiracist thought to antiracist action. Finally, let's stop saying we care about inclusion, diversity, equity, and access if we are not willing to stand in the gap.

We cannot wait for someone else to show up to do the work. We have no other choice but to be the change we want to see. I am counting on each of you! Let's take a note from our predecessors who boldly fought for freedom, and who had the audacity and courage to put their bodies on the line so that the next generation doesn't have to. I am counting on each of you!



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