

US Book Banning as Racialized Political Strategy

National Narratives, Public Pedagogy and the Fostering of a Tug-of-Values War

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that racialized political narratives articulated by US politicians are strategic, as well as potent forms of public pedagogy. In this instance, public pedagogy is defined as education in the public square, instead of in a traditional classroom setting. Such public pedagogical narratives are conceptualized here as designed to achieve yet another goal: demonstrating to large numbers of people that the political party in question aligns with the otherwise covert racialized values of those would-be constituents. My contention is that the current book-banning campaign in the US has been spawned, at least in part, by a powerful national narrative purposefully constructed to attract the votes of the citizenry targeted by this example of strategic political propaganda. Also, this paper will explore how nonpoliticians can use narrative tactics as public pedagogy to thwart biased political narratives. An historical analysis of race, politics, and religion comprises the methodology for this work, along with desk-top theory-building and an examination of recent book-banning research in the US. This paper deconstructs the concept of racialized political narratives to further reveal the complex conceptualizations that undergird this strategy, such as politics and privilege, Christian nationalism, and an idea I have labeled a racialized US values infrastructure (Becnel 2024). My argument is that white superiority and black

inferiority are values that were inscribed in the country's legal, institutional, and social infrastructure during the Slavery Era and largely remain in place today. Those racialized conceptualizations are contended here to have animated the choice of topic – book banning – for recent political campaigns dominated by cleverly-crafted narratives.

KEYWORDS

Book banning, Racialized narratives, Racialized legal practices, Public pedagogy, Political narratives, European superiority

Introduction

In *How We Win the Civil War* (2024), US political commentator Steve Phillips argues that the contemporary crisis in American politics is rooted in the nation's history of racial conflict: “We are up against opponents,” he writes, “who are waging an unrelenting, centuries-long war in defense of their cherished belief that America should be a white nation” (xxii). Phillips's bold assertion of racialized nationhood echoes religion scholar Robert P. Jones's articulation, in *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy* (2023), of the “Doctrine of Discovery” – the theological narrative conceived by religious leaders in the mid-1400s to justify Europeans' domination of other entities as a God-informed right based on the “superiority” of their race, culture, and religion. This form of messaging in the centuries since has worked to establish clear caste distinctions among the citizenry based on race and sexuality – black versus white, heterosexual versus LGBTQ+ – in the US, and still shapes today's political narratives.

In what follows, I draw on Phillips's and Jones's arguments to analyze the racialized political narratives utilized by book-banning campaigns in the US, which reflect a belief in white supremacy and, therefore, both rely on and exploit the existence of a voter base that supports this type of messaging. My focus is on racialized book banning specifically – that is, campaigns to target books on the basis of their engagement with issues of race – though my contention throughout is that white supremacist values in fact underlie book challenging across the board. This is to say that although the books banned in US libraries and classrooms in this

current wave have been targeted for engaging with topics other than race (according to PEN America, 26 percent of books banned during the last six months of 2022 centered on LGBTQ+ themes or identities, compared to the 30 percent that dealt with race, racism, and characters of color), the impetus behind their targeting can be traced back to the Doctrine of Discovery that has its roots in a white supremacist logic.

I begin by examining how the narratives of white supremacy that underpin book bans are entangled with complex societal structures, including American values infrastructure and public pedagogy, Democrat-versus-Republican politics and power, white Christian nationalism and morality. This analysis provides a means to better understand why racialized book banning in the US is occurring in its current forms and what strategic counter narratives might be mobilized to challenge them. Secondly, I use frame-semantics literature to deconstruct the art – or science – of political messaging to re-conceptualize current debates about controversial books as a strategic, racialized form of public pedagogy for political gain, such as the passing of book-banning legislation at the state level. That legislation is designed by conservative political majorities to support, and sometimes even in response to, local conservative grassroots advocacy to ban certain categories of books, particularly covering race, racism, American history, and LGBTQ+ topics (see Meehan and Friedman; Meehan et al.). In some states, conservative legislators' collaboration with grassroots activists to foment a book-banning movement via the tools of law-making and news-media messaging forms part of a calculated strategy for voter recruitment.

Religion and the Emergence of an American Values Infrastructure

The Doctrine of Discovery imagined and reimagined by papal authorities throughout the fifteenth century involved grand political and theological storytelling to support Europeans' God-given entitlement to colonize the new worlds they "discovered," and to rule over the indigenous people who in fact already inhabited those so-called new worlds. The Doctrine was bolstered by the principle that monarchs were divinely ordained – chosen

by God and therefore exercise authority in accordance with God's rules (Figgis 3; see Newcomb 51; Jones 14) and by the extension of the Church's sovereignty beyond spiritual matters (Newcomb ix). The latter was a direct consequence of the former: as entitled by divine right to their subjects' obedience, Monarchs were accountable to God, not man, and thus required the Church to theologially codify their laws. Such codification came in the form of papal edicts or doctrine, the first of which, *Dum Diversas* (1452), justified the expansion of the Portuguese Empire by framing inhabitants of the lands in its sights as "enemies of Christ wheresoever placed," and granted it the right to "invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens [Muslims] and pagans," seize "the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all moveable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them," and "reduce their persons to perpetual slavery" (qtd. in Jones 15). A later papal edict issued in May 1493 asserting Spain's ownership of the indigenous American land "discovered" by Christopher Columbus ensured, in turn, that the Church, and "especially the Catholic faith and the Christian religion," would "be exalted and be everywhere increased and spread" throughout the Americas (16).

Dum Diversas transformed the practices and customs of imperialism into officially sanctioned doctrine and law throughout much of the world (15). And as Steven T. Newcomb explains, Christian doctrines continued to exert a "clear and unambiguous" formative influence on US "property law, nationhood, and federal Indian law in the early nineteenth century" (ix). "Court decisions bound US law to the world of Christendom and Christian imperialism" in a process that was "n[either] hidden or mysterious, nor [...] conspiracy among judges and priests" but rather "a long-range planning for the takeover of a continent and a hemisphere. It was the theory that guided colonial practices" (ix). Originally a drastic remedy for converting "barbarous" citizens to Christianity to serve a ruling caste comprised of royalty and religious leaders, the legacy of this rationale endured in colonial America to justify slavery even after the Enlightenment. At that time, the rationale took on a belief in natural law that ostensibly followed the laws of nature, reflecting God's intentions for man and for a basic right to freedom, but, too, a natural social *order* in which black slaves were at the very bottom (Barnes 23).

On Thursday, 30 March 2023, more than five-hundred years since *Dum Diversas* was issued, the Vatican released a press bulletin repudiating those edicts that, it acknowledged, encouraged “violence, oppression, social injustice and slavery” and asking forgiveness for “the human weakness and failings of Christ’s disciples in every generation” (Holy See n. pag.). But in line with the co-originator of Critical Race Theory Derrick Bell’s assertion of the permanency of racism (qtd. in Cobb n. pag.), and sociologist Paul Gilroy’s delineation of the US’ foundation in the “racialized reason and white supremacist terror,” as written in his seminal work, *The Black Atlantic*, which characterized the cultural-political formation of slave-trading nations (x), I argue the damage done to millions of people over many generations extends beyond the theft of land, freedom and, at times, life. That history has encompassed, too, the erasure of entire cultures and the construction in their stead of a way of life, a culture of Eurocentric or white privilege, that so far has proven to be enduring. The purposeful messages imbedded in Christian doctrines conceived hundreds of years ago, I argue, cut deep cultural grooves in the social bedrock of colonial America that remain palpable to this day, contributing to the creation of a racialized values infrastructure that continues to shape US politics and culture and that underpins the narratives that support today’s racialized book-banning campaigns.

A notable descendant of the papal edicts’ assertion of Europeans’ superiority over nearly everyone else in the world was the Barbados Slave Codes Act of 1661. While the Doctrine of Discovery and its corresponding theory of the Divine Right of Kings bestowed Europeans with the authority to enslave populations deemed barbarous, the Slave Codes instructed Europeans and colonial Americans on how to deal with those barbarous men and women once they were enslaved. The country where the Codes were first issued, Barbados (The National Archives London, CO 30/2; Handler and Reilly 42-45), became in the ensuing decades Britain’s first openly identified slave society, developing a thriving sugar cane industry reliant on a slave workforce of thousands to meet global demand. During the latter part of the 1660s, the slave law was amended to more clearly enshrine black slaves’ status as commodities and more precisely delineate the justifications for their dehumanizing treatment. In 1668, for instance,

the law *An Act Declaring the Negro-Slaves of this Island, to be Real Estate* was passed in Barbados and published in 1764, along with a collection of slave and other laws from 1643-1762, by a member of the Barbados Assembly, Richard Hall.

The language of and ideological impetus behind Barbados' slave and indentured servant laws came to inform slave legislation in Colonial America. In the 1600s, the Crown sought to grow the nation's wealth by gifting tracts of colonized land to the aristocracy to encourage them to develop business interests there (Sirmans 463). One such aristocrat, Sir John Colleton, an acquaintance and epistolary correspondent of John Locke, was granted land in Barbados together with a proprietary charter in colonial America's state of South Carolina. From his home in Barbados, Colleton assisted Locke in his writing of Carolina's first constitution by sharing with him the language of the Barbados Slave Codes (463). Thus Locke's declaration in the constitution that "Every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves" (qtd. in Sirmans 463; Isenberg 43), mirrored Clause 2 of *An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes* (1661), which asserted that "any Negro Man or Woman slave" who "offer[ed] any violence to any Christian [white European]" would "for his and her first offence [...] be severely whipped by the Constable" and "[f]or his second offence [...] be severely whipped [,] his nose slitt [*sic*] [,]" and "some part of his face" "burned [...] with a hot iron" (qtd. in R. Hall 118).¹ The language of both communicated a similar principle of European entitlement to control non-Europeans as that found in the papal edicts of the 1400s. Both documents, in turn, afforded different rights to white indentured servants and black slaves. Namely, white persons could not be slaves and black people and people of color could not be indentured servants; slaves were not attributed "any positive rights [...] whatsoever" (Rugemer 439); and while indentured servitude

¹ Clause 2 of *An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes* was transcribed from an image of the handwritten Old English original 1661 document, made accessible to the author on 22 September 2021 by the National Archives, London. The words 'Negro,' 'Man,' and 'Woman,' are capitalized and 'slitt' is spelled with two 't's'. Commas were also included for clarity since they did not exist in the original document.

had a prescribed timeframe after which servants would be free from their duties, slavery was a life condition that a black slave passed on to their children. These tenets were subsequently introduced into legislation in Maryland, Virginia and eventually in the other American colonies (Sirmans 462).

In *The Origins of Others*, Toni Morrison argues that contesting white supremacy requires identifying what benefits are derived from “creating and sustaining an Other” and warned that it was important to think through the potential social and political consequences of fighting to deprive white America of entitlement (19). Evidence of these benefits can be found across the policies enacted during and after slavery, including the anti-literacy laws that for over a century (1740 to 1867) prohibited black Americans from learning to read or write. Colonial America was in fact one of the only territories in the world to use the legal system to deny people of African descent the right to read a book (Span and Sanya 402). The restrictions applied to both free black people and black slaves, and to those both in the north and in the South (402). And not unlike the current book-banning movement’s targeting of white and other educators who write about, or advocate for teaching, black history, the anti-literacy laws included clauses designed to prevent white Americans and anyone else from educating either black free men or slaves. In 1830, for example, Georgia passed laws that specified white citizens who dared teach black people how to read be fined, publicly beaten, and even imprisoned (27).

While purportedly designed to deny black slaves the skills that might enable them to flee captivity, for example by creating fraudulent documents that could help them to escape (Maddox n. pag.), the broader motive behind them was the recognition that education would render black Americans less pliable, more difficult to discipline, and more likely to resist their enslavement. As Carliss Maddox explains, it was to this threat that Hugh Auld, Frederick Douglass’s owner when he was a child slave, pointed when chastising his wife for having taught the boy to read: “He [Douglass] should know nothing but the will of his master and learn to obey it. As to himself, learning will do him no good, but a great deal of harm, making him disconsolate and unhappy” (qtd. in Maddox n. pag.). Auld’s expressed concern with protecting the young Douglass from “disconsolat[ion] and

unhappin[ess]” (n. pag.) belied a recognition of the potential for books to raise the boy’s consciousness and prompt a desire to rebel against his enslavement. Anti-literacy laws, then, provided white people the benefit of black ignorance – a powerful means for ensuring compliance and, too, for reaffirming whites’ superiority. And contemporary book-banning policies are their direct descendent – an example of the “anti-black racism” that Harvard University’s online “Confronting Anti-Black Racism Resource” describes as a “consistent factor” throughout the history of US education (n. pag.).

Isabel Wilkerson’s concept of “heritability” provides a useful tool for thinking through the logic that links the Doctrine of Discovery, slave codes, anti-literacy laws, and the contemporary book banning discourse. Wilkerson developed the concept to examine how race informs class and caste. Though each of these is determined at birth, caste is distinct in its immutability (103). Black slaves and their children were intended to be owned in perpetuity. That was the permanent caste that they inherited. Wilkerson argues that even though they are no longer enslaved, black Americans have been unable to escape their place at the bottom of a “social hierarchy” (103). This includes the black middle-class, who exist on a lower rung to white society and who she notes, citing Raymond T. Diamond and Robert J. Cottrol, have become “like a group of American untouchables” (qtd. in Wilkerson 106-07). Heritability serves a valuable function for the ruling class. The permanent, inferior status of black Americans across economic classes is offered up to middle- and working-class white Americans as evidence of their superiority over black people and justification for whatever entitlements accompany that white superiority. As the thirty-sixth US president, Lyndon Baines Johnson, famously put it, “If you can convince the lowest white man he’s better than the best colored man, he won’t notice you’re picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he’ll empty his pockets for you” (qtd. in Moyers n. pag.).

This principle, I argue, remains foundational, and is laced throughout the discourse of those campaigning to modify school curricula and edit out those aspects of US history that threaten to undermine the entitlement and superiority historically central to white Americans’ sense of identity. The

othering of black Americans on which twenty-first century conservative political efforts to limit what children read about race is premised, provides a “benefit” of luring white middle- and working-class people into a fantasy of racial superiority. If the real history of American racism is muted, for example, then remedies like the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and diversity policies can be easily eliminated on the grounds that they unfairly favor minorities. Their elimination can then be politically framed as a long-overdue correction that will improve white people’s lives. Granting white working- and middle-class people the power to banish the stories of black people and others in turn serves to reaffirm their entitlement to control how and if black history is taught in schools and thus reinforces their superiority in relation to black America. Book-banning campaigns, then, offer opportunities to display white superiority that is strategically framed to promote social and political advantage.

Political Messaging as Public Pedagogy and Political Strategy

A racialized values infrastructure in America is, I argue, the product of a five-hundred-year narrative and reflects a political strategy carried out as public pedagogical messaging: by which I mean the education of the public by means other than traditional classroom instruction. The Doctrine of Discovery and Barbados Slave Codes of 1661 can be considered early examples of public pedagogy since they were not taught in classrooms. What’s more, the behaviors and values that these and ensuing slave laws endorsed became, themselves, harsh instructional tools, cementing the social construction of Europeans’ superiority over non-Europeans and providing the justification, and indeed precedent, for subsequent acts of violence and oppression.

Book-banning campaigns follow a similar logic but are distinct from earlier descendants of the Slave Codes in their replacement of overtly anti-Black rhetoric with one constructed in opposition to “wokeness:” a term that while rooted in the Black Liberation Movements of the twentieth and early twenty-first century, has come to index, since the late 2010s, any social or political position perceived to be liberal. Identifying “wokeness”

as the target enables campaigners to obscure the racist and discriminatory impetus for their attack on the freedom to write, and be read, of those who have been cast as the Other. This is an example of framing, which conservative politicians and local advocacy groups have used in the news media and on social media to garner public support for this issue. Linguist and cognitive scientist George Lakoff, who is known for his work on political discourse, describes the concept of framing as creating “mental structures that shape the way we see the world” (xi). Framing, I argue here, is a way of purposefully establishing a perspective to direct how a group acts and reacts in their environment and, indeed, to render these behaviors predictable, and even formulaic. It is a form of epistemic manipulation whose aim is to either change how we process knowledge and thus our understanding of the world or reinforce our existing beliefs about what we know – or think we know – about it. Framing, therefore, forms the basis of all political discourse. As George Lakoff notes in his analysis of political frames’ impact on public policy:

You can’t see or hear frames. They are part of what we cognitive scientists call the “cognitive unconscious” – structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access, but know by their consequences. What we call “common sense” is made up of unconscious, automatic, effortless inferences that follow from our unconscious frames. (xii)

This characterization of framing provides a valuable lens through which to understand the US racialized values system as the product of a concatenation of strategic efforts to turn white entitlement into “common sense.” More specifically, it enables us to identify the nation’s racialized values system as the result of political narratives that over centuries have been embedded into the unconscious frames of the populace and polity in service to two unyielding ideas: white superiority and black inferiority. Put differently, political framing has rendered racism both an American value and a kind of background noise – a principle that both structures and underlies culture and politics in innumerable ways, in turn enabling political messaging that can be shielded with a wink or well-placed denial.

This framing has served to cognitively structure what Edward J. Clemmer and J. Gregory Payne term the nation's "public political mind" – that is, the public's "affective cognitions," or absorption, of rhetorical messaging. Clemmer and Payne's application of this concept to analyze the rhetorical messaging used in George H.W. Bush's 1988 presidential campaign (29) is especially useful for our purposes as it allows us to establish certain continuities between the racialized narratives described thus far and the framing strategies deployed by contemporary book-banning lobbyists. Most notably, the Bush campaign appealed to white conservative Americans by repurposing the racist archetype of the "welfare queen" – a low-income black woman who manipulates the welfare system to get rich – first advanced by journalists in the 1960s and later developed by Reagan while governor of California and US president (Clemmer and Payne 37; Dudas 188-89). Like Reagan, Bush deployed the welfare queen phenomenon to frame conservative white voters as the primary taxpayers in America, and thus the most harmed by the welfare queen phenomenon – a strategy that relied, too, on conflating poverty, criminal behavior, and blackness. As described by political scientist Jeffrey R. Dudas, Reagan-era rhetorical messaging reliant on highly specific and racialized pejorative imagery became the "ideological cornerstones of political practice" for Republicans in the US (158).

The book-banning narratives advanced by conservative American politicians in the 2010s and 2020s are premised on these same tropes. And they succeed, I argue, due to their adherence to longstanding protective rhetorical patterns that have historically served to buttress the well-being of white America as deserving priority over that of other, "lesser," populations deemed in need of subjugating and disciplining. More specifically, twenty-first century book-banning campaigns rely on a rhetorical messaging centered around the figure of the innocent white child who must be shielded from exposure to the history of racism in America lest it make them feel bad about themselves. The vivid image of the damaged white child is embedded into what Clemmer and Payne term the "popular imagination" (30) to warn against the dangers of allowing books about race in schools. And like the image of the "welfare queen," its success relies on the construction of racism as common sense provides a

powerful tool for those who seek social and political dominance over those society has cast as Other.

Conservative bills premised on racialized frames of white entitlement, the disenfranchisement of black history, and the decoupling of discussions of racism or its history from the discussion or recognition of black people's experience have all served to strategically reinforce grassroots book-banning campaigns. Take, for instance, the "Stop WOKE [Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees] Act," originally known as the "Individual Freedom Act." Enacted in Florida on July 1, 2022, the act provides that "subjecting individuals to specified concepts under certain circumstances constitutes discrimination based on race, color, sex, or national origin" (Florida House n. pag.). It stipulates that the Education Department "revis[e] requirements for required instruction on the history of African Americans [and] prepare and offer certain standards and curriculum," authorizes it "to seek input from a specified organization for certain purposes," and "prohibits instructional materials reviewers from recommending instructional materials that contain any matter *that contradicts certain principles*; requires DOE to review school district professional development systems for compliance with certain provisions of law" (n. pag.; emphasis added). I have italicized the phrase "that contradicts certain principles" as it exemplifies the encoded messaging of anti-"woke" legislation and, in particular, the legislation's reliance on the assumed indisputability of white entitlement. In deliberately leaving unspecified what these "certain principles" are, the legislation at once obscures its racist premise while affirming those principles as self-evident in much the same way as the determinative values of white supremacy heralded in the papal bulls of the Doctrine of Discovery and the Slave Codes. Both of the legislation's titles – "Stop WOKE" and "Individual Freedom" – are also examples of politicized framing. Positing the circumscription of what is taught in schools as a matter of protecting individual freedoms and child safeguarding serves to obscure its true, racialized, intent and render it palatable for public consumption.

The application of HB 7 by Studies Weekly, a Florida-based supplier of lesson plans for K-6 textbooks, provides an apt example of the real-world consequences of the racialized censorship of history and the resulting

legislation. Responding to Florida's (white) governor, Ron DeSantis's, demand that K-20 textbooks be scrubbed of all references to "contested issues" Studies Weekly radically revised the section on "Responsible Citizens in History." Most notably, it reduced civil rights activist Rosa Parks' arrest for defying the Montgomery, Alabama transit system's segregationist policies and the 382-day-long bus boycott and protests it catalyzed to a cryptic account of generic, unspecified, personal integrity: "Rosa Parks showed courage. One day, she rode the bus. She was told to move to a different seat. She did not. She did what she believed was right" (Gamble n. pag.). Lacking any explanation of why she refused to move or what made this refusal courageous, Parks' story became an abstracted and universally applicable parable about "responsible citizenship" attesting to the merits of doing the "right" thing.

Stuart Hall's concepts of "encoding" and "decoding," which he first introduced in a paper presented to the Council of Europe Colloquy on "Training in the Critical Reading of Televisual Language" (1973), help in understanding counter-narratives developed for television news media and social media that eventually forced Studies Weekly to disavow the revisions as errors, and, more generally, to challenge racialized book-banning and censorship campaigns. Hall described "encoding" as the production of a message, which relies on various modes of framing to convey a particular meaning and "decoding" as the interpretative process, or translation, of the encoded message. The development of meaning, he argued, requires both encoders and decoders. But in direct contradiction of the established conceptualization in mass communication theory of the period of television viewers as passive consumers of content, Hall identified the *decoder*, not the *encoder*, as the most important actor in the development of meaning (Procter 1-2). This is because decoders have the capacity to produce conflicting translations of the encoded messages they are expected to understand, accept, and adhere to – which is to say that there can be no guarantee that the meaning produced as an outcome for the decoder will align with the meaning intended by the encoder (Procter 1-2).

In the case of Studies Weekly, decoders who accepted HB 7's framing of censorship likely decoded the encoded message in the textbook supplier's lesson plans (that is, Rosa Parks' bio) as a statement about a courageous

woman called Rosa Parks who did not budge or as a welcome corrective to the longstanding burdening of white children with unjustified guilt and shame. Those who decoded HB 7 as infringing on free speech in turn likely decoded the Studies Weekly bio as a near-senseless string of words with dubious pedagogical value, a worrying falsification of the US' racialized history, or both. This was the framing, too, of the public-pedagogical campaign launched by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Legal Defense Fund, and the national law firm Ballard Spahr to accompany their lawsuit against the state of Florida. Notably, the statement of opposition to HB 7 on the ACLU website reflects a strategy of counter-narration that frames the act's self-proclaimed protection of students' individual freedom as an assault on their civil rights:

The lawsuit argues the Stop W.O.K.E. Act violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments by imposing viewpoint-based restrictions on instructors and students in higher education that are vague and discriminatory. The complaint also argues that the law violates the Equal Protection Clause because it was enacted with a racially discriminatory purpose and will have a disparate impact on Black educators and students. (ACLU, "*Pernell v. Lamb: Free Speech*" n. pag.)

Through the dissemination, across multiple media, of similar encoded messages that framed HB 7 as restricting freedom of expression and the textbook revisions as censorship, ACLU generated enough pressure to oblige the Studies Weekly to issue a press statement that uncannily resembled the Vatican's apology for the violence condoned by the papal edicts of the 1400s: "We find the omission or altering of historical facts to be abhorrent and do not defend it" (n. pag.). In contrast to the latter, however, Studies Weekly rationalized its actions as the result of misguided decoding. They had had, "like every publisher [,] to decipher how to comply with [the Department of Education's] legislation," and the edits were merely "unapproved changes" made by "individuals [who] severely overreacted in their interpretation of HB 7" and that were published due to "errors in the quality assurance process" (Gamble n. pag.). In this way, the erasure of a key event in the history of black American civil rights was

reframed as an unfortunate byproduct of an eager effort to comply with the law, and its racist intent was thus neutralized.

The ACLU's successful campaign against the Studies Weekly revisions and, to a lesser extent, the rhetorical strategies the latter in turn deployed to divest its actions of racist connotations or intent are examples of public pedagogy. My contention is that television news, video podcasts, and other social media locations in which to frame messages are all public pedagogical outlets to educate the public and are the main tools these days for conveying framed political narratives.

Conclusion

Thus far, I have outlined the historical evolution of the strength of white superiority and black inferiority in the US to help explain how a racialized book-banning campaign could possibly surface in a modern society. My work has also focused on how political messaging has led to new oppressive book-banning and history-altering laws and practices. But there are anti-book-banning groups that have formed to provide access to black literature. Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, has become involved with three organizations – Visit Philadelphia, the Free Library of Philadelphia, and Little Free Library – to create an initiative called Little Free(dom) Library that provides access to approximately 1,500 banned books authored by black writers. A Temple University director of community outreach explains the racialized circumstances that black writers face:

Sharing black history is an offense to some white people, so they have state laws that censor books that share historical events in America when it was legal for more than 400 years to oppress and abuse African Americans. [...] Some officials continue to ban literature by black authors because of the color of their skin; oppressive gatekeepers feel that black literary works aren't on par with mainstream white authors and audiences. It was wrong then and it's wrong now to censor that artistry. (qtd. in Baum n. pag.)

Providing locations to purchase banned books by black authors is one way of fighting against a book-banning movement. But I return to George Lakoff and his discussions of *reframing* as a means of “changing the way the public sees the world” and, in turn, establish a new basis for common sense (xii). Rather than slogans, reframing involves the developing of ideas that appeal to what people already unconsciously believe or value. The next task is to make those beliefs or values conscious and then repeat the message over and over again until it is normalized in everyday public discourse (xiii). My concern, of course, is that such a strategy is not designed to change existing racialized unconscious beliefs. However, this is not to say that it cannot be done. There is potential in fact to transform the American public political mind by constructing “hot” affective cognitions, as described by Clemmer and Payne, of strategic counternarratives of vivid imagery to produce powerful new archetypes capable of neutralizing racialized political messaging (29). These are topics that require more analysis than I can provide here. But it is a beginning for a study that I intend to pursue and upon which I invite others to build.

AUTHOR'S BIONOTE

Social justice activist, scholar, and author Barbara Becnel has more than twenty years of experience working for prison reform in the state of California, while writing nine award-winning non-fiction books on street gang culture, as well as over one-hundred academic journal, magazine, and newspaper articles.

From leading an international media campaign aimed at preventing the judicial execution of reformed Crips gang co-founder and Nobel Peace Prize nominee Stanley Williams, to organizing an ‘Occupy San Quentin’ rally attended by hundreds in front of the state prison that houses California’s death chamber, she has often shown inspiring leadership and tenacity. Recently, she was appointed by the Scottish Parliament to an Expert Steering Group for tackling racial harassment in Scottish higher education. She also participated in a Steering Group focusing on the development of an anti-racist curriculum for Scotland’s universities and colleges.

Building on her MSc in Social Justice and Community Action (With Distinction) earned from the University of Edinburgh, Barbara returned there to earn a PhD in social justice and criminology. Her thesis explored how death row became a symbol of heroism for America’s street-gang generation. Integral to this was her collaboration with three former-though-imprisoned South Central Los Angeles gang members who were co-researchers on the project.

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