

We Need Critical Hope

Self-Reflections on Cultural Wars, the Black Scare, and Black History

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WHEN I WAS IN GRADUATE SCHOOL at the University of Texas–Austin, one of the first classes I took was the history of curriculum. At the time, I did not know that my academic identity would evolve into curriculum history and theory, but I took a keen interest in class sessions that focused on the cultural wars of the 1980s and 1990s. I still remember reading articles by and about major actors such as Diane Ravitch (1990), E.D. Hirsch (1988), the New York and California state standards (Cornbleth & Waugh, 2012), *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), as well as the writings of Joyce King (1991), Gloria Ladson-Billings (1991), James Banks (1993), and Molefi Kete Asante (1991).

I was an elementary and middle school student during those cultural wars, so I had no personal references to those debates. But as I learned about the era, I was astounded by the lengths taken to misrepresent the purpose of multiculturalism and preserve a dying Eurocentric identity that I believed was coming to an end. From the communities I engaged with at the time, all we talked about was diversity and multiculturalism—often comparing the U.S. racial and cultural makeup to gumbo or salad. I thought it was both desperate and racist to demonize the efforts of multicultural education.

As I was preparing and deciding on the theme for this talk, I happened to stumble across some previous graduate school assignments in which I reflected on the 1980s and 1990s cultural wars. In one of those reflections, I wrote that cultural wars benefit White folks who, as Frantz Fanon (1952/2008) explained, often possess an unconscious fear of Blackness—especially when they believe that Western culture is being intruded upon. That fear, or what Carol Anderson (2016) classified as White rage, would prevent or stall any advancement that did not center Whiteness unless there was a keen convergence of interests with the dominant culture (Bell, 1980). Yet I believed that, at the very least, these cultural wars would always end in what Michael Apple (2014) noted as compromises—outcomes that mostly sided with Whiteness, but with minor accords to other people's cultures.

I never imagined that over a decade later I would become a subject in the most recent iteration of a cultural war during the COVID pandemic. In July 2021, during a virtual Zoom

meeting with potential authors for a book project, I received a text message from a former school superintendent who had hired me several times to conduct professional development for his district. He wrote, “Just thought you should know, there is an article about you in some conservative newsletter,” followed by a link. I was unfazed because I and other colleagues who do critical research were occasionally targeted by conservative activists who disagreed with our educational ideologies. I was already on the Professor Watch List as someone whom conservative activists believed held dangerous ideas and would indoctrinate students.

I did not immediately open the message and continued discussing the project. Then I received another text and an email from two different colleagues about the same newsletter. I wondered, *why are all of you getting these alerts?* I paused the conversation with my collaborators to see what was happening. The story addressed my involvement consulting with a school district that wanted to develop its first Black history curriculum and course. According to the article, the local school board had hired me to develop a curriculum to teach students Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Marxism. Again, I was unfazed—school leaders had already warned me about a parent group opposed to diverse education and told me to expect pushback. In response to those concerns, I suggested holding a public virtual meeting for parents who wanted to learn more about the curriculum. Understanding the polarizing nature of the course, I wanted to ensure transparency so parents and any interested community members could understand my approach to Black history. I felt that secrecy would only convey impropriety.

The Black history course emerged because Black students at the local high school demanded it. The students felt marginalized and ignored in the existing curriculum and within the school itself. They wanted to learn more about the national and local history of Black people, and they wanted to understand why things such as racism and police brutality continue to happen. They were acutely aware of the area and the district’s history of racial discrimination and recent tensions. Like many predominantly White suburban districts, Black students experienced anti-blackness from classmates and teachers and believed that certain policies were racist. They wanted a curriculum that told their story so they could better understand the anti-Blackness they experienced locally.

By 2021, I had consulted with dozens of school districts across the country on developing Black history curricula. This school district, like many others, sought to help their students make sense of systemic racism and anti-Blackness in the United States. These students came of age in an era where anti-Black violence was a constant fixture in media. They were profoundly shaped by documented police brutality and the public spectacle of racial violence. For example, high profile killings of teenagers such as Trayvon Martin in 2012 and Michael Brown in 2014 held profound significance for the students and their community (Berry & Stoval, 2013; Sciullo, 2014). The Ferguson, Missouri uprising, sparked by Michael Brown’s death occurred just miles from the students’ town. Along with subsequent killings of Black people by police officers leading up to the murder of George Floyd (Washington Post, 2024), these events created a major inflection point for both their local community and the nation. Millions saw the footage of Officer Derek Chauvin pressing his knee into Floyd’s neck for over nine minutes, causing asphyxia, all in response to a report that Floyd had used a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. Chauvin later claimed he used the tactic because Floyd was resisting arrest. The aftermath led to massive protests across the United States (Ellison, 2021).

Black history education is deeply tied to U.S. social movements and Black civil unrest. One of the more popular solutions to quell Black dissatisfaction and appeal to “good White people,” (Thompson, 2003) have been calls for more Black history in schools. The premise is that

understanding Black history is essential to understanding Black humanity and their experience with racism, and anti-Blackness. To learn Black history is for Black folks to get acknowledgment of what has been done in the past, center messiahs who fought those circumstances, and to create a history that students can be proud of learning. For White folks, as James Baldwin (2008) surmised, history is for White people to learn about themselves. This pattern emerged after the Civil War, during the nadir of race relations, the lynching era, the Civil Rights Movement, and again during Black Lives Matter. My experience with the school district was no different.

The curriculum we developed was based on my framework, Black Historical Consciousness (King, 2020). I wanted a framework that would reframe how Black history is defined and taught. I studied more than a century of Black history textbooks written by Black educators who identified what they felt students needed to know (King, 2014; 2019). I also studied discourse from Black history teachers, Black Lives Matter activists, and Black history scholars to identify common Black History themes. This research spanned ten years, beginning when I was a graduate student in 2010. From this work, I first developed six principles, later expanded to eight, outlining what teachers and curriculum developers should emphasize when creating Black history programs. These principles include Power, Oppression, and Anti-Blackness; Agency, Perseverance, and Justice; Africa and the African Diaspora; Black Emotionality; Black Identities; Black Historical Contention; Black Social History; and Black Futurism. For additional readings on Black Historical Consciousness, I recommend Chapman-Hillard (2024), Falkner & Tills (2025), King (2020; 2023), Martin et al. (2026), Pitts & James (2023), Simmons, et al. (2019), and Wise, et al. (2023).

As a consultant, I do not write the curriculum; district employees write their own curriculum based on the principles of my framework. This ensures local ownership and allows each district to tailor content to their community. At that time, about a dozen districts had adopted my principles, and each curriculum looked different. The district's Black history curriculum team included administrators, teachers, community members, and students. They developed six thematic units focused on current events, local histories, Africa and the Diaspora, Black joy, the Civil Rights Movement, and a student-chosen capstone project. The semester-long course was personalized to the district and culminated in a research project using historical methods.

When I read the write-up in the conservative newsletter—later revealed as Turning Point USA—I noticed mischaracterizations of my words and even edits to a video. Still, I did not think much of it. But in the next few days, I began receiving voicemails and emails from supporters of the newsletter. While none used explicit racist slurs, the familiar tropes appeared: I was called lazy, unqualified, a Marxist, a communist, a socialist, and told I needed a real job. One emailer even wished me dead, which I interpreted as a threat.

I then received an email from the state legislature asking me to testify in support of Critical Race Theory at a hearing. At the time, I would have been the only person testifying in favor of CRT, while a dozen others planned to testify against. I decided to decline the offer because I felt that the hearing was a charade. After witnessing similar hearings in other states—and given the lateness of the request (the hearing was in four days)—I concluded that this particular hearing was not about education but about putting a face, a Black face, a villain of sorts, on CRT for the state.

In many ways, I was the perfect specimen to vilify: a big, dark-skinned Black man with a baritone voice. The fear of the “big Black man” is historic, rooted in myths that lead to stereotypes of Black men as aggressive, violent, or physically overpowering White people (Johnson, 2018). Such stereotypes often result in negative encounters with those in authority. This trope, combined with attacks on CRT, was a convenient recipe for winning a cultural war.

I had also seen many others attempt to educate the public about CRT, only to be dismissed. I felt the process would be an unproductive use of my time. If I am being honest, to participate in the hearing would have given that movement legitimacy. I would not have classified Black Historical Consciousness, Critical Race Theory, which would have legitimized this simplified narrative that opponents attempted to paint about the theories and its usefulness. I was not up to playing that game, especially as I was finalizing plans for my international summer conference, The Teaching Black History Conference, which was only a week away. That work felt like real equity work. In my opening address at the conference, I testified—on my own terms—about what was happening in the United States around CRT, educational equity, and Black history.

While some disagreed with my decision not to testify, including the local NAACP and several Black community members, I do not regret my choice. I later learned I had become a hot topic on the social media platform, Facebook. Based on everything that transpired—and on what conservative activists have since admitted—it became clear that the attacks on me and others around the country were orchestrated to embarrass, disqualify, and dehumanize us for political theater. I do not engage in politics that way. I do, however, regret informing my university administrators about the ordeal.

When I began receiving emails, I told my department chair, who then informed the communications person in the President's office. Initially, they seemed helpful and concerned. I received calls from both the President and the Provost checking on my wellbeing. The FBI even got involved and contacted the individual who had threatened my life, although campus police initially claimed they could not act because the person had only said he "wished me dead," which they argued was not technically a threat. Once the President's office became involved, however, the situation escalated beyond anything I had asked for. When I mentioned my decision not to testify, the President, through subordinates, attempted to force me to do so. When I refused, he initiated a conflict-of-interest inquiry, claiming I had violated university policy because I had been paid for the consulting work.

I received the request to update my conflict-of-interest paperwork while I was on vacation. Like many of us who work too much, I had made a concerted effort not to bring any work on my family trip, so I did not have my laptop. I told them I would complete the forms once I returned home, but they insisted that I fill them out from memory. Being inexperienced and naïve to what was unfolding, I took time out of my vacation to complete the paperwork on my phone.

As I attempted to rectify my paperwork and ensure compliance, the administration was never satisfied with anything I submitted. After several weeks, it seemed clear, in my mind, that the issue was not the paperwork but an effort to build a case against me. My suspicion was confirmed when two high level colleagues informed me that a university board member had allegedly stated that I needed to be punished for my work with the school district. As a tenured faculty member, there are formal processes and steps required to sanction or fire someone for violating university policy, and they began that process.

Throughout this ordeal, I received conflicting messages. I was told that one major concern was that I made too much money consulting. They wanted detailed accounts of how many hours I worked and how much I was paid by each entity, including school districts, corporations, nonprofits, and community organizations. They were also particularly concerned with my previous work and board membership with Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance), the educational arm of the Southern Poverty Law Center. I was confused about the interests with Learning for Justice, especially since I served on several other boards that they ignored. With the recent attacks on the Southern Poverty Law Center by the FBI, I think I have a clearer

understanding of the tactic (U.S. Department of Justice, 2026). Nevertheless, I felt all these inquiries were a waste of time because they were already documented on my records that I submitted annually.

I was also told the administration wanted to determine whether my consulting work caused me to neglect my responsibilities as a professor. For context, I had received excellent reviews from department chairs and deans since joining the university—and had even received a merit raise just weeks earlier. Those of us who consult typically work within our areas of expertise and rely on existing professional development materials or speaking topics, making the time commitment minimal once materials are developed.

Nevertheless, I was required to submit extensive paperwork detailing every consulting job, every board membership, and even each book I had written or coedited since 2015—all because they did not believe I could manage both my consulting and my university duties. While some might argue that this is standard in state university systems, I ask: Have you ever had to submit your tax returns? Because I was asked to do exactly that. At that point, my wife and I decided we had enough, and we hired an attorney.

Whether I was guilty of the Conflict-of-Interest (COI) policy or the process was legitimate is not the issue and requires different questions. I will point out, however, that even if I violated the COI policy, very few people, historically, in my department had ever submitted COI forms—a fact my department chair acknowledged in a meeting with higher administrators. To my knowledge, I was the only person asked to submit extensive supplemental paperwork. Additionally, none of the administration's stated concerns (money, time, etc.) appeared in the original COI policy documents until after they began investigating.

Throughout this ordeal, I was reminded that the process of procedural racism (Lim et al., 2022) has been used against Black persons who are seen as threats to the social order. I learned that many universities allegedly use the ambiguities of COI policies to punish, withhold pay from, or remove faculty they do not like. After refusing to continue with the investigation, the university and I decided to part ways. For five months, not only did conservative activists continue attacking me, but so did my employer—placing extreme stress on me and my family. All because I helped a school district develop a Black history curriculum for students who needed to see their own humanity reflected—or, if you believe the university, because of a technical policy issue.

Black History and The Black Scare

It is important for me to share this story as an act of reflection, not victimhood. I do not see myself as a victim, although I was victimized by a manufactured crisis and a system designed to appease Whiteness. While I experienced stress (and probably added a few more greys to my beard), others around the country endured far more severe consequences—including a close friend, a mentor, and numerous Black women, other women of color, and LGBTQIA faculty. During these witch hunts, which I refer to as the *Black Scare* (Burden-Stelly, 2023), our most marginalized and vulnerable scholars—because of their research or simply because of who they are—faced tenure denials, were removed from prominent positions, and suffered extreme health consequences.

I hurt mostly for my family, who had to uproot their relatively comfortable lives. I hurt because, while my wife and I attempted to shield our children from what was happening, they still understood what was being done to me and to our family. Neither of them ever mentioned it or made me feel guilty about moving. I hurt for my wife, who was finishing graduate school and

preparing for her faculty position at the institution; she ended up being treated unfairly because of her connection to me.

I hurt for other educators who were victimized through this Black scare and may not have had a severance package or the privilege of securing another job quickly, as I did. I believe that everyone involved in the curriculum development team no longer works in the school district. I hurt most for the students who experienced curriculum violence their entire academic lives and had the courage to request—and were granted—a Black history curriculum that could help them make sense of the world around them. Instead, adults betrayed their concerns and reversed the decision to offer the Black history classes, proving once again that their lives and histories did not matter, and likely never will, to those who maintain power and privilege. These students were the true victims, as this manufactured cultural war brings the greatest disruption and pain to the most vulnerable.

The irony is that the claims made by conservatives are fraudulent. For over a century, curriculum studies research has shown that school curriculum overwhelmingly favors Eurocentrism, Whiteness, and Western epistemologies, while denying the humanity of people of color (Berry, 2017; Reddick, 1934; Yacovone, 2023). K–12 teachers have historically had limited knowledge and have struggled to teach about race and racism (King, 2016). They either ignore these concepts entirely or, whether intentionally or not, taught them in ways that reinforce Whiteness (Ott & Kohli, 2023; Picower, 2009). Even when teachers are familiar with Critical Race Theory—and I mean its original and real definition—it remains virtually nonexistent in classrooms. According to the American Historical Association (2024), teachers do not indoctrinate students to hate the United States or White people; rather, most teachers focus on teaching historical thinking skills—teaching students *how* to think, not *what* to think.

Black history education, in particular, has a long and polarizing history in K–12 discourse (Brown & Au, 2014; Givens, 2021; Zimmerman, 2022). Since the nineteenth century, Black history and its content have been questioned and policed. The enduring question educators have wrestled with is whether Black people have a history and, if so, which aspects are worthy of study. Before the late nineteenth century, those in power largely answered no. In response, Black people—often Civil War veterans—began constructing historical narratives to prove Black history existed. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Black history’s existence was acknowledged, but debates remained over what content should be included. During this era, a second generation of Black history educators, typically teachers, wrote Black history textbooks for their students. We also began seeing Black people become professionally trained historians and earn PhDs, marking a shift toward a more systematic and scholarly approach to Black history education (Dagbovie, 2010, 2015, 2018).

In the early twentieth century, public schools began accepting Black history as part of the official curriculum, but only in predominantly Black schools and only with the approval of White school boards. This Black history could exist only if it did not disrupt the patriotic or progressive narratives taught in regular history courses. Controversial Black historical figures were not allowed. Zimmerman (2022) notes that historical figures such as George Washington Carver and Jackie Robinson were acceptable but not the likes of Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey. White school boards believed that critical or pro-Black narratives undermined patriotism and unfairly painted White people as bigots and racists. For the next century, the unwritten policy of Black history education could exist only if it did not challenge the status quo too deeply. Yes, Black history could mention racism, White supremacy, and discrimination—but only as the actions of a few “bad men doing bad things,” (Brown & Brown, 2010) not as systemic forces shaping the nation.

And these narratives were acceptable only when framed as problems that had been solved by good White people.

Since the 1960s, Black history and Black Studies offerings have grown in public schools. However, the narratives have largely remained stagnant, often mirroring traditional history classes but with more Black faces. While inclusion has increased, there have not been systematic changes in content, particularly content dealing with systemic racism or its contemporary implications. Teachers continue to struggle with providing this education. Although what I call *critical Black history education* gained some traction among teachers and districts during the Black Lives Matter–George Floyd era, it never approached a critical mass. The fear of Critical Race Theory in public schools has never been grounded in reality.

Despite evidence contradicting conservative claims, conservative rhetoric has successfully helped elect political leaders who restrict curriculum and teacher practice (Alexander et al., 2023). We have seen Black educators fired, books banned, and Black history and Black studies courses eliminated based on unfounded allegations of CRT, wokeness, or DEI. So why do these anti-Black tactics continue to shape educational policy and public belief? As scholars, we understand the history of anti-Blackness and how it influences White attitudes and actions. This is what Charisse Burden-Stelly (2023) calls the Black scare—a phenomenon that helps explain why cultural wars tend to favor conservative ideologues who fear losing racial and cultural power.

According to Burden-Stelly (2023), the Black scare is “the historically and contextually situated debasement, distortion, criminalization, and subjection of Blackness rooted in fearmongering about Black social equality, political domination, and economic parity on the one hand, and the displacement, devalorization, and devaluation of whiteness on the other.” The discourse surrounding Black history and racial literacy reflects these fears. Claims that Black history causes students to hate White people, or the invocation of replacement theory, (Evans, 2024) are manifestations of the fear that Whiteness is losing its cultural dominance. Social studies curriculum has always been used to extol societal values; therefore, simply proposing Black history courses has long been seen as a threat to Whiteness. Policing Black history has always been about controlling narratives—ensuring that Whiteness remains centered and Blackness remains subordinate.

A major limitation in past attempts to create sustainable Black history education is that practitioners tried to situate Black history within White epistemic frameworks. They wanted to keep Black history White. In other words, the Black history taught in schools was not truly Black history—it was White history in Blackface (King, 2020). The Black scare works by limiting Black perspectives and voices. Authentic Black history must emerge from Black perspectives, voices, and experiences. When history is centered on Black experiences, the narratives look, sound, and feel different. For example, *Brown v. Board of Education*, from Black perspectives, emphasizes the loss of community, schools, teachers, and administrators, as well as the racist experiences of Black students in integrated schools—far removed from the celebratory narrative that integration ushered in a harmonious society (Parham & Nadelson, 2025).

The Black scare is rooted in fear of Black radicalism. It presents a distorted world in which Black social, economic, and political equality—what some White people perceive as power—threatens racial hierarchy. The Black scare begins with Black people possessing a spirit of liberatory consciousness—the ability to imagine a more equitable society. This consciousness is precisely what makes Black history dangerous when taught through Black eyes: it can give voice to injustice, but it can also offer strategies for liberation. To preserve racial dominance, the state invents what W.E.B. Du Bois called witchwords to demonize those who imagine a new society

(Burden-Stelly, 2023). We are familiar with these witchwords today—DEI, Critical Race Theory, “woke”—all positioned as threats to society. Their purpose is to sow distrust of Blackness, a task made easy in a culture where curriculum subtly frames Black people as problems to be solved rather than problem solvers.

The Black scare aims to elicit violence—physical, epistemic, and psychic—against Black people and Blackness. We see this in the policing of Black bodies, the discipline of Black children in schools, and the cancellation of Black history courses. Students suffered this when their Black history course was eliminated; students across the country felt it when AP African American Studies courses were rejected. Academics feel it through harassment, loss of grants, and restrictions on programs supporting marginalized communities. The Black scare remains effective because society continues to harbor disdain for Blackness. Claims of colorblindness or racial neutrality collapse under the reality that policymakers understand race, understand how Whiteness reacts to Blackness, and understand the power of an education that tells the truth.

At this point in the talk, it feels appropriate to shift toward solutions. To be honest, I do not know if I have a definitive solution. I understand why many of my critical colleagues feel apathetic or pessimistic about the future of racial justice in education and society. I hesitated to center the Black scare in this analysis because I worried some would interpret it as hopeless. After all, we are nearly two decades removed from electing the first Black president and only five years removed from the so-called “racial reckoning” of 2020 (Dyson, 2020; Grace, 2026). It once seemed like we were moving—at least cosmetically—toward a more equitable society. Yet within a few short years, our institutions reneged on those commitments. Therefore, my answer—my offering—is *critical hope*.

Critical Hope and Black History Protectionism

Hope is a highly contested and polarizing theoretical construct. It is also an international and transdisciplinary field that recognizes the concept as ever-evolving and shaped by geography, time, history, and socio-economic relations. In other words, hope is experienced differently across cultures and social groups (Lopez et al., 2018). According to Webb (2013), the literature identifies twenty-six theories of hope and more than fifty definitions of the term. Webb notes that hope studies—what Eliot (2005) calls the *hope industry*—can be divided into five theoretical and pedagogical approaches: patient, critical, sound, resolute, and transformative. My approach to theorizing hope and its connections to Black history education centers on its critical dimensions.

Critical hope emerged from the ideas and frameworks set forth by critical theorists (Bozalek et al., 2014; Giroux, 2001). Scholarship often traces its origins to the Frankfurt School and Neo-Marxist critiques, but most credit Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of Hope* (2001) as foundational to its contemporary intellectual development (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Freire, 1970; Zembylas, 2014). Critical hope has been widely applied in education, particularly in educational leadership, higher education, and anti-racist/social justice education (Bishundat et al., 2018; Glass, 2014; Sutton, 2015).

Drawing from Freire (2001), I define critical hope as the ability to understand how power, oppression, and systems shape one’s life and material realities. While oppressed people may succumb to cynicism, hopelessness, or retreat, those who embrace critical hope resist despair and imagine their current conditions as temporary. They envision the possibility of a better—or at least more equitable—future. Critical hope is cultivated by historically oppressed groups that

proactively and innovatively create spaces for hope to emerge. They attempt to construct what Zembylas (2014) calls “a different lifeworld” (p. 13). Critical hope arises because these groups believe in building a better future grounded in critical education and historical understanding.

Freire (2001) notes that critical hope is an ontological need—one that recognizes human agency as shaped by struggle. He reminds us that hope alone accomplishes little, but the absence of hope breeds pessimism and disillusionment, aligning with the oppressor’s interests by maintaining the status quo (Apple, 2014). Webb (2013) cautions that there is “nothing inherently radical or subversive about hope” (p. 399). Hope, especially its pedagogical manifestations, can just as easily reproduce society as transform it. Thus, distinguishing critical hope from more palatable or superficial forms of hope is essential.

Boler (2004) and Duncan-Andrade (2009) identify several mainstream discourses of hope that function as false or enemies of hope: naïve hope, hokey hope, mythical hope, and hope deferred.

- **Naïve hope** (Boler, 2004; Freire, 2001) consists of platitudes that preserve hegemonic interests and believe that blind faith is only needed for things to get better (Zembylas, 2014, p. 13), hence there exist no analysis of structural power.
- **Hokey hope** relies on an individualistic, bootstraps philosophy: work hard, follow the rules, and you will achieve the American Dream. While hard work is valuable, this form of hope ignores structural barriers. Rooted in privilege and common-sense logic (Apple, 2014), hokey hope dismisses the voices of marginalized people by placing blame on individuals rather than systems.
- **Mythical hope** is premised on the false narrative of equal opportunity, detached from historical and political realities (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). It celebrates exceptional individuals while denying the systemic nature of oppression.
- **Hope deferred** allows critique of inequity but stops short of action. It assumes no pedagogical intervention can be truly transformative given broader systemic barriers (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 182).
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The emotions driving these false hopes include fear, apathy, isolation, and despair.

Critical hope, by contrast, is action-oriented, purposeful, and political. It requires commitment to something greater than what is presently visible. It is messy, filled with honest emotions and contradictions. Critical hope demands historical and racial literacy, as well as a commitment to truth-telling. To hold critical hope does not mean possessing all the answers; nor does it demand perfection. In fact, the search for perfect messiahs is itself a problem within progressive spaces. Instead, critical hope is communal, offering belonging in difficult times. It recognizes the power of human agency—individual and collective—and understands that actions, not naiveté, drive social transformation. Critical hope is grounded in justice, reflexivity, and solidarity. It is the abiding wisdom that transformation is impossible without a vision of a more equitable society.

I like to think that I practice critical hope. During my ordeal, it changed me. I was traumatized, hurt, and tired. I stopped writing and thinking deeply. As a man, I worried about my family. I wondered whether my career would be damaged. Would I get my next promotion? Would consulting opportunities disappear? Would I be able to run my center? I questioned myself, my work, and my purpose. I did not stop

Everything I had built over my career felt at risk. We have seen Black institutions collapse in the face of such attacks. They target you—and whatever you value most. In my case, it was a

research and professional development center that I created in 2018. At the time, the center, an innovative space where Black history teachers and supporters could come to together to share knowledge and pedagogical ideas around Black history education was growing rapidly; nearly 2,000 educators from around the world had attended the in person and virtual conferences across four summers. The university wanted to stop those conferences. They wanted to remove me as director. They wanted to control the center's content. I did not stop.

When I left, I created a new center based on the similar principles. The Center for K–12 Black History and Racial Literacy Education was developed and we have extended our mission and soon will be entering a decade of service. A few people ask me, “Given what you have been through, why continue to consult, hold professional development, and direct a center around Black history and racial literacy in this political climate?” I owe it to the communities that I serve. All the students, parents, and teachers who want a culturally rigorous education that helps them see who they are. Plus, this fight is bigger than me. I understand the historical legacy of those who had fought for Black history education before me—many under far harsher conditions. That knowledge propelled me toward action and transformation.

Critical hope is difficult and often countercultural, but it is rooted in love for the communities we claim to serve. To those who write, teach, or research the very diversity issues now under attack: continue. They joke that no one reads or cites our work, that we do not matter in policy. But I have been around long enough to know that our research shapes discourse. If it did not matter, they would not be trying to dismantle higher education, destroy public schools, and silence critical history. We have lived through similar moments before. The lessons of the past will guide us. As we experience these times, we must document them—because our words will become hope for future generations, just as the writings of Carter G. Woodson, Joyce King, Gloria Ladson-Billings, James Banks, and Molefi Kete Asante were for me.

Can critical hope save us? Yes, but it is a collective effort that requires us to be patient and steadfast with our convictions. Critical hope rests on the belief that things will change. It requires continued support of each other and our needs. It is not about who is the most critical, say the most academically charged words, or these silly arguments and rivalries that serve as red herrings for us and our goals for liberation. Critical hope requires us to be strategic. Requires us to not be distracted by the academy, fame, and money. When one of us are attacked, we are all attacked. Those who attack us are not seeing differences or nuance. It can be humiliating, devastating, and embarrassing but as critical scholars, critical hope is our solution.

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