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Q. & A.

THE MEANING OF AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES

The discipline emerged from Black struggle. Now the College Board wants it to be taught with barely any mention of Black Lives Matter.

By Keeanga-Yamahitta Taylor

February 3, 2023



Robin D. G. Kelley, a professor of history at U.C.L.A., notes that there is currently “a general assault on knowledge, but specifically knowledge that interrogates issues of race, sex, gender, and even class.” Photograph by Keith Oshiro

On Wednesday, February 1st, the first day of Black History Month, the College Board released its long-awaited curriculum for a new Advanced Placement class in African American studies. Two weeks earlier, the Florida Department of Education had rejected the course, claiming that it “lacks educational value and is contrary to Florida law.” Then, nearly a week later, Manny Diaz, Jr., the state’s commissioner of education, released a flyer listing his complaints, based on a pilot version of the course. They included the fact that there were units on intersectionality and activism, Black queer studies, “Black Feminist Literary Thought,” reparations, and “Black Study and the Black Struggle in the 21st Century.” The Movement for Black Lives—which brought out the largest demonstrations in American history, in the summer of 2020, with more than twenty million people participating—was dismissed as a topic of study.

When the College Board released the revised curriculum, all of the sections that Florida complained about had been removed. Representatives of the nonprofit have insisted that they were already planning to revise the pilot version, and that the onslaught from Florida had nothing to do with their changes. It is certainly believable that the preliminary version of the class would have been revised, but it is unbelievable that right-wing complaints did not influence the final outcome. Trevor Packer, the head of the Advanced Placement Program, told *Time* magazine, last summer, that the Movement for Black Lives had inspired a renewed effort to get the class under way. He said, “The events surrounding George Floyd and the increased awareness and attention paid towards issues of inequity and unfairness and brutality directed towards African Americans caused me to wonder, ‘Would colleges be more receptive to an AP course in this discipline than they were 10 years ago?’ ” It is hard to reconcile that inspiration with the decision to excise almost all mention of Black Lives Matter, intersectionality, police brutality, or any of the litany of issues that shape the experiences of Black people in the United States. Indeed, there is barely any mention of the Black rebellions of the nineteen-sixties, which were the backdrop to the demands of Black students that Black studies be included in college and university curricula. These omissions undermine the legitimacy of the A.P. course and the College Board itself. They also diminish the power of Black studies to make sense of our contemporary world.

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On Wednesday evening, I spoke to Robin D. G. Kelley, a professor of history at U.C.L.A. and one of the authors whose work was removed from the revised course. (My work was listed as secondary reading in the pilot curriculum; it has also been removed.) In our conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity, we discussed the history of African American studies, its connection to political struggle, and the consequences of the College Board’s actions.

What is Black studies? Why is this not just Black history?

This course is not by any stretch of the imagination a course in African American studies. The College Board says African American studies is an interdisciplinary approach, with the rigors of scholarly inquiry, to analyze the history, culture, and contributions of people of African descent in the U.S., and throughout the African diaspora. But this is not the definition of African American studies, Africana studies, Black studies at the university level.

The way that we teach it, in the way that I came up, is really about examining Black lives: the structures that produce premature death, that make us vulnerable; the ideologies that both invent Blackness and render Black people less than human; and, perhaps most important, the struggle to secure a different future. And so, therefore, a lot of it’s about interrogating racial categories,

understanding the persistence of inequality, how this is shaped by the very foundations of Western thought, which is to say, it's not about making Black people feel better. It's not about your accomplishments. I'm sure that comes in. But, as a scholarly endeavor, it tries to understand how Black people came into being in the modern world—how that process through kidnapping, enslavement, the extraction of labor, the extraction of ideas, was foundational to the modern world. And, finally, the way that African people really tried to remake and re-envision that world, through art, through ideas, through social movements, through literature, through study in action. That's what I understand it to be. And that's not really in this curriculum.

So what do you think happened with the College Board and this course?

There's two levels. One is that it's about Ron DeSantis possibly running for President. I think that's the most important thing, because, no matter what we think about DeSantis and his policies, we know he went to Yale University, and majored in history and political science with a 3.7 G.P.A., which means that he was at one of the premier institutions for history. That's why I get frustrated when people say he needs to take a class. He took the class. He knows better. He knows that the culture wars actually win votes. He's trying to get the Trump constituency.

So I think this is about Ron DeSantis wanting to run for President. But I also think that the focus on Florida occludes a bigger story. As you know, this goes back to the Trump years—well before Trump, but let's just talk about the Trump years—the attack on the 1619 Project, Chris Rufo's strategy of turning critical race theory into an epithet by denying it any meaning whatsoever. And creating a buzzword. That's actually a strategy that has nothing to do with the field of African American studies; it has everything to do with vilifying a field—attacking the whole concept of racial justice and equity. So, to me, if DeSantis never banned the class, we would still be in this situation. And although it is true that a number of states did accept the pilot program for the A.P. class, some of those same states have passed, or are about to pass, laws that are banning or limiting what they're calling critical race theory. So there is a general assault on knowledge, but specifically knowledge that interrogates issues of race, sex, gender, and even class.

It's an ongoing struggle to roll back anything that's perceived as diminishing white power. They want to convince white working people—the same white working people who have very little access to good health care and housing, whose lives are actually really precarious, as they move from union jobs to part-time, concierge labor to make ends meet—that somehow, if they can get control of the narrative inside classrooms, their lives would be better. Racism actually damages all of our prospects and futures.

I don't think it's an accident that the people who are targeted are you, Angela Davis, myself, bell hooks. To say that we're not radical would be a lie. What does radical actually mean? What it means, what Black studies is about, is trying to understand how the system works and recognizing that the way the system works now benefits a few at the expense of the many. It's easy to allow someone to come in, in the name of Black status, and say, "We're going to talk about ancient Africa, and the great achievements of the Kush of ancient Egypt." That's not a threat—not as much as the idea of critical race theory saying that, no matter what policies and procedures and

legislation are implemented, the structure of racism, embedded in a capitalist system, embedded in a system of patriarchy, continues to create wealth for some and make the rest of our lives precarious. Precarious in terms of money, precarious in terms of police violence, precarious in terms of environmental catastrophe, precarious in many, many ways. And I think people could agree with me that that's why we do this scholarship: because we're trying to figure out a way to make a better future. You know, that's the whole point. And if that's subversive, then say it, but it's definitely not indoctrination, because indoctrination is a state that bans books.

I think one of the ways that this discussion about African American studies has been distorted is that the right claims that, if you are radical and on the left, it is disqualifying as a teacher and an author. In an article published by *National Review* about the A.P. course, the author said that you were prima-facie disqualified, because your first book was about the Communist Party in Alabama. If you have radical ideas, or radical politics, they claim, you're more interested in indoctrination than you are in teaching. And so I wonder how you would respond to that—if parents are concerned that, because you are a socialist, or an activist, or embrace, you know, causes on behalf of people, you can't teach objectively.

Right, of course it's ridiculous. We have outright conservatives—sometimes just actual confessed white supremacists—who are teaching at all levels. Stanley Kurtz, who wrote that article, was a professor, he got a Ph.D. And he's writing for a partisan publication. But his credentials are not in question. In fact, he not only is doing that but he's doing something neither one of us is doing: he's writing legislation—literally writing legislation for states to ban critical race theory. [In an e-mail, Kurtz acknowledged that a Texas C.R.T. law was partly based on model legislation he authored.]

Our job, as educators, is to open up all students to the world—which is the root of university, *universitas*. We can do that and still take a political perspective, because we are actual people, right? What I think would disqualify any teacher is to say, “You know what, we're not going to touch that. That's off limits.” Unless it's some made-up, useless piece of information. Generally, we teach in a way that opens up debate and discussion. We encourage disagreement, between us and our students or between students. We don't necessarily reveal in our classes what our political stakes are. We choose readings that are across the board. And the evidence of it is there in the syllabi, it's there in the actual teaching evaluations, it's there in the colleagues who decide that we're worthy of being hired.

I always tell my students, “I don't need you to think like me, I need you to think for yourself. And I'm here to help you think critically about everything, and to ask a million questions and try to figure out how to answer them.” It is the right that is actually saying, “Don't read this book, don't listen to this person, don't have this conversation.” I don't know if that's ironic—it's just rank hypocrisy. In the so-called concern about the left ruling the campuses, what we actually have is an onslaught by the right wing to control what we read, who we talk to, and what we talk about.

It's funny, because they were trying to attack you when you tweeted that the police are not actually helping us and that we have to think about abolition—and yet no one is called into account for arguing that we actually need more police and we need to spend more money. They're both actual political positions. They're positions that could be argued, rationally, with evidence.

It's all politics; it's just whose politics do you agree with? They want to teach the 1776 Commission, and think that that is O.K., even though that is also a political viewpoint of the world. It's looking at American history through a particular kind of lens, and that's O.K. But, if you look at it through a different lens, through a different set of experiences, then it's somehow indoctrination, propaganda, and something that should be dismissed.

And yet, despite all of these contradictions, they have a tremendous amount of momentum. The 1619 Project has been banned in many localities. Every day, there's a new state that is finding some way to ban the discussion of critical race theory. What happens next?

I work with a number of organizations, but one in particular, called Communiversity, is a project of Black workers for justice in North Carolina. And what we've been talking about is what they're talking about in Detroit, which is going back to the Freedom Schools idea. The United States might look like Mississippi did in 1960. So, if we cannot provide a fair and objective and useful education in public schools, then movements will have to create alternative institutions and structures.

On the other hand, it's worth fighting at the legislative level, at the school-board level. And the thing is, the grounds for this were established a long time ago. Do you remember, back in the nineteen-nineties, the whole movement to eliminate school boards and put schools in the hands of mayors? And I'm not talking about the South. I'm talking about New York, Chicago, places like that, saying that somehow school boards are tainted. Why? Because they're grassroots, or have some kind of relationship to the community.

So the fact is that we've been moving in this direction, where you have government input into a public education. Florida is a good example, where the former governor Rick Scott was promoting special incentives for high schools that develop STEM programming and none for those that invest in the humanities at the public-school level. Now, this may not sound like an attack on critical race theory, but it's certainly an attack on critical thinking. What they want to do is reduce public schools to vocational schools. Meanwhile, if you're rich, and you go to private school, you could do anything you want. You can read the best of literature, you can read the best of art criticism, you can be free—and that is your ticket to Yale, Princeton, Harvard, Stanford, and to do whatever the hell you want to do. So it is reproducing this kind of class inequality. The architecture for doing so is already there.

There is one last thing I want to ask you just to reflect on, about African American history. Black people were brought to this country to be slaves. And we were enslaved for hundreds of years. And then, when slavery ended, we were legally subjugated for another hundred years. And so it stands to reason that the entirety of Black letters would be completely bound up in questions of struggle, resistance, rebellion. And these are the very issues, topics, and histories that DeSantis and the right are trying to extract from the teaching of Black history. So I was wondering if you could talk some about the development of Black studies, which is a discipline that emerges out of this long struggle that Black people have been engaged in, because of the conditions under which we were brought to this country and the conditions that have been foisted upon us to try to resist.

I would just amplify everything you said: the subject of African American studies, even before it was called that, has been not just the condition of Black people but the condition of the country. And not just narrating that oppression and understanding it, and not just trying to think about ways to move beyond it—to transcend it, to come up with strategies to try to live—but also understanding what’s wrong with this country, with the system.

We’re not just interrogating our lives, we’re interrogating knowledge production itself. And this is the thing that frustrates me, and I keep reminding people: when we look at what’s being banned, it’s anti-racist literature, not racist literature. I’ve never seen any book ban against Thomas Jefferson’s “Notes on the State of Virginia,” or John C. Calhoun, or Edmund Ruffin’s “The Political Economy of Slavery,” or Samuel Cartwright, George Fitzhugh, Louis Agassiz. They wrote straight-up scientific racism that has been discredited. And yet those books are not being banned. What’s banned is Toni Morrison. And I’m not saying that those racist books need to be banned. We need to read that, we need to know it. But that they are not the books being banned—what does that tell us?

So much of that work, including by W. E. B. Du Bois, what they were trying to do is write texts that both understand and push back against a whole edifice of extraction, oppression, dispossession. And you would think that anyone who really believes in the American creed, who believes in what the Declaration of Independence says, is going to defend anything that tries to make the nation better—that tries to recognize that, you know, all people are created equal.

But it’s always an uphill battle. Because we could talk about the actual physical brutality that this country is built on. But it’s also built on the scholarship or the mythologies that are written in texts and taught in schools at every single level, that keep reproducing the same structure of knowledge. Black studies is supposed to be an epistemological break, and that’s why it’s dangerous—because it actually wants to try to figure out a way to make this country not racist. ♦

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Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor is a contributing writer at The New Yorker. She is the Leon Forrest Professor of African American Studies at Northwestern University and the author of several books, including "Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership," which was a 2020 finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for history.

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