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The "Ed Scare" and the Ritualistic Burning of Black Texts

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Abstract

This text employs the lens of Afropessimism to articulate the relationship between the Ed Scare and the legacies of anti-Black activity that continue to structure and govern the social world. The Ed Scare, primarily understood as the culture war combat taking place across K-12 and ivory tower arenas, is described here as that which attempts to resolve the ontological nightmare that "wokeness" presents to the non-Black unconscious. Wokeness, rooted in Black parrhesian defiance, heightens White and non-Black fears of the imagined ontological ascension of Blacks and the undermining of White-led value systems. The Scare emerges to confront and slay this "nightmare" (the Black) whose pursuits in the social arena are "unbecoming" of one who has been deemed Humanity's slave, and whose negation is a prerequisite for the psychic stability of the nation. The Scare emerges from the longstanding tradition of nourishing non-Black life through a call for non-Blacks to forget not their civic and ontological duty (participation in public anti-Black activity). To quell the imagined threat that Blacks are believed to currently and always represent, a consuming fire has once again been kindled in the depths of the collective non-Black world. And what the collective mob desires is to "burn" Blackness in the world of the symbolic and assault Blackness in the realm of the concrete.

Keywords

Ed Scare, Afropessimism, Book burning

That man who is forced each day to snatch his manhood, his identity, out of the fire of human cruelty that rages to destroy it knows, if he survives his effort, and even if he does not survive it, something about himself and human life that no school on earth – and indeed, no church – can teach.
He achieves his own authority, and that is unshakable.

(James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*)

Nothing more thoroughly reveals the actual intentions of this country, domestically and globally, than the ferocity of the repression, the storm of fire and blood which the Panthers have been forced to undergo merely for declaring themselves as men – men who want "land, bread, housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace."

(James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*)

In the summer of 1835, the American Anti-Slavery Society (AAS) embarked on a campaign to flood the South with abolitionist literature in what came to be known as the "Great Postal Campaign of 1835" (Stephens 80; see Wyatt Brown; Mercieca). The federal response to this effort was decisive. President Andrew Jackson used his annual address that year to lecture on what he called the "painful excitement produced in the South by attempts to circulate through the mails inflammatory appeals addressed to the passions of the slaves" (A. Jackson n. pag.). Seeking to mute "the misguided persons who have engaged in these unconstitutional and wicked attempts," Jackson declared it would be "proper for Congress" to pass "such a law as will prohibit, under severe penalties, the circulation in the Southern States, through the mail, of incendiary publications intended to instigate the slaves to insurrection" (n. pag.). Local and state-level factions also responded with great force. "Within weeks [...] enraged citizens of Georgia, Mississippi, Virginia, and South Carolina had passed laws and resolutions outlawing the newspapers" (Mercieca 52). Many in the South also took to "closing black schools [...] and imprisoning and often lynching anyone suspected of accepting the newspapers" (52). During that summer, Charlestonians formed a mob and stole bags of newly arrived abolitionist literature from the post office, made effigies of abolitionists, and set fire to abolitionist literature in front of an assembly of thousands of Southern White spectators

(Wyatt-Brown 230). Similar literature burnings took place in the decades following. In 1860, vigilantes from Mississippi, Texas, and South Carolina responded to the John Brown-led revolt known as the Harpers Ferry raid by "confiscat[ing] all books considered 'anti-Southern' and destroy[ing] them in ceremonial book burning" (Oates 321; see Reynolds).

While this unfolded, plantation owners clamped down on their slaves and threatened to "whip or hang any Negro who even *looked* rebellious" (Oates 321) while Alabama moved to protect "impressionable" young minds from abolitionist teachings (321). Then, a vigilance committee was formed in Palestine, Texas, to oversee "a public burning of 'incendiary books'" that opposed slavery (Reynolds 20) while Blacks, and Whites suspected of being abolitionists, were also murdered.[1] In 1892, a White mob burned down the Memphis office of *The Free Speech*, a newspaper known for its owner, Ida B. Wells', vocal opposition to lynching (see Wells; Mobley). In 1898, the Wilmington Massacre and Coup d'état saw White supremacists set ablaze *The Daily Record*, a Black-owned newspaper and a central voice for Black perspectives in the region (see Zucchino). And during the early part of the Second World War, US military officers, intelligence agents, and federal agencies responded to the Black-owned newspaper *The Pittsburgh Courier*'s Double V Campaign, which sought to expose the hypocrisy of America's simultaneous condemnation of the Nazis and apartheid-like treatment of Black subjects, by censoring Black newspapers, banning Black officers from US bases, and intimidating Black journalists "into softening their criticism of American racism" (Carroll 98).

As this brief selection of events confirms, efforts to censor the printed word – and by extension the subjects who are the source and recipients of that word – remain a distinguishing feature of the Black experience. One might argue that the historical record of literary censorship contains

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[1] I capitalize the words "Black" and "White" throughout this piece in line with Ibram X. Kendi's assertion of the importance of distinguishing between Black and White as social categories and black and white as colors, and to heed Eve L. Ewing's call to make Whiteness visible and foreground the better to interrogate the apparatus that sustains it (n. pag.). This text will, at times, deviate from this intentional capitalization while adhering to the casing used in the direct quoting of other scholars.

a directory of diverse characters and an index of discourses (religion, sexuality, etc.). However, the continuous reprisals and cyclical nature of episodic anti-Black assaults and condemnation of the efforts of Blacks to communicate (whether in print or speech) in the public square are part of a long tradition of obstructing Black entrance into what W.E.B. Du Bois termed the "kingdom of culture" (3).[2] These antagonistic efforts acutely echo the history of what "is done to make an example of this bad nigger so there won't be any more like him" (Baldwin, "Interview" 5:32-5:37).

In this article, I analyze contemporary efforts to curtail the teaching of Black writing and Black history in school curricula and beyond as inextricable from the broader history of attempts to circumscribe if not actually eradicate Black American liberatory consciousness. Interrogating the ramifications of these efforts requires us to straddle the space between the concrete and the metaphorical and, I want to argue, to grapple with the connotations of fire that the expression "book burning" implies. It requires us to address the violence that underlies efforts to censor texts that envisage the removal and dismantling of hegemonic and ontological structures and that seek to unsettle the coloniality of being and to decenter Europe and European conceptions of humanity and knowledge systems (see Wynter). It is in this context, too, that the circumscription of Black literature, education, and thought today must be understood.

I enlist the image of flames and redirect the metaphorical language advanced by James Baldwin in the epigraph of this essay to examine the dystopian and conservative domain of what I call *arsonic* violence evident in the nationwide campaign, since the early 2000s, to restrict or prohibit the instruction of race in schools and universities known as the "Ed Scare" (*PEN America* n. pag.). I am specifically concerned with enlisting concepts from Afropessimist thought to explore the racialized, and, as I will show, rac*ist*, subtext of the logic that governs the effort to control and redirect schoolhouse discussions about race. My term "*arsonic* violence," a moniker

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[2] Du Bois desired for Blacks to be "co-worker[s] in the kingdom of culture, to escape both death and isolation" (3). He strived for Blacks to be part of civil society, to be included fully in the American fabric, to exist not as slave but as a citizen. He wanted Human recognition and access to the political economy.

for a particular mode of antiblackness, aims to capture the recurring and iterative circumscription of Black American voices – a continuous reprisal that dates back to the antebellum era. Here I am building on the Afropessimist scholarship of Jared Sexton, who identifies the violence befalling Black flesh as part of Modernity's "opening gesture" ("Racial Profiling" 198). Afropessimism understands violence against Blacks to be not contingent on a transgressive act but, rather, to be a manifestation that is part of "repetition compulsion" (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black* 55). Unlike the Foucauldian notion of disciplinary activity that is dependent on deeds and elaborates on non-racialized dualistic formations (Foucault 199), Afropessimist understandings highlight the persistent prosecution and punishment of dark-skinned subjects by the regime of the State/Empire and social collective whose penalty/punitive torture is rooted in their mere appearance (as Black) to the rest of the world and a dualistic formation that elaborates on one's status as non-White and non-Human.[3] James explains, "In racialized societies such as the United States, the plague of criminality, deviancy, immorality, and corruption is embodied in the black because both sexual and social pathology are branded by skin color" (26). The activity of "civil society reenacts gratuitous violence on the Black" so "that civil society might know itself as the domain of Humans – generation after generation" (26). It is the violence of reifying non-Black Human renewal and self-assurance.

"*Arsonic* violence," then, connotes the untamed, gratuitous, violence that underpins book bans and the censorship of Black bodies, and to which Baldwin's descriptors, the "fire of human cruelty" and "storm of fire and blood," quoted in the epigraph of this article, allude. The term also highlights the direct relationship between contemporary assaults on the discussion and instruction of race and the nation's violent history of book

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[3] See, for example, Wilderson's articulation of Blackness as "always-already criminalized in the collective unconscious" (qtd. in Ball 09:27). See, too, Joy James's critique of the omission of race and colonialism from conceptualization of panoptical mechanisms of dominance (24), and Brady Thomas Heiner's excavation of the unacknowledged influence of the writings of the Black Panther Party, with whose leaders Foucault spent time in the early 1970s, on the latter's work – most notably, the fact that Foucault never cited any of them.

burning, drawing attention to the anti-Black sadism (Ajari, "Irrepressible" 4) undergirding such activity. In turn, it provides a tool for squarely confronting the predatory nature of this fundamentally anti-Black nation that is America.

I locate myself, in part, within the Black prophetic tradition which embraces "parrhesia" – that "fearless speech" in the face of injustice so often displayed by Ida B. Wells and Malcolm X (West 142). One may even label my communicative methods an *arsonic* effort designed to counter the fire of the White-led world and that echoes the assertive rhetoric of the Black press of the 1940s. My style is also inspired by scholars of the Black Arts era such as Amiri Baraka and James Baldwin. Throughout, I will also refer back to the critical work of Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson, who spearhead the advancement of pessimism within the Black Radical tradition. Section One introduces the Afropessimist conceptual framework on which I draw. Section Two applies these concepts to the Ed Scare.

Ontology, Blackness-Slaveness, Civil Society, and the Libidinal Economy

Afropessimism maintains that Blacks exist within a specific ontological context, and are subjects of ontological violence, both of which are the direct consequence of the rise of a modernity that removed the African from the field of relationality and cast them into the abyss of Blackness/slaveness – a condition that Orlando Patterson describes as "the permanent, violent domination of natally alienated and generally dishonored persons" (Patterson 13). The slave is deemed "a socially dead person" who is "culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors" (5). Wilderson in turn describes Blackness as an "ontological condition" and argues that Blackness and slaveness are "coterminous" products of a modernity that recast the African as the ultimate "other" against which the modern concept of the human could be defined (*Red, White & Black* 18; "End of Redemption" n. pag.). Afropessimism attends to this "ontological debasement of Blacks, the negation of their humanity, and their reduction to the status of tools, instruments" (Ajari, "Irrepressible" 37; see Wilderson *Red, White & Black*).

If we understand the slave as someone who exists in what Fanon

called the "zone of nonbeing" (*Black/White* 2) we can begin to recognize the continuities between the construction of Blackness-slaveness at the dawn of modernity and the status of Black people today. The condition of Blackness-slaveness did not conclude with the end of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, decolonization, or the passing of laws against racial discrimination. To quote Sithole, "the structural position of being black in the anti-black world is to be a slave" (25). And the slave, Wilderson contends, "is not a laborer but an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity" (*Red, White & Black* 11). This is what Baldwin intimated in his assertion that "One knew where one was by knowing where the negro was" (qtd. in CBC 21:33).

Civil society is the realm of the social in which Humanity plays. It is, in my view, the "kingdom of culture." It is where those to whom the social contract applies reside.[4] We must wrestle with the notion that American civil society is "predicated on black death" (Wilderson, "Gramsci" 234). We must conclude that "racism or anti-Blackness are pillars of both white states and white civil societies" and therefore "Black liberation requires breaking free from these structures" (Ajari, *Darkening Blackness* 9). This suggests that there is something about civil psychic health and symbolic meaning that is dependent on or that requires the concrete and metaphorical reinforcement of existing hierarchies. The marker of Blackness functions to meet the needs of civil society – including defining its very structure, determining its borders, and justifying its exclusionary practices.

This brings us to the libidinal economy, and to my key concepts: *arsonic* violence and Black texts. The libidinal economy "underwrites" the political economy, and encapsulates "the fantasies of murderous hatred and unlimited destruction" underlying the violent anti-Black activities of non-Black society (Sexton, "Afro-Pessimism" n. pag.).[5] This pertains to anti-Black fantasies and the role of those fantasies in the psychic, political, and economic life of society, wherein "the Black imago" is positioned as a "phobogenic object" that "saturates the collective

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[4] I am drawing, here, on the link Dancy and Edwards make between the "social contract" (of philosophy) and the composition of civil society (31).

[5] Black and non-Black bodies do participate in the fantasy and engage in the destruction of those who have been made Black.

unconscious" (Wilderson, "Ruse of Analogy" 56). The phobogenic object called the "Negro" is "a stimulus to anxiety" (Fanon *Black/White* 117) that according to Fanon exposes the White's phobia toward Black flesh and that according to Ajari reveals the "life-affirming" "anti-Black sadism" that structures White society ("Irrepressible" 4). To quote Wilderson, hostility toward Black beings is best understood not as "a form of discrimination, but as a form of psychic health and well-being to the rest of the world" (qtd. in Ball 10:25). Identifying police brutality as an allegory for the broader disciplining of Black flesh, he notes: "policing – policing Blackness – is what keeps everyone else sane" (qtd. in Ball 10:10). This was the (not so subtle) subtext of DeSantis's unprovoked proclamation in December 2023, in response to the conflict between Hamas and Israel, that "If someone was firing missiles from the Bahamas into, like, Fort Lauderdale, we would never accept that. We would flatten. Anything that happened, it would be done like literally within 12 hours, it would be done" (qtd. in Gancarski n. pag.). DeSantis's Manicheanism, in which the settler/colonial paints the native or Black as perversion, is evident (see Fanon, *Wretched*). But more importantly, what is evident is DeSantis's *need*, on an intimate level, for the vilified Blackened figure to be "real." This allows us to conceptualize White conservative figures' portrayal of Black flesh, Black literary texts, and Black imaginaries as the encroaching manifestations of the (Black) "phobic object" that is not an aberration but, rather, ubiquitous. I am referring to the "excitement" that anti-Blackness inspires, and that I argue, following the logic of Afropessimist thought such as Ajari's, spurs the White to act. This is tantamount to saying that the White *must* participate in this *arsonic* performance that tramples on the Black object. "The white" Ajari writes, "must ensure that the black is nothing, in order to attain the certainty that he is everything" ("Irrepressible" 4). And this psychic gravitation is the impetus behind the concrete efforts to have books removed from school curricula and libraries, and the incendiary hate speech and suppressive efforts that stalk teachers, university professors, and writers, especially those of color, on social media platforms and conservative activist websites.

My use of the term "Black text" in turn derives from Ronald L. Jackson's articulation of "the body [as] socially understood and treated as

a discursive text that is read by interactants" (2) and Hartman's position that "the fungibility of the commodity" – which is to say, the way that commodification effectively transforms the object (or objectified human) into an extension of their owner's desires – renders "the captive body [of the slave] an abstract and empty vessel, vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values" (*Scenes of Subjection* 21). This coincides with Fanon's statement that the Black "is woven" by the White [Le Blanc] "out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" (*Black/White* 84). The "Black" is the dark phobic and fungible canvas onto which the White supremacist narrative can script the horrors it invents to justify their violence.[6] To quote Marriott, "the racialized body is made up of several racist fantasies or 'myths'; each myth is contiguous to the others in so far as they fuse a Manichean logic" (*Whither Fanon* 67). In this way, Black bodies become, on a metaphorical level, at once a text onto which White culture inscribes signification, and, specifically, the threat of danger, and a text whose elimination or elision "rescues" White culture from that same, imagined, danger. Useful, too, is Marriott's articulation of "epidermalization," in which "the body forms an imaginary surface veiled (or disfigured) by hostilities" and a "historical-racial schema" is imposed on a corporeal one (*Whither Fanon* 67).

I use "Black text," too, to index the slippage between the perceived destabilizing effects of Black texts and the destabilizing effects of those Black people who write and consume them, and to highlight the interdependence of the history of emancipation and the writing and literature that fueled it, which is literalized in the shared fate of both runaway slaves and abolitionist literature. In their reassertion of the sovereignty of Black bodies, Black texts cannot but invite their own destruction. The term *arsonic* violence registers this slippage between Black text and Black body. I in turn also employ the term "fugitive text" to underscore the efforts to systematically thwart the Black textual imagination and, in particular, the imagining of being elsewhere. But I also wish to evoke the fugitivity and desire for

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[6] Fanon introduces the Black phobic object in *Black Skin, White Masks*. The conception of fungibility and accumulation in relation to Blackened bodies originates in the work of Hortense Spillers and Saidiya V. Hartman.

sovereignty within Frederick Douglass' revelation that he was a criminal for rebuking the White world's regulative hand and stealing himself back by running away from formal enslavement (310).

I argue, following Afropessimists such as Sexton and Wilderson, that what we might term the ontological engineers, benefactors, and allies of White culture respond to the threat that Black texts pose to the culture's psychic coherence by treating Blacks as metaphorical slaves in revolt. Black texts, in multiple forms, are also "guilty" in advance, because the very endeavor to "integrate," if that is the aim of that particular text, cannot be done without questioning the "why" behind the desire to integrate what was lost/ what has yet to be integrated. When I speak of *arsonic* violence and fugitive texts, then, I am pointing to the specific connotations of book banning and censorship of Black writing, knowledge, and abolitionist calls for an "ontological revolution" (Warren 171), in the context of a long and violent history. These terms throw into vivid relief the parallels between the treatment of books as dangerous influences to be torched lest they destroy the hegemonic order, and the immolation of Black subjects. To speak of fugitive texts is to speak of the radical capacity of literature to threaten and destabilize an entire network of relations that upholds our supposedly post-racial society.

Hartman informs us that "black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago" (*Lose Your Mother* 6). This highlights the "tragic continuities in antebellum and postbellum constitutions of blackness" (*Scenes of Subjection* 7). Can we not consider that this calculus and arithmetic are part of "the fire"? The fact remains that both the Blacks of yesteryear and the Blacks of the present day exist within the same consequences, in the same ontological location, under the same regime of violence. In connection with our theme, the Ed Scare is part of the continuity, part of "the afterlife of slavery" that includes "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration…" (*Lose Your Mother* 6).

The Ed Scare

As the events described at the outset of this piece attest, the phenomena of censorship via the banning or burning of books or the vehement opposition against Black beings in such a form in the US is cyclical in nature – consistently rooted in the perception that Blacks have disrupted the ontological and anthropological order, threatened the stability of civil society via "Black infiltration," or violated White Manichean logic. The Ed Scare that began in 2021 is the most recent iteration of this longstanding tradition, and is characterized by "educational gag orders" passed in many states that "target discussions of race, racism, gender, and American history;" prohibit "divisive" dialogue in grades K-12, spaces of higher education, and the workplace; and work to "ban books that address these topics" (*PEN America* n. pag.). It is a distinctly postmillennial phenomenon, intimately related to the resurgence of the Far Right after the election of Barak Obama in 2008; the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014 in response to police brutality against Black youth and the broader Prison-Industrial Complex (in which the carceral state's relationship with Blacks became, once again, a focal point); the election of Donald Trump in 2016; and the resurgence of BLM following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. The lingering currents of discourse at the time concerned the need for social justice, police reform, reparations, and so on, and were swiftly met with the histrionic decrying of DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion), affirmative action policies, and claims of "reverse racism."[7] Most notable were White conservatives' focus on Bell's "critical race theory" and their intense concern with excising what they refer to as "wokeism" – a word that stems from the expression, "stay woke."[8] Coined in the early twentieth century to articulate a heightened level of Black consciousness, adopted in

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[7] A discussion of so-called "reverse racism" against Whites would merit an article in and of itself.

[8] Some scholars trace the first use of "stay woke" to William "Ramblin" Thomas's 1928 song, "Sawmill Moan" (see Carter). Its first documented use in print was in William Melvin Kelley's 1962 New York Times article, "If You're Woke, You Dig It," a commentary on White appropriations of Black linguistic style.

the 1960s by Civil Rights activists, and reemployed in the 2010s by the Black Lives Matter movement (Carter n. pag.), the word "woke" in the speeches, sound bites, and social media posts of reactionary politicians and activists in the US and beyond functions as ill-defined pejorative shorthand to portray efforts to redress systemic injustice as irrational, propagandistic, racist towards Whites, anti-American, and a threat to the social order (see Robin). Clark notes that "anti-woke rhetoric" is "an exercise in destructive abstraction" that "uses inference and imprecise language to position Black people" and in some ways other minorities "as Others whose very presence and influence are aberrations in American culture" (1). This reframing of "woke" as a destructive force exemplifies what Leslie Dorrough Smith has termed "chaos rhetoric" – a "type of declension speech," especially prevalent within the Christian Right, "that seeks to persuade […] by stressing an imminent threat to a beloved entity" – anything "from children, to liberty, to the nation itself" (5). Chaos rhetoric transforms the teacher who, for example, assigns a book that discusses historical inequalities into an embittered actor who is intent on making "White children" as Chuck Todd articulated "feel ashamed of their race" ("Meet The Press" n. pag.),[9] and Critical Race Theory, developed by the Black educator and lawyer Derrick Bell to explicate structural racism and now often found in university curricula, into what Chris Rufo called an "existential threat" that "has pervaded every aspect of the federal government" (02:48, 00:07). It mandates that the history of Black slavery be replaced with claims that, for example, "'slaves developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit'" (Atterbury n. pag.). And, building on Afropessimist thought, I argue that it frames Black texts as necessarily subjective, partisan, inflammatory, and heretical (Isen n. pag.) and the promoters of its contents as necessitating proverbial immolation. In some fashion, this speaks to David Marriott's description of racial anxiety and fear as stemming from "the intricacies of cultural fantasy […] abjection, and desire": the "unconscious fear" that Fanon described in *Black Skin,*

[9] Anchor Chuck Todd is not agreeing with this assertion. Rather, he is explaining how some stakeholders view discussions on certain social justice-oriented issues in schools.

White Masks is a fear within "Western culture" of "being intruded upon […] by the black other" (*Haunted Life* 208, 211).

The Ed Scare has manifested itself in a range of different forms. On one level, we find this hyperbolic fright in policies circumscribing what is taught in schools and, in particular, to reframe the history of slavery, emancipation, and desegregation. Thus, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis's 2022 decision to reject K-12 students access to an African American studies course, which he argued would enable the infiltration of radical thought such as Black Queer theory and what he referred to as "cultural Marxism"[10] into American families – an argument in keeping with that of right-wing White conservatives' longstanding concern with preserving American family values coded White. Likewise, in 2023, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders, of Arkansas, signed EO 23-05, "Executive Order to Prohibit Indoctrination and Critical Race Theory in Schools," which asserted, among other things, that "Critical Race Theory (CRT) is antithetical to the traditional American values of neutrality, equality, and fairness. It emphasizes skin color as a person's primary characteristic, thereby resurrecting segregationist values, which America has fought so hard to reject" (Sanders n. pag.). In March 2024, DeSantis lauded the fact that "Florida is where DEI goes to die" in the wake of the University of Florida firing all DEI staff (DeSantis, [@RonDeSantis]; see Betts). Elsewhere, he stated with immense satisfaction that Florida is "'[w]here woke goes to die'" ("Governor DeSantis Delivers Inaugural" n. pag.).

But alongside this material aim of regulating and thwarting revolutionary praxis, the Ed Scare has a symbolic aim: to reaffirm what we might call the right to be unapologetically White via an embrace or reactionary frame that enlists Blackness in order to vivify Whiteness. I think of James Baldwin, who asserted in "Notes for a Hypothetical Novel," that "the fact of color […] persists as a problem in American life because it […] fulfils something in the American personality […] the Americans in some peculiar way believe or think they need it" (*Price of the Ticket* 242). The project of eliminating critical race theory, or references to slavery, or

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[10] See Goldwag, who also lists Ben Shapiro, Jordan Peterson, Tucker Carlson, and Marco Rubio as participating in slander against Marxism.

accounts of lynching, is necessary on a symbolic level: vanquishing the threat of Black violence – interpreted, here, as returning to the safety of the status quo – requires a violent and, indeed, fiery response. The fantasy of torching Blackness pervades White culture but critical flashpoints emerge to assuage rising White libidinal anxiety.

Like the racially-coded "Superpredator Scare"[11] of the 1990s that trafficked in the myth of Black male violence to justify the expansion of legislation to try juvenile defendants as adults based on criminologists' (since-debunked) prediction of an impending surge in "radically impulsive, brutally remorseless [...] teenage boys, who murder, [...] deal deadly drugs" and "join gun-toting gangs" (Bennett, DiIulio, and Walters 27) and the "Birther Movement" (Tumulty n. pag.; Rothman n. pag.) of the early 2000s that sought to delegitimize the nation's first Black presidential candidate via claims that he was born in Kenya and a "covert" Muslim (Conlon n. pag.), the "Ed Scare" is best understood as perpetrating the fantasy of the Black menace that continually threatens to destabilize White America. It is, in other words, an offspring of a fear of Black emancipation whose purpose is to justify, reinforce, and ultimately quell that fear via the promise of the emendation of schoolbooks and the removal of disloyal or un-American interpretations of the nation's identity and past. I also want to link this to what Warren calls the "sadistic pleasure principle" which describes the various manifestations of anti-Black violence that have long been "routinized and ritualized" (Warren 2). I'm attempting to tie these libidinal dreams to that which motivates the activity of those who call for the destruction of Black literary/fleshly texts (attacks on literature are truly a method of warfare against the authors of said texts), who desire the destruction and removal of Black books, curriculum, admissions policies, hiring practices, etc.

DeSantis's maneuvering arouses the libidinal dreams of the collective, tapping into the terror especially saturating the psyches of White 'victims' who are already equipped with a prescription for the "Black that plagues" (or so they believe) them.[12] DeSantis and many across the nation promise

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[11] See "The Superpredator Myth, 25 Years Later" in *EJI* for a brief summary.

[12] Wilderson (*Red, White & Black*) and Sexton ("Afro-Pessimism") define the libidinal

rescue from "an imagined Black invasion," and "ensure" that justice for imagined Black offenses will be served by his hand. We might characterize these actions as ensuring the diffusion of the *paradigmatic perfume* of slavery into the social (where the atmospheric conditions are ripe for other forms of anti-Black violence to catch fire).[13]

Baldwin's explication of the Black experience succinctly summarizes, too, the present turmoil: that for Blacks in America—legal codification remains nonexistent.[14] Baldwin, significantly cited in the literature of Afropessimism,[15] exclaims: "We're still governed, if that is the word I want, by the slave code. That's the nature of the crisis. [Y]ou haven't got to have anything resembling proof to bring any charge whatever against a difficult, bad nigger" (qtd. in Glaude n. pag.). One of the aims of 'the Scare,' I argue, is to move directly into the "sentencing phase" for "difficult" Blacks (understood, here to be those Blacks who espouse CRT and anti-White supremacist rhetoric, etc.) and "bad niggers" (whose status as such is predetermined, and effectively encompasses all Blacks. More specifically, the persecution of educational institutions that support DEI initiatives is premised on the treatment of Black texts as *fugitive entities*. In this, it follows the same logic of antebellum legislation such as the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, which punished those who assisted "escaped" Blacks, and of what Kenneth Robert Janken, in his introduction to Walter White's *Rope & Faggot*, describes as the "civil religion of the 'Lost Cause,'" which arose in the South as White Southerners "respond[ed] to the overthrow of slavery" (conceived, here, not as Afropessimism defines it, but as chattel and labor) and sought to reframe both the Civil War and "African Americans' drive for equality" as assaults on the Southern way of life (xxi). Like the slave

economy as the collective unconscious.

[13] Wilderson argues that "Blackness is a paradigmatic position" that arrived 1,300 years ago – and thus even outside the European Empire and the Transatlantic Slave Trade, the people between Cape Town and the Sahara had already been omitted from the Human family by the Arab, Iranian, Moroccan, Jewish, and Chinese worlds ("End of Redemption" n. pag.). This reminds us of a structural reality, a hierarchical formation.

[14] This is articulated in Eddie Glaude Jr.'s Time piece in which an interview between James Baldwin and Ben Chavis is quoted in Eddie Glaude's text.

[15] See for example Wilderson, *Afropessimism*; Finch.

codes and like the Lost Cause narrative, which the Klan enforced, as McVeigh notes, by curtailing "the range of acceptable behavior for African Americans" and by treating "any type of behavior that did not serve the interests of Klan constituents [...] as a threat to the established order" (McVeigh 73), the Ed Scare understands Blackness to be fugitive in its very essence, and thus assigns to itself the task of constraining it.

The irony, of course, is that DEI support is often, itself, performative, and arguably falls under the umbrella of Derrick Bell's *interest convergence* – which is to say that conservative legislators are very often campaigning against a mere performance of escape-assistance, and are, in fact, punishing institutions for refusing to *explicitly* defend/uphold the slave code. While seeking to compel the removal of specific texts and the circumscription of specific narratives, the Scare functions more generally as a disciplinary force intended to foreclose even the cogitation of shallow and symbolic alliance – seeking to erect antebellum nostalgia in its stead. The Ed Scare's chaos rhetoric seeks to prepare the conservative troops for a nostalgic ritual to quell what its proponents characterize as a grand existential and ontological threat.

Political grandstanding and virtue signaling serve as calls to muster the non-Black troops and start the fire. The reactionary conservative legislation that ensues places "texts" in the fire. This placement calls to mind the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill board's actions toward Nikole Hannah-Jones (author of the New York Times best-seller *The 1619 Project*). The board refused to vote on providing Hannah-Jones tenure with an appointment to the Knight Chair in Race and Investigative Journalism. There were "reports that Walter Hussman Jr., after whom UNC's Hussman School of Journalism and Media is named, opposed Hannah-Jones's appointment" (Jaschik, "Hannah-Jones" n. pag.). In unison with the NAACP's Legal Defence Fund that represented her, Hannah-Jones would pen a letter: "I cannot imagine working at and advancing a school named for a man who lobbied against me, who [...] believed that a project that centered Black Americans" referencing her *1619 Project* "equaled the denigration of white Americans" (qtd. in Jaschik, "Hannah-Jones" n. pag.). She continues, "Nor can I work at an institution whose leadership permitted this conduct and has done nothing to disavow it" (n. pag.). The

conservative outcry grew, and in 2021 Hannah-Jones resigned. A similar pattern is evident in the trajectory of Professor Cornel West's departure from Harvard that same year. West resigned his post after being denied tenure, which he argued was a response by the administration to his public expression of support for Palestine (Jaschik "Cornel West" n. pag.). Others have argued that the resignation from Harvard of its first Black woman president, Claudine Gay, in 2024 was not a consequence of the allegations made against her of plagiarism or of condoning antisemitic violence on university campuses, but rather the product of a sustained campaign to discredit her launched by Chris Rufo four years earlier, when she reinitiated cluster hiring in the College of Arts and Sciences to bolster ethnic studies (Nair and Wang n. pag.; Radsken n. pag.), or after she inaugurated a new deanship of diversity and the launch of a diversity task force (Radsken n. pag.).

The threat to Black teachers is also present in K12 education. Perhaps the most egregious example of this is the campaign that the White parents in Cherokee County, Georgia launched to object to the school district's appointment of Cecelia Lewis, a Black woman, as an administrator with a mandate to focus on DEI. Nicole Carr describes the parents' rallies as components of what amounted to a "war" on CRT (n. pag.), which, I would argue, was (but a stand-in) simply a cover-up for the true threat: the challenging of White hegemonic accounts of US history and culture, and of the place of Black and White children in the social hierarchy. To quote the title of Carr's article, such a mission required "Chas[ing the] Black Educator Out of Town" and "then chas[ing] her to the next town."[16]

Giroux states that education is arguably "a struggle over what kind of future you want for young people" (qtd. in França n. pag.). This involves considering the ideological and political processes shaping education. First, Giroux considers the types of individuals the system of education is producing rather than the methods that the powerful employ to structure education in such a way as to produce passive creatures. Second, he outlines the danger of an education that presents itself as neutral. Giroux explains this projection of neutrality is the foundation for "a kind of fascist politics

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[16] Co-published by ProPublica and PBS Frontline.

because it hides its code for not allowing people to understand the role that education plays ideologically, in producing particular forms of knowledge, of power, of social values, of agency," and most importantly for our text, "of narratives about the world" (n. pag.). Giroux's position provides a diagnosis of DeSantis's Florida Statutes that specifically rail against "indoctrination" and any push towards what they describe as "a particular point of view" in Florida schools – thereby casting DeSantian education as a neutral agent while unintentionally unmasking the fascist politics inherent in those Statutes (Florida Senate Statute n. pag.). Yet I remain fixed on the question within Giroux's analysis: What kind of future do the powers that be want for young people? Disciplinary regimes project and erect a future of discriminatory scope, a form of "education" that is in line with hegemonic interests. A more pressing question remains, however. Can we even begin to talk of futurity in relation to those who function as slaves? The politics within the Scare are more intensely fashioned to echo an infinite futurelessness that is inherent in the slave's social death sentence. The Scare proceeds to perform a ritual of foreclosure (and imagines a foreclosed future)[17] that is a reiteration of the making of Blackness (in which the African's Humanity and futurity ends at the very creation of the Black-slave). Put differently, Scare politics narrates to the former African, and the rest of Humanity, that the Black's biographic details are and shall remain "absent."

Upon the young my focus remains. I consider renowned children's author Rudine Sims Bishop's framework of "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Doors," which stresses the transformative potential and power of books to serve as self-affirming instruments, in light of non-White stories that are being given the chance to be told. But a world, and specifically an institution, that projects and affirms Black Humanity threatens to unravel the threads of a society predicated on Blackness as the "nothing" that Warren (*Ontological Terror*) and Ajari ("Irrepressible"; *Darkening Blackness*) respectively underscore. The Scare's function is to deny Black students even the opportunity to access the remnants of their Afrocentric heritage and to thwart any effort to integrate Afrocentric orientations into their own lives and the story of America (see

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[17] In some ways, this is inspired by Sexton ("Afro-Pessimism") and Douglass et al.

King and Swartz).[18] The Scare's logic is a natural extension, and byproduct, of the logic that Patterson reminds us that distinguished slaves from Whites, and that was strategically leveraged to further oppress them: "Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives," or, "to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory" (5). Where antebellum America denied slaves the right to locate themselves in history or indeed the knowledge to craft a sense of community and lineage, the Ed Scare serves both to *continue* denying that right and to *make invisible or normalize that denial* – including its historic centrality to Black oppression. In circumscribing what can be said about the history of Black Americans' exclusion from the project of writing the nation's history, the Scare impedes, too, confrontation with the ramifications of that exclusion and its entanglement with centuries of violence. The historical denial of Black Americans' right to write their own stories, let alone participate in writing the story of America, precludes for centuries the possibility of their contributing to the "kingdom of culture." Denying the history of that denial in turn precludes the possibility of arriving at an understanding of America that reflects its most horrific aspects.

This is precisely what Oklahoma's Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters is doing when in 2023 he denied that the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, in which 300 Black people were murdered and thousands displaced, was motivated by race (Khaled n. pag.). This, too, is what Idaho Governor Brad Little and Idaho Superintendent of Public Instruction Debbie Critchfield are doing when they construct and present a different curriculum that gifts students with what Little describes as the "factual story of our nation's history" (n. pag.). To which we might respond by once more quoting Baldwin: "Whereas you from Europe came here voluntarily, I was kidnapped, and my history was destroyed here. For your purposes, this has to be faced" (*Cross of Redemption* 95).

What I have offered here is a soliloquy of the present, and what amounts to a prophecy of the future that the Ed Scare seeks to produce. As I write, I

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[18] For more information on Afrocentric considerations in education see Asante.

reflect on the kindling of the fire during the period before the formal rise of the Scare. In November 2020, Fox News broadcast a Trump MAGA rally and one unnamed crowd participant, holding up an explicit placard, stood out. The host interrupted the interview to draw attention to what the sign communicated: "We just saw a very disturbing sign, it said 'Coming for Blacks and Indians, welcome to the New World Order'" (Fearnow n. pag.). I mention this occurrence because I see it as a foreshadowing of the *arsonic* violence that was to erupt in a multitude of arenas in 2021. This, a story of books and literature in general, is a tale without a comedic ending, a narrative that halts with an abrupt caesura. And, in the end, we look to Woodson for our call to action: "The fire is getting hotter every day, and the Negro is about to be consumed. Who will deliver him?" (8).

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