



Deep in the heart of Texas: History's Lessons for Black (social studies) Teachers Prioritizing Racial Justice

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ABSTRACT

From my position as a Black social studies teacher educator and interdisciplinary historian of education who calls Texas home, I explore in this essay how critical educators might consider what some of Texas's most recent "diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)" statutes signify about the effectiveness of critical Black social studies teachers' work thus far. I underline what Nobel laureate Toni Morrison said about the heightened restriction she faced given her writing: that it can often indicate our work is indeed disrupting the ongoing, systemic project of white domination and antiBlack subordination. Then, I highlight how Black educators of the Jim Crow era navigated political atmospheres comparable to the one in which Texas educators, among others, now find themselves. Looking back at these educators' subversive practices, which sought to undermine the status quo of white supremacy and antiBlackness, I suggest how their work might guide those engaged in similar projects today.

Published July, 2024

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DOI [10.29173/assert75](https://doi.org/10.29173/assert75)

Pages: 15-24

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Keywords: Texas, social studies, Black Education, DEI

INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that much of the state of Texas represents a bastion of conservative ideologies that prop up white supremacy and antiBlackness alongside other forms of oppression. I say this as someone who calls Texas home, whose ancestors have resided here for at least six generations—since our enslavement. For many social studies teachers, perhaps the most recent indications of such are in the state legislature's efforts to obstruct diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in education.

It is overwhelming to think about what this atmosphere must mean for Black social studies teachers, particularly those who strive to humanize Blackness in their work. Many are likely navigating feelings of angst, fear, and exhaustion nuanced by a longstanding commitment to Black education. What many of these educators likely understand is that these issues move in reform and retrenchment cycles (Crenshaw, 1987; James-Galloway & Dixson, 2022), episodes of social progress that are halted, derailed, or wholly reversed often by groups committed to the racial status quo (Hamilton, 2021). Nonetheless, the pointed opposition Black educators face, particularly in the state's social studies classrooms, presents an especially precarious circumstance where such educators must contemplate how they do their racial justice work while maintaining their livelihoods.

In this short paper, I, a Black social studies teacher educator and interdisciplinary historian of education, offer some scholarly insights on how such educators might consider what this concerted challenge signifies about the effectiveness of their work thus far and the historical resonance of this moment in the context of Black education. I place these comments against a political backdrop highlighting some of the most threatening statutes. I close by discussing notions of progress in endeavoring to continue the work of Black freedom fighters in the struggle for racial justice in education.

THE RESEARCH: Politics, Texas Style

On the heels of the Supreme Court's ban on Affirmative Action in college admissions (Sherman, 2023, June 29), Texas' 2023 state legislative session was one for the history books. Although white male Republican Senator Bryan Hughes' proposed bill, Texas Senate Bill 16 (2023), which aimed to ban critical race theory in higher education, did not pass, its premise sent a chilling message to all educators across the state, including those working in K-12 schools, about daring to prioritize, for example, historical accounts of this country that highlight the centrality of racism (Texas AFT, 2023, July 14). Working to understand racism from the experiences of those who suffer it, critical race theory is rooted in legal studies, studied primarily in post-baccalaureate programs, clarifies how the law fails to arbitrate

justice neutrally and explains why racism continued after the civil rights movement (Crenshaw et al., 1995). The bill warned that making such an instructional choice could put educators at odds with the many state lawmakers who supported it.

Texas Senate Bill 17 (2023), however, did pass. Introduced by white male Republican Senator Brandon Creighton, this bill sought to prohibit diversity, equity, and inclusion programs on public higher education campuses. In practice, diversity offices were shuttered, consideration of race or ethnicity in hiring ended, and diversity training to guard against sexism, for instance, was discontinued. Furthermore, hiring committees are no longer allowed to require faculty candidates to give statements explaining their commitment to diversity.

The final installment of the trio, Texas Senate Bill 18 (2023), intended to ban tenure for university faculty members. Although the bill that passed was a blunted version of the initial proposal, the final bill, according to the TX AFT (2023, July 14), “significantly limited the employment protections established by tenure” (para. 15). Also introduced by Creighton, Texas Senate Bill 18 now makes it easier to terminate a faculty member for “professional incompetence” or if they involve themselves in “conduct involving moral turpitude,” vague phrases open to subjective interpretation.

Alongside broader book bans in K-12 schools (Schwartz, 2023, Oct. 11), 2023 also saw “the Texas State Board of Education pass ... a policy ... prohibiting what it calls ‘sexually explicit, pervasively vulgar or educationally unsuitable books in public schools’” (Ulaby, 2024, Jan. 24, para. 3). This effort built on white male Republican state representative Matt Krause’s 2021 list of more than 800 titles that he argued could “make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress because of their race or sex” (Chappell, 2021, Oct. 28, para. 1). What is centrally prioritized in such thinly veiled concerns are the feelings of white children who identify with other mainstream social groups. To fight back, some Texas high schoolers have collaborated with supportive teachers to create a secret bookshelf to access these banned books (Ulaby, 2024, Jan. 24).

In culmination, these Bills and bans significantly implicate K-12 social studies education. In addition to “prevent[ing] educators, for fear of incurring threatened penalties, from teaching about the role of racism in U.S. history and engaging students in meaningful discussions about race,” they also stand to “increase the chances that the next generation of students will remain uninformed of the racial history of the United States and its legacy and will thus come of age unmotivated—and unequipped—to improve upon it” (Hamilton, 2021, p. 61). This threat is especially daunting for educators who prepare K-12 teachers and work on higher education campuses.

Nobel laureate Toni Morrison knew firsthand of Texas’s prohibitive practices. She understood

these measures to repress her work as an indication of their importance and effectiveness. Morrison explained that she has “a little framed document in my bathroom, a [1998] letter from ... Texas Bureau of Corrections, saying that *Paradise* [(1998)] was banned from the prison because I might incite a riot. And, I thought, ‘How powerful is that? [laughs] I could tear up the whole place’” (Greenfield-Sanders, 2019). Many of Morrison’s novels continue to be banned (Falcon, 2023, Oct. 28), suggesting to her that the ideas in her writing are powerful and subversive. Framing this letter and putting it in her bathroom, Morrison acknowledged the notification’s significance, but in a sarcastically glib way by hanging it in a room widely considered unsanitary. Thus, she took this letter as confirmation that her work challenged the oppression that dominant forces in Texas and across the globe apply to undermine the lives of Black people and other marginalized groups. Morrison’s treatment of this message literally and figuratively shows us one way to engage in Texas social studies classrooms.

FINDINGS: Lessons from our Past: The Deliberate Stealth of Black Educators

Black educators were the invisible thread that bound them together and made possible U.S. school desegregation (Siddle Walker, 2018). Although organizations like the NAACP and African American attorneys like Thurgood Marshall are often credited, “these educators ... employed a visible network to operate secret strategies” (p. 4) because “fighting school segregation was indeed a covert operation for Black educators” (Heller, 2019, pp. 45-46). In fact, “the secrecy was necessary” to prevent information leaks and counter-strategizing, “but mostly the secrecy was meant to protect people [because it] was ... dangerous to ... com[e] forward to petition for better school buildings, textbooks, transportation, smaller classes and such could get an educator fired, harassed, or killed” (Heller, 2019, pp. 45-46).

Pathbreaking teacher Septima Clark of South Carolina, for example, was fired when her membership to the NAACP became public knowledge (James-Galloway & Dixson, 2023). By all accounts, the threat was real.

Ultimately, these educators viewed the goal of enhancing Black education as essential, so they strategized with precision to see it through. They knew that the broader institutions in which they were working did not want to see Black education improve, so they created ways to link resources and advance their agenda in ways that kept their identities and influence primarily private. It was not until recently, with the publication of Siddle Walker’s 2018 book, that such maneuvering became evident. “The power of perception and the creation of illusion,” she asserted, were “ways to effect change” (Siddle Walker, 2018, p. 6).

Although many, including myself (James-Galloway, 2021, 2022, 2019; James-Galloway & Ward

Randolph, 2021) view school desegregation's complicated legacy as a mixed bag, it is in many ways marked by a fundamental fight to get more and better-quality resources for Black students, educators, and communities. As a result, it is important to see the efforts of such Black educators as indicative of how Black educators and co-conspirators today might organize to advance racial justice in Texas and beyond.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Many know to expect resistance when racial justice gains advance. Knowing pushback will come, however, does not make fighting it any less difficult. Though it may have to look different for a spell, the teaching of Black history and intersectional Black oppression more broadly in this atmosphere persists in many places (Alfonseca, 2022, Feb. 23). Drawing on the lessons of our ancestors can empower Black social studies teachers today to stay in the struggle, combine forces to organize in stealth and recognize the importance of the work they have already done.

I do not need to dictate precisely how this path forward looks. I can say with certainty, though, that many of the freedom fighters in classrooms right now know, as they are part of the reason the legislature felt it vital to impose such restrictions in the first place. As noted, I am inclined to say that broader collaboration with students, their caretakers, community elders, and working-class and impoverished African Americans can be part of the plan. To be crystal clear, I am not encouraging teachers to sacrifice their livelihoods by breaking the law only to find themselves less capable of supporting the students and communities in greatest need; I am, however, advocating that they see the issue as more significant than one they or schools can address in isolation and draw on the historic legacy of fugitivity that has long been foundational to iterations of the Black freedom movement (Gumbs, 2016).

What I do know is that effectively subverting the system has not historically involved transparently broadcasting one's plans. So, when progress manifests additional restrictions, make room for these sanctions either on secret bookshelves (Ulaby, 2024, Jan. 24) or on the bathroom wall (Greenfield-Sanders, 2019).

Q & A WITH [AUTHOR(S) NAME(S)]

Question #1

Teacher's Question:

What might “wider collaboration with students, their caretakers, community elders, and working class and impoverished African Americans being part of the plan” look like in a Black social studies teachers’ classroom?

ArCasia's Response:

This political issue was not created in isolation and, therefore, cannot be meaningfully addressed in schools alone. Although classrooms might offer some spaces for collaboration, they cannot serve as the only sites of such action. As a broader social and community matter, redress must be fomented in and with the communities in which Black children and their teachers are nestled.

Question #2

Teacher's Question:

What are some of the biggest challenges of the “stealth pedagogy” to which the author alludes? What are some recommended ways for Black teachers to prepare for these challenges and meet them proactively, without “transparently broadcasting their plans”?

Question #3

Teacher's Question:

What are some examples of resources and organizations Black educators can access for support in current divisive times?

ArCasia's Response:

In implementing stealth pedagogy, teachers may face challenges related to knowing where their colleagues or students stand on social issues, making it difficult to organize and shore up support. To mitigate these challenges and others that may arise, teachers might consider establishing or strengthening community partnerships that can provide extra-school avenues and resources, such as religious hubs or community centers like the Boys and Girls Club, to access Black history education, akin to a Freedom Schools model (Perlstein, 1990).

ArCasia's Response:

Because this issue is still emerging and many of my suggestions involve deliberate discretion, it proves counterintuitive to name specific resources or organizations that might support teachers in this effort. Social media, however, represents a powerful and effective tool for stealth organizing (e.g., Arab Spring) that can lend itself to related matters.

Question #4**Teacher's Question:**

What next steps can you offer Black educators who may be on their last rope educating in the most restrictive states like Texas and Florida?

ArCasia's Response:

I encourage these educators to remember that they did not create these circumstances and that they alone cannot improve them. Progress in this regard is reserved for a group—a community—of folks with a similar vision of justice. Finding or creating this community has historically been and remains vital to the project of Black education. Remember, it is truly a marathon, not a sprint, and much of the resistance against white supremacy, even if ultimately unsuccessful, is important because Black humanity is measured in part by our will to fight against racial oppression (Bell, 1992).

Question #5**Teacher's Question:**

Are there ways in which white teachers might be useful allies in the struggle (without making it about themselves)?

ArCasia's Response:

Often, this longer struggle has historically involved non-Black co-conspirators committed to amplifying (not co-opting) the central purpose of a movement, assuming blame when Black people doing so would render them vulnerable to greater harm, and facilitating the reallocation of resources in the way of racial justice (e.g., Perlstein, 1990). Non-Black co-conspirators of today could do the same.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am an assistant professor at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, which is in the United States. My ultimate, professional goal is to become a leading expert on the history of African American education and the leading expert on the history of Black education in Texas. In reaching these goals, I hope to work with k-12 classroom educators to make academic histories, which rarely travel beyond the ivory tower, more accessible to k-12 students. I am inspired to do this work by my former students to whom I taught secondary humanities both internationally and abroad. My research focuses on African American struggles for educational justice, primarily in the past; I look at this issue from a variety of angles, including pre-collegiate Black history education. I remain invested in continuing to grow as a professional, learning at the feet of Black elders from my home community, Waco, through oral history. Their stories about surviving school desegregation in the 1970s is the focus of my book project. More personally, I have developed an affinity for weight training in the last few years and am slowly improving my care practices for several very low maintenance house plants.