

Critical Education

Volume 16 Number 4 November 30, 2025 ISSN 1920-4175

“More beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said” 9/11, BLM, and the Creation of an American Identity

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Batt, J., Joseph, M., Brown, A. (2025). “More beautiful and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said”: 9/11, BLM, and the creation of an American identity. *Critical Education*, 16(4), 129-143. <https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v16i4.187038>

Abstract

We contend that September 11th (9/11) and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement were critical moments that challenged earlier notions of an American identity and the false pretenses of a racially, religiously, and culturally equitable United States. Using theoretical lenses of double consciousness and cultural memory, we further that the way newspapers present narratives of these events emphasizes how the memories of a country and who they think they are fluctuate and change throughout time. We end with implications for social studies spaces that explore 9/11 and the BLM movement’s impact on American national identity. We hope to critique how memories shaped by media outlets like newspapers reinscribe or counter previous notions of the American national identity.



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Introduction

On June 17, 1912, former President of the United States Theodore Roosevelt declared to the Republican National Convention in Chicago, Illinois, “This country will not be a permanently good place for any of us to live in unless we make it a reasonably good place for all of us to live in” (Hodgson, 2004). As the country listened and read about alliances forged between European nations throughout the continent and bubbling tensions brewing between rivals from across the Atlantic Ocean, the United States itself struggled with racial and religious discrimination domestically. A massive influx of immigrants into coastal cities like Boston, New York City, and San Francisco presented previous generations of Americans with a new face of the United States, a face unlike their own that often spoke a different native language, possessed a distinct phenotype, and engaged in unique cultural practices. Many immigrants who ventured thousands of miles by sea to the “Land of Opportunity” found themselves as scapegoats for political and economic issues in their new homeland (Takaki, 1993). The United States, touted as the “Land of Milk and Honey”, quickly soured for those who did not fit neatly into an English-speaking, white, and Protestant American identity, a feeling that many Arab, Asian, Black, Indigenous, Latiné, and/or LGBTQ2IA+ communities had already encountered decades prior and continue to experience today. Once you arrived on its shores—or even if you had been there far before the first English ship rolled into Roanoke—being ‘American’ was far more complex than residing in the country itself. The American identity and the capital it provided remained elusive, even when falsely presented as attainable. As time passed, this imagined American identity became a memory, perpetually reshaped and reshared through formal and informal discourses. As this occurs, the struggle to fashion a “reasonably good place for all of us to live in” also continues, even after the passing of constitutional amendments, sacrifices made by those involved in numerous civil rights movements, and steadfast convictions of individuals and groups dedicated to equity and freedom.

As we enter the twenty-first-century chapter of the United States, we believe two critical moments have impacted the orientation of the American identity and, subsequently, their reinscription into a country’s memory: September 11, 2001 (9/11) and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement’s inception in 2013. Guided by the question, how do critical moments shape the American identity?, we assert that these two critical moments challenge earlier notions of the American identity and the false pretenses of a racially, religiously, and culturally equitable nation. 9/11 and the BLM movement presented a mirror to the United States, emphasizing how the memories of a country and who they think they are fluctuate throughout time.

One medium that possesses this power to construct and transfer narratives into transcendent, nation-shaping memories is newspapers. Although waning in physical presence due to the expansion of social media platforms, newspapers in digital formats, such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, are read by millions on a daily basis. Newspaper platforms heavily publicized 9/11 and the BLM movement to many readers across the United States. Subsequently, articles about these critical moments often formed the foundation of people’s understandings of—and later, *memories* of—the events. This paper argues that the connections between the U.S.’s memory and identity play an integral role in how individuals view themselves and others, and how the media presents events, shaping how communities understand themselves as American.

If linkages between memory and identity do in fact shape U.S. identity, then how newspapers present events and communities must face constant analysis if integrity and truthfulness remain the bedrock of their aims. As educators and researchers in social studies

education, we are keenly aware of the importance of media, such as newspapers, amongst teachers because of the credibility associated with newspapers' in-depth informational gathering and professional journalistic reporting. Often, teachers use these sources to serve as quality secondary sources to teach their students about events like 9/11 and the BLM movement and engage in practices like critical historical inquiry and critical media analysis. Thus, incorporating newspapers into social studies spaces works in a twofold manner: it provides students with a formalized account of people and events that produces a fundamental memory, which prescribes the ever-evolving concept of American identity at that critical moment.

In this conceptual paper, we examine how events of 9/11 and the BLM movement shaped American national identity. We extend the notion of the beautiful/terrible that Baldwin mentions in his 1963 "A Talk to Teachers" and assert that America has a problem—one of many—that needs addressing: the supposed binary of America being a beautiful, patriotic nation, or one that is troubled and terrible. We propose rethinking that binary into a more fluid, gray state influenced by political and social discourses of the time and as informed by changes to American identity post-9/11 and the establishment of the BLM movement.

In this discussion, we start by focusing theoretically on how the making of memory influences the creation of national identity. A brief literature review follows, explaining how historical context and timing, issues of power involving race and ethnicity, and a dynamic U.S. cultural memory have shaped what the education and social studies fields know about the role that American identity plays in schools. We then provide the historical context of the two aforementioned critical moments, 9/11 and the BLM movement, and how they were presented by *The New York Times* in the early stages of each event, including the memorialization of each event, and how the recounting of these critical moments fabricated an "official" memory that also generated an American national identity.¹ To conclude, we contribute possible implications for social studies spaces that explore 9/11 and the BLM movement's impact on American national identity and/or critique how memories shaped by media outlets like newspapers reinscribe or counter previous notions of the American national identity.

Theoretical Framework

The theories that inform this paper are W.E.B. Du Bois's notion of *double consciousness* and *cultural memory*.

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois used double consciousness to describe the existential experience of being Black and American in the classic text, *The Souls of Black Folk*. He described the duality of this experience as two "warring ideals" and as two "unrecognized strivings" (Du Bois, 1903).

We expand this notion of double consciousness to explain that American identity vacillates between two conceptualizations of this nation. American identity formation can help advance a

¹ The authors of this piece do not advocate for the promotion of *The New York Times* due to the media platform's failures to provide a fair presentation of the conflicts in Palestine and condemnation of the genocide perpetuated by the Israeli settler colonial state. In addition, the authors are not economically, politically, or socially supported by other competing outlets like *The Wall Street Journal* or *The Washington Post*. Instead, we advocate and implore all media conglomerates to critically evaluate their own journalistic convictions and openly denounce the Israeli settler colonial state and the systematic dehumanizing and annihilation of the Palestinian peoples for over 75 years.

story that resides ubiquitously in telling the tale of America as a shining, glittery ‘city on a hill’, or a grand space of opportunity for all. In this context, anything running contrary to this narrative is viewed as not having the right civic and economic reasoning to reap the benefits of America. Thus, the other, a more cynical conceptualization, recognizes that America has not fulfilled its ideals, is mired in contradiction, and has not been able to achieve full and equal rights for all.

The core of Black intellectual thought and politics (Grant, Brown, & Brown, 2015), including the work of W.E.B. DuBois, advances a central critique that American national identity is a myth that helps to sustain raced and classed power constructs. In this sense, inequities exist because of the social structures of American society that seek to maintain a racially stratified society. In Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, he drew on the analogy of a “bad check” to illustrate how American ideals were as empty as a check marked insufficient funds. At the root of this critique, King’s metaphor of a “bad check” poignantly illustrates that white power was a racial and economic phenomenon grounded by the mythology of the American social contract. Dr. King’s critique of American nationalism suggested that an empty social contract was more in line with being a *racial contract* (Mills, 1997).

We understand that ideas of criticality help articulate how American national identity formation is also deeply rooted in the political economy. We define political economy as “a specific set of social relations organized around power or the ability to control other people, processes, and things, even in the face of resistance” (Mosco, 2009, p. 24). We particularly understand that advancing a national identity formation is central to power’s effectiveness, which helps bolster interests and material domination. In this sense, American national identity formation is not merely a discursive construct.

These notions of American identity resurface and take shape within historical moments, forming these two notions of national identity. In this sense, we also draw from the scholarship in cultural memory, which suggests that the cultural forms of a nation take shape through historical constructions of memory (Lowenthal, 1998). We maintain that ideas about American-ness as a city on a hill become accessed to preserve grand notions of American exceptionalism. In the same sense, ideas of America as a troubled and contradictory nation surface when the public confronts the reality that American ideals exist only for the privileged few.

In this paper, we draw from the public discourse of 9/11 and BLM to show how, in a moment, the dual notions of American ideals are accessed and deployed. We show through the media discourse that 9/11 helped to galvanize ideas of America as a solid and unified nation. We then show that the BLM movement helped to draw attention to America’s contradictions. We maintain that in these moments, discourses of race and nation surface. These moments show that memories of America remained enclosed by the dualities of race that highlight or demure the double consciousness of exceptionalism and cynicism.

Literature Review

Many have written about the role of national identity in education, specifically in schools and their humanities curriculums and, even more specifically, in social studies classes. How American identity shows up in schools swirls around themes of historical context and timing, critical education and issues of power involving race and ethnicity, and an ever-changing U.S. cultural memory.

Scholars have paid attention to timing and historical context's role when it comes to what gets taught in schools and how. While surges of curricular censorship and calls for patriotic content have ebbed and flowed throughout the history of U.S. public schools, one of the most notorious cases involved Harold Rugg in the 1940s. Rugg, previously a respected scholar and textbook writer and editor, was accused by the Advertising Federation of America and the American Legion, among others, of imbuing socialist propaganda into his popular textbooks, one of which covered social studies content (Evans, 2007). The controversial socialist ideas were, in fact, points that raised how the U.S. had strengths and weaknesses, including content that encouraged students to brainstorm how education could help overcome challenges the U.S. faced. The context of the U.S. involvement in WWII and a government-sponsored backdrop of unquestionable patriotism did no favors to Rugg's call for critical consideration of national improvement. This trend would continue into the 1990s culture wars, as debates about if the 'great speckled bird' of diversity caused help or harm to an American unified image ensued (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1993). This of course is alive and well into the 2020s, with the removal of entire curriculums and sometimes even whole libraries that touch on multicultural themes of LGBTQ2IA+, race and racism, and gender and sexism—not only in K-12, but increasingly, in university and collegiate public and private education systems as well (Aguirre, 2021). Such sharp spikes of censorship of educational materials, topics, and curricula have ridden waves of heightened national identity crises—times when arguments over what it means to be 'American' and what is patriotically at stake have contestedly tug-of-warred between liberal and conservative sides.

Critical education and issues of power involving race and ethnicity also immensely affect how national identity exists within formal school settings. Critical education, rooted in an inquiry-based exposure of the structures, policies, and hidden curriculums of authority in schooling, as well as an examination of the covert and overt resistances manifested in response to such hegemonic institutional inequities, address power as affected by intersectional pieces of social capital (Apple, 2023; Apple et al., 2009; Giroux, 1997). Where students and educators fall within society's racial and ethnic hierarchies are an undeniable part of how this social capital is valued—or denigrated—in school settings, which are anything but neutral to begin with (Jay, 2003). It also affects how students themselves engage with the curriculum, hidden or not. Expanding on this, how students understand and take up history and social studies content involving a national American identity depends on who those students are in terms of their own racial and ethnic identity (Epstein, 2010). The literature shows that students' identities, which include race, ethnicity, class, regional location, and much more, profoundly shape how they think of and take up national histories within the context of their social studies learning in schools (Childs, 2015; Halagao, 2004; Harris & Reynolds, 2014; Peck, 2010; Zevin, 2003). These identities enormously influence the way young people in schools experience the world, their country, and its stories of the past, especially if, for instance, Black students have both experienced personally and been the audience of home histories that conflict with an 'America the great' narrative white students might be more readily able to digest due to their racial privilege (Epstein, 2010). Not only do students and their racial and ethnic identities create complicated relationships with embracing a national American identity in curriculum, but the educational ideas and materials curriculum is made of do the same, with some texts and curriculums portraying an ever-changing, multicultural America and others a mythic settler nation imbued in individualism, with plenty of gray area in between the two versions (Foster, 1999; Hardwick et al., 2010; Journell, 2011; Korostelina, 2008).

Moreover, much literature has paid attention to the slippery, dynamic nature of the U.S.'s collective cultural memory and how attempts to solidly grasp it in school settings, much like the

social and community attempts to do so outside K-12 walls, is nearly impossible. Instead, it is a complex process largely dependent on the way nostalgia has bled into history, and on what narrative individuals and groups become acculturated by and readily able to buy into at the current moment (Levy, 2014; Lowenthal, 1998; Peck, 2010; Thelen, 1989; Trouillot, 1995). The challenges social studies and other educators face in schools when trying to present historical narratives immune from forces of nostalgia and popular culture are numerous, and only seem to multiply with increasingly polarized political contexts outside their door (DiGiacomo et al., 2021; Giroux, 1995; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). However, much literature has also drawn attention to how if schools and their educators embrace multicultural American national identities that are as ever-changing as the history they are trying to teach, then increased global civility and cultural tolerance, more robust democratic engagement, and expanded sense of youth citizenship grounded in more participatory understandings of civics can result (Benninga & Quinn, 2011; Reimers, 2006). Either way, current political stratification, stressors on testing, and a lessening curricular focus on social studies hinder such improvements, even as its content criticisms rise (Batt, 2023). If, as poet, songwriter, author, and educator Regie Gibson says, “Our problem as Americans is we actually hate history. What we love is nostalgia”, then teachers historically and currently face colossal pressure to teach nostalgia over the complex, multi-voiced histories that tell whole U.S. historical truths which complicate the notion, and veneration of, one national identity (Jeffries, 2018).

Methods

In this conceptual piece, we examined a collection of news materials for an overview analysis, mainly pulling from *The New York Times* (NYT) coverage of 9/11 and the BLM movement, both as in-the-moment events as news broke immediately around the phenomena and their events, and then as narratives told after the fact, reshaped by multiple perspectives, cultural memory, and new journalistic findings. They were chosen as the medium for our conceptual analysis because, although waning in their influence in a changing journalistic and social media backdrop, newspapers were integral in the way the American public both learned about and then memorialized 9/11 and the BLM movement, with the articles about these critical moments forming the foundation of the events’ narrative and cultural memory.

We each pulled over 50 articles covering 9/11 and BLM from the current NYT website, NYT archives, and other online repositories. We then examined the pieces, individually and manually coding, and analyzed them by noting patterns and themes, arriving at comparisons and contrasts, and determining conceptual explanations of the study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2020). Data was then analyzed again, focusing on the codes that emerged through the comparative process. The patterns, themes, and data comparisons discovered therein led us to the findings included in this study, and also informed the implications for schools.

It is also important to note that we identify as three cisgender researchers (one white-identifying woman, one Black-identifying man, and one Arab-American/white-identifying man), so our experiences are not only distinct from each other but also from the narratives we researched (Banks, 1998). We have all been teachers in secondary schools and now work for-collegiate institutions; our positionalities reflect the responsibility we possess as researchers and the importance of valuing individual and communal reflection through discursive practices.

Findings

The findings of this study showed three distinct themes: firstly, that conceptualizations of American identity have been strongly forged and changed course dramatically due to 9/11 and the BLM movement, critical events that have pressurized and thus altered what an American national identity means; second, that these conceptualizations of an American identity formed by such critical moments have significantly varied between what they present as American and patriotic at the onset of the phenomena or events, and what transpires, gets storied, and then shaped into what it means to be ‘American’ post event; and third, that these two critical moments and their subsequent public narratives in the news uniquely challenge earlier notions of the American identity and pretenses of the U.S. as a racially, religiously, and culturally equitable nation.

9/11 (September 11, 2001)

The Event

On the morning of September 11th, 2001, thousands of pedestrians in New York City and near Washington, D.C. watched as their morning commutes turned into a living nightmare. Others learned via radio and television of a strategically planned terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in downtown Manhattan, the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia, and a downed plane in an open field in Somerset County, Pennsylvania. First, American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, instantly killing everyone onboard and countless individuals at and above the 93rd story of the building. Almost twenty minutes later, a second plane, United Airlines Flight 175, slammed into the South Tower of the World Trade Center, again killing all passengers and crew and people between floors 77 and 85. Nearly 250 miles southwest of New York City, American Airlines Flight 77 struck the western side of the Pentagon. The sudden impact killed all aboard and around 125 workers inside the Pentagon. In less than an hour, the South Tower of the World Trade Center collapsed, trapping survivors and emergency first responders in suffocating rubble. Nearly four minutes later, passengers on United Airlines Flight 93 fought valiantly against four hijackers that would ultimately end in the plane crash-landing into an open field in Pennsylvania, killing all 44 individuals in the aircraft. In Manhattan, the North Tower of the World Trade Center toppled, hurling the building’s wreckage onto the street, covering the area in smoke and soot. In a little over two hours, four hijacked planes destroyed three significant American buildings and caused one of the most devastating events in United States history.

Across the world, billions of people speculated the identities of the perpetrators of such heinous, unprecedented violence and their motivation in doing so. The smoldering field and burning buildings galvanized government agencies like the Federal Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I.) and Central Intelligence Agency (C.I.A.) to work quickly amongst their national branches and reach out to international agencies for any leads about the incursion of safety on United States soil. Meanwhile, thousands of courageous firefighters, police officers, paramedics, doctors, and everyday citizens worked in frenzied unison to save as many individuals from the ruins as possible. Although official numbers still change to this day, an estimated three thousand people lost their lives on 9/11, with thousands of others sustaining short- and long-term injuries from the terrorist attack.

Its Memorialization Afterwards

In a seismic shift overnight, New York City, often viewed by outsiders as a city infested with drugs and danger, became the epicenter of the patriotic American identity (Rojas, 2019). The city's public servants, the New York City Fire Department (FDNY) and the New York City Police Department (NYPD) in particular found themselves as heroes celebrated for their valor, poster children of grit, dedication, and sacrifice amongst the American public (Barron, 2001; Schmemmann, 2001). The United States, still recovering from unfathomable tragedy, presented itself to the world as the bastion of resilient Western democracy, a phoenix rising from the ashes of a carnage caused by enemies that tried to extinguish the pillars of freedom, liberty, and justice (Hartig & Doherty, 2021; Schultz, 2008). A new lexicon and vocabulary overtook the nation, one of fear, terror, patriotism, and revenge (McGrath, 2011). If one believed in democracy and supported the United States, then one was an American.

However, one particular community found themselves unable to claim this: Arab and Middle Eastern/North African (MENA) Americans. The essentialization of Arab and MENA Americans and the false association with the extremist perpetrators of the attacks, Al-Qaeda, placed a condemning spotlight on the community (Bayoumi, 2009; Cankar, 2016, 2018; Naber, 2008). Memorialized by U.S. President George Bush's comment, "You are either with us, or you are with the terrorists" during his joint session with Congress and the American people on September 20, 2001 (Bush, 2001), Arab and MENA Americans were subject to public ostracization, acts of discrimination, and even racialized hate crimes (Civil Rights Division, 2015). Expounding further, reports of hate crimes towards Arab and MENA Americans rose exponentially in counties across the nation such as Los Angeles county in California, Maricopa county in Arizona, and Suffolk county in New York (Disha, Cavendish, & King, 2011). The violence directed at Arab and MENA Americans spotlighted a social hardening of what it meant to be "American" and ruptured the claim that the U.S. was a racially and equitably unified nation after 9/11.

The BLM (Black Lives Matter) Movement

The movement and its events

In 2013, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi formed the Black Lives Matter movement after the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). Martin, who was walking back from a convenience store with Skittles and a watermelon drink to his visiting family in Sanford, Florida, was fatally shot by Zimmerman. This neighborhood watch volunteer who killed Martin would later claim self-defense against the unarmed teenager who he had deemed 'suspicious'. Rallies such as Manhattan's 'Million Hoodie March' were led in protest and solidarity with Martin after his murder, as well as millions of tweets of Martin's name, fraught conversations around racial profiling and stand-your-ground laws, and comments from U.S. President Barack Obama saying how if he had a son, he would look like Trayvon Martin, and "if a white male teen was involved in the same kind of scenario that, from top to bottom, both the outcome and the aftermath might have been different" (Cohen, 2013). Martin's name would not be the first nor the last to be accompanied by #BlackLivesMatter protests, social media postings, and overall political and social outrage and organization. Through continued posts and the hashtag #BLM, people around the world saw racial violence and even death inflicted upon Black Americans such as Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, and Mike Brown, and responded with

outcry and activism, but also apathy and ideologies rooted in post-racial refusal and defensiveness of an ‘equal’ America.

Recently, the 2020 murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers once again challenged the notion of the American identity. Floyd, a Black man, father, and grandfather, was killed in police custody on May 25, 2020. Witnesses watched, filmed and cried for Derek Chauvin to stop as he apprehended Floyd for a supposed counterfeit twenty-dollar bill he used in a grocery store, then knelt on Floyd’s neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, causing Floyd to die from lack of oxygen (Bailey, 2021). Chauvin was later convicted on counts of both manslaughter and murder, and is currently serving out a 22-and-a-half-year sentence in prison. Floyd’s murder acted as a spark, with his last words of “I can’t breathe” rallying large-scale protests across the country demanding the reformation, defunding, and even all-out closure of police departments due to their histories of brutality, excessive force, violence, and dehumanization toward people of Color. Various and widespread Black Lives Matter street murals, school walkouts, newsroom debates, and Black Lives Matter-focused school curriculum generated activity and reckoning with if America was indeed a post-racial society and, if not, what needed to dramatically change. In turn, oppositional viewpoints stood on the premise that “law is the law” and that race plays no factor in American policing. Marches led by Black Lives Matter chapters saw protestors use their voice to call out systemic racism still pervasive in institutions like police forces, while also reminding those unaware that the promise of an equal America is just that...a promise.

Its Memorialization Afterwards

Once Black Lives Matter had taken hold after both Martin’s and Floyd’s deaths, both discourse and action ensued fiercely in multiple veins. One was a racial reckoning that showed up in continued protests and activism, revamped DEI curriculum in schools and racial sensitivity development in corporations, and an uneasy but naked look at how little America had progressed concerning racial equity not only since the 1950’s-’70’s Civil Rights Movement, but since the abolition of slavery (Burch et al., 2020). Calls that it was the largest movement in U.S. history, and a true “social change tipping point” for sustained political activism, even from white populations and especially from those under 35, abounded (Buchanan et al., 2020). Personal awakenings took over social media, renaming gestures attempted to right colonial and white supremacist pasts, and Black Lives Matter street art replaced toppled Confederate symbolism in major U.S. cities. But a growing and steady backlash crudely equated BLM and anti-racism with ‘anti-white’, and by 2022, an earlier rhetoric of hope had lapsed into a new narrative which accepted how “transformative national change proved to be an illusion”; Americans watched (or eagerly took part in) the demolition of the collective identity 2020’s Black Lives Matter had built, and saw as it faded and was replaced by calls for ‘less hate’ and ‘why is everything about race’, just as so many Black Lives Matter murals and graffiti got painted over, reduced and removed (Blow, 2022). While Black support for Black Lives Matter remained strong, white support sharply fell, accompanied by curricular attacks on race, removal of state DEI trainings, and hashtags such as #all/bluelivesmatter that went viral as police brutality continued to murder BIPOC (Kim & Wilson, 2020). With chapters around the U.S., the Black Lives Matter network continues to highlight a double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) mentioned earlier—one in which the collective nation stands falsely believing in a post-race society, while the other centers a nation willing to destroy Black bodies, and in doing so, the promise of equality.

Implications for Education and Schools

Concerning 9/11, the reality is that for most students, this is now distant history. Save a textbook photo of the Twin Towers on fire, young people have little textural connection to the events of 9/11, and how the aftermath of the tragedy spun the country into a tri-fold path of war and violence in the Middle East, severe Islamophobia at home, and an extreme veneration of an America that never quite was in cultural memory—one that fought for the right reasons, protected everyone’s freedoms at home, and rejected violence on its home soil. Students already know a different set of national truths: parents and loved ones came home from the War on Terror with physical and psychological scars as testament to a U.S. policy failure so deep we are still living with the repercussions today; Islamophobia still lives on in the current-day genocide in Palestine and the U.S.’s lack of intervention and official call for a permanent cease-fire; and violence at home was hardly eradicated by post-9/11 efforts, a fact that haunts young people as they endure monthly school shooting drills and worse. Giving students the space to connect these dots, and draw primary-and secondary-source-based conclusions on how the events of 9/11 have both influenced, and failed to influence, changes in how America perceives herself is a powerful pedagogical strategy. It allows for expanded student understandings of the changing nature of a U.S. national identity that is often built on the sands of whichever cultural memory best serves those in economic and political power in the country at that time. It also allows for understandings of how to push back on these nostalgia-fueled tenets of political economy.

In relation to social studies, collective memory, and American identity, the BLM movement opens a pathway for critical educators to present to their students the complexity of the American identity. Works such as Jones and Hagopian’s *Black Lives Matter at School* (2020) provide interviews and strategies for students to examine how critical moments in relation to BLM reshape who is an American and what they, as students, can do to play a role in historical changemaking. Expounding further, the presentation of Black Lives Matter, its protests against racial injustice, and the responses by media outlets to BLM actions afford teachers and students a wealth of opportunities to discuss how formal (ex: *NYT*) and informal (ex: Instagram) mediums reinforce and/or supplant notions of the American identity. This work remains as essential as ever, as the social studies field witnesses the passing of anti-CRT, “Don’t Say Gay”, and other dehumanizing bills by conservative state legislators that seek to silence discussions of America and its complicated, if not sordid, relationship to race and racism. If, as Giroux (1997) says, we are living “at a time when democracy is in retreat” (p. 95) in a post-2024-election U.S., wherein political leadership actively threatens the rights and everyday livelihoods of BIPOC, women, LGBTQ2IA+ community members, and other non-white/cis/male/Christian groups in all their intersections, now is a time for students to examine the media’s hidden curriculum and how it has bled into social studies teaching in schools.

Conclusion

Our focus on the changing dynamic of American national identity formation highlights how moments in time alter the American story. Once again, we argue that the double consciousness of American national identity remains rooted in the tension between American idealism and racial realism (Bell, 1992). However, we maintain that specific moments in time help make a version of that national identity surface, as in the case of 9/11 and the BLM movement. While in each instance of 9/11 and BLM movement, both drew on existing notions of an American past, each moment helped to galvanize a new way of reasoning about American national identity in its own way.

The critical moments of 9/11 and the actions of the BLM movement in the wake of Trayvon Martin's (2013) and George Floyd's (2020) murders, have both (re)membered and (re)covered American identity into poles of beautiful (something to save, protect, cherish) and terrible (something to protest, radicalize, change). These moments have also muddied the water between the two conceptions, further deepening and complicating what it means to be American and love America. Thus, both events provide a way for teachers to talk to students, in social studies contexts and otherwise, about how what it means to be American has always been shifting, changing, and susceptible to events in history that have caused the public and its news outlets to redefine a greater, newer national identity. Furthermore, both events can help students understand the chasm between what American patriotism has promised in the wake of nation-shaping events (renewed 'freedom' post-9/11 that concentrated anti-Arabism and Islamophobia; calls for racial equality left unanswered in policy that were later weaponized in DEI pushback efforts post-BLM protests) and how there is so much work yet to be done towards becoming a truly equitable nation.

It's safe to argue, therefore, that now that we are on the other side of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, the dual consciousness of American national identities will surface again. A critical, primary-source based discourse on 9/11 and BLM in a classroom space allows for not only an examination of the space between America as an idea and America as a reality and why the nation keeps falling short, but a discussion about why certain brands of national identity keep insisting that we *aren't* in fact falling short at all, and who that belief serves. Students need opportunities to ground in actual history and dissect an American national identity that stares back from a clear mirror, *and* confrontations with a misty cultural memory of a national identity that maintains a patriotic U.S. narrative, so they can ask why such differing versions exist, and continue to proliferate, in the first place.

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Critical Education

criticaleducation.org

ISSN 1920-4175

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