

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “It Feels Like White Supremacy Losing Control”: Gleaning Local Perspectives on “Anti-Woke” Legislation

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(Received 13 April 2024; revised 17 October 2024; accepted 12 January 2025; first published online 26 March 2025)

## Abstract

Since 2021, 18 states in the USA have restricted education on race and structural inequality. Conservative coalitions frame these restrictions as a war on “woke” ideologies. Through interviews with youth and educators in locales (Florida; Georgia; and York, Pennsylvania) that restrict education on race and structural inequality, I investigate the following: What discourses do students and educators use to describe bills that restrict race-related studies? What, if anything, do their discourses suggest about the perceived political implications of these restrictions?

In this study, I argue that gleaning students’ and educators’ views on “anti-woke” legislation sheds light on the perceived political consequences of these bills for American democracy. I find that students and educators perceive restrictions on race-related studies as *epistemic injustices* that divest society of the knowledge to identify, problematize, and redress the structural conditions that (re)produce racial subordination. For participants, the health of democracy is contingent on addressing racial disempowerment. Hence, they suggest that restrictions on race-related studies encumber democracy precisely because these policies impose *epistemologies of racial ignorance* that impede racial redress and allow systems of racial inequality to fester.

**Keywords:** education; race; anti-woke; democracy; epistemic injustice; critical race theory; Florida

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, political philosopher W.E.B. DuBois (1903) describes the problem of the twentieth century as the problem of the color line: systems of racial hierarchy across the globe that socially, politically, and economically subordinate darker races in Asia, Africa, America, and the islands of the sea to lighter races (Chapter II, para. 1). DuBois (1903) argues that one purpose of education in a democracy should be to lift the “Veil of Race” that hangs between “[race-class subjugated people] and Opportunity” (Chapter IV, para. 14). The “Veil” can be

understood as ideologies and habitus that contour and naturalize the established racial order.

The problem of the color line that DuBois articulated in 1903 endures today. Structural practices—including economic disinvestment, social control policing, residential segregation, concentrated poverty, unequal school funding formulas, etc.—continue to fuel racial disparities in Black Americans’ access to resources (Story 2019); political participation (Cohen and Dawson 1993); education outcomes (Domina et al. 2019; Ladson-Billings 2006); and contact with the carceral state (Weaver and Lerman 2010). However, contrary to DuBois’ vision of democratic education, 18 states across the U.S. limit or outright prohibit education that addresses the problem of the color line. Rather than lifting the “Veil of Race,” these restrictions affix it.

Since 2021, a right-wing faction of state and civil society actors have led a movement against education that addresses race and structural inequality, which they dub “woke” ideology (African American Policy Forum 2022; hereafter AAPF). Scholars argue these restrictions reproduce mythical accounts of American history (Carbado and Roithmayr 2023, 197; Crenshaw et al. 2023; Goldberg 2023, 361) and colorblind, individualist explanations of inequality (Goldberg 2023; Mueller 2018; 2020); thwart racial progress (López et al. 2021; Russell-Brown 2022); and erode multiracial democracy (Repucci 2022.; Russell-Brown 2022).

However, there are no studies that systematically marshal the testimonies of impacted students and educators to empirically investigate their views on the meaning and implications of so-called “anti-woke” legislation. This study seeks to address this gap and contribute to the growing field of political science scholarship that analyzes how constituents, particularly race-marginalized populations, perceive the laws that govern them. Through semi-structured interviews with students, youth leaders, and educators in Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Florida, I investigate the following questions: What discourses do students and educators in locales that restrict race-related studies use to describe these restrictions? What, if anything, do these discourses suggest about the perceived political implications of restrictions on race-related studies? I use the term race-related studies as shorthand to refer to education that addresses race *and* structural racism.

In this study, I argue that gleaning students’ and educators’ views on “anti-woke” legislation sheds light on the perceived political consequences of these bills for American democracy. I find that students and educators perceive restrictions on race-related studies as *epistemic injustices* that divest society of the knowledge to identify, problematize, and redress structural conditions that (re)produce racial subordination. For participants, the health of democracy is contingent on addressing systems of racial disempowerment. Hence, they suggest that restrictions on race-related studies encumber democracy precisely because such restrictions impose *epistemologies of racial ignorance* that impede racial redress and allow systems of racial inequality to fester.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I contextualize restrictions on race-related studies. Secondly, I survey scholarship that interrogates restrictions on race-related education, and I indicate gaps in the present research. I then present my methodology and expound the *a priori* theme of “epistemic injustice” that guided this study. Penultimately, I offer a thematic analysis of participants’ interview

responses. Lastly, I reiterate my findings, describe the implications of these findings, and offer future directions for researchers.

## Background

### 2020 Reforms and Right-wing Resistance

During the summer of 2020, the movement for Black Lives sent shockwaves across the United States in response to the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. Activists urged the nation to interrogate and eradicate systems of racial oppression. In response to this activism, government officials, schools, and employers made steps to address racial injustice (Hudspeth Blackburn 2021; Kane and Wagner 2020). Notably, many workplaces—including educational institutions—developed antiracism and anti-bias trainings; and some schools made efforts to diversify curricula and educational materials (Schwartz 2023).

These reforms were met with dissent and organized resistance from government leaders, parents, interest groups, and political pundits—conservative by and large but some across the political spectrum (AAPF 2022; Schwartz 2023). Over the past 3 years, 44 states have introduced bills that restrict education on race and structural inequality, and 18 states have enacted such bills (Schwartz 2023). For example, Florida's House Bill 999 bars general education courses "based on theories that systemic racism, sexism, oppression, or privilege are inherent in the institutions of the United States and were created to maintain social, political, or economic inequities" (Fla. Leg. 2023, 23). The language in this clause captures legislative efforts to curtail education that analyzes racial oppression through systemic and institutional lenses. Legislative bills have also been accompanied by state and local bans on books that discuss Black history (i.e., the Ruby Bridges' story *This is Your Time*); systemic racism (i.e., *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson); or life experiences from the viewpoint of a Black protagonist (i.e., *New Kid* by Jerry Craft).

Notably, lawmakers have framed race-related studies as "divisive," "discriminatory," and "guilt-inducing" in the text of state bills. For example, Florida's House Bill 7 (hereafter HB 7) declares that "[i]t shall constitute discrimination on the basis of race . . . to subject any student or employee to training or instruction that espouses, promotes, advances, [or] inculcates" 8 prohibited concepts (outlined in HB 7) related to race, race-consciousness, racial privilege, and oppression. Although restrictions on race-related concepts are cloaked in a colorblind, "antidiscrimination" veil, researchers highlight that it is important to consider the racial politics that undergird these bills.

For example, legal scholar Johnathan Feingold (2022) argues that since the *Civil Rights Cases* of 1883, political elites have appropriated antidiscrimination rhetoric to further regressive ends by framing antiracism as preferential treatment, anti-White discrimination, and "reverse racism" (742). Relatedly, Feingold (2022) contends bills that situate race-related studies as "discriminatory" are a part of "broader efforts to delegitimize antiracism as an un-American, [anti-White], 'racist' project that contravenes our nation's core equality commitment" (727). Feingold's analysis suggests that charges of "anti-White discrimination" are tacit in the claims that education on race and structural oppression is "discriminatory."

However, scholars argue that the framing of race-related studies, including Critical Race Theory, as discriminatory and anti-White is a gross distortion (AAPF 2022). Critical Race Theory (hereafter CRT) is an analytic framework that examines how law, policies, and structural practices reproduce racial constructs and racial inequality in spite of civil rights reforms that prohibit de jure discrimination (Crenshaw, Gotanda, and Peller 1995). Conversely, experts in law and policy indicate that right-wing “anti-woke” factions have distorted the meaning and message of critical race studies and turned the discipline into “a boogeyman for racial anxieties” (AAPF 2022, 6; Feingold 2022). In fact, conservative actors have publicly admitted their agenda to distort CRT. In a series of tweets in March 2021, Manhattan Institute senior fellow Christopher Rufo, who advises lawmakers on anti-CRT policy, wrote the following:

We have successfully frozen their brand—“critical race theory”—into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category. The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think “critical race theory.” (Rufo 2021)

Rufo’s (2021) admission and dog-whistles through the use of “cultural insanities” elucidates the ways that political actors in the “anti-woke” movement have manipulated CRT and constructed an “us vs them” binary to undermine antiracist interventions, stoke racial hysteria, and mobilize public support for conservative platforms and politicians. Additionally, Rufo’s statements capture how far-right actors have appropriated and perverted CRT as a catchall term to colloquially refer to divisive and extreme concepts about race. In the subsequent sections, I survey the literature that interrogates the distortion and suppression of race-related studies and the implications of these restrictions.

## Literature Review

Scholars proffer that restrictions on race-related studies promulgate mythic accounts of American history and colorblind, individualist explanations of inequality; thwart racial progress; and erode multiracial democracy.

### *Historical Myth-Making*

Researchers (Carbado and Roithmayr 2023, 197; Crenshaw et al. 2023; Goldberg 2023, 361) argue that restrictions on race-related studies enforce mythic narratives of American exceptionalism by framing injustice (i.e., slavery, Jim Crow, police brutality) as anomalous in the USA (as opposed to structurally endemic). In these accounts, the nation and White Americans are uplifted as righteous, stainless guardians of democracy while the perspectives, knowledges, and experiences of non-White communities, who are regarded as the racial “other,” are disavowed (Collins 2000; Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Stanley 2020). Namely, during their teach-in at Yale University, professors Kimberlé Crenshaw et al. (2023) proffer that restrictions on teaching about racial inequality through a structural lens situate

racial injustices as “departures from the norm” in America. That is, state legislators frame racial subordination—such as slavery, Jim Crowism, etc.—as mere blips in America’s upward progress toward moral and democratic perfection.

Notably, critical race theorist David Theo Goldberg (2023) argues that refusals to highlight the structural nature of racial subordination obscure “the historically produced social conditions [that] establis[h] ongoing racist systems” (361). Researchers hold that by eliding historical and enduring systems of racial subordination, restrictions on race-related studies propel idyllic myths of an exceptional past and post-racial present (Carbado and Roithmayr 2023, 197; Crenshaw et al. 2023). Under these renditions of history, America’s White-male-elite-propriety Framers are revered for establishing a free state (allegedly) founded on democratic principles, and the American nation is adulated for observing and upholding these principles. Here, “the actual histories of slavery, racial subjugation, segregation, and inequity” are distorted in order to propel ideological myths that insulate the Framers and American institutions from critique (Goldberg 2023, 361).

Markedly, state legislators’ efforts to enforce notions of American exceptionalism are apparent in the text of their statutes. For example, section 1007.55 of Florida’s 2024 Early Learning-20 Education Code mandates that “general education courses must . . . promote the philosophical underpinnings of Western civilization and include studies of the nation’s historical documents, including the United States Constitution, the Bill of Rights and . . . the Federalist Papers” (Fla. Stat. § 1007.55 2024). While the state standardizes these perspectives and documents, Florida’s Department of Education (2023) has barred AP African American Studies on the grounds that the course “significantly lacks educational value” because it includes material that addresses structural racism (1).

The excerpts from Florida’s legislative statutes alongside the ban on AP African American Studies elucidate the state’s maneuvers to (1) standardize the perspectives and writings of Western philosophers and America’s Framers; (2) propel the narrative that America was founded on and continues to effect democratic principles of freedom and equality; and (3) disavow disciplines that challenge this narrative (i.e., disciplines that expound the history and legacy of racial subordination and structural inequality in the USA). These 3 practices fit neatly with scholar Ellen Swartz’ description of master scripting in American education—whereby power-holders enshrine the perspectives and knowledge claims of White, male elites as the objective truth and subordinate all other perspectives and epistemologies (Swartz 1992, 341 as cited in Ladson-Billings 2023, 22–23).

This section has corroborated literature that analyzes how restrictions on race-related studies promulgate mythic narratives of American exceptionalism that obscure systems of racial subordination and denigrate non-White knowledge claims. Scholars suggest that under these accounts, racial injustices are framed as mere anomalies in American history (rather than structural continuities).

### **Colorblind Individualism**

Furthermore, researchers argue that restrictions on race-related studies mandate colorblind renditions of social relations that elide structural reproductions of inequality. Colorblind individualism refers to logics that evade race and the material

implications of racialization; instead, colorblind frameworks often situate social relations and inequality as byproducts of one's individual actions and abilities (Feingold 2022; Goldberg 2023). Goldberg (2023) describes the ways that restrictions on race-related studies enshrine colorblind individualism: "Wiping the slate of history clean, [conservative critics of CRT] insist that formal equality under the law—never mind how recently or imperfectly realized—vitiates any claim of enduring injustice. Whatever the unfairness of the past, this thinking goes, individuals are now free to make of their lives what they will" (361). Goldberg's insights suggest that colorblind framings of social relations render charges of racial disadvantage unintelligible because formal equality under the law is said to guarantee that "we" can all participate in society on equal footing and rise above our station. Mueller (2018; 2020) argues that under this logic, legal equality is detached from structural reality (12). More specifically, colorblind individualism obscures that although formal equality is enshrined in abstract law, systems of deprivation (i.e., economic disinvestment, redlining, racial residential segregation, unequal school funding, employment discrimination, etc.) create and reproduce racial inequalities in the material world.

Clinging to the pretense that racial inequality is not structurally reproduced because the law is race-neutral *prima facie*, colorblind individualism instead situates inequality as a natural product of individual missteps or alleged cultural deprivation (Feingold 2022, 739; Goldberg 2023; Ladson-Billings 2023). Scholars argue that this colorblind logic naturalizes White privilege, suggesting that the (unearned) benefits, protections, and status conferred on Whiteness are results of individual achievement and human capital (Gillborn, Warmington, and Demack 2023, 191; Leonardo 2023, 327). Correspondingly, non-White disadvantage is rationalized as the byproduct of personal traits and deficits (i.e., lack of hard work, unstable family structures, etc.) as opposed to the result of structural reproductions of deprivation. For these reasons, researchers suggest colorblind framings of social relations upheld in "anti-woke" legislation obfuscate systemic causes of racial inequality.

Scholars argue that these colorblind, individualist logics not only naturalize White privilege and non-White disadvantage; but colorblind individualism also maintains White privilege, wealth, and power by precluding race-conscious reform. Because colorblind individualism situates inequality as a byproduct of individual achievements or deficits, demands for structural reforms (i.e., affirmative action, redistribution, reparations) to remedy racial subordination are rendered illegitimate, unnecessary, and even preferential treatment (Feingold 2022, 739). Feingold (2022) and Mueller (2018, 149) proffer that by foreclosing the possibility of remediation, colorblind doctrines protect White power, privilege, and wealth—and thereby maintain White dominance economically, politically, and legally. This literature suggests that restrictions on race-related studies promulgate colorblind explanations of social relations that individualize inequality, obfuscate systems of racial disadvantage, and reinforce White supremacy.

### ***"Anti-Woke" Legislation Through A Lens of Racial Retrenchment***

Moreover, scholars argue that the recent restrictions on race-related studies are methods of racial retrenchment in response to the racial reckoning of 2020. There is

a long line of scholarship that analyzes how perceptions of Black racial threat influence White action. Sociologist Scott Duxbury (as cited in Russell-Brown 2022) holds that “perceived racial threat” is not always based on the numerical increase of a Black population in a geographical area (14). Rather, the perception of Black racial threat may also be measured by the increased salience, power, and presence of Black Americans in traditionally White spaces (Russell-Brown 2022, 14). According to legal scholar Katheryn Russell-Brown (2022), this increased Black presence shows up not only in entertainment and media, but also as “legal and journalistic expertise, as forms of social protest (e.g., Black Lives Matter), as nationally recognized holidays focused on African Americans (e.g., Juneteenth), and as widely celebrated observances of Black achievement (e.g., Black History Month)” (14). For some, this increased social, economic, and political empowerment and presence of Black Americans is perceived as a threat to White monopolies in intellectual, political, economic, and cultural spheres.

Russell-Brown (2022) argues that more recently, “massive national and international protests in the wake of George Floyd’s murder . . . [and] demands for corporations and universities to address and teach about explicit and implicit forms of racial bias and anti-Black racism” have been interpreted as “a Black insurgency into previously all-White domains, including the schoolhouse curriculum” (14–15). Russell-Brown’s (2022) scholarship forwards that cleavages of White Americans and White political elites have perceived multiracial demands for structural reforms—innervated by 2020 mobilizations—as threats to Whites’ grip on socio-political power. Additionally, this scholarship suggests that curricular materials that address race and structural inequality have been interpreted as a threat to a White-controlled epistemological canon, one that advances Eurocentrism and American exceptionalism and negates structural racism.

Scholars argue that as a reprisal to the prospect of racial reform instigated in 2020, state legislatures have enacted bills that discredit and vitiate education on race and structural inequality in efforts to quash interventions that destabilize (or “threaten”) the established racial, social, and epistemological order. According to scholars Francesca López et al. (2021), conservative coalitions use CRT as a “frightening symbol to intensify a collection of cultural and political fears related to race, racism, and [racial reform]” (López et al. 2021, 4). López et al. (2021) argue that these tactics of distorting and besmirching critical race studies thwart racial progress because they create culture wedges that not only incite the Right’s loyal political base but also mobilize moderates and individuals who might otherwise be inclined to support critical race studies and structural reforms against these interventions (10). Corroborating Russell-Brown’s (2022) scholarship with López et al.’s (2021) literature suggests that restrictions on race-related studies are a part of right-wing efforts to impede multiracial support for antiracist reforms, including education that addresses race and structural inequality, through a strategy of suppression and distortion.

### ***Implications of “Anti-Woke” Legislation for Democracy***

Furthermore, scholars proffer that restrictions on race-related studies encumber participation in and the maintenance of a multiracial democracy. Freedom House is

an institution that measures each country's degree of democracy based on the extent to which rule of law, civil liberties, political freedoms, and civil rights are upheld. Sarah Repucci (2022)—Senior Director of Global Publications at Freedom House—reports that “democracy in the United States has suffered serious erosion,” which is evidenced by a 16-point decline in the country's Freedom House democracy score from 2010 to 2021. Repucci (2022) argues that the democratic decline in the United States is in part due to restrictions on scholars, scholarship, and curricula that address race and structural inequality because these restrictions abridge academic freedom and free expression.

Additionally, research suggests that these restrictions encumber the health of a multiracial democracy by suppressing knowledge that can galvanize political action to redress structural racism. According to Repucci (2022), “One of the great strengths of any democracy is the means it provides for people to bring attention to its own flaws and attempt to correct them. The United States['] . . . ability to advance democratic values and interests in the world depends on its success in addressing its domestic shortcomings.” That is, the maintenance, legitimacy, and integrity of U.S. democracy are contingent on whether the state addresses rampant inequalities, unfreedoms, and illiberalism in its national borders.

However, law professor Virginia Hamilton (as cited in Russell-Brown 2022) holds that restrictions on race-related studies are detrimental to democracy because these policies vitiate knowledge that is useful in addressing a salient domestic shortcoming in the USA: racial subordination. For example, Hamilton (as cited in Russell-Brown 2022) argues, “[T]he laws increase the chances that the next generation of students will remain uninformed of the racial history of the United States and its legacy and will thus come of age unmotivated—and unequipped—to improve upon it” (35). That is, legislative restrictions advance an epistemology of ignorance (to borrow a term from Mueller 2020) on race and structural racism that foments apathy and political inaction—stifling the potential for students to recognize and redress systems of racial subordination as they mature into adults.

In this section, I have corroborated literature that interrogates restrictions on race-related studies. To reiterate, existing scholarship holds that restrictions on education pertaining to race and structural inequality reproduce mythical renditions of American history and colorblind, individualist explanations of unequal social relations; thwart racial progress; and encumber participation in and maintenance of a multiracial democracy.

### ***Methodological Gap in Existing Literature***

While existing literature adroitly contextualizes the political implications of bills that curtail race-related studies, this scholarship does not systematically marshal the testimonies of impacted students, educators, and community members to empirically investigate the implications of “anti-woke” legislation through their eyes.

This methodological gap is deserving of scholarly attention because research suggests that students' educational experiences influence their outlooks on politics, society, and power. For example, William as cited in Ehman (1980) “[finds] a relationship between [B]lack studies course and general social studies courses and

political powerlessness, but with differential effects by race” (106). Additionally, research indicates that gathering youth’s thoughts on their social and political milieus provides insights on how they perceive the (il)legitimacy and integrity of U.S. democracy. For example, in *Democracy Remixed*, political scientist Cathy Cohen (2010) elucidates that young Black Americans’ testimonies about their lived experiences shed light on the ways that they understand citizenship and assess democratic equality.

Cohen’s (2010) research and Hulbary’s study (1972 as cited in Ehman 1980) suggest there is great academic merit in gathering students’ thoughts when interrogating the perceived implications of policies that govern their lives. Hence, this study aims to address the methodological gap in existing research by marshaling the testimonies of impacted students and educators to interrogate the perceived political consequences of restrictions on race-related studies.

## Methodology

Through semi-structured interviews with students, youth leaders, and educators in Georgia, Florida, and Pennsylvania, I investigate the following questions: What discourses do students and educators in locales that restrict race-related studies use to describe these restrictions? What, if anything, do these discourses suggest about the perceived political implications of restrictions on race-related studies?

## State Selection

Aside from my effort to maximize geographic diversity, I choose communities in Georgia, Florida, and Pennsylvania as points of inquiry because the scope and politicization of restrictions on race-related education in each of these states vary—which I presume may increase the robustness of my findings. With regards to scope, state legislative assemblies in Florida and Georgia have each enacted restrictions on race-related concepts that apply to state government entities, public and charter schools, and public institutions of higher education in the state (Fla. Leg 2022; 2023; Ga. Gen. Assemb. 2022).

However, the politicization of these restrictions varies in Florida and Georgia. Since HB 7 was enacted in April 2022, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, the Florida Department of Education, and the Florida state legislature have continued to issue decisions and enact policies that restrict race-related education. For example, in January 2023, the Florida Department of Education barred the College Board’s AP African American Studies course. Additionally, in May 2023, the Florida State legislature passed HB 999, which curtails courses about systemic racism, prohibits diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, and fortifies the Board of Governors’ role in tenure review (Fla. Leg. 2023). The recent passage of these bills indicates that the political maelstrom surrounding critical race education in Florida is enduring.

In contrast, the political fury around race-related studies in Georgia simmered after Republican politicians secured victories in 2022 midterm elections—where candidates on the Right used Critical Race Theory as an issue campaign in their electoral races (Martínez-Cachero 2022; NBCUniversal News Group 2023). Hence, I choose communities in Florida and Georgia as points of inquiry because the degree,

political intensity, and endurance of state opposition to race-related studies vary in each of these states—which may enhance the complexity of my findings.

Lastly, I choose York, Pennsylvania as a location of interest because it offers an example of district-level restrictions on race-related studies. The Pennsylvania General Assembly has not successfully passed restrictions on race-related studies at the state level. However, in the fall of 2020, the York Pennsylvania School District implemented a “freeze” on books related to race, Black history, and social justice—including titles about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr.—after a group of parents voiced dissent to these materials (Bella 2021). (At the time of writing of this study, the moratorium has been reversed.) Hence, I choose York, Pennsylvania as a point of inquiry because it allows my research study to capture policies at various levels of local government as well as policies that differ in scope (i.e., restrictions on books versus entire academic courses).

### ***Participant Recruitment***

In total, 31 individuals participated in the study. The modal participant was a young, Black, woman-identifying student in either college or high school. Table 1 details demographic information about study participants. I employed snowball sampling as a recruitment method, whereby I initially contacted leaders and directors of education nonprofits, youth programs/recreation centers, and student organizing groups in Florida, Georgia, and York, Pennsylvania for interviews about restrictions on race-related studies. I then asked these individuals to refer me to other youth and educators in their programs that might be willing to discuss the restrictions in their state or school district. Instead of referring me to specific individuals, the organizer or director often invited me to their center or program to share information about my research study.

Upon visiting the site, I introduced myself to groups of youth, educators, and youth leaders—stating my name and educational affiliation. I then described my research study as fieldwork that seeks to gather students’ and educators’ views on restrictions on race-related studies through in-depth interviews. I shared that participants would not be compensated, there were no physical risks in participating in the study, and individuals would be de-identified if they chose to participate. After describing the study, I answered questions that individuals had about the study. I then asked attendees to share their contact information (i.e., email or phone number) with me if they were interested in participating, so that I could share consent forms and arrange an interview time.

After obtaining contact information, I requested informed consent and screened for prospective interviewees by ensuring that they met 3 requirements: (1) identify as a student, educator, and/or youth leader; (2) reside in Florida; Georgia; or York, Pennsylvania; and (3) are aware of restrictions on race-related studies in their locale. There was not a high threshold for participants’ level of awareness; merely hearing about these restrictions informally was sufficient to meet requirement #3. I included youth leaders in the study population along with students and educators because similar to educators, this group closely engages with students and often assumes an educative role. Additionally, many youth leaders (such as summer camp counselors) are often students or recent graduates themselves.

**Table 1.** Participant demographics

	Number	%
Education or Occupation		
Educator	2	7
Youth Leader	6	19
College Student	7	23
Incoming College Student	6	19
High School Student	10	32
Race and Ethnicity		
Black or African American	18	58
Black and White (Mixed)	1	3
White, non-Hispanic	1	3
White, Hispanic	2	7
Latinx (no race specified)	5	16
Arab	1	3
Asian	1	3
Unspecified Race or Ethnicity	2	7
Gender		
Woman	18	58
Man	12	39
Nonbinary	1	3
Region		
York, Pennsylvania	3	10
Georgia	9	29
Florida	19	61

I chose to recruit participants in the aforementioned ways because youth organizations and education nonprofits tend to host diverse populations of students, educators, and youth leaders. I specifically chose snowball sampling as a recruitment method because this method is commonly used under conditions where traditional sampling methods are impractical and target populations are hard to reach. Generally, students and educators are not populations that are hard to reach—as schools can serve as accessible sites for participant recruitment.

However, state- and district-level restrictions on the topics of interest have raised questions and concerns about what kinds of conversations are permissible in formal school settings and penalties for violations. Additionally, I anticipated that some members of the target population might have been apprehensive to speak with an “outsider” or unknown researcher for the same reasons. Thus, I relied on snowball sampling and referrals because the existing political conditions made it harder to

recruit participants in formal school settings, and I anticipated that gathering participants through referrals from youth organizers and education leaders would assuage apprehension that members of the target population might have experienced in speaking with an outside researcher.

### **Representativeness**

The demographics in this study do not mirror national demographics, and hence, I cannot say how representative participants' views are. However, I believe that not having a representative study is permissible due to the interpretative aims of this study. To clarify, this study does not intend to measure the distributions of views in society, the likelihood of their occurrence, or causal relationships—which are research inquiries that generally seek to maximize representativeness. Such studies often ask “how many” and “how related” questions and generally require large-N surveys to capture a wide array of participants (Prowse, Weaver, and Meares 2020, 1433).

In contrast, my study is concerned with how particular communities make sense of the laws that govern them and their political milieus. That is, this study asks “how” and “why” questions—“more akin to a ‘case study logic’ . . . with which sampling logic has greater difficulty” (Small 2008, 6 as cited in Prowse, Weaver, and Meares 2020, 1433). Thus, I believe that not having a representative sample is acceptable due to this study's effort to capture how groups of students, educators, and youth leaders interpret restrictions on race-related education—as opposed to measuring the prevalence of participants' views in society or causal relationships.

### **Interview Procedure**

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, whereby I (the interviewer) asked open-ended questions from an organized interview guide (see Appendix) while also providing participants with the flexibility to introduce new discussion ideas and control the direction of the conversation. This organized list of questions was approved by the Yale University Institutional Review Board, which monitors the ethical compliance of research studies that employ human subjects.

I generated the interview questions by developing open-ended probes that would elicit in-depth responses about restrictions on race-related studies. Instead of posing “yes” or “no” questions, I used the 5 Ws and H framework (“who,” “what,” “when,” “where,” “why,” and “how”) to generate the interview guide. Similar to its function in journalism and other qualitative studies, this framework lends itself to interviewee elaboration. Because this study seeks to understand how students and educators make sense of restrictions on race-related studies, the 5 Ws and H method seemed appropriate in fostering reflection and elaboration.

Additionally, I employed this open-ended approach in question generation to minimize leading and truly provide interviewees with the latitude to describe their educational experiences and explain their interpretations of restrictions on race-related studies in their own words. In order to mitigate leading, I referred to policies that restrict race-related studies as “restrictions on race-related studies” or by their

name (i.e., Florida's "Stop W.O.K.E. Act") as opposed to using value-laden monikers, such as "regressive legislation" or "copycat bills."

Interviews were mainly conducted in a group format—where multiple participants (between 3 and 5 individuals) in the same locale were collectively interviewed about their views on district-level or state restrictions. As the discussion unfolded, the interviewer engaged in active listening and took longhand notes—occasionally introducing probe questions to guide the conversation but primarily allowing discussants to raise discussion points and shape the conversation flow. Some participants were interviewed in a one-on-one format with the interviewer due to interviewee preference for this format, scheduling conflicts, etc. One-on-one interviews flowed in a similar fashion as group interviews; however, the interviewer played a more active role in the former because the interviewee did not have a co-discussant to guide the direction of the conversation.

Social scientists across a wide array of disciplines attest to the utility of semi-structured interviews that rely on interpersonal dialogue (among participants) and active listening (on the part of the interviewer). For example, political scientist Clément Pin (2023) proffers that semi-structured interviews allow researchers to better understand how individuals or groups of individuals conceive "of their relations with others, with institutions, or more broadly of social phenomena" (1). Hence, I found it appropriate to use semi-structured interviewing in this study because political science scholarship suggests that this method is useful in gleaning participants' unique interpretations of their political conditions—which is the aim of this study.

Moreover, Black feminist theorists and critical race scholars highlight how dialogue-oriented methodologies that recognize discussants' experiential knowledge as legitimate help bring the counterstories, insights, and discourses of communities of color to the fore (Collins 2000; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Namely, outgroups' personal stories (referred to as counterstories) often expose, analyze, and challenge dominant discourses on race and privilege; "strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance" (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, 32); and provide a vehicle for psychic preservation (Ladson-Billings 2023, 18). Hence, I employed semi-structured interviewing in hopes of providing participants with the space to articulate and express knowledge that is not fully captured by quantitative methods.

### **A Priori Theory: Epistemic Injustice**

The a priori theme that I used to frame this study is the theory of "epistemic injustice." In 2007, philosopher Miranda Fricker coined the term epistemic injustice to refer to knowledge-based harms that are done to individuals and communities in their capacities as knowers. Fricker (2007) describes one form of epistemic injustice as hermeneutical injustice: "the [disadvantage] of having . . . one's social understanding obscured from collective understandings" due to unequal relations of power in knowledge-generating processes (i.e., journalism, politics, academia, and law) that subordinate or exclude marginally situated persons; and thereby produce lacunae in collective social understandings (152; 154; 156).

More specifically, hermeneutical injustice occurs when a marginalized speaker's efforts to describe their experiences are unintelligible to the dominant-hearer due to

gaps in collective hermeneutical—or interpretative—resources “where the name of a distinctive social experience should be” (Fricker 2007, 15–151). One example that Fricker (2007) provides of hermeneutical injustice is the lack of a word for sexual harassment prior to 1975. According to Fricker (2007), women’s subordination in meaning-generating processes prevented them from being able to articulate and convey experiences of sexually inappropriate conduct in the workplace that was not rape (149–152). This created a hermeneutical gap in the collective social understanding where the concept “sexual harassment” now exists.

Fricker (2007) argues that epistemic lacunae produce disadvantage because the marginalized speaker is unable to verbalize and make sense of subordinating conditions, which in turn prevents the marginally situated person from protesting such conditions in intelligible ways to dominantly situated persons. Consequently, these epistemic gaps hamper marginally situated speakers from securing remedies for subordinating conditions, according to Fricker (2007).

### ***Epistemic Injustice: Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance***

However, scholarship across a wide array of disciplines complicates Fricker’s (2007) theory of hermeneutical injustice, suggesting that it rests on a deficit-oriented assumption that marginally situated speakers lack the discourses to describe their experiences. More specifically, Fricker (2007) does not consider the possibility that critical epistemic resources exist and are often crafted by marginalized communities, but the dominant group actively maintains hermeneutical lacunae and refuses critical epistemic resources. Philosopher Gaile Pohlhaus (2012) highlights that the experiences of marginalized communities are not necessarily obscure due to these communities’ alleged inability to articulate their experiences nor due to dominant groups’ inability to recognize marginally situated groups’ experiences. Rather, gaps in dominant social understandings often result from willful hermeneutical ignorance—whereby dominant groups refuse alternative epistemic tools crafted by marginalized groups because such tools unmask subordinating conditions and unsettle dominant groups’ privilege, power, and control of collective social understandings (Mueller 2020; Pohlhaus 2012).

### ***Epistemic Injustice: Racial Ignorance/Non-Knowing***

More pointedly, scholar Jennifer C. Mueller (2020) argues that White elites and the White polity maintain and defend epistemologies of racial ignorance “institutionally, organizationally, and in the everyday” (148). Epistemologies of ignorance (or racial non-knowing) refer to logics that evade, distort, and obfuscate race and structural racism in order to uphold White privilege and power (Mueller 2020, 147). Examples of structurally reinforced epistemologies of racial ignorance that Mueller (2020) provides are the Supreme Court’s colorblind doctrine and “intentional, individual animus” standard in post-civil rights era jurisprudence that “obscur[e] the depth and scope of racism [by negating how racially disparate outcomes persist despite the overhaul of de jure discrimination] and foreclos[e] numerous arguments and remedies” (Mueller 2020, 149). Muller’s research (2020) indicates that by refusing epistemic resources that challenge the arbitrary power, influence, and

privilege conferred on Whiteness, the commitment to racial ignorance reproduces White supremacy.

Notably, racial ignorance is not primordial or inevitable: “[W]hite ignorance requires real effort and dedication in a world saturated with evidence of racism and suffering, counterdiscourse, and resistance of people of color (Bell 1992; Feagin 2013; Jung 2015 as cited in Mueller 2020, 147). However, Mueller (2020) argues that dominant groups often actively maintain logics that “evad[e], mystif[y], and obscur[e] [race and] the reality of racism” because these modes of racial ignorance afford several material benefits to Whites as a collective group (147). For example, by obfuscating the reality of racism, epistemological ignorance permits White Americans to (1) enjoy the spoils of racial privilege and power and (2) disavow marginalized groups’ demands for redress because, so the thinking goes, “we are all equal before the law” (Mueller 2020; Pohlhaus 2012).

Additionally, Mueller (2020) argues that racial ignorance makes it easier for White Americans “to abide by and perform racism without appearing or feeling racist (i.e., deviant and immoral)” (Mueller 2020, 157). That is, refusing to acknowledge race and structural racism permits White Americans to perpetuate and benefit from systems of racial subordination but still claim moral virtue since they do not view themselves as overtly or explicitly “racist” (i.e., they do not espouse “racist sentiments”). Similarly, scholars argue that even when racial non-knowing is not materially beneficial, epistemologies of ignorance may provide psychic comfort for White Americans (Hochschild 2016 as cited in Mueller 2020, 150). Altogether, Pohlhaus’ (2012) and Mueller’s (2020) scholarship complicate Fricker’s (2007) theory of hermeneutical injustice by demonstrating that critical knowledge exists to unearth and redress racial subordination; however, hermeneutical ignorance is often institutionally and socially upheld to advance the power, interests, privileges, and psychic comfort of White Americans.

Importantly, the dominant group does not merely uphold its own ignorance, but it may also coerce ignorance among subordinated groups (Mueller 2020). Historian Carter G. Woodson’s (1933) book *Mis-education of the Negro*, French philosopher Louis Althusser’s (1971) literature on ideological state apparatuses, and Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire (1970)’s theory on “banking education” suggest that dominant groups design educational institutions in ways that coerce epistemic ignorance among subject populations. These scholars argue that the hegemonic group enforces hermeneutical non-knowing in order to compel subordinated communities to accept the dominant social order as natural and inevitable as opposed to oppressive, endogenous to human processes, and structurally produced. According to Freire (1970), dominant groups project this “absolute ignorance” onto subject populations in order to stifle inquiry and contestation, which “serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed” (73).

This section has surveyed scholarship on epistemic injustice: knowledge-based harms that disadvantage individuals and groups in their capacities as knowers. Scholars propose at least 4 types of epistemic injustices: (1) hermeneutical injustice (Fricker 2007), (2) willful hermeneutical ignorance (Pohlhaus 2012), (3) epistemologies of racial ignorance (Mueller 2020), and (4) coerced hermeneutical ignorance (Althusser 1971; Freire 1970; Woodson 1933). This taxonomy of

epistemic injustices provides functional a priori theories to aid in my analysis of participants' perceptions of restrictions on race-related studies. The data suggests that participants do indeed perceive these restrictions as epistemic injustices.

## Data and Analysis

Across interviews, participants described restrictions on race-related studies as policies that divest society of the knowledge to identify, problematize, and redress conditions that (re)produce racial inequality and oppressive relations of power. These descriptions suggest that students perceive restrictions on race-related studies as an *epistemic injustice*, or knowledge deprivation, that stifles society from fully comprehending and rectifying systems of racial subordination. In short, students view restrictions in their locales as imposed epistemologies of racial ignorance.

### *Erasure, Concealment, Distortion*

Participants began with the baseline logic that racial subordination exists and is endogenously (or structurally) created (i.e., through particular processes, arrangements, or conditions). For example, Savannah—a young Black woman attending college in Florida—prefaced our conversation by stating, “The USA is based in oppression of Black people, Native Americans, Hispanics, [pause] Japanese internment. All of this is done to make sure they don’t get power.” Here, Savannah conveys that racial subordination is a longstanding feature of U.S. governance that is systemically (re)produced to maintain unequal relations of power.

However, participants perceive restrictions on race-related studies as a strategic effort to obscure historical and enduring subordination; and buttress the myth of an exceptional American nation devoid of injustice, brutality, exploitation, and deprivation. Their perceptions corroborate with scholar Jason Stanley’s (2020) scholarship on the ways that governments uphold narratives of a virtuous nation by inculcating myths that mask national wrongs, elevate the alleged achievements of the nation, and obscure the perspectives and experiences of “those who do not belong” (36). Megan (young Black woman, college student, Florida) stated, “How I view the situation is they are trying to erase the idea of inequality in America.” Megan’s comment implies that inequality exists in America, but restrictive bills obfuscate this inequality.

This notion of erasure, distortion, and concealment pervaded participants’ testimonies:

Why are we D.I.Y-ing history? I think they are trying to ban the idea that there was no struggle. “We were all ooh la la, holding hands.” “Abraham Lincoln was so great.” “We all hold hands and ring around the rosy.” (Lupe: Latina, rising first-year college student, Florida)

By like hiding [race studies] or taking it away, it’s trying to make the country look better than it actually is. Trying to erase some of history makes it look like they have it under control. Like there was no oppression, or there was no

racism. [It makes it appear that] the development of the country went smoother than it actually is. (Raven: High school student, Florida, young woman, race/ethnicity unspecified)

Stories about African American experiences or experiences that Black Americans [face] were . . . banned. It [permits] us [to] thin[k], “Racism is solved.” “We don’t have this problem anymore.” And that’s why [these bans] are an issue. (Skylar: Black young woman, high school student, York, Pennsylvania)

Here, participants’ testimonies reveal that they perceive restrictions on race-related studies as strategic efforts to obfuscate the historical and present reality of racial subordination and other forms of oppression in the USA

Participants suggest state legislatures (or school districts in the case of York, Pennsylvania) obscure historical and enduring forms of subordination through enacted bills in order to (1) avert accountability for unfixed wrongs and (2) promulgate portraits of a righteous, unstained nation devoid of injustice and degradation. Lupe’s use of phrases such as “ooh la la” and “ring around the rosie” encapsulates her perception that these framings of the nation and U.S. governance are fanciful and idyllic distortions of reality. Students’ reflections echo scholarship that analyzes “master scripting” in American education—which refers to the practice of excluding, obscuring, and distorting perspectives that unsettle the virtue and narrative authority of dominant groups (Swartz 1992, 341 as cited in Ladson-Billings 2023, 22–23).

Students anticipate that in scenarios where injustices are mentioned, restrictions on race-related materials risk framing these injustices as antiquated “things of the past” that are inconsequential in the present. For example, Skylar expresses that bans on books related to Black history are an issue because this erasure leads us to think that “racism is solved.” Here, she suggests that racial subordination has not been resolved and thus efforts to obscure this reality are injurious.

This section has explained participants’ views that restrictions on race-related studies conceal, erase, and obscure historical and enduring systems of racial subordination in the USA. These views corroborate with Goldberg’s (2023) research, which argues that restrictions on race-related studies evade and obfuscate systemic racism.

### ***Epistemic Injustice***

Moreover, students outlined the epistemic consequences of restrictions on race-related studies. Participants suggest that these restrictions divest society of the epistemic resources to identify and problematize conditions that produce racial inequality and disadvantage. For example, discussants indicate that curtailments on teaching about race and inequality through structural lenses make racial subordination appear banal, natural, or self-inflicted. Val (Latina, rising first-year college student, Florida) reflected,

I feel like without the knowledge [pause] my first thought was like how majority White communities [pause] they don’t understand why there’s so

much poverty in majority Black areas. The system teaches us to think that Black people are criminals when in fact it's like no [pause] it's because of ABCDEFG that y'all don't see because you don't have the information. Without information [on systemic racism] you can't see all these harmful things in the background. Or, when you do see it, it's not that bad. [This] pushes harmful stereotypes.

Here, Val's reflections illustrate her understanding that restrictions on race-related studies divorce racial inequality—namely, the concentration of poverty in Black neighborhoods (Cohen and Dawson 1993)—from systemic conditions that reproduce these disadvantages (or what Val refers to as “all these harmful things in the background”).

In Val's eyes, race-evasive bills actually reinforce the ideas that race and vice are pathological because these restrictions stifle individuals from identifying the structural causes of racial inequality, harm, and disadvantage. Val offers that instead, one is likely to associate crime and poverty with Blackness because the underlying processes, structural arrangements, and institutional practices (i.e., economic disinvestment, legacies of redlining, zoning, residential segregation, subprime lending, etc.) that reproduce Black subordination are concealed. Val's insights corroborate with existing scholarship, which argues that race-evasive policies divorce inequality from systems of racial disempowerment (Goldberg 2023; Mueller 2018; 2020) and instead situate disadvantage as the result of individual missteps, personal failures, and cultural deficits (Feingold 2022; Goldberg 2023).

Additionally, Val's testimonies suggest she views restrictions on race-related studies as epistemic deprivations, specifically epistemologies of racial non-knowing, because these policies create hermeneutical lacunae (to borrow a term from Fricker 2007) where the words “systemic racism” or “racial subordination” should be when explaining concentrated poverty in minority communities. Val explains that without the appropriate concepts to account for the conditions that produce racial disadvantage, individuals will instead draw upon racial stigmata or deficit-oriented logics to fill epistemic gaps.

Participants suggest that the implications of these epistemic lacunae are particularly pronounced for younger students because these children will grow up in a society where the erasure of race-related studies “is the new normal” (Megan: Black woman, college student, Florida). Participants pointed out that before restrictive bills were passed, their schools promulgated distorted, superficial, or meager accounts of race and ethnicity in America (i.e., “Heroes and Holidays” approaches to multicultural education; curricula that only discuss Black Americans in the context of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement). However, participants propose that existing bills are particularly invidious because the erasure and dilution of race-related studies carry the force of law. Participants reflected that before these bills were enacted their teachers had the choice to teach race-related topics but chose not; but now “they don't have the choice” under existing state law (Val: Latina, rising first-year college student, Florida).

In calling attention to the legalized enforcement of race-evasive education, participants suggest that legislators (1) engender hermeneutical gaps in the collective social understanding of race and structural racism; and (2) deny students

and educators agency to address these gaps. This corroborates with Pohlhaus (2012) and Mueller's (2020) argument that dominant racial groups often use their institutional power to create and maintain racial ignorance (non-knowing).

Amad's (Arab, high school student, male, Florida) reflections further capture the perception that restrictions on race-related studies create hermeneutical lacunae that foster racial ignorance:

Banning isn't fair because it takes away important education. Previously slavery wasn't even viewed as a problem. It was viewed as the norm . . . That's the problem [with restrictions on education today]. Racism and injustice we see today [gets] viewed as normal. If we don't teach these things, things get normalized. It's important to allow classes covering racial problems so we know not to repeat these things in the future and create change.

Here, Amad suggests that restrictions on race-related topics facilitate racial non-knowing because these policies create knowledge gaps that make racial subordination appear banal or natural. In recounting how slavery was naturalized in society (i.e., through "positive good" and "necessary evil" logics), Amad captures the deleterious implications of racial ignorance. Namely, for Amad and several other participants, restrictions on race-related topics allow racial subordination to persist because these mandates naturalize the existing social order; and thereby encumber society's ability to identify and problematize oppressive relations of power, which allows systems of racial disempowerment to fester. Amad's reflections corroborate with Val's aforementioned testimonies and suggest that restrictions on race-related studies mandate epistemologies of racial ignorance that make racial subordination appear natural, innocuous, and normal.

### ***Political Repercussions: Stifling Structural Reform***

As aforementioned, participants perceive restrictions on race-related studies as epistemic deprivations that uphold racial ignorance (or non-knowing). Participants also described the ways that racial non-knowing prevents society from redressing inequality and oppressive relations of power:

[These restrictions] hurt educators, students, and minority communities [ability] to discover and create solutions to problems that run rampant in their respective communities. If you don't understand the rules in place when it comes to three strikes, recommended list of felonies and misdemeanors, if you don't know how the system works, or what works, or doesn't work . . . you can't fix it. If you don't know a race-neutral policy is racist, you're not going to fix it because you [don't] know it's broke. (Savannah: young Black woman, college student, Florida)

Similar to Amad's reflections, Savannah's reflections suggest that restrictions on race-related topics produce hermeneutical gaps that obscure how certain policies and structural practices reproduce racial disadvantage although these policies are race-neutral *prima facie* (i.e., draconian crime policy, sentencing practices, etc.).

Savannah conveys that this racial ignorance impairs society's ability to design structural reforms that redress racial subordination because the policies and practices that fuel racial inequalities do not appear wrongful, disadvantageous, injurious, nor deserving of reform.

Savannah's reflections corroborate with Feingold (2022) and Mueller (2020)—who hold that race-evasive frameworks foreclose the possibility of remedial action by obfuscating systems of racial subordination as impartial, neutral, or nonexistent and thereby rendering demand for redress as gratuitous. Savannah's testimony captures participants' views that restrictions on race-related studies divest society of the knowledge to redress systems of racial subordination.

### ***Political Repercussions: Racial Retrenchment***

Participants across all interviews articulated the perceived political consequences of restrictions on race-related studies with various permutations of the adage "history will repeat itself." Participants did not perceive "history repeating itself" as a return to a glorious past but as a fortification of systems of oppression and unequal relations of power. They perceive that restrictions on race-related studies serve these regressive purposes:

It seems like we have people in power who are trying to dim that brightness by enacting this legislation. They're trying to [exert] control so systems of oppression can stay and get worse, go back to how things were. (Darius: Black male, youth leader, Florida)

People who are making these bans are afraid to see change. They have grown up in a very traditional society, where white people are the majority and [you] gotta be straight. [There's] more women, minority races [today]. If [there's] changes around [you], then the person who has power will become fearsome of losing power, [so they try] to combat it. (Lynn: Asian young woman, rising first-year college student, Florida)

Knowledge is power and they want to limit power. (Lupe: Latina, rising first-year college student, Florida)

A through line in these participants' testimonies is the notion that legislators have enacted restrictions on race-related studies in order to (1) "limit" and "dim" critical consciousness that unsettles systems of oppression; and (2) thereby fortify unequal relations of power.

They connected these policies with the curtailment of affirmative action in *Students For Fair Admissions v. Harvard*; and state bills that prohibit diversity, equity, and inclusion (e.g., Florida's HB 999). Students viewed the confluence of these mandates, court rulings, and local bills as government efforts to maintain White supremacy.

Furthermore, several participants interpret restrictions on race-related studies as backlash to the racial reckoning of 2020. Participants suggest that conservative

coalitions have led the movement against race-related studies in efforts to thwart racial progress and insulate systems of White power and privilege:

The school [district] attacked diversity and antiracism after the murder of George Floyd. To them, diversity means Black. Black equals diversity to them. From a minority perspective, [this is] not good. [It's] very alarming. (Skylar: young Black woman, high school student, York, Pennsylvania)

They don't want it to be a big thing like what happened with BLM [when] more info [became] public like previous topics that weren't discussed. (Raven: High school student, Florida, young woman, race/ethnicity unspecified)

Supremacy wants to stay supreme . . . It feels like a tit for tat retaliation . . . like petty, childish retaliation. It feels like White supremacy losing control and mad it . . . The impact of restricting [race-related studies] is pretty much . . . a rollback, turning back the hands of time and returning to a place where no one questions or people that [do] question are silenced. (Tamika: Black woman, youth leader, Florida)

These reflections suggest participants perceive restrictions on race-related studies as a method of racial retrenchment in response to challenges to the racial order precipitated by the 2020 movement for Black lives. These perceptions corroborate with research on racial threat (Duxbury as cited in Russell-Brown 2022)—which analyzes how White political elites and members of the White polity pursue racial retrenchment when they perceive threats to their established power, privilege, and status.

Additionally, Tamika's reflection conveys that she views restrictions on race-related studies as epistemic injustices that quash efforts to interrogate, problematize, and contest White supremacy. She suggests that state legislators enact these bills in order to sow credulity and racial non-knowing and thereby insulate White supremacy from critique and challenge. Her reflection that restrictions intend to "return society to a place where no one questions or people [that] do question are silenced" corroborates with Freire's (1970) scholarship on banking education—which proposes that education institutions coerce ignorance among subject populations in order to stifle inquiry, dialogue, consciousness, and contestations that challenge the power and authority of dominant groups.

### ***Consequences for Democracy***

Thus far, I have described how participants perceive restrictions on race-related studies as epistemologies of racial ignorance that maintain unequal racial power and quell social transformations. For these reasons, participants also hold the view that restrictions on race-related studies encumber democracy. Chris (young Black male, rising first-year college student, Georgia) reflected, "I feel like with [banning] CRT, you're blocking people from getting a view on history and education [and] inhibiting people from having an open mind. [It's] setting us back, not letting us walk forward, it's bad." Here, Chris uses "us" to refer to the American nation. Chris'

reflections suggest he views critical consciousness and national progress as intertwined. Hence, he proposes that restrictions on race-related studies encumber America's democratic potential (or ability to "walk forward") because these policies erode society's consciousness of historical and enduring injustices.

Chris' reflections mirror other participants' views. For example, Dylan (high school student, male, identified as mixed/Black and White, Florida) stated, "Issues [related to systemic racism] are so important. [These restrictions are] stopping society from bettering itself." Similarly, Lynn (Asian young woman, rising first-year college student, Florida) expressed, "Not having discussions around these topics would really hinder us . . . hinder the growth of America . . . and make us less aware of how the world really is."

Similar to Chris, Lynn and Dylan suggest democratic progress in America (or "the growth of America"/"bettering" of America) is contingent on society's ability to reckon with and rectify systemic racism. Hence, they hold that restrictions on race-related studies arrest the democratic potential of the USA because these policies impede society's ability to fully perceive and redress one of the nation's core democratic failures: systems of racial disempowerment. Their reflections corroborate with Hamilton (as cited in Russell-Brown 2022, 35) and Repucci (2022)—who argue that restrictions on race-related studies encumber participation in and the maintenance of a multiracial democracy. Darius' reflection further conveys the perception that restrictions on race-related studies are deleterious to democracy:

Right now they're trying to destroy or hide history that is important to the growth of kids. The students today are our future legislators and future presidents. How can you represent someone if you don't know the issues they're faced with? Without understanding that, how do you do your job? You need to understand the diversity of issues. The plight of communities. How will you get things done without understanding [their] plight? (Darius: Black male, youth leader, Florida)

Here, Darius suggests that restrictions on race-related studies divest students of the knowledge to understand the diverse struggles and disadvantages that communities face. He anticipates that these epistemic deprivations will prevent students that eventually serve in government from being able to fully identify and respond to their constituents' grievances.

Hence, Darius' reflections suggest that restrictions on race-related studies erode the integrity and legitimacy of representative democracy because these policies produce epistemologies of ignorance that impair elected representatives' consciousness of and responsiveness to the injurious conditions (or "plights") that inform their constituents' lives; and thereby, restrictive legislation stifles redress.

This section has expounded the ways that participants make sense of the political consequences of restrictions on race-related studies. Participants wed democratic progress to the redress of structural racism. Hence, participants suggest that restrictions on race-related studies encumber American democracy because these policies propel epistemologies of racial ignorance that impede society and legislators from perceiving, deliberating on, and redressing systems of racial disadvantage.

## Competing Perspectives

A point of difference among study participants was whether educational content about systemic racism may evoke feelings of guilt. This was a notable discussion point because in bills that restrict race-related concepts, legislators particularly prohibit the “concept” that “an individual, by virtue of his or her race, color, sex, or national origin, bears personal responsibility for and must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress because of actions, in which the individual played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race, color, sex, or national origin” (Fla. Leg. 2022, 4). This concept constitutes actionable discrimination under Florida law. Feingold’s (2022) aforementioned research on the discursive framing of racial reform suggests that implicit in these antidiscrimination clauses and clauses pertaining to guilt is the charge that educational content about systemic racism imposes guilt, shame, and culpability on past and present populations of White Americans.

While participants repudiated the view that concepts pertaining to race and structural inequality command that individuals *must* feel guilt or assume responsibility for historical actions, the statutory clause on guilt elicited participant dialogue on whether learning about the histories and legacies of racial subordination might incidentally bring about feelings of guilt and discomfort. On the one hand, some students rejected or were dubious of the notion that learning about racial oppression may arouse feelings of guilt:

When I was told about racism, it wasn’t me doing it. It was my ancestors. This wasn’t me. I didn’t do this. There’s no reason why 6 year olds should feel guilty. If they do, create an open space to talk about it. [Like,] “Hey! Let’s solve racism together.” (Raven: High school student, Florida, young woman, race/ethnicity unspecified)

I think . . . [the argument that people will feel guilty] is dumb . . . I don’t think that’s right . . . You shouldn’t feel guilty for the way somebody else thinks because you have no influence over that. (Ivan: Latino, high school student, Florida)

Whereas Ivan suggests that it is improbable that curriculum about racism will arouse feelings of guilt or shame because one is not responsible for others’ racist *attitudes* or *thoughts*, Raven draws upon her own educational experiences and expresses doubt that race-related topics will trigger feelings of guilt because present-day students were not involved in past racist *practices*. Altogether, these students disclaim the notion that teaching about racial subordination will evoke guilt because they propose that students seemingly understand that they are not liable for others’ wrongs nor history.

On the contrary, other participants held that learning about racial subordination may lead to feelings of guilt or discomfort for multiple communities. However, they expressed that these feelings should not be cause for restrictions on race-related topics:

Talking about slavery is uncomfortable. When [you restrict these topics and students] get to the real world, now you have adults who don't know how to be uncomfortable. (Skylar: young Black woman, high school student, York, Pennsylvania)

I've heard the uncomfortable [argument] . . . so many times. Like what makes you uncomfortable? The fact that your pee paw had slaves? . . . It must be uncomfortable to learn about Emmett Till, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor. You think it's uncomfortable just for you? You need to be uncomfortable to learn. Like no babes, embrace comfortability. To use that as a scapegoat to not teach it, is very . . . white supremacist. (Val: Latina, rising first-year college student, Florida)

[Learning about these things] does produce guilt. [It's] hard for me to square how huge the scope of this is and not feel at fault . . . [But] if i had someone tell me "here's the truth of the matter and this is what you can do," [you] can't feel guilty because this is what you can do now. (Zee: Latinx, college student, non-binary, Florida)

These testimonies capture Skylar, Val, and Zee's perspectives that unearthing and grappling with historical and ongoing systems of racial disempowerment—including slavery, police brutality, vigilante violence, and other forms of racial subordination—may evoke discomfort, discontent, and guilt. Val's reflections challenge us to consider how reckoning with these histories and legacies may not only stimulate discomfort in individuals whose ancestors committed racial harms; rather, she suggests that grappling with these issues may also produce discomfort in individuals who share backgrounds with those who have endured racial oppression.

Importantly, although these participants consider potential feelings of guilt and discomfort that may arise when learning about structural racism, they repudiate the view that these feelings necessitate restrictions on race-related topics. They highlight consequences of restricting this knowledge based on the claim that such knowledge may incidentally produce feelings of guilt or discomfort. For example, Skylar anticipates that insulating students from difficult content and lamentable histories will hamper students' dexterity and confidence in grappling with contemporary social challenges. Additionally, similar to scholarship on master scripting (Swartz 1992, 341 as cited in Ladson-Billings 2023, 22–23) and mythic narratives of American exceptionalism (Carbado and Roithmayr 2023; Crenshaw et al. 2023), Val argues that restricting race-related concepts on grounds that these topics are uncomfortable obscures and naturalizes White supremacy under the veneer of "safeguarding children."

Conversely, these participants propose that learning about race and inequality through critical, structural lenses in an educational setting is productive because even though the gravity of these topics may lead to discomfort or feelings of guilt, race-related studies can offer tools (or epistemic resources) to redress the social and structural conditions that are discomfiting. Consider Zee's (aforesaid) reflection that with critical knowledge about race and power, "you can't feel guilty because . . . [this

knowledge teaches you] what you can do now.” Here, Zee’s reflection corroborates with Darius’ (Black male, youth leader, Florida) reflection: “If you feel guilty, that’s the first step. If you feel guilty, that causes you to do something. [It] causes . . . action to right these wrongs.”

Both Zee and Darius express the view that despite the initial feelings of guilt or discomfort that students might experience when grappling with the legacies and contemporary implications of racial disempowerment, race-related studies can provide a space for students to attend to these feelings and build epistemic and tactical repertoires to address and resolve racial injustices. Hence, these participants suggest that race-related studies do not sow despondency. Rather, participants propose that (1) race-related studies can offer students knowledge to rectify systems of racial disempowerment and (2) feelings of discontent, guilt, and discomfort that might arise during these studies may galvanize political action and interventions. These reflections corroborate with social movement theory—which analyzes the mobilizing effects of emotions (Gupta 2017; Jasper 1998).

This section has highlighted research participants’ diverging perspectives on whether race-related topics arouse feelings of guilt and discomfort. While some participants express doubt that knowledge about racial subordination might evoke guilt, other participants consider the ways that these topics may be discomfiting but nevertheless do not warrant restriction. Some of the latter participants also complicate assumptions about who may feel discomfort, the political effects of emotion, and the role that race-related studies can serve in helping students resolve feelings of guilt and discomfort.

## Discussion

In this paper, I have argued that gleaning students’ and educators’ views on “anti-woke” legislation sheds light on the perceived implications of these bills for American democracy. I find that participants view restrictions on race-related studies as *epistemic injustices* that divest society of the knowledge to problematize, identify, and redress the conditions that (re)produce racial subordination. They view democratic progress as contingent on the nation’s ability to address systems of racial disempowerment. Hence, they suggest that restrictions on race-related studies encumber democracy precisely because such bills enforce epistemologies of racial ignorance that allow systems of racial inequality to fester.

Their views corroborate with existing scholarship, which argues that restrictions on race-related studies uphold mythic narratives of American exceptionalism (AAPF 2022; Crenshaw et al. 2023); obscure and naturalize systems of racial subordination (Goldberg 2023; Mueller 2020); stymie racial progress (Feingold 2022; Mueller 2020); and erode multiracial democracy (Hamilton as cited in Russell-Brown 2022, 35; Repucci 2022).

While participants express differing opinions about whether race-related studies may arouse feelings of guilt or discomfort, they tend to hold the view that these feelings should not be leveraged as reasons to restrict race-related studies. Instead, many participants propose that education on racial power and structural inequalities can equip students with the epistemic resources (knowledge) to

transform and redress historical and ongoing subordinating conditions, which may be the sources of guilt or discomfort.

### ***Implications and Direction For Future Research***

These findings suggest that constituents do not only view democracy as procedural, or based on formal rules (i.e., elections, civil rights) that enable political participation and political competition. The testimonies of students and educators in this study illuminate that they also evaluate democracy based on substantive features—including the extent to which state institutions (i.e., legislatures and schools) promote democratic deliberation and racial egalitarianism. These insights challenge researchers to consider how the *quality* of governance—not merely guaranteed rules and abstract rights—informs constituents' views on the integrity and legitimacy of democracy.

Additionally, these findings highlight the merit and academic value of gathering grassroots perspectives through in-depth conversations to understand the perceived micro and macro-level implications of public policy. These findings offer methodological guidance for social scientists, pointing to the viability and utility of qualitative fieldwork. Furthermore, while this study primarily focused on the political perceptions of local communities that are subject to restrictions on race-related studies, future researchers may find it useful to interrogate how restrictions on race-related studies and race-conscious practices (such as affirmative action) influence the political behaviors of impacted communities.

### **Conclusion**

According to DuBois (1903), the “one panacea of Education” is its potential to “give us poise . . . to stamp out those [prejudices] that in sheer barbarity deafen us to the wail of prisoned souls within the Veil, and the mounting fury of shackled men” (Chapter IV, para. 7). Here, imprisonment functions as a metaphor for social, economic, and political degradations that abridge the full and equal citizenship of communities of color. DuBois captures how parochial logics about race and power legitimize and buttress racial subordination. However, he proposes that democratic education has transformative power such that it enables the national community to interrogate, problematize, and transcend the “Veil of Race.”

Students, youth leaders, and educators in Florida, Georgia, and Pennsylvania suggest “anti-woke” legislation, “divisive concept” bills, and other curtailments of race-related studies arrest the transformative power of education and instead impose epistemologies of racial ignorance that maintain an unequal racial order. For these reasons, they perceive that restrictions on race-related studies are ruinous for democracy. Hence, I conclude that gleaning local views on restrictions on race-related studies sheds light on the perceived political repercussions of these policies for the health and integrity of U.S. democracy. As DuBois highlights, “Only by a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line . . . shall justice and right triumph” in America (Chapter IV, para. 30). The communities that I spoke with during this research study seem to concur with DuBois.

**Acknowledgments.** I am grateful to the students, educators, youth leaders, and education organizations in Atlanta, Georgia; Miami, Florida; and South Central Pennsylvania for being willing to share their experiences and views on the state of education. I am thankful to Professors Jason Stanley, Amir Fairdosi, and Allison Harris as well as Ms. Samantha Shields for their support and guidance throughout my research and writing processes. Additionally, I am thankful to the Yale Center for International and Professional Experience (CIPE) and its generous donors for funding my summer research through the Yale College Public Service Research Grant (Research For A Better World).

**Funding statement.** The Yale Center for International and Professional Experience (CIPE), which funded this research through the Yale College Public Service Research Grant (Research For A Better World), played no role in the design, execution, data analysis, data interpretation, nor writing of the study.

**Competing interests.** The author is not affiliated with or aware of any memberships, funding, or vested interests that might be perceived as compromising the content, objectivity, and integrity of this research.

**IRB Compliance.** This research study with human participants has been approved by the Yale University Institutional Review Board.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

- What was your reaction to the anti-WOKE legislation (“divisive concepts” ban)?
- What is your opinion on the anti-WOKE legislation?
- Has the legislation impacted your education in any way(s)? If so, please describe how.
- What was your education like before recent restrictions and bans were enacted?
- Has the legislation impacted your views on education? If so, please describe how.
- When the legislation was passed, did you respond in any way? If so, how did you respond to the anti-WOKE legislation?
- Do you believe that the concepts that are restricted should be taught in schools? Why?
- What is your vision of the most ideal education system?
- Do you draw any connections with these educational restrictions and other restrictions, such as the curtailment of affirmative action and LGBTQ+ studies?

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**Cite this article:** Carroll T (2025). “It Feels Like White Supremacy Losing Control”: Gleaning Local Perspectives on “Anti-Woke” Legislation. *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics* 10, 603–631. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2025.3>