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Towards an Unpatriotic Education: Du Bois,
Woodson, and the Threat of
Nationalist Mythologies
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Abstract

This article examines two essays by W. E. B. Du Bois, his November 1910 "Editorial" and "The Propaganda of History," alongside The Mis-education of the Negro by Carter Woodson to probe the politics of knowledge production in light of the escalating Republican attacks on education today. Together, these revolutionary Black thinkers reveal miseducation to be a political project, a form of sabotage and propaganda designed to facilitate and expand white power under the guise of "patriotism." These miseducation tactics, employed by white conservatives during the 1890s, coincided with a wave of antidemocracy laws and practices from voter suppression to white vigilantism that helped create the Jim Crow apartheid state, one that remained intact for the next seventy years and continues to shape our institutions today. The GOP deploys anti-"CRT" laws, which target teaching and information critical of white supremacy, in much the same way, attacking education while supporting "patriotic" antidemocracy and vigilante organizing. Du Bois and Woodson show the historical dangers of these tactics and the need for a response that combines politics with historical fact. A close reading of Du Bois and Woodson reveals the importance of a robust "unpatriotic" history, one that grounds our hopes for a future defined by justice and equality in an awareness of America's racist past.

Writing in the inaugural issue of *The Crisis*, famed historian and NAACP co-founder W. E. B. Du Bois explained that the new magazine's central

and most important mission would be to “set forth those facts and arguments which show the danger of race prejudice, particularly as manifested to-day toward colored people.” The periodical, he anticipated, would advocate for “the highest ideals of American democracy” then under threat by a series of state laws that used colorblind language to formalize the system of racial oppression we know today as Jim Crow. While America had failed to live up to its founding ideals, Du Bois theorized that it could still do so through a commitment to the truth above “clique or party” (Du Bois 1910, 10). *The Crisis*, he hoped, would accomplish just that (Horne 2021).¹

Although Du Bois penned this inaugural editorial in 1910, his words might very well apply to the United States today. The premise of his argument—that misinformation grounded in racial prejudice undermined American democracy—bears a striking similarity to Nikole Hannah-Jones’s controversial 1619 Project essay, titled, “Our Democracy’s Founding Ideals Were False when They Were Written. Black Americans Have Fought to Make Them True” (Hannah-Jones 2019). Yet, while Du Bois advocated for a nonpartisan commitment to honest reporting in *The Crisis*, subsequent history has shown the fruitlessness of his neutral framing. Hannah-Jones’s essay, for example, synthesizes widely accepted historical analyses for a general audience, but instead of helping white America embrace multiracial democracy, her work inspired modern-day McCarthyites seeking to prevent students from learning about America’s racist history (Kearse 2021).

This article examines two essays by Du Bois, his November 1910 “Editorial” and “The Propaganda of History,” alongside *The Mis-education of the Negro* by Carter Woodson to probe the politics of knowledge production in light of the escalating Republican attacks on education today. What Du Bois shows in both essays, especially in his articulation of the relationship between state-sanctioned knowledge and power, is

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that the white conservatives of his day refused to engage in good faith. They lied. They produced racist myths and ignored obvious and overwhelming evidence that contradicted their fantasies because these lies justified existing systems of profit and power. These white conservative lies formed the ideological foundation of what we today call Jim Crow—the system of racial apartheid enshrined by the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and *Williams v. Mississippi* (1898)—helping to create and cement a racist system of wage, voter, civil rights, and education suppression that remained in place through the civil rights struggles of the 1960s.

As with the Jim Crow-era attacks on education and public memory, those waged by today's Republican Party are designed to standardize education as white mythology. They falsely claim that American schools have been infiltrated by radicals hoping to undermine the United States by indoctrinating students in "critical race theory" ("CRT")—a catch-all term Republicans use to attack anything critical of white supremacy (Frey 2022), not to be confused with the legal theory of the same name (Crenshaw et al. 1996). As of this writing, Republicans have proposed 166 bills across forty-one states banning or restricting books, lessons, and concepts denounced as "CRT" (Friedman and Tager 2022), which primarily engage the history of white supremacy in the United States. Fourteen states have already implemented versions of these restrictions that limit or forbid teaching about America's racist history, including the swing states of Georgia, Florida, Virginia, and Texas. The administrative restriction of the Florida State Board of Education (three related bills remain active in the Florida legislature) shows the scope and design of this movement. It banned teaching about the historical ways that "racism is embedded in American society and its legal systems in order to uphold the supremacy of white persons" (Florida State Board of Education 2021). The law would effectively forbid teaching about the Supreme Court itself, not to mention local and state institutions and agencies, which affirmed slavery, Jim Crow, and eugenics as constitutional.

Rather than simply telling a "convenient fairy tale," Du Bois illustrates, "the masters of men" designed the white erasure movement of the Jim Crow era to legitimize their own power at the expense of Black

Americans (Du Bois 1935, 726). In this respect, Du Bois has much to tell us about the current anti-“CRT” campaign. It is no accident that this raft of legislation coincides with attacks on the rights to protest and to vote, nor is it a fluke that these antimemory (Snyder 2021), antiprotest (Quinton 2021), and antidemocracy (Brennan Center for Justice 2022) laws target precisely the same groups while hiding the historical impact of similar discriminatory laws and practices. Republicans’ memory laws are not about education, then, but about power, requiring a response that combines politics with historical fact (Robinson 2022).

Like many scholars of racial capitalism (Kelley 2017), Du Bois changed his tactical responses to white supremacist systems of theft over time. He explains this process of trial and error in his 1944 essay, “My Evolving Program for Negro Freedom,” which outlines how he used his scholarship to promote Black liberation from his early education through the waning days of the Second World War. Du Bois recounts that, while his initial work sought to address the glaring absence of meaningful studies of Black life and history in the United States, he came “to realize, as early as 1906, that my program for studying the Negro problems must soon end, unless it received unforeseen support.” Rigorous studies of Black life cut against the logic of racial capitalism, which deployed cheap stereotypes to justify the gruesome torture and expropriation of Black America. “We rated merely as Negroes studying Negroes,” Du Bois (1944, 50) recalled, “and after all, what had Negroes to do with America or Science?” To preserve its own legitimacy, white capital sought to sabotage and prevent serious studies of racial discrimination. Much easier, instead, to puff cigars and peddle false and racist stereotypes.

When Du Bois launched *The Crisis* in 1910, he initiated “a distinct break from [his] previous purely scientific program” after coming to terms with the bad faith engagement of white scholars. The “rift between theory and practice” had undermined his research in the scholarly world and failed to address racial persecution and misery for Black Americans (Du Bois 1944, 56). Though he pitched the paper as nonpolitical, it

represented the first phase in his embrace of increasingly radical tactics to address white supremacist misinformation. His nonpartisan framing also reveals a distinct difference between Du Bois's time and our own—white supremacy was overwhelmingly bipartisan in Du Bois's day. While some of those legacies remain in ongoing support for mass incarceration, segregated schools, and wars of empire, the Republican Party's wholehearted embrace of white supremacy over the last sixty years has made racist policies increasingly partisan (Anderson 2016; HoSang and Lowndes 2019).

In the opening 1910 "Editorial," Du Bois explains the purpose of segregation in no uncertain terms, writing that the ultimate goal of white policy is plunder. "Discrimination in schools and in public institutions," for Du Bois, was nothing less than "an argument against democracy and an attempt to shift public responsibility from the shoulders of the public to the shoulders of some class who are unable to defend themselves" (Du Bois 1910, 10). By creating segregated schools using public funds, white Americans secured white wealth and opportunity at the expense of everyone else. White America then used this stolen education, opportunity, and wealth to proclaim its own superiority and to justify new regimes of discrimination and privation.

This segregated antithesis of democracy—whether in education, housing, or justice—ensured that white Americans could take and terrorize with impunity. White America had "lulled [itself in] to a false sense of security," Du Bois observed, "and preened itself with virtues it did not possess." White Americans claimed to be paragons of virtue and accomplishment with wealth and opportunity stolen from Black communities. The only antidote to the white American mythology feeding antidemocracy was *agitation*—"to tell this nation the crying evil of race prejudice" (Du Bois 1910, 10–11). Yet white Americans were literally invested in unknowing the effects of their racist policies and in believing the supremacist mythologies they used to steal work and wealth from their Black neighbors. If white policy was as it remains—a system of theft—it cannot be undone by access to better information.

Editing *The Crisis* accelerated his embrace of a critical and engaged, change-oriented scholarship designed to transform the world—what

Marxist intellectuals refer to as praxis. As Du Bois recalled, he “began to know the problem of Negroes in the United States as a present startling reality.” Just as contemporary scholars of the racial state and liberation struggles cannot help but address the relationship, so too did Du Bois (1944, 57): “(and this was most upsetting) I faced situations that called—shrieked—for action, even before any detailed, scientific study could possibly be prepared.” As Du Bois understood, we must not only accurately diagnose the effects of white supremacist lies but also engage in counternarrative, spelling out alternate futures as we organize them into being (Williams 2014, 16–24).

His time at the helm of *The Crisis* not only afforded Du Bois a vantage point to critique the “propaganda of history” but also brought him into dialogue with many of the most important thinkers of his day. He asked Carter G. Woodson, for example, the founder of what would become Black History Month, to “sum up [his] criticisms of Negro Education” for the August 1931 edition of the magazine (Du Bois 1931). Woodson’s essay, “The Miseducation of the Negro,” argued that “the inferiority of the Negro is drilled into him in almost every class he enters.” For Woodson, this miseducation was hardly accidental—“the schools and colleges of this country are so conducted as to produce this result.” “To handicap a student for life,” he wrote, “by teaching him that his black face is a curse and that his struggle to change his condition is hopeless is the worst kind of lynching” (Woodson 1931, 266). As Woodson understood, miseducation had very real material consequences—designed to reinforce racial hierarchy and the segregated wealth and opportunities that animated it (Goggin 1993).

Woodson’s 1931 essay in *The Crisis* gave the outline of what would eventually become his more developed critique of the racist design and execution of white mythology. Writing in *The Mis-education of the Negro*, Woodson excoriated the modern education system as an attempt to indoctrinate American students, including Black Americans, into anti-Blackness as the defining feature of civic virtue. He wrote, “The so-called modern education . . . has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples. For example, the philosophy and ethics resulting from our educational system have

justified slavery, peonage, segregation, and lynching. . . . The Negro's mind has been brought under the control of his oppressor. The problem of holding the Negro down, therefore, is easily solved. When you control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions" (Woodson 1933, 5). Woodson saw the celebratory nationalist education of his day, which sought to justify slavery and segregation as "natural," as nothing short of a colonial enterprise. The intended, inevitable result of this system, for Woodson, was the alienation of Black students and a celebration of existing systems of racial plunder, hierarchy, and control (Givens 2021).

The white nationalist education system against which Woodson wrote had been heavily influenced, as Du Bois would note in *Black Reconstruction*, by Confederate apologists who sought to cover up Black accomplishments during Reconstruction. Founded by William Archibald Dunning, the so-called Dunning School helped standardize history as an academic discipline in the United States with a reliance on archival evidence even as he and his protégés grounded their analysis in anti-Blackness (Smith 2013, 4; Proctor 2019). These historians argued for a patriotic "reunion" between white Northerners and Southerners by depicting Reconstruction as a "tragic" experiment in multiracial democracy. This "Lost Cause" mythology founded by the Dunningites became the racist bedrock of US history as an academic discipline and infiltrated American classrooms through a textbook campaign led by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), which sought to ban textbooks and teaching materials that they deemed unsympathetic to slavery and the Confederacy. Their campaign also helped to transform popular culture, inspiring proslavery nostalgia like Joel Chandler Harris's *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1880), which depicted enslaved people as longing for the good old days of slavery, and the celebration of the Ku Klux Klan in *Birth of a Nation* (Blight 2001, 228–30; Cox 2003, 3–8, 120). White supremacists wove these racist ideas into the American consciousness and, in the case of Harris's work, disseminated them through Disney's *Song of the South* (1946) and "Splash Mountain" (1989) theme-park ride, which continue to generate controversy today (Tobias 2019; Frank 2020).

Woodson saw this regime of racist propaganda, which inundated American classrooms during the Jim Crow era, as a vector of white supremacist violence. Ridding American classrooms of racist myths and fantasies, he wrote, “is much more important than the anti-lynching movement, because there would be no lynching if it did not start in the schoolroom. Why not exploit, enslave, or exterminate a class that everybody is taught to regard as inferior?” As Woodson concluded, white mythology promoted racist violence, justified by further white mythology. And yet, despite their rhetorical commitment to democracy and equality, white American scholars and educators continued to spread racist misinformation. These “friends of truth and . . . promoters of freedom,” Woodson charged, “have not risen up against the present propaganda in the schools and crushed it” (Woodson 1933, 8). In this respect, *Mis-education* might easily have been written about today’s anti-“CRT” agitators—whose gag orders, teacher surveillance and intimidation, and book bans operate under the slogans of “freedom” and “choice” (President’s Advisory 1776 Commission 2021).

Although Woodson critiqued the anticapitalist organizers of his day as utopian, his analysis in many respects foreshadowed Du Bois’s articulation of whitewashed histories as a “propaganda of history” essential to the functioning of racial capitalism. Where Woodson concluded that Black education should promote capitalist uplift—“push[ing] banana carts, and sell[ing] peanuts among their own people” (Woodson 1933, 9)—Du Bois claimed that this would never be enough because white elites had carefully drained the wealth and political power in Black communities. He argued that the US state was designed to guarantee white wealth through law, practice, and culture, and that only agitation could bring about equality. From the general strike that brought about emancipation to the organizing that led to Black enfranchisement through the political gains of “the Black proletariat” in Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, Du Bois saw radical Black and white organizing as the only solution to the ravages of the white supremacist state (Du Bois 1935).

Writing from the vantage point of Jim Crow, a quarter century after launching *The Crisis* and roughly sixty years after the White League

insurgency that sabotaged the multiracial democracy of the 1870s, Du Bois identified what he termed the “propaganda of history” as a key component of white power. White elites orchestrated a two-pronged misinformation campaign designed first to inspire white vigilantes, militants, and legislators to undermine Black rights. The second prong of this campaign was retrospective, intended to whitewash America’s racial history by covering up the origins and effects of racist laws, fraud, and violence. In his penultimate chapter, “Back towards Slavery,” Du Bois (1935, 670–730) observed not only that white conservatives used the “propaganda of history” to end America’s experiment in multiracial democracy but also that the white backlash that ended Reconstruction gave rise to the Jim Crow wave of white supremacist misinformation and violence.

Du Bois identified a series of racist lies in “The Propaganda of History” that white intellectuals planted in Americans textbooks designed to present white plunder as meritorious and white power as natural and inevitable. Nothing could have been further from the truth. White historians and teachers taught that Black Southerners sought to “eat, drink and clothe themselves at the state’s expense,” that they “believe[d] that they need no longer work,” and that “foolish laws were passed by the black lawmakers, [and] the public money was wasted terribly.” They claimed, literally unbelievably, that “the humiliation and distress of the Southern whites was in part relieved by the Ku Klux Klan, a secret organization which frightened the superstitious blacks” (Du Bois 1935, 712). This white mythology served two goals: to cement white power and to hide its origins in the systems of theft and violence enshrined in the racial state. Above all, it ensured that white Americans had almost no understanding of their country’s history beyond ridiculous fables about mythical white virtues.

For Du Bois, the “propaganda of history” was both deliberate and tactical, created by “men who hated and despised Negroes and regarded it as loyalty to blood, patriotism to country, and filial tribute to the fathers to lie, steal or kill in order to discredit these black folk.” This was no misunderstanding or poor reporting. White supremacists lied to justify white theft and violence at the expense of Black America. They lied

fluently and without consequence or remorse, because they considered it a “defense of the white race . . . deliberately encourag[ing] students to gather thesis material in order to support a prejudice or buttress [their] lie” (Du Bois 1935, 725). Finally, they lied because it made them feel good, as Du Bois wrote in the chapter overview: “How the facts of American history have in the last half century been falsified because the nation was ashamed. The South was ashamed because it fought to perpetuate human slavery. The North was ashamed because it had to call in the black men to save the Union, abolish slavery and establish democracy” (Du Bois 1935, 711). White Americans were ashamed of their actual history and sought to cover it up rather than to relinquish white supremacy and the systems of power and plunder it animated.

Against the backdrop of the apartheid regime of Jim Crow, Du Bois understood Reconstruction as a moment of opportunity—a period in which Black Americans joined the US Army en masse to save the country, rejected slavery and cemented emancipation, and articulated the most robust understanding of citizenship and democracy to date. It was Black Americans, after all, who demanded and ultimately initiated the public school system in the South after slavery. It was Black Americans who embraced universal manhood suffrage—who held office despite the legacies of slavery, passing laws and implementing reforms that guaranteed equality (Du Bois 1935). While he understood his argument as intrinsically political—that asserting Black humanity would be controversial—Du Bois was “not trying to convince” those who “regard[ed] the Negro as a distinctly inferior creation, who can never successfully take part in modern civilization.” He wrote, instead, “as though Negroes were ordinary human beings, realizing that this attitude will from the first seriously curtail [his] audience”—a counterpropaganda campaign (Du Bois 1935, prologue). For Du Bois, the solution lay not in educating white supremacists but in creating more compelling and inclusive histories that showed the potential for more equal and just futures.

The pattern of white supremacist misinformation and violence critiqued by Woodson and Du Bois has overwhelmingly shaped American history while remaining largely invisible. The “propaganda of history” guarantees that invisibility, which in turn promotes the reproduction of this history of racist plunder, violence, and oppression. Just as members of the UDC worked relentlessly to remove negative images of slavery and positive images of Black Americans from schoolrooms, today’s anti-“CRT” agitators promote a “patriotic” vision of American history that glosses over the contributions of Black thinkers to American democracy and the intentional, institutional role that racism played in our history. Georgia’s State Board of Education, for example, began its anti-“CRT” resolution by announcing that the “United States of America is not a racist country.” The resolution, which forbade teaching how “slavery and racism are anything other than deviations from, betrayals of, or failures to live up to, the authentic founding principles of the United States” (State Board of Education 2021), would seemingly ban teaching about Supreme Court rulings affirming slavery, segregation, Black disenfranchisement, convict-leasing, and eugenics.

The anti-“CRT” movement, as with its Jim Crow-era predecessor, coincides with a rise in right-wing political violence. Especially since the January 6 Insurrection, we face a growing risk of election, terrorist, and insurrectionary violence from the very politicians and agitators seeking to prevent us from learning about historical instances of white paramilitarism and antidemocracy movements (Byman 2022; Horne 2022). So what might Du Bois and Woodson teach us in the face of this growing threat? Both men illustrate not only the dangers of such a movement but also the futility of trying to win over its adherents, who are more concerned with maintaining white power than any semblance of truth. Both Du Bois and Woodson eviscerated the vacuous nonsense of white nationalist education, but they also proposed an alternate vision of history and of the future. They emphasized training educators with a content program and commitment to empower Black students, designed to create a landscape defined by democracy and equality rather than pockmarked by lynching and racist plunder.

We have already seen successful versions of Du Bois's and Woodson's counterpropaganda. The 1619 Project itself is a testament to the power of such work to capture the public attention, inform public discourse, and expand our collective imagination. Despite the mass intimidation tactics, educators and legislators have resisted anti-“CRT” bills, even in deep red states. Since January 2022, for example, Indiana, which banned Black Americans from moving to the state in its Constitution of 1851 (Indiana Constitution of 1851), had *eight* different versions of anti-“CRT” bills working their way through the state legislature that would ban teaching about these racist laws and their legacies (Appleton 2022). Outspoken resistance from educators helped scuttle House Bill 1134 in the state senate and shows the power of organizing against repressive legislation (Herron 2022) and its deeply restrictive vision of the future. Although perhaps counterintuitive, committing to an honest, unpatriotic education reveals the shortcomings of the world we inherit and invites us to create a better one in its place.

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