

All Education Is Political: Critical Race Theory, White Power, and the Killing of Black Academic Freedom

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Abstract

Politicians across every level of government have recently proposed and often passed legislation that prohibits the teaching of critical race theory and other “divisive topics” in K–20 classrooms. This article seeks to reframe mainstream scholarly narratives and suggests that a more precise term be developed to describe white violence toward nonwhite people. Using public assaults on critical race theory by conservative policymakers as evidence, I argue that these assaults represent examples of white power killing Black academic freedom. I analyze these assaults through Derrick Bell’s articulation of the permanence of racism and Amos Wilson’s typology of power used in the subordination of Black people.

During President Barack Obama’s reelection campaign against current Senator Mitt Romney, Andrew Breitbart (2012), the former owner and founder of Breitbart News, boisterously exclaimed at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference, “Barack Obama is a radical! We should not be ashamed to say that!” Breitbart claimed he possessed videos so scandalous, so egregious, that they would disqualify Obama from the presidency and force him to drop out of the presidential race. “I’ve got videos, this election we are going to vet him! We are going to vet him from his college days to show you why racial division and class warfare are central to what hope and change [Obama’s campaign slogan] were sold in 2008.” The video in question revealed Obama during his law school years introducing the late Derrick Bell, one of the originators of and leading scholars in the field of critical race theory, at a Harvard Law School rally (Weisinger, 2012). In the video Obama is heard saying these words:

I remember that the Black law students had organized an orientation for the first-year students. And one of the persons who spoke at that orientation was Professor Bell. And I remember him sauntering up to the front and not giving us a lecture but engaging us in a conversation and speaking the truth and telling us the [inaudible] to learn at this place that I’ve carried with me ever since. Now how did this one man do all this? How has he accomplished all this? He hasn’t done it simply by his good looks and easy charm. Although he has both in ample measure. He hasn’t done it simply because of the excellence of his scholarship, although his scholarship has opened up new vistas and new

horizons and changed the standards of what legal writing is about. Open up your hearts and minds to the words of Professor Derrick Bell.

This speech was perceived as a “smoking gun” by conservative media pundits, that provided decisive proof that Obama was anti-American and thus unelectable. The conservative media had first tried to paint Obama as an un-American extremist in 2008, when he first ran for the White House. They did this by linking him to his former pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr., and his “un-Christian and radical” Black liberation theology, which Wright had espoused during Obama’s membership at Trinity Unity Church. Wright’s sermons incorporated traditional Black American sermonic prose with social justice commentary that spoke truth to power about the US role in oppressing nations around the world. One of the more “controversial” sermons given by Wright called into question the use of terrorism through US military drone strikes on foreign countries and how it helped influence the events of 9/11. Conservative and liberal media alike lambasted Wright, his sermons, and Barack Obama by association. Media pundits called Wright divisive and an “un-American agitator” who would have the ear of the president. Candidate Obama was forced to denounce Wright’s commentary and disassociate from his longtime pastor in fear of losing support from his liberal constituents.

Despite Obama’s relationship with Wright, the Republican Party failed to defeat him in 2008. In 2012, part of the GOP’s smear campaign strategy during Obama’s reelection campaign attacked his association with Derrick Bell and his “radical” critical race theory. In an interview with former CNN host Soledad O’Brien, Joel Pollack, a conservative pundit, lawyer, and editor-in-chief at Breitbart News, remarked, “The bombshell is the revelation of the relationship between Obama and Derrick Bell. . . . Derrick Bell is the Jeremiah Wright of academia. He passed away last year but during his lifetime he developed a theory called Critical Race Theory which holds that the civil rights movement was a sham, and that white supremacy is the order and that it must be overthrown.”

Obama was able to withstand the GOP attacks during his 2012 campaign and won his reelection bid. However, the political backlash to the Obama presidency brought forth a resurgence of anti-Black racism codified in public policy and law. Currently, politicians across every level of government have drafted bills and passed laws that restrict the teaching of critical race theory and other “divisive” topics in public K–20 classrooms. In this article, I review recent governmental bans on CRT and argue that these assaults are examples of white power killing Black academic freedom. These acts of legislative abuse serve to restrict any idea, discussion, theory, epistemology, pedagogy, or study that examines white acts of terrorism (that is, white power) and qualifies these teachings as seditious threats to the “untainted and divinely inspired” ideological foundation of this country (Smith, Rotolo, and Tavington 2022). To bring clarity to this argument, I ground Bell’s (1992a) thesis of the permanence of racism and incorporate Amos Wilson’s (1998) typology of power to provide context for what white power is, and how it is being employed through state-enacted prohibition of CRT and related curricula.

Governmental Attacks on CRT

According to data from UCLA's CRT Forward Tracking Project (2023), since September 2020, a total of 229 local, state, and federal government entities across the United States have introduced 750 anti-CRT bills, resolutions, executive orders, opinion letters, statements, and other measures. To date (2023) eighteen states have banned the teaching of critical race theory or any race-centered curriculum that mentions race, racism, white supremacy, or gender.

The Republican governor of Florida and current presidential candidate, Ron DeSantis, has been one of the more vocal opponents of the teaching of CRT. In 2022, he signed into law H.B. 7, the Individual Freedom Act, which effectively banned the teaching of CRT in Florida public schools. Below is a description from the Florida Department of Education that stipulates the curriculum prohibitions educators and college professors must adhere to:

Instruction on the required topics must be factual and objective, and may not suppress or distort significant historical events, such as the Holocaust, slavery, the Civil War and Reconstruction, the civil rights movement and the contributions of women, African American and Hispanic people to our country, as already provided in Section 1003.42(2), F.S. Examples of theories that distort historical events and are inconsistent with State Board approved standards include the denial or minimization of the Holocaust, and the teaching of *Critical Race Theory*, meaning the theory that racism is not merely the product of prejudice, but that *racism is embedded in American society and its legal systems in order to uphold the supremacy of white persons*. Instruction may not utilize material from the *1619 Project* and may not define American history as something other than the creation of a *new nation* based largely on universal principles stated in the Declaration of Independence. (my emphasis)

On February 1, 2023, twenty-eight university and college presidents in Florida agreed to eliminate academic programs and deny funding to any teaching of "belief in critical race theory" or subjects related to intersectionality (Coghill 2023). In a joint statement, the presidents wrote, "Our institutions will not fund or support any institutional practice, policy, or academic requirement that compels belief in critical race theory or related concepts such as intersectionality, or the idea that oppression should be the primary lens through which teaching, and learning are analyzed / improved upon."

This statement was delivered after DeSantis signed into state law the "Stop WOKE [Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees] Act," a bill that prohibits race-related curricula and conversation in workplaces, schools, and colleges. In Texas, Republican Governor Greg Abbott signed into law House Bill 3979, calling it "a strong move to abolish critical race theory in Texas," and adding that "more must be done." As a follow-up, the Texas Senate recently passed Senate Bill 16, which prohibits CRT from being taught at any public Texas university. In New Hampshire, Republican Governor Chris Sununu stated, "The ideas of Critical Race Theory and all of this stuff, I personally don't think there's any place for that in schools" when asked about CRT being taught in K-12

schools. Although against teaching the theory, Sununu said he would veto House Bill 544, which bans CRT. The Republican-controlled New Hampshire legislature, however, was able to add a ban on teaching CRT in the state's current budget bill. Republican Governor Sarah Huckabee-Sanders of Arkansas signed Executive Order 23-05 banning CRT throughout the state. In an interview with Fox News, she stated, "We have to make sure that we are not indoctrinating our kids and that these policies and these ideas never see the light of day." Using her official state Twitter account, Republican Alabama Governor Kay Ivey posted, "We have permanently BANNED Critical Race Theory in Alabama. We're focused on teaching our children how to read and write, not HATE" (emphasis in original). The Republican Governor of Virginia, Glenn Youngkin, who made banning CRT a centerpiece of his campaign platform, signed Executive Order (No. 1) on his first day in office. In the order, he stated, "Inherently divisive concepts, like Critical Race Theory and its progeny, instruct students to only view life through the lens of race and presumes that some students are consciously or unconsciously racist, sexist, or oppressive, and that other students are victims. This denies our students the opportunity to gain important facts, core knowledge, formulate their own opinions, and to think for themselves. Our children deserve far better from their education than to be told what to think."

In the US House of Representatives, Dan Bishop (R-NC) introduced the Stop-CRT Act, which would have defunded and banned any federal funding for the teaching of critical race theory but failed to get the act passed. Bishop argued, "Critical Race Theory is a poison to the psyche of our nation. This destructive ideology has no place in America's institutions, and the bills I'm introducing will help ensure that our government isn't spending resources on promoting it. But President Biden and the radical Left are committed to pushing this neo-Marxist propaganda into our classrooms, places of work, and even the military. Legislators on every level must fight back against this insidious effort to undermine the truths about our nation's founding with everything we've got."

In the US Senate, Tom Cotton (R-AR) introduced Amendment 3680, which prohibits the use of federal funds to promote critical race theory in pre-K and K-12 educational programs. The amendment passed 50-49 in favor. After its adoption, Cotton stated, "Our future depends on raising a generation of kids who love America and love each other as fellow citizens, no matter their race. But Critical Race Theory teaches that our country is irredeemably racist, that 'equality' is a sham, and that true justice requires treating everyone differently—based on the color of their skin. Our tax dollars should never support indoctrinating the youngest Americans with such poison."

The historical revisionism, flat-out lies, and subsequent legislative attacks outlawing critical race theory are clear examples of white power killing Black and race-centered "academic freedom" of US citizens. The restrictions on CRT are unnecessary because no individual school, local education agency, or state department of education requires the teaching of CRT in K-12 public schools. No university mandates that faculty teach CRT in their departments and

disciplines. This move of intellectual censorship is a preemptive strike by the GOP to control the language, definition, and “academic freedom” regarding the history of anti-Black racism in this country.

The Permanence of Racism

Hope is a defense mechanism required for imaginative dreaming; without it, one drifts into a state of uncomfortable reality. Bell’s (1992a, 92–93) thesis of the permanence of racism frightens many scholars and academics (Curry 2021). The idea that racism / white supremacy is a constant fixture within society, one that cannot be vanquished, not only interrogates the rationality of their scholarly work but also interrupts their dreamlike aspirations of achieving justice, inclusion, and freedom in an anti-Black world. Bell’s conclusion unsettles most people because he refuses to consider racism as a solvable aberration; instead, he speaks plainly about what racism is, a permanent component of life in the United States (Greenhouse 1992). A life not measured by real progress but by occasional short-lived victories that obscure the underlying truth, that whites will not relinquish their controlling power in the United States and abroad.

To properly operate on the premise of ending racism, individuals must subscribe to a form of secular religion that Bell (1992a, 97) refers to as the belief and faithfulness in the creed of racial equality. Parishioners of this theology must accept racial equality under the law as the true salvation for the United States and reject its contrary message of racial discrimination, or any other tenets that do not point toward racial equality. Signifying as a heretic to this belief, Bell argues that racial equality is not achievable, especially through legal means, and asserts that racial realism should be used as the perspective to understand the continuance of oppression, racism, and anti-Blackness. He states, “What was it about our reliance on racial remedies that may have prevented us from recognizing that abstract legal rights, such as equal-ity, could do little more than bring about the cessation of one form of discriminatory conduct that soon appeared in a more subtle though no less discriminatory form?” (Bell 1992b, 373).

Bell (1992b, 377) suggests that the adoption of racial realism as a purview for analyzing white discrimination enables Black people to properly identify recurring attempts of racism and develop appropriate responses against these attacks. Bell’s racial realism position does not retire him to the sidelines of defeat by white supremacy; rather, he advocates for a reconceptualization of anti-Black racism and the systems and people that sustain it. This reorientation involves examining the so-called progress of Black lives through a nonlinear lens of social gains and losses. It involves examining anti-Black racism through socioeconomic frames to understand why white dedication to practicing racism endures. Through this reframing, Bell argues that one must either respond to racism realistically or repeat the same cycle of failure in countering anti-Black racism (98).

The recent governmental bans on teaching critical race theory in schools and universities provide evidence and support for Bell’s argument that racism is permanent. The United States is

witnessing an evolution of anti-Black subjugation, cloaked in the color-blind language of antidiscrimination laws and public policies (Bonilla-Silva 2020). Moreover, when we understand that racism / white supremacy is permanent and use Bell's racial realism to analyze it, it becomes extremely difficult to perceive these bans as anything other than as demonstrations of white power.

Power Is a Chameleon

The late Amos Wilson makes this statement in his seminal book, *Blueprint for Black Power*. Wilson (1998, 5) opens this text by asking the reader, "What is Power?" I begin this section with similar queries: What is power in the context of public education? Who possesses the power to define what knowledge is? How is it produced? How is it measured? How is it disseminated? And why are people classified as white, the archetypal group of people that possesses the power to define public education and knowledge globally?

Answering these queries is difficult. Understanding and, more important, defining what power constitutes is an intellectual endeavor that rarely is taught, discussed, or examined in K-20 school systems. Moreover, in the esteemed halls of the academy, power is more debated among academicians as a theoretical concept than examined as a real-life tool, or weapon, used to constrain the lives of US citizens (Pansardi and Bindi 2021).

This confusion as to what power is constitutes one of the difficulties in explaining what power *does*. Part of this confusion stems from ambiguous definitions of power that create duplicitous comprehension and discourse on how power is wielded. With this understanding, power is a chameleon. Said differently, power takes on the texture of its environment; it adapts, evolves, and assumes different shapes, forms, and varying degrees of transparency (Wilson 1998, 5). Since racism / white supremacy is the author of confusion, understanding how power is applied, and how it affects individuals within an anti-Black system of governance becomes just as muddled. To provide clarity, the subsequent paragraphs describe Wilson's (1998, 7-22) articulation of global white power and its constraint on the lives of nonwhite people.

Wilson's Typology of Power

The ability to define is the ability to say what is real, and what is not real, about the world. Definition brings about reality. Definition helps shape people's ways of understanding a given phenomenon. Defining power is paramount to our understanding of how it is used to oppress and suppress others.

Wilson (1998, 8) defines *power* as "the ability to do, the ability to be, and the ability to prevail." Through this definition, power is viewed as an actionable skill that can be used by a person or group of people to achieve the outcomes they desire. Said differently, power as an ability, according to Wilson, represents the *power-to*. The *power-to* may refer to the ability to accomplish a

relatively difficult goal, task, or objective (for example, the *power-to* dunk a basketball, ban a book at school, or review a journal article). Wilson describes *power-to* “as the ability a person or group has to produce intended effects upon the world around them, to realize their purposes within, whatever these purposes happen to be.”

Furthering this idea, Wilson (1998, 8) compares *power-to* with *power-over*, which “refers to control that is exercised over a person or group, when he is not able to act freely, that is, with a full set of possibilities available to him.” He continues, “*Power-over* emphasizes the use of power by one person or group to constrain or restrict the possibilities or options of another person or group.” He contends that the individual or group that possesses power can apply it over another group or individual. This form of power allows possessors to structure or restrict the actions of a subordinate group and limit their available options. Wilson concludes that this is the ultimate form of *power-over* and suggests that this behavior represents the primary power relationship between white and Black people in the United States and abroad.

To help clarify the connection between *power-to* and *power-over*, Wilson (1998, 6) suggests that one of the key components in understanding power is to analyze it through the events and history of racialized intergroup relationships. As Michael Parenti (2011, 4) notes, “All sorts of interpersonal and intergroup relationships can be seen as involving power, including between lovers or between parent and child.” I extend and use this relational description to explain the constant imbalance of power between racialized groups and people classified as white. Historically and currently, the intergroup power dynamic (that is, relationship) between racialized people in the United States has witnessed the positioning and empowerment of white groups over, and to the detriment of, nonwhite groups. Due to this constant positionality, a new interpretation must be developed to analyze the forging of these two concepts of power (*power-to* and *power-over*). I conceptualize this as the “*power-to-power-over*” outgroups, especially where people classified as white wield control over and influence on the lived experiences and outcomes of nonwhite people. Moreover, the wielding of *power-to-power-over* nonwhite outgroups establishes the foundation for what I conclude is white power. I define *white power* as the dedication by people classified as white to forcefully obtain what they desire, in attempts to shape the world around them (*power-to*) while simultaneously restricting the possibilities, options, and world outcomes (*power-over*) of persons or groups they classify as nonwhite.

Permanence of White Power?

Power is never defeated, it only changes hands. Power is permanent. Centering the current legislative bans of critical race theory, I conclude that reframing these bans as deliberate acts of white power is a more precise description than fluid or semiambiguous terms such as *white privilege* and *white supremacy*, and their related theories (such as white fragility). This descriptor provides a more accurate analysis of the force used to maintain permanent hierarchal caste between racialized groups in the United States. White power in the form of racist, anti-Black laws

and policies has been wielded on the lives of Black folk since the inception of this country. White power has shaped and influenced (*power-to-power-over*) every facet of what constitutes public education (K–20) for students classified as nonwhite, specifically Black and Indigenous students (Horne 2022).

In *Teaching White Supremacy: America's Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity*, Donald Yacovone examines the origination of racist classroom texts, and how publishers deliberately wrote history books to groom a strong white national identity in US students. Yacovone (2022, xiv) shows that textbook authors crafted whiteness as a national inheritance to preserve white supremacy through classroom materials and public education. This is a critical revelation in the development of public school curricula throughout the United States and explains why the teaching of CRT is being censored. Simply put, the education for white students is conservative by nature. It is intended to conserve and advocate for the white status quo, to help retain white dominance and empower white interests in society. This reality cannot be escaped, even in “neutral” spaces like the academy.

All Education is Political

Public education is a political war, and the battlefield is the classroom. In this article, I have developed the framework, white power, to assess current legislative restrictions on critical race theory and similar teachings. The teaching of CRT is an affront to white educational spaces and power, vilified as inherently discriminatory because it seeks to disrupt white dominance and power. The legislative bans prohibiting the teaching of CRT can only be overturned by elected or appointed officials, most of whom are classified as white. Nonwhites must wait until a “benevolent” white person is elected to a key office or takes the reigns of our democracy before these bans are removed. Because of this, proponents of CRT, especially nonwhite proponents, are still subjected to white power if they desire to see these bans lifted.

Moreover, regardless of its political ideology (liberal, moderate, or conservative), Black intellectual thought must align with, and be approved by, a consensus of white people before it is accepted. This consensus then legitimizes Black intellectual thought, irrespective of its actual benefits for Black liberation and freedom. This is why some scholars on the left reject or ignore Bell’s permanence of racism thesis, and why people on the right seek to ban critical race theory.

The killing of critical race theory represents another example of white power feeling threatened and violently striking against that threat (whether real or not). This was evident following the Reconstruction era, in the creation and rise of the Ku Klux Klan and its violent backlash against the perceived societal gains of formerly enslaved Black people (whether real or not) (Du Bois [1935] 2014). This country witnessed similar violent backlashes against the election of the first African American president, in the subsequent rise of the Tea Party and Alt-Right (Futrell and Simi 2017). Most recently, the election of Donald Trump represented another backlash against the perceived loss of white control of the United States during the Obama

Administration. White backlash against the “progress” of nonwhite groups, especially Black people, is nothing new. It should be expected.

To its detriment, the academy was unprepared for the rise and election of Trump. Progressive-orientated academics mistakenly believe in the idea of a linear progression toward “freedom and equality” —that tomorrow will bring a better day. Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton ([1967] 1992, 58) and Bell (2004, 1060) warned against using this type of thought process. Although Trump was defeated in his 2020 reelection campaign, his ability to bring forth an unwavering majority of white voters back to the forefront of political discourse and policy creation helped reestablish their relevancy and position. We are witnessing, in real time, the evolution of white power.

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