

Silence Rules the Day: Why does Conservative America Fear the 1619 Project Curriculum?

| By Kimberly S. Bouyer

One morning in July 2020, I got an interesting phone call from my aunt. She told me a story about her experience with *The New York Times* regarding the 1619 Project. At the time, I had little knowledge of the 1619 Project or the controversy surrounding it. After we ended our call, I decided to find out exactly what the fuss was all about.

My aunt's name is Brenda Roberts. She is a retired, special education teacher who was searching for information on the 1619 Project Curriculum. *The New York Times* representative explained to her that a group of conservative politicians were passing legislation to ban anything related to the 1619 Project. According to my aunt, *The New York Times* suspended the 1619 Project Curriculum because of this. "The bans and political pressure affect millions of students, educators, and administrators nationwide by inhibiting classroom conversations on racial injustice," she exclaimed.

What is the 1619 Project? In August 2019, *The New York Times* newspaper published a series of articles on race and the legacy of slavery in America. Nikole Hannah-Jones, the lead staff writer, initiated the long-form journalism project, which reframed the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of our national narrative. The project's proponents expressed discontent with the inaccurate portrayals of slavery in school curricula and offered lesson plans for teaching the 1619 Project Curriculum to students. However, conservative lawmakers linked the 1619 Project to **critical race theory** (the study of race and ethnicity), creating a cultural uproar in the school districts across the country. According to Politifact.com, right-leaning lawmakers in about a dozen states have passed bills that restrict educators from teaching any subjects connected to critical race theory.

"What does the 1619 Project have to do with critical race theory?" I asked.

"I suppose that conservative politicians think that the 1619 Project is too radical politically and kind of affront to their sense of patriotism," she replied.

Aunt Brenda's response on that day loomed in my thoughts. Is this really the case? Or is there something else going on? In that moment, I realized if I genuinely wanted answers, I had to dig deeper into racial politics.

In a recent interview with Dr. Sekou Franklin, Political Science professor at Middle Tennessee State University, I asked, "Why link the 1619 Project to critical race theory?"

"The most prominent Republican party members and conservative activists meshed these two projects together to create this wedge issue for mobilizing White racial animus and White nationalism," he replied.

“What does critical race theory have to do with teaching elementary and high school students about America’s colonial past?”

“It’s like talking about golf and tennis, and you’re playing baseball,” Franklin explained. “They think anything that covers race is critical race theory. Unfortunately, today’s narrative around critical race theory has been framed and propagated by people who don’t really understand critical race theory.”

The person widely credited for the term, critical race theory (C.R.T), is Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, a law professor at the U.C.L.A. School of Law and Columbia Law School. According to *The New York Times*, C.R.T. is a graduate-level academic framework that encompasses decades of scholarship. Mari Matsuda, a law professor at the University of Hawaii who was an early developer of critical race theory, said, “For me, critical race theory is a method that takes the lived experience of racism seriously, using history and social reality to explain how racism operates in American law and culture, toward the end of eliminating the harmful effects of racism and bringing about a just and healthy world for all.”

Aunt Brenda interjected, “The conservative backlash fueled heated debates on the role of critical race theory in the classroom, the study of how racism shapes laws, policies, and society, and how race factors into the teaching of American history. At least twenty-seven state-level efforts attempt to restrict educators from discussing systemic racism, critical race theory, and the 1619 Project.”

“What the lawmakers are doing in Tennessee, Texas, Florida, and other places, is that they are preventing the teaching of diversity,” Franklin said. “If you unpack their legislation, they’re not preventing the teaching of critical race theory because they don’t know what it is. They have drawn up legislation that is anti-diversity. If you follow the letter of the legislation, the language prohibits teaching any subjects related to diversity-based programs.”

“Has this legislation personally affected you or your family?”

“I live in Nashville...Davidson County. Davidson is the best possible county in Tennessee for minorities because they have senior leadership that is more committed to diversity and inclusion. A few years ago, I did have conversations with school board members at my daughter’s school about the subtle attacks on diversity. But it was nothing like what is happening with Moms for Liberty in Williamson County Schools.”

Moms for Liberty, a group of local mothers in Franklin, TN, complained about the reading curriculum being too focused on the country’s segregationist past. Their protests have caused division within the community and even frightened some educators. “Overall, it’s a beautiful community,” said Tizgel High, a Black mother of three. “But these battles, they get tiresome. You’re sort of constantly fighting for your humanity.”

“Why would America not want our story to be told?” Aunt Brenda asked.

Brian Dixon, a Williamson County parent of a second grader, said, “It’s good for him to learn [about race relations] but not as a 7-and-8-year-old child in second grade. [The online lesson] started out very beautifully talking about Dr. King and his speech and children from different

backgrounds all coming together. But then it started talking about the deep and dark portions of what happened during the 1960s. He was ashamed to be an American after reading this lesson.”

“The bottom line is, we’re teaching facts, and how anyone internalizes those facts...we don’t have any control of that,” said Angela Mosley, a reading and math specialist at a Williamson County elementary school.

In a report released on September 21, 2021, by Reuters.com, Moms for Liberty is currently “reading the middle and high school curricula for material they deem inappropriate and in need of district review.” Gabiella Borter writes: “Members also are forming a political action committee, ‘Williamson Families,’ to back conservative candidates for local school board elections in 2022, when half the district’s twelve seats will be up for grabs.”

According to Franklin, right-wing lawmakers have passed legislation under the guise of critical race theory. But these laws are really an attack against diversity-based programs. “If you take the example of Colin Powell, you cannot teach this story in some of these states because he was able to rise in the military with the help of Affirmative Action,” he explained. “The question a student would ask: *Why would they need diversity-based programs in the military?*”

“But what’s wrong with asking this question?” I interrupted.

“Well, if you were teaching high school, junior high, or even elementary school, you would respond by saying the military was segregated up until the Korean War. Then, you would have to explain the importance of integration in the military and why they wanted soldiers to get along in training and on the battlefield. At that point, you’re really telling a story about deeply embedded racism.”

“There was a moment when I was hopeful that our country was on the right path to being transparent about the truth of our past injustices, especially with the recent social protests which led to Derek Chauvin’s conviction of George Floyd’s murder,” Aunt Brenda said.

In a CNN opinion article written on June 18, 2021, Nicole Hemmer stated that critical race theory is the “signal to conservatives of the ‘New Bad Thing’ penetrating every part of American life...” “But it also draws on old, familiar political fights: Battles in the 1990s over the content of history curricula and White angst over everything from ‘reverse racism’ to ‘Black identity extremism.’” She also points out that for this reason, it is necessary to expose the hysteria for what it is—a smoke screen for “derailing the debate about racial inequality and police brutality” that seized the nation a year ago. She writes: “The footage of George Floyd’s murder was so brutal, the injustice and immorality so clear, that there was no effective political argument against it.”

“These false equivalencies or subtle attacks on diversity are polarizing us,” Franklin said.

Franklin agreed with Aunt Brenda that we need curricula to tell more complicated and nuance stories about all Americans—Black Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and others. “These stories are essential and constitutive of the American story,” he said. “The language in the legislation does not allow teachers to raise issues about racism and diversity. The right-wing politicians want the teachers to offer a whitewash version of American history.”

“Since the conservative lawmakers and right-wing groups are trying to silence these stories in the classroom, what options do the teachers have?” I asked.

“My argument is that the teachers should just resist,” Franklin replied. “I think school districts who want to resist these attacks should fight the state legislators by filing lawsuits. People need to be protesting in the streets. I even saw high school students in Nashville leading the protests. Teachers should find stealthy ways to teach it. We need to find creative ways to protest and resist.”

“Wouldn’t the educators’ resistance and the push for enforcement of the law cause more mayhem, making matters worse?”

“The Tennessee law is so backwards and dysfunctional,” Franklin said, chuckling. “The state legislators wrote it in an administrative way that makes the law hard to enforce. They don’t even know how to monitor the people who might be violating it. If dozens of school districts across the state wanted to teach critical race theory, there is no administrative infrastructure within the state to stop it. What they did was back themselves into a corner by creating a process that is too cumbersome to enforce. If teachers collectively challenge the law, it would be extremely hard for the state to do anything.”

In recent months, America’s fraught debate over race and justice has reached an antagonistic crescendo. And this pandemonium has spilled into the battle over teaching about our country’s colonial past. Three years since the 1619 Project addressed the falsehoods in the U.S. democracy’s founding ideals—slavery, Black America’s contribution, the national narrative about race relations—conservative lawmakers and right-wing activist groups, such as Moms for Liberty, want to silence the discourse by whitewashing our history.

After my interview with Franklin, I deeply thought about that phone call with my aunt a year ago.

“What is White conservative America so fearful of?” she asked me.

“Maybe it’s what you said earlier, Aunt Brenda,” I replied. “You know...about being afraid of ‘looking into the mirror.’ Honestly, I really don’t know.”

“I’m astonished with this silencing of African Americans’ lived experiences,” she said, adding, “But it’s the prospect of not telling the truth about our history that truly disappoints me. Why would America not want our story to be told?”

“If you believe that 1776 matters,” Nikole Hannah-Jones said in an interview with PBS, “if you believe that our Constitution still matters, then you also have to understand that the legacy of slavery still matters, and you can’t pick and choose what parts of history we think are important and which ones aren’t.”