

Teaching Critically in Contentious Times

Black Consciousness, Historical Knowledge, and Educational Policy

LaGarrett J. King and Daniella Cook Sumpter

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[See table of contents](#)

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL SECTION OF *CRITICAL EDUCATION*:
TEACHING CRITICALLY IN CONTENTIOUS TIMES

Teaching Critically in Contentious Times *Black Consciousness, Historical Knowledge, and* *Educational Policy*

LaGarrett J. King
University at Buffalo, SUNY

Daniella Cook Sumpter
University of South Carolina

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Let's begin by saying that **we are living through a very dangerous time**. Everyone in this room is in one way or another aware of that. We are in a revolutionary situation, no matter how unpopular that word has become in this country. **The society in which we live is desperately menaced**, not by Khrushchev, **but from within**. To any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible – and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people – must be prepared to “go for broke.” Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, **you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance**. There is no point in pretending that this won't happen. (James Baldwin, 1963, emphasis ours)

Baldwin's (1963) prescient *A Talk to Teachers* reminds us that times have *always* been dangerous and contentious for educators committed to teaching about the United States honestly. This special issue, *Teaching Critically in Contentious Times*, is important for scholars and practitioners who believe in the transformational possibilities of critical education. Some may automatically align this issue as a response to the U.S. conservative backlash against racially conscious education. To be clear, readers should understand that those who practice critical education are rarely “safe” as the practice has always been polarizing and those who teach criticality in the classroom are always vulnerable. We cannot ignore, however, our current circumstances. Critical education at all educational levels (PreK-20) is under attack.

The backdrop of the United States and the 47th Presidential Administration stems from the height of the 2020 COVID pandemic when conservative politicians and operatives, led by then-President, Donald Trump, convinced a segment of the U.S. population that teachers were indoctrinating students to hate the United States and white people. This led to a 2020 Executive Order banning “divisive concepts” in schools and government agencies ([Executive Order No. 13950, 2020](#)). These groups attacked and co-opted academic terminology such as Critical Race Theory (CRT), anti-racism, and diversity training as anti-white racism and an assault on American ideals and values. These efforts resulted in several states banning CRT - read as any topics related to teaching about race, racism, and other related topics identified and deemed by conservative ideologues – in local and state school boards of education, educators being fired, and hundreds of books being banned in schools and libraries across the country.

While many of the federal policies were reversed during the administration of President Joseph Biden, societal and political discourse remained entrenched. Recently, there has been renewed vigor to extend these attacks on teachers and critical education at the federal level. In his first few weeks of 2025, newly re-elected President Trump signed a handful of Executive Orders dedicated to education, including the *Ending Radical Indoctrination in Schools*. Similar to previous attempts, the Executive Order makes it illegal to promote “equity ideology,” providing a maligned definition of equity ideology as anti-white and counter to civil rights laws. The Executive Order's effectiveness is rooted in the fear of its attempts to instill critical dispositions in teachers, schools, and school districts.

Yet, research stemming from over a century has proved conservative attacks as fraudulent. School curricula have overwhelmingly favored whiteness and denied the humanity of persons of color (Brown & Brown, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Reddick, 1934; Yacovone, 2023). K-12 teachers have historically had limited knowledge and struggled to teach about race and racism in classrooms (Boutte, 2008; Epstein, 2010; King, 1991). They either ignore the concepts together or

teach, innocuously or not, race in a way that reifies whiteness (Picower, 2009). Additionally, even if teachers were familiar with CRT, its presence in their classrooms was almost nonexistent (Lopez et.al, 2021). According to the *American Historical Association* (2024), teachers do not indoctrinate students to hate the United States or white people; instead, the majority of teachers attempt to teach historical thinking skills to teach students *how* to think, *not what* to think. Despite the evidence against conservative claims, the influence of conservative rhetoric has been successful in helping elect not only the 47th Presidential Administration but also state and local officials with commitments to continue restricting school curriculum and teacher practice (Lopez et. al, 2021).

Teaching Critically in Contentious Times serves as a space to help guide educators and practitioners' pedagogical responses in these difficult times. Collectively, the authors acknowledge the contemporary moment within the longer and ongoing struggle to demand educational curricula and spaces that center on Black humanity. The first two articles' examination of the past informs contemporary pedagogical moves of how Black people navigate contentious times culturally and pedagogically. In "Racing Culture: Critical Race Theory, Culture Wars, Anti/Blackness, and In/formal Education in the 1990s," ArCasia D. James-Gallaway and Chaddrick D. James-Gallaway explore racialized episodes of the recent past to illustrate the persistent tension between Black, often gendered, modes of expression and dominant US culture. Using a CRT analysis, their analysis articulates how culture wars are better understood as attacks on Blackness. Kristen E. Duncan, Alex E. Chisholm, and Terrance J. Lewis's article, "I Don't Feel Noways Tired: Why Black Teachers Will Persevere through the Anti-Truth Movement," addresses how current laws banning discussions of race in schools echo historical anti-Black legislation. They illuminate Black teachers consistent and continual use of fugitive pedagogy informed methods to teach Black students in anti-Black contexts. The next three articles address the politically charged use of how race and racism discourse with a focus on the impact of anti-CRT rhetoric and the need for educators to counter censorship and promote race-conscious pedagogies.

Brittany Jones, Tim Monreal, and Anthony White challenge common sense ways of thinking about race in "It's Not Even Happening in Our Classes": The Impossibilities of CRT as Racial Knowledge." Their use of moments of resistance by educators to censorship subtly shifts to what has been produced rather than prohibited by (anti)CRT discourse. In "Blackness at the Center: An Antidote to Anti-CRT Rhetoric for Early and Elementary Literacy Classrooms," Wintre Foxworth Johnson, Dawnavyn James, and Brianne Pitts use the metaphor of the ghost pipe plant to outline instructional practices and methods that amplify the Black gaze in early childhood and elementary spaces. Marcus Wayne Johnson and Daniel J. Thomas III analysis of discourse within Black male sports media surrounding Deion Sanders' move from a historically Black college and university (HBCU) to a predominately white institution (PWI) explores how a prominent Black figure's decision shapes perceptions and understanding of complex issues related to Black identity and liberation. "In Prime Time or Nation Time? Black Historical Contention and Coach Deion Sanders' HBCU-to-PWI Decision as a Quest for Black Liberation," offer a more nuanced portrayal of Black identities and create space for the multiplicity of ways Black people pursue dignity and assert humanity in contentious times.

In the final article, "The Poetry of the Future": Black Anarchism, Abolition, and an Imagined Future for Critical Black Education," Rachel McMillian and Reginald BoClair build upon the robust lineage of Black anarchist thought and the imprisoned Black radical tradition as maps towards an abolitionist society devoid of state-sanctioned oppression. In doing so, they

elevate Black anarchism as a conceptual tool in educational research for creating sustainable freedom in classrooms and communities.

Collectively, this special issue centers teaching and researching in good faith by centering Blackness as essential for teaching and learning about democracy, freedom, and liberation. In going for broke, this issue unapologetically faces resistance and, as the authors proffer, imagine a more inclusive democratic project that transforms democracy as rhetoric into democracy in practice in schools, classrooms, and communities.

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Authors

LaGarrett J. King is a Professor of Social Studies Education in the Department of Learning and Instruction in the Graduate School of Education at the University at Buffalo. Dr. King earned his PhD from the University of Texas at Austin. A former teacher in Texas and Georgia, his research broadly examines how Black history and race is taught and learned in schools and society.

Daniella Cook Sumpter is a Professor in the Department of Teacher Education and affiliate faculty in the Department of African American Studies at the University of South Carolina. Originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, she received her master's and doctoral degree from The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As a social foundations scholar—examining the historical, philosophical,

and sociological contexts of education—and teacher education scholar, her community-centered research explores Black education, critical race methodologies, and anti-racist pedagogies. She is guided by the understanding that equitable learning opportunities require authentic collaboration with and in communities traditionally marginalized by schooling. Her research has been published in *Qualitative Inquiry*, the *International Journal of Qualitative Studies*, *Southern Anthropologist*, and edited volumes such as *Evolutions in Critical and Postcritical Ethnography: Crafting Approaches* and *The Handbook of Critical Race Theory in Education*, among others. Dr. Cook Sumpter is Vice President of the American Educational Studies Association and Past President of the Critical Race Studies in Education Association.

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