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Racing Culture

Critical race theory, culture wars, anti/Blackness, and in/formal education in the 1990s

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Abstract

In this conceptual paper, we argue that many episodes of the so-called culture wars of the 1990s in the U.S. can be better understood as attacks on Blackness, a contention that critical race theory illuminates. To substantiate this claim, we recast key societal episodes through a Black perspective that unfolded in both formal and informal educational spaces. We demonstrate that the notion of the culture wars reflects a pivotal tension between Black, often gendered, modes of expression and dominant US culture, which we assert operates under the guise of morality. Drawing on critical race theory's themes of racial realism, intersectionality, and counter storytelling, we analyze three racialized occasions often subsumed under the culture wars umbrella: the scapegoating of hip hop, specifically Sister Souljah, for systemic racism; Lani Guinier's Assistant Attorney General nomination revocation; and the Oakland Ebonics Debate. To end, we illustrate the current relevance of these enduring culture wars themes in a hip hop-informed prison-based literacy initiative and the curricular prohibition of African American studies.



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Introduction

Few would disagree that the country's current political moment is fraught. News media outlets are calling the last few years a new era of the culture wars (Alfonseca, 2023; Todd et al., 2023). Assessing the last wave of these battles, historian Hartman (2015) contended that much of the "urgent rhetoric" (p. 1) spouted by conservative politicians served as commentary and critique of signature cultural events that occurred in the 1990s—what sociologist Hunter (1992) described as culture wars. Although discussions vary to some extent, two topics consistently populate these reports: race and education. As this discourse circulates and evolves, Black peoples, Black history, and Black culture command significant attention in it, raising questions about African Americans' distinct relationship to the culture wars. Notwithstanding different ethnic or national ties, Black people in the U.S. include both those who identify as African American and Black American—a racial identity that coalesces around African descent; therefore, we use these terms interchangeably. In the most recent iteration, what many law makers mistakenly refer to as critical race theory (CRT) is taking center stage, and the site of such race-based "indoctrination," they argue, unfolds across various mediums that are, indeed, educational, in both formal and informal ways. These troubling observations have a longer history steeped in questions of so-called morality. Directly tied to virtue and ethics, morality is predicated on one's axiology, the way one goes about assessing value (i.e., goodness or lack thereof). A retrospective take on the nation's last culture war wave may offer some clarity on the issues at the heart of our current debate and what they mean for the contemporary fight for racial justice.

Indeed, the term *culture wars* is misleading. A major issue is that it relegates issues of race to the background when, as we will show, matters of race, specifically Blackness, were and remain integral to the so-called culture wars. The slippery relationship between culture and race has been critiqued by scholars in and beyond the field of education (Hartman, 2015; Lynn, 2006; Zimmerman, 2022). As education scholar Lynn (2006) asserted, "cultural analyses — however critical — do not provide a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which race and racism can be addressed at both the school and the societal level" (p. 113).

The purpose of this essay is to re-examine the culture wars of the 1990s with an eye toward the role of race, particularly as it mapped onto constructions of Blackness within formal and informal educational sites. To do so, we analyze three culture war episodes that in part defined this era: 1) hip hop's (e.g., Sister Souljah's) undue blame for structural racism, 2) Lani Guinier's contentious nomination for U.S. Assistant Attorney General of Civil Rights, and 3) the Ebonics debate in Oakland California. Using CRT as a lens, we recast these key societal episodes to underline that the notion of culture wars reflects a pivotal tension between Black often gendered modes of expression and dominant U.S. culture, which we assert operates under the guise of morality. That is, we show that in many cases being Black and upholding an anti-oppressive political stance disrupted dominant ideas about the soul of America (Hartman, 2015). We argue centrally that many episodes of the so-called culture wars of the 1990s in the U.S. can be better understood as attacks on Blackness, a contention that CRT illuminates.

To proceed, we provide an overview of the culture wars and CRT to contextualize our subsequent discussion of three specific culture wars episodes. In reviewing CRT, we highlight three key propositions we engage for analysis: racial realism (Bell, 1992), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and counter storytelling (Delgado, 1989). In our final section, we discuss how these issues link to recent events under the contemporary wave of the culture wars, namely, a hip hop-informed literacy initiative in the prison industrial complex and the contention around the

Advanced Placement African American Studies exam. This work contributes to scholarship invested in critical discussions of race and Blackness as they relate to education both in and outside the traditional classroom. Its implications speak to the need for the research community to take race, particularly (anti)Blackness, more seriously in discussions of culture.

Background

What Were the Culture Wars?

Historians writing about the culture wars in the late 20th century often underline the pivotal moment in 1992 when this term entered our national lexicon, having moved beyond academic circles into a more mainstream arena. Often, they refer to Patrick Buchanan’s remarks during the Republican National Convention (RNC) in Houston, Texas. Texas’ durable reputation as a bastion of racism and conservatism, despite its sizable Black and Latiné population, accentuates the RNC’s deliberate choice to hold the event there. During the convention, Buchanan charged that there was a war “going on in our country for the soul of America” (Zimmerman, 2022, p. x). With this statement, Buchanan was indicting not only George H. W. Bush’s opponent for the presidential race that year, Arkansas governor William (Bill) Clinton, but he was highlighting “conflicts [that] involved fundamental beliefs and assumptions that simply do not allow for compromise—or even for dialogue” (p. x). In many ways, Buchanan was broadcasting the fact that there were disparate camps in the U.S. that “d[id] not share the same moral language” (p. x).

In essence, this metaphorical war situated two opposing sides sparring over traditional (read—white/hegemonic) and more liberal or progressive visions for society. By name, Buchanan called out the threat that a Clinton presidency would pose to “the Judeo-Christian values and beliefs upon which this nation was built” (Hartman, 2015, p. 1). In large part, this enunciation asserted that efforts to promote racial and/or ethnic equity were at odds with traditional “American values.” Growing out of the cultural shifts of the 1960s, the culture wars of the 1990s reflected how with a generation’s time, strides to improve the U.S. served to threaten the bedrock of the nation’s ideals. Although plural, the culture wars can be best understood as a collection of multiple battles within a larger war. To be sure, these constitutive battles include social institutions like church, family, and education as well as other areas, notably, politics, art, and the law. Indeed, one of the most visible sites of this struggle was education—curriculum in particular.

We contend that embedded in these smaller battles, and thus within the wider war, is race. One of the most striking features of these battles was the attention they garnered from President Clinton’s Administration, signaling the perceived significance of these issues and their relevance. Although scholars writing about the culture wars have attended to issues of race, many reflect Hunter’s (1992) view that race could not fully explain which side social groups assumed in the culture wars. We, however, disagree. Looking at the history of the culture wars through a dedicatedly racial lens reveals that the issues subsumed under the culture wars umbrella were deeply racialized in a notably antiBlack way; this is not to say that all Black people held the same beliefs about moral issues, but it is to say that the perspectives upheld on the traditionalist side of the culture wars promoted antiBlackness as an ideology while simultaneously seeking to sustain and strengthen white hegemony and supremacy. We define antiBlackness, or antiBlack racism, as “structural or institutional acts and supporting ideologies that oppress, subjugate, or subordinate Black peoples” (A. James-Gallaway, 2022b, p. 222). Much of this focus is apparent in the (coded)

language used to describe or comment on the proverbial culture wars. Thus, a reinterpretation is needed of the culture wars through a racialized lens sensitive to (anti)Blackness.

Critical Race Theory

CRT's history, in many ways, mirrors key debates that unfolded during the culture wars era of the 1990s. This theoretical tool was created by a coalition of legal scholars in the post-Civil Rights era (Crenshaw, 2011). Its early founders were wedged between purportedly liberal law schools that in actuality promoted race-evasiveness and an allegedly progressive school of thought, critical legal studies (CLS), that denied that race was vital to dismantling systems of racial oppression. In 1989 after seven years of growing conflict around these issues, 24 legal scholars of Color came together at a legal conference in Wisconsin to codify their ideas into the theoretical framework that became CRT, which views race as a social construct that converges with actions (Crenshaw et al., 1995). Thus, CRT posits race as a verb instead of a noun, further underscoring the social mechanisms by which people (un)consciously mobilize race. One key CRT theme is racism's ubiquity across U.S. social systems and structures, evidenced in, for example, the nation's legal founding on white supremacist genocide that sought to extinguish Indigenous Americans and enslave as chattel African peoples (Crenshaw et al., 1995). In naming CRT's focus on ordinary everyday racisms that fortify whiteness while harming People of Color (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Matsuda et al., 1993), it recognizes the unremarkable, subtle manifestations of racism that order society.

For the purposes of this essay, we engage three CRT propositions to analyze particular culture war episodes: racial realism, intersectionality, and counter storytelling.

Racial realism is a resource that original CRT founder Bell (1992) discusses as specific to Black Americans; it encourages them to accept that U.S. society, systems, and structures are decidedly antiBlack and, as a result, that racial equality is unlikely. Instead of fighting for the unattainable goal of racial equality, Bell (1992) argued that racial realism frees Black people to appreciate their humanity and measure it by their willingness to resist racial oppression despite knowing they cannot win. This perspective encourages Black people to see that there is beauty, life, and humanity in the enduring Black freedom struggle. Racial realism, we posit, offers much of the Black-specific analysis BlackCrit (Dumas & ross, 2016) seeks to provide; Dumas and ross, however, missed an opportunity to engage it more deeply in not citing it.

Founded in Black feminisms (Collins, 2000) and CRT, intersectionality is a multidisciplinary lens that perceives overlapping systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991; 2016; Carbado et al., 2013). Crenshaw presented intersectionality to contest single issue analyses common in the feminist movement, the anti-racist movement, and in jurisprudence (Carbado et al., 2013). Illuminating Black women as a particular social group who faced dual marginalization, Crenshaw (1989, 1991) explicated how racism and sexism interlocked to subjugate them within the workplace and in social movements (Carbado et al., 2013).

Fostering psychic preservation (Bell, 1992), counter storytelling represents the creation and use of narratives rooted in the lived experiences of people of Color and destabilizes the racial status quo by undermining white racial superiority (Delgado, 1989; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson 2018; Matsuda et al., 1993). To challenge harmful, widely normalized perspectives on race (e.g., antiBlackness), this tool of racial resistance elevates racially marginalized people's experiences about their oppression (Delgado, 1989; Dixson & Rousseau Anderson 2018; Solórzano & Yosso,

2002). These stories can take different forms, including allegory, personal stories (C. James-Gallaway, 2022), other people's narratives, and composite stories (Cook & Dixson, 2013).

The Culture Wars in Three Episodes

A criterion we used to select the culture war episodes we analyze here was the attention paid to them by the Office of the President of the U.S., in this case, the Clinton Administration. The attention given to these issues by this office reflects the cultural significance each had and its social magnitude. Specifically, each of the episodes we highlight was publicly discussed or commented on by President Clinton himself during his presidency or by a key member of his administration.

Scapegoating Hip Hop and Sister Souljah

Hip hop is a "black American ... oral and auditory art form," rooted within "black language, black music, black style and black youth culture" (Perry, 2004, p. 2). Perry reminds readers that although hip hop has "nonblack" contributors, Black Americans invented the genre, which relies on "African American Vernacular English," focuses on the Black experience, and stems from Black "oral" and "musical contexts" (p. 10). Hip hop artists are musical storytellers that convey their lived realities about societal oppression, representing a critical form of counter storytelling (Ards, 2004; Dyson, 2004; Lamotte, 1999; Kelley, 2008; Perry, 2004; Rose, 2008). As hip hop's popularity grew in the 1990s as a musical artform and an informal form of education, so did criticisms from mainstream U.S. society that viewed the genre as anti-American and deviant despite its function as a social mirror (Dyson, 2004; Ogbar, 1999; Rose, 2008). By informal education, we mean a type of learning that occurs outside spaces dedicated to schooling. Critics that cast hip hop as an amoral monolithic music genre unified across racial, gender, and bipartisan lines (Dyson, 2004; Ogbar, 1999; Rose, 2008). Hip hop, purportedly, lacks virtue, reflecting the moral dimension on which this genre draws, particularly in its intersection with antiBlackness.

In a 1992 speech, presumptive presidential nominee Bill Clinton, seeking a scapegoat for racial tensions, zeroed in on hip hop, castigating one of its most outspoken, critical MCs: Sister Souljah (Clinton, 1992; Edsall, 1992). Bringing national and international attention to this New York native (Soulja, 1992a), Clinton found himself in the middle of a culture wars episode that exposed the nation's deference to white supremacy, antiBlackness, and individual, vs. structural, solutions to social problems. Quoting from her debut single, *The Final Solution: Slavery is Back in Effect*, Clinton attempted to illustrate Sister Souljah's views about structural antiBlackness and white peoples' questionable morality given their un/conscious participation in white supremacy (Clinton, 1992). Drawing unfounded parallels between Sister Soulja's discourse and known white supremacist politician David Duke (Clinton, 1992), Clinton painted Sister Souljah as a racist to distinguish himself as *the great white man politician*, who was allegedly key to ending the nation's racial prejudice. This entire episode represented an informal form of education in a very public venue (James-Gallaway, 2024).

Sister Souljah's deep, longstanding concern with Black people's plight predicted the important perspective she brought to bear on social problems plaguing Black communities. Born Lisa Williamson, Sister Souljah was raised in New York City's housing projects in the Bronx, the birthplace of hip hop. As a Black woman community activist, published author, and hip hop artist, she produced works grappling with the wake (Sharpe, 2016) or the afterlife of slavery (Hartman, 1997). Sister Souljah's activism, music, and literature incisively viewed the plethora of issues

affecting the Black community as deriving from white supremacist antiBlack subjugation that manifests itself in, for example, housing and food insecurity, colorism, single motherhood, misogynoir, and mental health challenges (Sister Souljah, 1994). Many of such issues were front and center in the months after the 1992 release of *360 Degrees of Power*, Sister Souljah's debut album, when racial tensions exploded in Los Angeles after the acquittal of four non-Black police officers, who mercilessly brutalized Rodney King, a Black man (Sastry Krbechek & Grigsby Bates, 2017). It was this state-sanctioned beating and the social fallout that followed when the officers responsible were acquitted from which Clinton was seeking to separate himself. Within a week, the *Washington Post* published an article based on an interview with Sister Souljah about these events (Mills, 1992). Reaching a larger audience the following month, then-presidential candidate Clinton drew on this article to chastise the young MC during a live, broadcasted campaign speech on C-SPAN (Clinton, 1992; Edsall, 1992).

Trying to pit Black people against one another, Clinton attempted to publicly humiliate Sister Souljah in front of Jessie Jackson's National Rainbow Coalition and the Citizenship Education Fund (Edsall, 1992), a person and an organization dedicated by many accounts to racial justice. Clinton did so after Jackson's opening remarks, which praised Sister Souljah and others such as Doug E Fresh and Cleo Fields for engaging in a dialogue the night before that sought to "take the pain of this generation and turn it into power ... from dope to hope and higher ground" (Jackson, 1992, 11:00). Subsequently, Clinton remarked on the Rodney King Riots and broader social issues related to race, then turned his attention to Sister Souljah (Clinton, 1992, 47:31). He stated,

You had a rap singer here last night named Sister Souljah ... Her comments before and after Los Angeles were filled with a kind of hatred that you do not honor today and tonight. Just listen to this, what she said: She told The *Washington Post* about a month ago, and I quote, "If black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people? So if you're a gang member and you would normally be killing somebody, why not kill a white person?"

After praising Louisiana State Congressman Cleo Fields as a "role model" or good Black person, Clinton juxtaposed Sister Souljah to him. Scapegoating her and hip hop writ large, Clinton drew on a white supremacist political strategy that exploited white racial fear (Hartman, 2015) and decontextualized the spirit of her social commentary.

Sister Souljah replied three days later to presidential hopeful Bill Clinton in a press conference. She remarked, in part, that

It is very shocking to me that in a time of American economic recession and inner-city urban chaos, Democratic presidential contender Bill Clinton has chosen to attack, not the issues, but a young African woman that is very well educated, alcohol free, drug free, a successful self-employed businesswoman, and a community servant. (Sister Souljah, 1992a, 1:35)

In the comments that followed, Sister Souljah with verve employed counter storytelling to invert dominant narratives working to caricature Black Americans as uneducated, drug addicts, and criminals (Barnett & Flynn, 2014; Bogle, 1973; Staples & Jones, 1985). Shrewdly demonstrating her awareness of the related plight of all oppressed peoples of Color around the globe, she noted U.S. invasions of countries across North America, South America, southern Africa, the Middle East, as well as national issues like lynching, anti-critical curricular manipulation,

Indigenous American genocide, police brutality, and housing and food insecure conditions in which gang culture thrives (Sister Souljah, 1992a). This rejection of the majoritarian narrative of the U.S. as a great, prosperous nation exposed how the country committed and continues to commit myriad national and international humanitarian crimes on behalf of white supremacy—with lethal impact. It also boldly exposed the nation’s morally tenuous foundation. She went on to underline, in third person no less,

We can conclude that Sister Souljah is not a racist nor is any other African leader or African person in this world able to be a racist because they do not have the power to collectively and systematically beat down white people, European people; does not have the power to deny it all, refuse to discuss it, and silence, intimidate, harass, and hunt down those who take a stand and fight back. Yes, I am angry, which means I am sane. (Sister Souljah, 1992a, 10:40)

Sister Souljah’s searing critique was not only courageous, but also showcased her practice of self-definition in declaring herself both angry and sane, salient Black feminist principles (A. James-Gallaway, 2022a; Collins, 2000). This reply was not her first-time countering mendacious claims about Black people’s capacity for racism or their interest in Black nationalism as innately racist (Hartman, 2015). The music video from her debut single *The Final Solution: Slavery is Back in Effect*, for instance, featured her articulating,

You can’t call me or any other Black person in the world a racist. We don’t have the power to do to white people what white people have done to us, and even if we did, we do not have that low down dirty nature. (Sister Souljah, 1992b, 0:12)

Sister Souljah repeatedly provided racial realist accounts by giving a “hard eyed view of racism and our subordinate role in it” (Bell, 1992, p. 378). Boldly, she named the inferior social position of Black people and analyzed the racial power relations that underpinned this arrangement (Sister Souljah, 1992). Although the majoritarian narrative put forth by Bill Clinton tried to cast her as a racist (Clinton, 1992; Edsall, 1992), Sister Souljah publicly unsettled whiteness and resisted its power, which constitutes a humanizing, educative act of agency. The Clinton Administration was clearly unnerved by this young Black woman’s audacity to name the world as she saw it, a practice that eschewed gendered racist expectations of proper ladyhood and made her more vulnerable to the Clinton Administration’s attacks (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Showing that she was never one interested in pandering to white supremacist sympathies, Sister Souljah substantiated her claim that “Souljah was not born to make white people feel comfortable” (Sister Souljah, 1992c, 1:33) (*The Hate That Hate Produced*), leaving her indelible mark on the culture wars.

Lani Guinier’s Nomination Withdrawal

In 1993, when University of Pennsylvania law professor Lani Guinier refused pleas to withdraw her nomination for Assistant Attorney General of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Justice Department, her Yale Law School classmate President Bill Clinton did it for her (Hartman, 2015; Tate, 1997). Wanting the opportunity Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas two years earlier had been given to sit before the Senate Judiciary Committee and make her case, as he was permitted, to defend the ideas in her legal scholarship, Guinier was denied. It would take almost three decades before a woman would hold this appointment, with Black woman Kristen Clarke assuming this post in 2021 (Reilly, 2021 June 2). In making Guinier a public spectacle, Clinton and his Administration exposed their deep investment in mainstream discourses that repudiated

Black political power and racial justice; their actions highlight another instance of informal education given the public way these events unfolded and the stark lessons such aimed to teach assertive Black women bold enough to openly challenge the status quo. Yet again, the culture wars of the 1990s pivoted on antiBlackness, targeting this critical race theorist for daring to envision a more responsive government (Tate, 1997).

The scholarship said to unnerve the President's office most was concerned with the legacy of inequitable Black political representation and potential remedies to address such, and the fact that a Black woman leveled these critiques served ostensibly as an invitation for sexist antiBlack affronts. Notably, Guinier's nomination was revoked in part because she had satisfied, and by many accounts exceeded, the performance expectations of her academic position as a legal scholar by publishing pathbreaking, critical scholarship; her doing so enabled her to earn tenure and promotion at two ivy league institutions: the University of Pennsylvania and subsequently, as the first Black woman to do so at Harvard Law School. Her accomplishments in this regard are legible through a conventional moral frame that values high academic achievement and exclusivity, as these institutions are arguably the most difficult for one to secure admission or faculty employment. Insults repeatedly hurled at her included being an ideologue and a quota queen, labels that sought to undermine her legal acumen and intelligence as a Black woman, exhibiting the ways her gender and race intersected to compound the oppression she faced in this circumstance (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). The quota queen slur was a play on the controlling image of a welfare queen, who is often depicted as a poor single Black matriarch (Collins, 2000). Guinier's legal brilliance and suggested strategies to transform the U.S. into the bastion of democracy it claims to be were viewed as antithetical to conventional (i.e., white dominant) political thought and theory. Stated differently, her approach to righting the systemic wrongs of legalized white supremacy were rooted in a CRT logic that aimed to disrupt "the vexed bond between law and racial power" (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii).

Though many if not most ideas in Guinier's scholarship threatened the political status quo, a few specific articles accounted for much of the opposition to her nomination and appointment, "Keeping the faith" (1989), "The triumph of tokenism" (1991b), and "No two seats" (1991a). These publications reflect more traditional formal learning in that academics are required to produce them as a means to teach the scholarly community. In these articles, Guinier (1989) critiqued why "Blacks may vote, but it is whites who will govern" (p. 394) by imagining how "the Department of Justice [could] ... embrace the concept of 'meaningful,' actual representation through race conscious remedies" (p. 342). She maintained that "our political system must redress its historical insult to African-Americans by fostering actual representation ... and thoughtfully considering race issues" (p. 435). This effort, according to mainstream narratives, was an immoral feat because it worked to afford historically disenfranchised groups meaningful political power. Specifically, Guinier (1991b) argued for "[p]roportionate interest representation," which she described as "an empowering concept to the extent it enables black voters ... to develop their political imagination" (p. 1154). The work of enhancing one's imagining practices is characteristic of a Black feminist tradition that works toward the full liberation of oppressed peoples (e.g., Davis, 2016; Gilmore, 2022). Explaining how this strategy could work, she contended that

by disaggregating the majority and structuring decision making to reduce the effect of prejudice, proportionate interest representation reflects an effort both to increase the number of black officials and to minimize the disadvantages accruing to black voters in a majoritarian system ... [It] ... embraces the civil rights movement's

vision of effective representation ... [to] encompass ... a broader theory of responsive government, the goal of which was to promise legislative accountability to black political interests” (Guinier, 1991b, p. 1080 (n. 9)).

The revolutionary possibility of Black political equity served to turn the contemporary political system on its head, a system that Guinier critiqued given that “the only countries that still use single member district, winner-takes-all systems exclusively, are former colonies of Great Britain” (McGuire & Guinier, 1995, p. 99). Interest representation, according to Guinier (1991a), stood to rectify how the current political system promoted “[d]ilution,” which happens when “an advantaged majority controls disproportionate legislative power, not just that it holds a disproportionate number of legislative seats” (p. 1417). This arrangement exposed that “legislative seats alone do not enfranchise” (p. 1416). Her remedy, then, was “a ‘winner-take-only-some,’ or interest representation, system [that] actually ensures fewer disaffected voters than the sub districted majority approach. It allows black voters and their representatives the opportunity to express the intensity of their preference for candidates and for legislative programs” (p. 1465). “The political process,” Guinier posited, “is suspect when statutorily protected groups are denied meaningful participation, which occurs, for example, where minority interests are consistently ignored or discounted due to prejudice or winner-take-all majority” (p. 1461-1462).

Her suggestions were threatening, and allegedly unethical, because they endangered white political power and hegemony. If politicians wielding power were addressing the needs of all their constituents, not just those most wealthy or powerful, they would have no reason to fear Guinier’s ideas. Because, however, most politicians were uninterested in working to meet the needs of Black and other racially and economically oppressed citizens—those the extant political system emboldened them to ignore—there was no need to change. Putting a Black woman with such visionary acuity at the helm of such an outdated, unresponsive system promised to uproot hegemonic power as it stood, replacing it with a responsive democracy aligned with the spirit of the civil rights movement. Guinier (1991b) theorized ways “to conceive of a deliberative process in which racism does not control all outcomes” (p. 1154), one in which “minority groups [were able to] enjoy equal voting weight and equal voting power” (p. 1513). Such notions were so potentially transformational that they kept someone with the courage to actualize them out of the position to effect such change.

With time, Guinier came to see that her nomination and its withdrawal were not actually about her; she was collateral damage in a much bigger, longer ideological war bent on sustaining white supremacy. Five years after this debacle, she published a book in which she set the record straight, furnishing a counterstory that corrected mistruths about the whole nomination process (Guinier, 1998). This account threaded her career as a civil rights attorney with her work as a law professor and as an almost-public servant, thereafter, attesting to her racial realist propensity not to despair but to resist anyhow (Bell, 1992). It also told a history of the civil rights movement through a critical lens that situated her ongoing struggle with U.S. democracy and race as indicative of the deeper, larger problems that were keeping the country from reaching its democratic promise. These issues, Guinier showed, predated her nomination fiasco and would surely outlive it (Guinier, 1998), revealing how the culture wars of the 1990s pivoted race, on Blackness, and how any recounting of their relevance or meaning proves impossible without such lenses.

The Ebonics Debate in Oakland

Language is tethered to notions of culture that mirror many of the racial cleavages ordering society. The language of Black Americans offers one of the most apparent examples of this observation, and a CRT perspective illuminates how deeply engrained antiBlackness is in dominant U.S. culture (Bell, 1992). The term Ebonics was coined in 1973 by Black psychologist Robert Williams, who “had grown sick and tired of White linguists writing about the language system of African Americans” (Williams, 1997, p. 209). Pervasive were characterizations of such language as “substandard,” “restrictive,” and “deviant,” wholly negative descriptions that reflected broader themes of antiBlackness throughout society (Williams, 1997). The name itself combined the word ebony, meaning Black, with the word phonics, meaning speech sounds, to denote a legitimate language distinct from English. Scholars speculated that Ebonics was a result of either a pidgin/Creole blend of the language varieties that different (mainly west) African peoples spoke as they forcibly converged in the U.S. South for their enslavement or the retention of specific features from various west African languages (Asante, 1996; Delpit & Perry, 1998).

Despite this history, few laypeople were familiar with the term Ebonics until it started to dominate national news headlines two decades after its conception. On December 18, 1996, the Oakland, California, school board passed a unanimous resolution that declared Ebonics to be its own language system, not a dialect of English as previously believed. In doing so, the school board sought to repurpose formal educational spaces, schools and classrooms, and English/literacy curriculum to meet the needs of Black learners. This decree represented a major ideological and epistemological shift that appeared to many to undermine communication virtues of mainstream society; that is, it challenged the moral code educators and other language stakeholders had historically used to systemically chide and penalize Black language practices. Chiefly, the reason for this decree centered on the systemic underachievement of Black children in the district’s schools and their aim to “train teachers to value rather than devalue the home language of the African American child” (Williams, 1997, p. 213). The board took this approach in hopes of “helping teachers figure out how to use the rich and varied linguistic abilities of African-American children to help them become fluent readers and writers” (Perry & Delpit, 1998, p. 4).

A key part in making this vision a reality was to declare that “Black English/Ebonics was a legitimate, rule-based, systematic language, and that this language was the primary language of many African-American children enrolled in the Oakland school system” (Perry & Delpit, 1998, p. 3). Opposing the rampant stigmatization of it, the board was effectively urging educational stakeholders to “affirm, maintain, and ... use [it] to help African American children acquire fluency in the standard code” (Perry & Delpit, 1998, p. 3), what English education scholar Baker Bell (2020) calls white mainstream English. In making this move and working to value Blackness and Black culture, they were undermining dominant discourses around morality. A CRT perspective highlights how the push to recognize the value in Ebonics constituted a counterstory that challenged the dominant narrative, or stock story, about its inferiority (Bell, 1987; Delgado, 1989).

This bold avowal incited pronounced controversy across the country, however, notably from those who fervently disagreed with what they saw as the school board’s position on Ebonics. Many falsely assumed the board was instructing educators to “teach Ebonics instead of Standard English to African American children” while also “condoning slang and street language,” “reward[ing] failures and lower[ing] standards,” and trying to manufacture an increase in federal and state funding without any research support (Williams, 1997, p. 208). Situating this controversy

in a culture wars frame illustrates how those on the side of tradition or conservatism opposed, in this case, those seeking to further educational equity. This arrangement also exposes how antiBlack ideas can be and often are promoted by those who identify as Black themselves, as prominent figures in society such as Jesse Jackson and Maya Angelou denounced the resolution (Delpit & Perry, 1998).

Discourse at the federal level echoed lamentations about how the Oakland Unified School Board was setting up Black children who were conversant in Ebonics to fail, and it illustrated how misunderstood the board's actions were. The Clinton Administration even weighed in on this matter. In a *New York Times* article published the week following the board's resolution, Richard W. Riley, the Secretary of Education, underscored that, "elevating black English to the status of a language is not the way to raise standards of achievement in our schools and for our students" (Bennet, 1996, para. 3). Riley went on to clarify that "the Administration's policy is that Ebonics is a nonstandard form of English and not a foreign language" (Bennet, 1996, para. 3). Even the future mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emanuel, who at the time was serving as a domestic policy advisor to the President, decried the resolution "a big mistake," going on to criticize it by saying, "just when the debate around the country is how do we raise standards, this is going the other way" (para. 10). In culture wars terms, the alleged *soul of our nation* (Hartman, 2015; Zimmerman, 2022) spoke only white mainstream English and saw no use for or value in other tongues that had nurtured the country's other children (Delpit, 1996).

The fight to legitimize Black communities' language practices represents a racial realist endeavor (Bell, 1992). In it, Black educational stakeholders in Oakland launched an attack on systemic educational injustice harming their children. This fight to protect and enhance the academic livelihood of Black learners was met with concerted opposition masked as concern for Black children's academic achievement. The racial realists who proposed this resolution and those who supported it made themselves vulnerable to attack, not unlike the children Oakland Unified School District had been underserving for decades. Working to reorient the view of Black communities and their language practices was a humanizing feat intended "to give confidence and feelings of empowerment to the black community" (Bell, 1992, p. 363). The courage that motivated this decision quickly exposed that "black Americans by no means are equal to whites. Racial equality is, in fact, not a realistic goal" (p. 363).

Within two years, due to pressure and growing criticism, the Oakland Unified School Board had revised its resolution and related program to support Black learners by eliminating its use of the term Ebonics and instead employing African American Vernacular English (Cuban, 2018 April 4), describing Black students' language practices as part of a wider system with more direct ties to white mainstream English (Baker Bell, 2020). Such reclamation represented a corrective vis-à-vis appropriate (i.e., hegemonic) uses of formal education space. Debate about whether Ebonics constituted its own language, however, or a dialect of English served to obscure the perpetual antiBlackness that fueled the larger controversy. Furthermore, addressing the pedagogical language and literacy approaches that had long underserved Black children in Oakland was insufficient to remedy the wider and deeper social ills that were harming them. These points are why it remains critical to, as racial realism urges, "acknowledge the permanence of our subordinate status ... to avoid despair ... [thus] to imagine and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph" (Bell, 1992, p. 373-374). Although one might view the resolution as a failure, another perspective might see it as a step toward "psychic self-preservation and ... as means of lessening their [Black people's] own subordination" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2436), even if it

failed to overturn the larger oppressive structure. Such triumph must be rooted in the joy that comes about in simply resisting oppression, not the victory that will never come.

Contemporary Relevance

It does not take much effort to identify connections between the episodes we recast here and recent events. In at least two ways, the issues we explored in this essay are linked to ongoing, formal and informal educational struggles today: hip hop's promotion of literacy for those incarcerated and in curricular debates about African American studies. Although these specific examples have escaped overt, public attention from the POTUS, we selected them because they exemplify how contemporary culture wars continue to center on Blackness, and the topics with which they are engaged, incarceration and education, remain significant political issues. Such subjects are decidedly political matters because Blackness represents a politically (and economically and socially) contentious analytic that is ever relevant. Blackness also invites stigma given how the dominant society situates it as antithetical, in many cases, to morality.

Noname's Book Club: Reading Materials for the Homies

Despite the pervasiveness of antiBlackness in U.S. life, hip hop artists continue to push back lyrically via social activism and community education. Hip hop artist and poet Fatimah Warner, known by her stage name Noname, founded Noname's Book Club in 2019. This digital space was complemented in 2021 by the addition of The Radical Hood Library, a physical headquarters of the book club (Noname Book Club, n.d.). Given Noname's stated struggle to make her way through important yet challenging reading material, these joint spaces aim to create community as readers digest and react to the texts. Working alongside a "Black-led worker cooperative" who owns and operates the book club and the Radical Hood Library (Teen Vogue Staff, 2022), Noname began this book club because she, in her own words, "thought there might be people who in the meeting could help me understand the material I was struggling to get by myself" (PBS Newshour, 2023, 1:25). Each month, Noname's Book Club selects a new book to read (Noname Book Club, n.d.). Although this club is not led by a formally trained teacher, it is academic in nature given its focus on books, some of which are academic. So far, Noname's Book Club has selected authors such as Joy James, Assata Shakur, Sister Souljah, Mariame Kaba, Zeba Blay, Aja Monet, and many more. The selection of authors is based largely on writers' lived experiences and their commitment to undermining systems of oppression, including racism, sexism, colonialism, and capitalism. Noname's Book Club provides a directory of bookstores owned by peoples of Color in the U.S., and they encourage readers to shop there to push back against capitalist giant Amazon and the FBI COINTELPRO's destruction of Black bookstores (Amira et al., 2019 October 29).

Filled disproportionately with Black peoples, the prison industrial complex is multifaceted (Alexander, 2010), and part of its power lies in its knowledge prohibition efforts, which Noname's Book Club is subverting. Because prisons, which are populated by ostensibly unvirtuous, "bad" actors, have banned thousands of books under the pretense of prisoner safety (Holden, 2021), it is challenging for incarcerated individuals to acquire them. This censorship practice is not new, as Angela Davis (1972) noted the difficulty she experienced in accessing reading material during her imprisonment. It is common for U.S. prisons to "allow incarcerated people to receive only newspapers, books, and magazines directly from a publisher or from book clubs" (Holden, 2021 p. 108). Known as the *Publishers Only* rule (Holden, 2021), this regulation even hinders

incarcerated people from receiving reading material from family and friends (Sanchez, 2019). Directly subverting this attempt to ban knowledge, Noname's Book Club has recently begun adding to its roster chapters within prisons, with 14 local chapters now existing in total across the U.S. With community and inclusivity as guiding principles, the organization sends "hundreds of books to incarcerated comrades" (Noname Book Club, n.d.), ensuring that those within prisons can take part in a critical, contraband education practice despite their circumstance or status.

In all likelihood, it is doubtful that Noname expects to topple the U.S. prison industrial complex through this effort, demonstrating the racial realist dimension of her actions (Bell, 1992). Her subversion, however, does embody a salient act of resistance sure to frustrate white supremacy's domination. In making prohibited knowledge accessible to prisoners, who are disproportionately Black (Alexander, 2010), she is using her influence as a hip hop artist to provide a social critique, paired with insurgent action, of white supremacist capitalism through education—through books! Noname's Book Club exemplifies the current relevance of the culture wars in US society, showing how the culture wars are virtually incomprehensible absent an acute analysis of race, of Blackness and the complicated ways such interacts with traditional notions of morality.

Clapping Back: African Americans Studies in US Schools

"In history and the social studies," Zimmerman (2022) noted, "critics alleged that an emphasis on America's racial diversity—and particularly on its racist deeds—eroded students' reverence for their country. These battles reflect not just differences over specific educational policies, it often seems, but different ways of seeing the world" (p. 2). One view of the world became painfully clear when the state of Florida prohibited the new Advanced Placement (AP) African American Studies exam in early 2023. This direct attack on a formal educational space—a course, no less—was undeniable, and it highlights the lengths white supremacy will go to arrest teaching and learning in a forum commonly devoted to such virtuous activities. The move, yet again, exposed white supremacy's investment in maintaining and willingness to maintain its power through epistemic violence and annihilation. One might perceive, however, the existence of such a course as an indication of racial justice's progress in education. Given that the ethnic studies movement unfolded largely at the higher education level in the 1960s (Liu, 2018), additional challenges to such content at the k-12 level are expected (Camarota, 2017). Notwithstanding the class interests bound up in the College Board's AP exams, which are a major educational industry (Kaepernick et al., 2023), this specific course constituted subversive knowledge that critiqued the status quo. When Florida's political leaders administered this ban, they did so within a wider ecology of right-wing resistance to racial justice (James-Gallaway & Dixon, 2023). Thus, the marked contempt for Blackness in this act is conspicuous, especially as it stands to punctuate the culture wars of now.

Looking at the fight some of the original critical race theorists waged for racial justice reminds us that doubts about Black humanity often undergird hegemonic social concerns of moral panic (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Hartman, 2015; Matsuda et al., 1993). As we have shown, Blackness has consistently been at the center of the culture wars discourse, both now and in decades prior. For better or worse, education, formal and informal, has been and continues to be a critical site of these struggles. Critical race theorists and other scholars and activists concerned about Florida's ban on Black cultural thought point out that this state's actions are emblematic of larger trends permeating the entire country (Kaepernick et al., 2023). In making this observation, they have refused to despair (Bell, 1992) and instead furnished a path forward. Drawing on a racial realist

perspective (Bell, 1992), Kaepernick and colleagues (2023) have presented a major challenge to Florida's ban—and thereby all political entities working to thwart Black cultural thought in education—by publishing an edited volume that includes most of the ideas designated contraband. This companion text, *Our history has always been contraband: In defense of Black studies* (Kaepernick et al., 2023), stands to supplement the approved version of the AP African American Studies curriculum, which underwent major revisions following Florida's complaints. Thus, in supplying the insights deliberately removed from the curriculum, this volume embodies a longer tradition of renegade knowledge. It also helps clarify Blackness' place at the core of culture wars debates about education.

Assessing Black political mobilization in the civil rights movement, Crenshaw (1988) underscored that, “because rights that other Americans took for granted were routinely denied to Black Americans, Blacks' assertion of their ‘rights’ constituted a serious ideological challenge to white supremacy” (p. 1365). In the same vein, efforts such as those by Kaepernick and colleagues (2023) to directly subvert white supremacist hegemony constitute one of the ways educational stakeholders can resist, avoiding, as Mrs. MacDonald (Bell, 1992) did, “discouragement and defeat because at the point that she determined to resist her oppression, she was triumphant. Nothing the all-powerful whites could do to her would diminish her triumph” (p. 379). As with Sister Souljah, Lani Guinier, and the Oakland Unified School Board, daring to rewrite the narrative about Black insufficiency is a commendable—dare we say moral—act in and of itself. Getting to define the terms of triumph ought to give Black education stakeholders some resolve because the nation's culture, as it were, ebbs and flows with Blackness at the center, and education remains a pivotal site to witness its movements.

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