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"That's What All This Wokeism Is About"

Books Erased, Printed Word Censorship, and US National Identity

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Abstract

The history of US literature has been shaped, from its inception, by the fundamentally political question of *who* the printed word is for, and *what* purpose it should serve. The historical justifications given by the State for denying specific demographics' right to literacy and access to educational institutions, by campaigners for banning individual books from classrooms, school libraries, and bookshops, and by education policy makers for including some subjects in school curricula and not others, are indicative of how (some) Americans have answered these questions.

The contributors to this Special Section of *RSAJournal* locate the vocabulary of censorship and discourse around free speech of the 2020s within the broader history of the liberation struggles of those groups whose representation is at the heart of contemporary discussions around the shape of school and HE curricula, reading lists, and intellectual debate, and within a wider, conservative political agenda aimed at maintaining the status quo by restricting and policing (among other things) the promotion and exercise of critical thinking, especially among young people. Studying the evolution of the public discourse around book banning and censorship, they argue, provides a valuable way for understanding, more generally, how US hegemonic powers discursively construct writing, reading, and

education to maintain existing social hierarchies and shape the individual subjects within them. From this perspective, portrayals of inclusive curricula, literary works that center historically marginalized voices, and initiatives to complicate established accounts of the nation's history as impinging on individual freedom serve to foreclose opportunities for critical reflection that might result in the questioning of the social order.
In this Introduction we zoom out from the specifics of book banning, tone policing, and curriculum reform to advance a broad-ranging structural analysis of the socio-political landscape from which these phenomena have emerged. We begin by tracing the evolution of a word, "woke," central to free speech alarmist discourse (Section 1), which we use to analyze critiques of the so-called campus free speech crisis (Section 2). The last two sections expand our enquiry to locate this discourse within a broader culture of nostalgia apparent across the US and Western Europe (Section 3) and to analyze its metabolization by Italian media (Section 4), the latter of which provides a useful case study for understanding European free speech alarmist rhetoric as strategically leveraging longstanding European constructions of America to produce a singular affective response of disdain.

KEYWORDS

Book bans, Culture wars, "Woke" culture, Free speech and cancel culture, American exceptionalism

In April 2023, the conservative US think tank The Heritage Foundation published a new edition of its *Mandate for Leadership* – a series of policy proposals it has released in advance of every presidential election campaign since 1981. The brainchild of a coalition of conservative groups called Project 2025 established to ensure Trump 2.0 achieves the sweeping legislative changes that the first administration failed to pass, *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* seeks to "bring the Administrative State to heel, and in the process defang [*sic*] and defund the woke culture warriors who have infiltrated every last institution in America" (Roberts 9). Among its targets are the alleged existential threats posed by the climate change "alarmism" stifling investment in domestic energy production (Gilman 676), the "long march of cultural Marxism through our institutions" (Dans and Groves xiv), "the new woke gender ideology'" (Vought 62), and the "inva[sion]" of school libraries by "drag queens and pornography" (Roberts 1). These, its authors argue, are the product of a "highly educated managerial elite" who oppose the American values of "self-governance, the

rule of law, and ordered liberty" and who look down on "humble, patriotic working families" (Roberts 10). To achieve its goals, Project 2025 aims to disarm the Environmental Protection Agency (Gunasekara 420-45); delete from all legislation words including "sexual orientation and gender identity [...], diversity, equity, and inclusion [that are] used to deprive Americans of their First Amendment rights" (Roberts 4); "excis[e]" from public school curricula texts that "inject racist, anti-American, ahistorical propaganda into [the nation's] classrooms" (8); and close the Department of Education (DoE) itself (Burke 319).

The Conservative Promise is a natural extension of a series of narratives that since the mid-1950s have cast public libraries and primary, secondary, and higher education as facilitators of an all-out ideological assault on the American way of life on the one hand and free speech and debate within the so-called marketplace of ideas on the other (Steel and Petley 1-10; see Diamond; Davies n. pag.; Scatamburlo-D'Annibale 230). One finds here echoes of the Red and Lavender Scare-era rhetoric used in the 1950s to justify purging government and cultural institutions of alleged communist sympathizers and queer people (who were supposedly more vulnerable to blackmail by Soviet agents looking to recruit spies) (Johnson 10-16). One finds echoes, too, of the language in the "Massive Resistance" laws passed in 1956 to prevent the desegregation of public schools (Wallace n. pag.) and of corporations in the 1960s to position support for market regulation as "a pathological and phobic response akin to racial bias" that discriminated against businesses (McCarthy 72). But most notably, *The Conservative Promise* echoes the vocabulary enlisted in the 1970s and 1980s by the campaigns of a then-nascent Christian Right funded by conservative corporate philanthropic foundations (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale 223) to remove from school libraries works deemed inappropriate for children and adolescents due to their sexual content, references to racism, or supposedly anti-American themes (Heins 11), and to discredit a Higher Education (HE) system long viewed as an incubator of radical leftist thought and the prime obstacle to the implementation of free market economics and the shaping of compliant neoliberal subjects (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale 222-31).

To achieve the latter, conservatives launched a coordinated campaign against "political correctness" – a term originally used by left-wing activists

to mock themselves, and which the Right appropriated at the turn of the 1990s to recast the diversification of university syllabi, implementation of diversity, equality, and inclusivity (DEI) initiatives, campus environmentalist policies, and emergent theories for explicating systemic inequalities as ideological assaults on individual freedom (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale 223). This narrative, exemplified by Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) and Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Higher Education* (1991), soon dovetailed with the theory of "cultural Marxism" referred to in *The Conservative Promise*, which extended the Nazi conspiracy theory of "Cultural Bolshevism" to ascribe so-called political correctness to the pernicious influence of Jewish Marxist philosophers associated with the Frankfurt School and, just as inexplicably, postmodernist thought.[1] And it has formed the basis of conservative activism in the three decades since (Scatamburlo-D'Annibale 229; see Smith; Wilson and Kamola). In the absence of a meaningful counternarrative, and despite the wealth of data attesting to the contrary (Hanlon n. pag.; see Wilson and Kamola),[2] this view of US academia as a seeding ground for dangerously radical, censorial views and of equality movements and initiatives as impinging on freedom of expression has morphed from a conservative talking point into the dominant perspective advanced by media outlets.

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[1] The first articulation of cultural Marxism for a mainstream audience, an essay by Michael Minnicino titled "The New Dark Age: The Frankfurt School and 'Political Correctedness,'" explicitly linked the new so-called assault on free speech to the specter of Jewish leftist power (see Woods; Braune; Jamin). Anyone familiar with the vast divergences between Marxist thought, the ideas of the thinkers most frequently criticized by Bloom's generation (Derrida, Barthes, Foucault), and postcolonial, feminist, gender, critical race, and queer studies frameworks will recognize the oddity of assuming their interchangeability.

[2] When Georgetown University's Free Speech Project examined speech violations reported on campuses between 2016 and 2018, it identified only 60 such cases, which translates to 0.65 of all 4,583 colleges and universities in the country. The researchers concluded that "beyond the same oft-cited anecdotal examples [...] there is very little actual evidence that conservative and libertarian voices are routinely stifled on college campuses," and that the data does not support claims that "safe spaces, speech codes, and trigger warnings" have stifled speech (Wilson and Kamola n. pag.).

The contributions to this Special Section of *RSAJournal* contextualize the vocabulary of censorship and discourse around free speech of the 2020s within the broader history of the United States, with specific attention to the history of the liberation struggles of those groups whose representation is at the heart of contemporary discussions around the shape of school and HE curricula, reading lists, and intellectual debate. We are especially interested in the reinterpretation of social justice efforts intended to enable historically underrepresented groups to participate more fully in public life, and which are premised on a definition of "freedom of speech [as] a negative freedom" that grants "freedom *from* persecution/discrimination based on expressed views, not on the freedom *to* express those views" (Bacevic n. pag.), as, instead, limiting the rights of non-minorities and betraying American values, however defined.

Our focus stems from our acute awareness of the mounting pace, and growing success, of conservative lobbying efforts in the US to restrict the circulation of printed texts, position progressive calls for social justice as authoritarian, and foster public distrust towards educational institutions specifically and the value of intellectual enquiry more generally. It also stems from our concern with the dissonance between the popular account of universities' leftist militancy and privileging of ideology over truth or knowledge and our own experiences as educators in the neoliberal university, whose capacity to publicly critique racism, misogyny, transphobia, war conflict, and the structural inequalities in our own institutions (Docherty 248-51) has eroded in line with the broader decline in power, autonomy, pay, and job security of academic faculty apparent across the sector, especially within the humanities (Docherty 248-51; Slaughter and Leslie 2, 43; see Morrish and Sauntson; Fasenfest; Klikauer and Young; Gray 745-50).

To this end, Barbara Becnel's "US Book Banning as Racialized Political Strategy: National Narratives, Public Pedagogy and the Fostering of a Tug-of-Values War" contextualizes contemporary efforts to circumscribe how race is taught in public schools within the nation's broader history of limiting Black American expression, including antebellum-era bans on teaching Black free men and slaves to read or write. Anna Ferrari's "Mice, Slurs and Freedom Fries: American Tensions between Teaching the Literary Canon and the Need for a National Narrative in an Era of Book Bans"

examines the debate around the teaching of sensitive subjects including race, gender, sexuality, disability, and the Holocaust as illustrative of broader tensions between different stakeholders in the construction and reaffirmation of America's national narrative. In "The 'Ed Scare' and the Ritualistic Burning of Black Texts," Michael Baugh develops the concept of "*arsonic* violence" to unearth the violent subtext of the book bans, delimiting of what school children learn about race, and targeting of Black academics and public intellectuals that comprise the so-called "Ed Scare" of the 2020s. In "Skim, Quote, List: The Censorship of *All Boys Aren't Blue*," Katherine Inglis develops a forensic analysis of what she terms the conservative book challenger "playbook," which instructs activists to forego in-depth reading or critique in favor of skimming for sexually and racially charged content. Finally, Nicola Paladin's "The Success of US Literature in Italy during Fascism: Ambivalent Censorship, Market, and Consensus" draws our attention overseas to the translation, censorship, and circulation of American literary texts in fascist Italy to analyze the role of American letters in the Regime's efforts to shape a new national identity.

In this Introduction we zoom out from the specifics of book banning, tone policing, and curriculum reform examined in our contributors' pieces to advance a broad-ranging structural analysis of the socio-political landscape from which these phenomena have emerged. We begin by tracing the evolution of a word, "woke," central to free speech alarmist discourse (Section 1), which we use to analyze critiques of the so-called campus free speech crisis (Section 2). Our last two sections expand our enquiry to locate this discourse within a broader culture of nostalgia apparent across the US and Western Europe (Section 3) and to analyze its metabolization by Italian media (Section 4), the latter of which provides a useful case study for understanding European free speech alarmist rhetoric as strategically leveraging longstanding European constructions of America to produce a singular affective response of disdain.

The Social Life of "Woke"

The quote in our title comes from a bewildering pronouncement made by Russ Vought, the president of the Christian Nationalist Organization,

and one of *The Conservative Promise*'s contributors, while a guest on the conservative podcast *The Charlie Kirk Show*: "I am against the Department of Education because I think it's a Department of Critical Race Theory [...] you're funding essentially a cultural revolution not just with teachers, but with the students. That's what all this wokeism is about" (LastWeekTonight 2:58-3:05). Vought's statement employs a mode of rhetorical obfuscation and dog whistle politics – "coded racial appeals that carefully manipulate hostility toward nonwhites" while appearing to do nothing of the kind (Haney-López 5) – apparent throughout the different instantiations of censorship analyzed by our contributors. In her contribution to this issue, Barbara Becnel reads such constructions as paradigmatic of what George Lakoff describes as political rhetoric's reliance on the activation of the "automatic, effortless inferences that follow from" the "cognitive structures" or "unconscious frames" that shape what we call "common sense" (qtd. in Becnel 54). Becnel notes that such rhetoric is premised on "political narratives that over centuries have been embedded into the unconscious frames of the populace in service of two unyielding ideas: white superiority and black inferiority" (54).

But in her analysis of the strategic leveraging of specific social constructions of childhood innocence, maternal concern, and obscenity-condoning leftism in the conservative book challenging discourse against LGBTQ+ texts, our contributor Katherine Inglis shows how such rhetoric also activates a plethora of other, complementary, frames (118). Vought's grammatically dubious soundbite seeks precisely to activate multiple such structures contemporaneously: the third-person pronoun ("this") transforms his earlier articulation of the specific threat of the DoE's alleged leftism into an indictment of a more general assault on American values, while the semiotically supple word "wokeism," whose meaning he does not define but about whose negative ramifications he is unequivocal, allows the audience to project onto the generic threat their own specific fears.

The term "woke" originated as a descriptor for what Brianna Perry terms "an alternative temporal state, in which Black people are perpetually aware of the state of the world" (93). White mainstream audiences were first introduced to a diluted version of this meaning in 1962, via the Black writer William Melvin Kelley's discussion of white America's appropriation and distortion of Black vernacular in a *New York Times* article titled "If You're

Woke, You Dig It." However, scholars trace its origins, variously, to Marcus Garvey's essays and speeches of the 1920s in which, drawing on Marx and Engels, he called on Black subjects globally to "wake up" (5) to their shared struggle and referred to "the awakened spirit of the New Negro, who does not seek industrial opportunity alone, but a political voice" (56);[3] to Williard "Ramblin" Thomas's complaint, in "Sawmill Moan," that he couldn't "stay woke for crying;"[4] and to the spoken afterword, "Stay woke," at the end of blues singer Lead Belly's 1938 protest song, "Scottsboro Boys," about the Black men in Scottsboro, Alabama, wrongly accused of raping two white women (Perry 91; Carter n. pag.). Ironically, the glossary flanking Kelley's article (SM 45) reduced this imperative to be alert to racial violence to an adjective for someone "well-informed, up-to-date" – thereby divesting the word of its radicalism, priming it for use by white Americans, and further side-lining the centrality of Black lexicon to a rapidly growing Black liberation movement (one wonders if this was Kelley's choice, or the editors').

The *New York Times*' deflection notwithstanding, the use of "stay woke" both in everyday Black speech and as a rallying cry gained momentum over the course of the Civil Rights era, propelled by its deployment by the Black Power movement (Robinson n. pag.). And after lying dormant for decades, it was recovered in the 2010s by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement that arose following the acquittal of white police officer George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2013 and the murders, also by white police officers, of Michael Brown and Eric Garner in 2014 (Carter n. pag.). On social media, at rallies, and in BLM literature, "stay woke" communicated a denunciation of police brutality specifically and institutional racism more generally (see Chambers and Harlan; Szetela).

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[3] For this and other examples of Garvey's use of the expression, see *More Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, initially published in 1923 and re-issued in 1925 and 1968. Notable instances include his description of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (over which he presided) as "represent[ing] the hopes and aspirations of the awakened Negro" (120), and his proclamation, "Wake up Ethiopia! Wake up Africa!" (5).

[4] While Thomas's use of the expression is seemingly a descriptor of the singer sobbing himself to sleep, Stephen L. Carter identifies this as an example of blues musicians' tradition of embedding their lyrics with "hidden meanings representing opposition to cultural norms" (n. pag.).

This usage gained further currency following the release, in 2016, of the award-winning television documentary *Stay Woke: The Black Lives Matter Movement*, and after the summer of 2020, when the murder of George Floyd saw BLM become a global phenomenon (Asmelash n. pag.).

Just as the expression was diluted for the *NYT*'s majority-white readership in 1962, however, "stay woke" was rapidly appropriated: in the first instance by brands intent on positioning themselves as allies, and in the second instance by conservative journalists and politicians to challenge the movement's legitimacy. "Life For Now" (2017), a Pepsi ad directed by Michael Bernard and starring the white reality television star and social media influencer Kendall Jenner, is emblematic of the first of these shifts (ABC News). In the ad, Jenner interrupts a modelling shoot to join an undefined march reminiscent of a BLM protest minus the overt anti-racist messaging, and then prevents a violent encounter between marchers and armed police by offering the latter a Pepsi – all to the tune of Bob Marley's grandson's studiously apolitical song, "Lions" (Dinh n. pag.). "Life For Now" was pulled almost immediately after being widely condemned by its target audience of 16- to 35-year-olds and derided, across the political spectrum, as a poor imitation of "Hilltop: I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke" (1971) – the iconic Coca Cola ad whose nod to the countercultural movements of the 1960s is generally recognized as the first major instance of a brand's integration of (diluted) progressive political imagery into its messaging (Dini, "Into the Blue Again" n. pag.).

Marked by BLM organizers as trivializing the "sacrifices" that radical protest entails (Victor n. pag.), by advertising experts as a lesson in tone-deaf scripting (Monloss n. pag.), by historians as a logical extension of corporate America's reduction of activist movements to fashion trends (see Shankar), and by the Right as a dangerous precedent foretelling a "woke" minority's potential to bend corporate America to their ideological will ("People Actually LIKED Pepsi's Ad!"), the "Live for Now" saga reads, in hindsight, as a proverbial canary in the coalmine, foretelling how large swathes of the American public would metabolize the discourse around the place, tone, function, and appropriateness of this new vocabulary of social justice and the calls for change it seeks to articulate. For, as with the term "political correctness," "woke" has evolved from indexing allegiance to the cause of advancing social equality (specifically for

Black Americans) into an "intentional linguistic inversion" (Hernández-Truyol 20) used to charge any effort to redress injustice as discriminatory (see Kilgore; Blake). This charge has been leveraged against BLM, the trans rights and Stop Oil movements, DEI initiatives, curriculum decolonization efforts, advocacy of Covid-19 vaccines and mask-wearing, calls for a ceasefire in Palestine, and the campaign to boycott, disinvest from, and sanction (BDS) Israel. And it has served, we argue, to group these various positions as constitutive, together, of a worldview defined by intolerance of difference to be roundly ridiculed.

The Free Speech Panic Industry

One finds an apt allegory of "woke"'s trajectory from call for liberation to coopted slogan to "term of derision, subject to memeification" (Perry 94) that "exists in its own hyperreality" (Zavattaro and Bearfield 585) in a 12-second video that the libertarian tech billionaire Elon Musk posted on then-Twitter a month after purchasing the platform. Captioned "Found in closet at Twitter HQ fr [for real] 🤣🤣," the video featured Musk narrating, in mock-documentary style, the discovery of "an entire closet – *secret* closet! – of hashtag woke t-shirts." Where Twitter under Jack Dorsey had leveraged BLM and subsequent social justice movements to promote itself as *the* platform for social justice activism, Musk's public disposal of #staywoke merchandise in 2022 marked the beginning of his much-publicized mission to reform the site to "stop the woke mind virus" whose infectious censoriousness risks destroying humanity before it can "colonize Mars" (Higgins n. pag.).

Musk's attempt to capitalize on anti-"wokeism" forms part of what Peter Mitchell describes as "the lucrative gaslighting industry" ("Culture Wars" n. pag.) that has arisen since BLM to explain to liberal and conservative Americans alike why social justice movements, campus activism, decolonizing efforts, and DEI are in fact bad. Among such interventions are a plethora of sensationalist titles by conservative authors, mostly male, including Ben Shapiro's *Bullies: How the Left's Culture of Fear and Intimidation Silences Americans* (2014), Jordan B. Peterson's *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (2018), Chris Heitzman's *The Coming Woke Catastrophe: A Critical*

Examination of Woke Culture (2022), Vivek Ramaswamy's *Woke, Inc.: Inside Corporate America's Social Justice Scam* (2021), Tom Pickering's *The Evil of Silence: Woke Culture and the Mechanics of Tyranny* (2021), and Ted Cruz's *Unwoke: How to Defeat Cultural Marxism in America.* In the liberal camp are Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure* (2018), Michael Rectenwald's *Beyond Woke* (2020), John McWhorter's *Woke Racism: How a New Religion Has Betrayed Black America* (2021), Yascha Mounk's *The Identity Trap: A Story of Ideas and Power in Our Time* (2023), Susan Neiman's *Left Is Not Woke* (2023), and Greg Lukianoff and Rikki Schlott's *The Canceling of the American Mind: How Cancel Culture Undermines Trust, Destroys Institutions, and Threatens Us All* (2023).

The narratives advanced by these texts rely on what Leslie Dorrough Smith terms "chaos rhetoric" – a "type of declension speech" that persuades by instilling fear of "an imminent threat to a beloved entity (which could include everything from children, to liberty, to the nation itself," and which our contributor Baugh discusses in his article (qtd. in Baugh 100). And like the screeds against political correctness that precede them, they follow the logic of DARVO – the acronym for "Deny, Attack, Reverse Victim and Offender" coined by Jennifer Freyd in the late 1990s to describe domestic abusers' strategic claim of victimhood when confronted about their behavior (30). Hence the function of memorable pejoratives such as "snowflakes" (entitled and too-easily offended progressive),[5] "social justice warrior" (overly militant youth), "gender ideology" (which constructs both the trans rights movement and transsexuality as a cult premised on the rejection of science), "cancel culture" (denoting the stifling effects of a

[5] The word "snowflake" derives from David Fincher's 1998 film adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel, *Fight Club*, where it serves to articulate the effects of a late capitalist paradigm premised on the commodification of individuality – as exemplified by the strategy of promising millions of people that one product marks them all out as special – in fostering fascism. The Right's adoption of this word to discredit leftists's commitments to social justice and the prevention of fascism is either a lesson in poor reading comprehension skills or an extension of the broader strategies of rhetorical *détournement* discussed throughout this piece.

culture in which public figures can be publicly shamed or lose work for statements or actions deemed socially unacceptable).

Within conservative media, chaos rhetoric and DARVO are at play in *New York Times* columnist Bret Stephens' description, in a 2021 article titled "Why Wokeness Will Fail," of schools and universities that teach about racism and misogyny as "Orwellian" "factories of wokeness" (n. pag.); Fox News columnist Ryan Walters' vision of a "radical left [that] believe[s] the mistakes of our past define our character and our future" and that seeks to "indoctrinate young, impressionable minds [...] [to] be ashamed to be American" (n. pag.); Florida Governor Ron DeSantis's definition of "woke" as "a form of cultural Marxism" and a "war on truth" that "put[s] merit and achievement behind identity politics" (qtd. in Scully n. pag.); Texas Senator Ted Cruz's pledge to defeat "cultural Marxism" and "tak[e] our society back from the woke neo-Marxists who have captured it" (62); and philosopher turned anti-woke self-help pundit Jordan Peterson's campaign against something he calls "postmodern neo-Marxism," which rather marvelously mischaracterizes both postmodernism and Marxism to describe the West's supposed siege by cultural relativism and totalizing narratives centered around race and gender. Chaos rhetoric and DARVO are also at play in political science academic Eric Kaufmann's condemnation of applications of social psychology concepts including DARVO to critique structural inequality and anti-woke rhetoric as, themselves, emblematic of a "censorious victimhood culture" (n. pag.). And too, they are evident in the myriad riffs, in conservative writing, on "the long march through the institutions" – a phrase coined by Rudi Dutschke and subsequently popularized by Herbert Marcuse to describe revolution from within, which when reworded as a "long identitarian march" (Kaufman n. pag.), "long march of cultural Marxism" (Dans and Groves xiv), or "The Long March Through the Corporations" (Gonzalez n. pag.), serves to reframe equality movements as a hidden menace. This is the rhetoric that our contributors Becnel, Ferrari, Inglis, and Baugh examine, and which shares features with that of the Italian Fascist Regime whose treatment of American literature that our contributor Paladin analyzes.

The liberal narrative is a different beast entirely, as its use of chaos rhetoric is tempered by a vocabulary of reason and concern that helps

position the critic as at once wise, authoritative, and compassionate, and to construct (1) postmillennial campus protests as aberrations of previous progressive movements, (2) the so-called limiting of debate as a threat to the free exchange of ideas on which liberalism itself depends, and (3) the American student populace as emotionally fragile, privileged, and intolerant to difference. These constructions merit closer scrutiny as they have served to establish the free speech crisis as a *fact* and distract attention from the more extreme forms of censorship being championed by the Right.

The first construction forms the basis of Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's "The Coddling of the American Mind," the much-quoted *Atlantic* article published in August 2015 that formed the basis of their eponymous book. In the article, whose title nodded to Allen Bloom's earlier-mentioned screed against political correctness, Lukianoff and Haidt differentiated between what they described as the laudable "politically correct" efforts of activists in the 1990s to "restrict [. . .] hate speech aimed at marginalized groups" and decolonize the "literary, philosophical, and historical canon," and what they termed a twenty-first-century "movement [. . .] largely about emotional well-being" that "presumes an extraordinary fragility of the collegiate psyche" (n. pag.). Ironically, Richard Bernstein's "The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct," the *NYT* article that in October 1990 brought the free speech panic to the mainstream, characterized the end-of-millennial campus culture that Lukianoff and Haidt applauded in precisely the same terms: as a "growing intolerance [. . .] closing of debate, [and] pressure to conform to a radical program" out of step with the spirit of earlier liberation movements (E1). Just as Bernstein disassociated postcolonial, gender, environmental, and critical race studies and the campus activists who sought to apply their ideas from the midcentury liberation movements that engendered them, "Coddling" recast postmillennial students as naïve militants, and their efforts as irruptions divorced from a wider history of political organizing.

Exemplifying the second construction (censorial illiberalism) is "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate," an open letter signed by 153 writers, academics, and public intellectuals and published in *Harper's Magazine* at the height of the 2020 BLM protests. Appealing to readers' sense of

nuance, the letter described the BLM protests as "heighten[ing] a new set of moral attitudes […] that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity" ("A Letter on Justice" n. pag.). This construction relies on what Nesrine Malik describes as a politics of equivalence that views the KKK and BLM as equally deserving of condemnation (qtd. in Steel and Petley 4). It also relies on a reductive if not downright warped interpretation of Enlightenment-era thinking (Kemp 25, 33-34) premised on a universalized white, male, and upper-class human subject, and on a culture of debate involving only members of this demographic – a far cry from the contemporary context in which liberal free speech alarmists seek to apply it. In a multicultural, multiethnic, and gender diverse society, in which public discourse around the rights of the historically marginalized takes place in and is shaped by a minimally regulated media ecosystem largely funded by a handful of white male billionaires with vested interests in popularizing some ideas over others, the pledge to "defend to the death" the right of one's opponent to speak becomes rather moot.

Finally, exemplifying the third construction (student fragility) is Barak Obama's denunciation, a mere month after the publication of Lukianoff and Haidt's article, of university students' supposed sense of entitlement "to be[ing] coddled and protected from different points of view" (qtd. in Nelson n. pag.) and his imploration to the 2016 graduating class of Howard University (a historically Black institution) to resist the "trend" of intolerance and instead "engage folks who disagree with you […] no matter how ridiculous or offensive you might find the things [they say]" (qtd. in Politico n. pag.). The latter drew heavily on the vocabulary of respectability politics – the term Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham coined to describe Black Americans' advancement of their position via the strategic and performative rejection of the more controversial or "bad" aspects of their identity (187-88). But another case in point is former *Guardian* columnist Hadley Freeman's ascription of the younger generations' "evangelism about gender ideology" (trans rights advocacy) to their desire for "a civil rights fight of their own," akin to those waged by their mothers and grandmothers and more interesting than environmentalism – since "fighting for plants is not quite as fun" as fighting for people ("Hadley Freeman, Toni Crews" 9:40-

10:05; "Where Does Feminism Go Next?" 23:30-24:07). According to this logic, cisgender women's right to vocally oppose trans rights is under threat by emotionally delicate ideologues playing at politics but with no skin in the game.

Free Speech and the Backward Gaze

As Peter Mitchell notes, the incitement to university students to open their hearts to "opposing views" deflects from the fact that those "'opposing views' [are] usually [...] some variation of exactly the same one," and that "the 'people who disagree with you' are always some variation of the same person: a well-paid white man who isn't sure where all these women and brown people and queers came from but has some ideas about where he'd like to send them" ("Culture Wars" n. pag.). More generally, framing those who challenge inequality as spoiled children who need to be carefully managed out of something that is *most likely* just a phase but that risks solidifying into a dangerous radicalism facilitates the elision of both the material realities that produced the supposedly censorial social justice movements and initiatives under examination and the material reasons their critics oppose them.

Firstly, it ignores the fact that the demands of so-called "woke" youth are but *recapitulations* of demands made by earlier generations whose main distinction is to have permeated beyond campuses and establishment media headlines thanks to a digital ecosystem that enables the dissemination of concepts, theories, and terminology at a pace that would have baffled the so-called class of 1968, and that have especial pull with members of the first generations since the Second World War to face worse prospects than their parents' by nearly every metric (see A. Peterson xxii, 11; see Bessant; Farthing and Watts n. pag.). Secondly, it negates that the questions around DEI, curriculum decolonization, and the vocabulary of intersectional politics with which college campuses are grappling might in fact be ascribable to tensions resulting from the professoriate's lesser and slower diversification than the students it is tasked with teaching (see Brahm; Matias, Lewis and Hope). Finally, it sidesteps the other stakeholders in

the conflict: private enterprises and philanthropies lobbying, as mentioned earlier, for universities to run like businesses and instill neoliberal values, and the State, which has a vested interest in limiting critiques of the social order. The latter is attested by Florida's banning of Critical Race Theory and mention of homosexuality from school curricula, and by the 2023 Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act passed in the UK, where some of our contributors are based, and which critics argue is designed to limit campus protest and academic speech as part of a more general assault on universities' capacity to intervene in public life (Bacevic n. pag.; see also Riley).

Together, these elisions enable the construction of the recent past as a time when minorities were less angry, activist movements were less disruptive, and students talked about something other than identity politics. Such a construction, we argue, belies a broader concern with protecting the story of the nation that America has long told itself, and which in turn reflects what critics have variously identified as "postcolonial melancholia" (Gilroy), "imperial nostalgia" (Mitchell), and "postmillennial nostalgia" (Dini, "Things of Beauty" n. pag.; "Appliance Nostalgia" 441-42; see *"All-Electric" Narratives* 259-304). This is a structure of feeling apparent across former imperialist nations that is characterized by a heightened sentimentality towards and adherence to nationalist myths of exceptionalism, and condemnation of the perceived desecration of cherished traditions, national memories, and modes of commemoration. It is rooted in anxieties about individual nations' relative loss of power, hegemony, and credibility on the world stage (see Golub; Wallerstein 1, 7), the decline of the so-called Liberal International Order established (according to this credo) to preserve liberal democratic values (see Porter), the diversification of power among states, and demographic shifts within the nations themselves (see Didier; Bigo). It is a response, in other words, to the destabilizing effects of global shifts on the one hand, and the proliferation of voices and perspectives within the nation itself on the other, which together pose a challenge to its identity as a global leader, beacon of progress, and custodian of democracy and protector of human rights (see Nye). Hence the defense, in the Netherlands, of "Black Peter" – St Nicholas' chimney-soot covered assistant, who is usually played, in Christmas pageants

by a white man in blackface (see Hilhorst and Hermes). Or the British media's vitriolic coverage of the National Trust's efforts to acknowledge its properties' imbrication in the transatlantic slave trade (Mitchell, *Imperial Nostalgia* 58) and of Megan Markle, the first Black and American royal, initially for perceived instances of "breaking royal protocol" and later for identifying such coverage as racist (Clancy n. pag.). Our contributor Becnel's concept of "public pedagogy" – the utilization of narrative tactics to shape collective attitudes – enables us to understand these responses as premised on entrenched racialized values whose challenging poses a threat to the national identity (53). So, too, does our contributor Ferrari's analysis of the anxieties that undergird the discussion around the place in school curricula of classic American texts that contain racist or ableist slurs: for at stake is the national narrative that the teaching of these works over the decades has helped construct (78).

Revisionism is also what facilitates Stanley Fish's performatively dispassionate appraisal, over the course of three decades and four books – *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech, and It's a Good Thing, Too* (1994), *Save the World on Your Own Time* (2008), *Versions of Academic Freedom: From Professionalism to Revolution* (2014), and *The First: How to Think About Hate Speech, Campus Speech, Religious Speech, Fake News, Post-Truth, and Donald Trump* (2019) – of free speech as "just the name we give to verbal behavior that serves the substantive agendas we wish to advance" (*There's No Such Thing* 102), and of what he calls "activism" and "political views" as defiling the sacred apoliticality of academia (*The First* 64).[6] Such an account facilitates the dismissal of the latest manifestation of a long and inherently political history of competing interests regarding the place and function of intellectual enquiry – including who should be allowed to pursue it, enjoy its fruits, steward its history, and shape its future – as, instead, a foolish game between conservative and so-called radical academics who should know better than to bring politics into the classroom. Recasting free speech as an opportunistic construct separate to the pursuit of

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[6] It is not clear how Fish reconciles these views with his acceptance of a post at New College-Florida in 2023, shortly after it replaced its entire board of trustees with conservatives and denied tenure to staff perceived to hold liberal views (Gutkin n. pag.).

knowledge in turn provides an expedient means to deflect attention from the academy's historical role in the imperialist project and how this role has been historicized.

Finally, revisionism enables the swift reframing of liberation movements as *il*liberal. We have already seen how "wokeness" has been reappropriated to denounce BLM and other parallel movements. But another notable example is the media backlash against the #metoo movement that arose following Harvey Weinstein's arrest in October 2017, which portrayed the thousands of survivors who had shared their experiences of sexual harassment and rape on social media as a mob threatening the freedom and livelihoods of innocent men. The movement's one-year anniversary was marked by a slew of articles in liberal media outlets that reconstructed the events of the previous twelve months as a story of male suffering. These included Jian Ghomeshi's "Reflections from a Hashtag: My Path to Public Toxicity" in *The New York Review*'s special issue on "The Fall of Men," John Hockenberry's "Exile and a Year of Trying to Find a Road Back from Personal and Public Shame" in *Harper's Magazine*'s special issue on "The Printed Word in Peril," and *The New Yorker*'s profile piece on Al Franken. Following these came counter-allegations of defamation (Weisbrot 335) and Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPS) against survivors who publicly shared their accounts of experiences ruled by a court of law to constitute abuse ("SLAPP suit" n. pag.) – many of which were successful (Morgan n. pag.). That the narrative of the ruined accused man is contradicted by the very publication in prominent media outlets of his stories and by the devastated careers of the survivors he has successfully sued does not appear to have registered.

The collective DARVOing of #metoo and its legacy in institutions including HE, where a wealth of scholarship shows sexual misconduct is pervasive, survivors are dissuaded from coming forward and encouraged to sign non-disclosure agreements if they do (see Bondestam and Lundqvist), and researchers of academic sexual misconduct are prevented from publishing their findings on the grounds of libel (Morgan n. pag.), provides a salient example of the ramifications of the weaponization of free speech to cloak *actual* efforts to silence, and of the leveraging of nostalgia to further entrench regressive beliefs and prevent social change. The backlash's swift recasting of survivors' accounts of their harassment, rape, and assault as

more dangerous than the acts themselves demonstrated the speed with which a liberation movement can be neutralized through its integration into a fantasy of disruption and loss. And its trajectory finds its parallels in the disciplining measures, discussed in our contributors Becnel, Ferrari, Baugh, and Inglis' individual articles, taken against those individuals and institutions that have attempted to recover marginalized histories and introduce them into collective memory.

The Italian Perspective

In this last section, we cast our gaze home to examine Italy's metabolization of the different mediated versions of the so-called free speech crisis discussed thus far. Our focus here is not on what Emiliana De Blasio and Donatella Selva describe as the strategic leveraging, apparent across Europe, of anti-woke rhetoric to foment a "polarising discourse" to "establish hegemony" (91)[7] but on what we identify as the *construction* of American "wokeness" and censorship that European media generally and Italian media specifically treats as a foreign artefact to be utilized to confirm extant attitudes to US culture and the perils of Americanization.

One group of these critics dismisses trigger warnings, safe spaces, and so-called cancel culture as exemplifying a quintessentially American presentism stemming from the nation's relative youth, and a uniquely American earnestness, humorlessness, and self-righteousness born out of its puritanical roots (see Faloppa; Vitiello; Righetto). Another identifies them as exports akin to "McDonalds, Marvel superhero movies[, and] rap" that attest to the pernicious "cultural hegemony of Made in the USA" (Pizzati n. pag.).[8] And a third warns of their threat to Western civilization and

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[7] Vassallo and Vignati note Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's targeting, between 2016 and 2022, of "political correctness" alongside "international finance, globalist utopias, Islamism and […] the Left" in a manner akin to that of far-right parties in Hungary, Poland, France, and the US (184). Since 2022, Meloni has increasingly reframed herself as "anti-woke" and Italy as a haven from "woke" diktats (Kaval n. pag.).

[8] This and all subsequent quotes from Italian publications and English versions of Italian article titles are Rachele Dini's translations.

implores Italians "not [to] let those who would cancel the West succeed" (Lucattini n. pag.). All three construct "wokeism" as *sui generis* – a product of a unique culture of extremes distant from the realities of a less polarized, less self-righteous, Europe – to more easily reject the progressive ideas and movements with which it is associated.

We argue that these constructions are in keeping with a broader pattern of distancing and deflection identifiable, for example, in the tendency among Europe's former slave-trading nations to rhetorically disown the legacy of the transatlantic slave trade by casting slavery itself as specifically American (and that can be seen as another manifestation of the nostalgic mode discussed earlier).[9] As De Blasio and Selva note of the French context, "rather than marking a clear distinction between left and right, the quérelle on *wokisme* in France rests on a common rejection of what is perceived as an Americanism alien to French culture" (32).[10] The Italian media's discursive construction of the US campus free speech discourse is but another example of American culture's function in the European imaginary as a theatre where conflicts and dramas in which Europe is directly enmeshed are reformulated as antithetical to European values, in the interest of reaffirming a particular idea of the continent generally and of individual nations specifically.

A case in point is the way "woke" entered the Italian mainstream in 2021: not via coverage of the second wave of BLM protests but via an opinion piece by the gender critical feminist Marina Terragni titled "Cancel culture. La dittatura del gender nel rifiuto di ogni confronto" ("Cancel Culture: The Gender Dictatorship in the Rejection of Debate"), published in the conservative newspaper *Avvenire*, and via a reprint (in translation) in the center-left newspaper *La Repubblica* of the earlier-cited Bret Stephens article, "Why Wokeness Will Fail." Published on

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[9] As Trinidadian historian Eric Williams famously said to explain British publishers' refusal to publish his book, *Capitalism and Slavery*, "British historians write almost as if Britain had introduced Negro slavery solely for the satisfaction of abolishing it" (qtd. in Owalade 78). See also Olusega. For an analysis of what Myram Cottias terms France's "politics of forgetting" its history of slavery, see Hannoum.

[10] For a more expansive analysis of the discursive function of *wokeisme* in French politics and public debate, see especially Campangne.

23 September 2021, Terragni's article cited Binah Shah's description of trans rights as "gender colonialism," identified so-called cancel culture as an inevitable product of "the mortal graft of postmodernism and French theory on a society as narcissistic and navel-gazing as America's," and implored Europeans to "vaccinate ourselves" against America's "woke virus" before it "overwhelm[s] us" (n. pag.). Meanwhile Stephens' article, originally published on 9 November in the *NYT*, compared "wokeness" directly to the destructive impetus of white supremacy (n. pag.). Notably, when *La Repubblica* reprinted Stephens' article on 11 November, it did not reprint *NYT* columnist Charles M. Blow's riposte of 10 November, which identified "the war on woke" as a bipartisan attempt to vilify movements that "indic[t] the status quo" (n. pag.). Like Terragni's citation of only gender critical feminists, *La Repubblica*'s reprinting of Stephens's piece without Blow's rejoinder ensured readers encountered a very specific account of America's culture wars.

Such a positioning is only possible, of course, in a context defined by a lack of discourse: which is to say that it is precisely because the American free speech panic is much less prominent in the Italian press than in the US that the few publications that do cover it[11] have the power to effectively shape its public perception. The most interesting example from this perspective is an article published in the nonpartisan (and more or less centrist) newspaper *Corriere della Sera* in March 2024 about an anonymous 42-year-old Italian MA student mortified by Columbia University's *cultura woke* ("woke culture"), and which was subsequently covered in the national news and republished in conservative media outlets. Titled "Un'italiana a New York: 'Io, dentro la dittatura woke. Sono bianca e devo scusarmi anche se non sono razzista. E guai a chiedere: di dove sei?'" ("An Italian in New York: 'I, Under the Woke Dictatorship. I'm White and Have to Apologize Even if I'm Not Racist. And Don't You Dare Ask Where Somebody is From'"), the article portrays an HE system defined by diversity training

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[11] Of these, *Avvenire* and nicolaporro.it, a media outlet launched in 2015 by the conservative, climate sceptic, director general of the center-right newspaper *Il Giornale*, are in the lead. For examples of *Avvenire*'s coverage, see Lavazza; Righetto; Lanzieri; Simone. For examples from nicolaporro.it, see Lodige, "Woke, benvenuti;" Lucattini; Piccoli.

sessions and privilege-checking exercises premised on the "dogma that the only true racism is that by us white people against the Blacks" (Rampini n. pag.).

It may well be, of course, that Columbia's equality efforts are reductive and ineffectual: some scholarship on campus DEI initiatives does indicate, for example, that their effectiveness is undermined by the defensiveness they trigger in staff from high status groups (see Brad et al.; Spisz and Tanega; Dobbin and Kalev). Building on Zavattaro and Bearfield (588), we ourselves submit that diversity initiatives often deflect from wider systemic issues that institutions choose not to address, effectively functioning as a performance of institutional commitment to equality and a proxy for the kinds of radical critiques and transformation that the neoliberal university has, in fact, a vested interest in curtailing. But the *Corriere* article is not interested in such discussions. Instead, its strategy of alienation-by-distancing seeks to provoke an *affective* negative response by presenting DEI as an unintelligible language whose distance from supposedly homogeneous Italian values (gestured at in the article's reference to an "us whites" that presupposes its Italian readers are the woman's same race and will identify with her distress) renders it inherently absurd, and its import into Italian culture even more so.

This linguistic focus shares features with a tradition of popular depictions of Americanization that between the 1950s and 1990s took playful aim at the nation's enthusiastic absorption of, and indoctrination into, American culture at the level of language through comedic depictions of *inglese maccheronico* – the combination of Anglicized Italian words and approximations of English words by someone who does not speak the language. Here we are thinking especially of the *inglese maccheronico* punctuated by *oirait, oirait* ("all right, all right") of Alberto Sordi's Americophile protagonist in *Un americano a Roma* (1954); the nonsense lyrics of Adriano Celentano's celebrated song "Prisencolinensinainciusol" (1973), which mimicked the sound of American words spoken in an Italian accent and whose *oirait, oirait* in the refrain paid homage to Sordi; and Maxibon's 1994 ad, "Du gust' is megl che uan," whose co-option of end-of-millennial Italian youths' relationship to American culture (and Italian men's fascination with American women) gained it cult status.

The last of these paid homage to *both* Sordi and Celentano, depicting Italian actor Stefano Accorsi attempting to flirt, in *inglese maccheronico*, with two women he mistakenly assumes are American, by comparing their combined beauty to the luscious hybridity of a Maxibon ice cream bar. It also ironized the brand's own participation in the Americanization of popular culture: Accorsi's collapsing of the Italian phrase "due gusti sono meglio di uno" and its American translation "two flavors are better than one" was but an extension of the logic of the name "Maxibon," which juxtaposed the Latin word "maxi" with an Americanization of "buono."

In each of these instances, the collision of languages was calibrated to bring together its audience in a moment of collective self-recognition. Thus, for example, Sordi's myriad linguistic mishaps and failed efforts to become American, exemplified in the famous scene in which he attempts to eat what he thinks is American food only to spit it out and scarf down the plate of *maccheroni* he had initially rejected, all while mumbling in *inglese maccheronico*, articulated an all-too familiar ambivalence towards American culture with which audiences could identify. Celentano's song in turn confronted listeners with the Freudian Uncanny to provoke a collective reckoning with the making-strange of Italian by American English and the making-strange of American English by its Italian butchering.

But while the title of "Un'italiana a New York" gestures to Steno (Stefano Vanzini)'s affectionate satire of *Americamania*, the article's enlistment of repetition, concatenation of decontextualized anecdotes, and framing of the vocabulary of social justice as gibberish are strategically geared towards eliciting a collective sense of *revulsion.* In this way, the *Corriere* article repackages the tropes of "woke" militancy and illiberal campuses by now established in public discourse in the US to reaffirm American culture as a place of extremes and, by extension, Italian culture as a rational environment free of the madness of "wokeism" and its puritanical vocabulary. Like a 2023 article in the liberal/progressive newspaper *La Stampa*, aptly titled "Tu woke fa' l'americano" (after Renato Carosone's 1956 song), which quoted neoconservatives including John Gray and Tyler Cower to bemoan European nations' naïve acceptance of this new instantiation of American cultural hegemony (Pizzati n. pag.), "Un'italiana a New York" implores its readers to keep their defenses high.

As an Italian scholar of American studies educated at MA level in Italy and at PhD level in the UK (Elisa), and as a scholar of American studies raised between Italy and the US by Italian academics at US universities before studying in the UK and working in UK HE (Rachele), we are especially interested in this instantiation of the free speech debate and the different rhetorical purposes it serves. I, Rachele, was profoundly shaped by my otherwise liberal parents' view of American education as limited by a political correctness that put student comfort ahead of knowledge. Their incitements to me, throughout my childhood in the 1990s, to *non essere così Americana*, like their Italian friends' amusement at American students' supposed inability to take a joke, long shaded my understanding of the place and value of social justice issues, and their appropriateness in the context of academic letters. Though this is but an anecdote, it is illustrative, like the *Corriere* article, of the kinds of ascriptions and extrapolations of meaning, and critical reflections on or affirmations of particular national myths, to which an exported discourse such as "political correctness" or "wokeness," beginning with the very export of the English word itself, lend themselves.

And so we return to our contributor Nicola Paladin's account of the tension between Italian editors' and fascist censors' competing ideas about the place and function of American letters in Italian culture: as a tool in acculturating the public into a particular understanding of great literature, versus an opportunity to import a carefully delimited image of America consonant with the regime's vision of a modern Italian nation poised for the future. This of course is not to directly compare fascist Italy's construction of America to bolster its own national project with the country's elaboration in the 2020s of America's so-called free speech crisis, but to contextualize the export of America's anti-woke "discourse" within a broader history of Italian appropriations and reformulations of "America," and of the concepts of freedom, free expression, and dialogue as mediated by American letters, in order to reflect on what American Studies scholars outside of the US generally and in Italy specifically might add to the ongoing discourse around the reality, nature, and extent of a free speech in freefall.

Conclusion

In this Introduction we have advanced a structural analysis of the American culture wars to contextualize a free speech discourse characterized by a core set of recurring narrative formulae cut through by variations in tone, style, and underlying logic that in the aggregate produce quite different accounts of the source and ramifications of their subject of alarm. And we write these last paragraphs in the wake of the latest illustration of the politics of equivalence: the report by *Reuters/The Nation* that the Biden presidential campaign plans to respond to the attempted assassination of Donald Trump, and to Republican politicians' claims that the shooter was inspired by Democrats' hate speech, by switching from "verbally attacking Trump" to "draw[ing] on [Biden]'s history of condemning all sorts of political violence including his sharp criticism of the 'disorder' created by campus protests over the Israel-Gaza conflict" (Heer n. pag.).

We argue that the zeal with which US politicians, media outlets, and pundits across the political spectrum have condemned social justice activists, which has been more vehement than the criticism of book bans, censorial legislation, or violence of police officers breaking up campus protests, is emblematic of the underlying function of the term "woke." That is, to buttress high status groups against threats to their position, stymie the consciousness-raising effects of online discourse, and reduce universities to producers of uncritical neoliberal subjects. From this perspective, the defense of Christian values, free enterprise, tradition, national pride, due process, liberal debate, and so on enlisted to both criticize social justice initiatives and DEI and justify the curtailing of school curricula are ancillary to what is essentially a circling of the wagons of those who benefit from the structure of American society as it stands – a group that includes both self-proclaimed white supremacists and advocates of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all. To attempt to debunk their individual arguments is but to contribute to and legitimize their broader project.

The contributors to this issue thus argue that at a time when *actual* authoritarian parties are gaining influence globally ("The Global State of Democracy Report 2023" 1, 7), and hate crimes in the US against those

with protected characteristics are on the rise (Nakamura n. pag.; Tynes 17-18; "Report to the Nation" n. pag.), remaining focused on the collective impact of the rhetorical strategies, vocabulary, imagery, and constellations of values enlisted by free speech alarmists is especially vital. So, too, is distinguishing between the different strands and permutations of this discourse, and its material manifestations across the different arenas in which American letters circulate, including outside the bounds of the nation itself.

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