

“There Would Be No Lynching If It Did Not Start in the Schoolroom”

Ethlyn Daniel-Scherz

Carter Godwin Woodson was a monumental figure in advancing Black people's representation and recognition within institutions of education. Woodson, a profound thought leader, was born in 1875 to formerly enslaved parents who were illiterate. Although known for many things, amongst the most important was his founding of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in 1915, and through this organization's effort, the emergence of Black History Week in 1926, which evolved into what we now know as Black History Month. The aim of ASNLH, which later became the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH), was to amplify the “neglected aspects of Negro life and history.” The organization's mission was a direct response to the sociopolitical climate of the time, which deliberately silenced Black intellects; knowledge, Woodson understood, was a pathway to liberation, which stood directly in opposition to the preservation of white supremacy.

Woodson's oeuvre described the systemic ways in which systems of education reinforced the success of the whites at the peril of Black people. Specifically, *The Miseducation of the Negro* has important implications today. Woodson refers to the worst kind of lynching as teaching, that a “Black face is a curse and that his struggle to change his condition is hopeless.” In this passage, he explores the powerful grip of mental subjugation, and how this *mis-education* facilitates the future control of a Black student's actions. In this, Woodson incites a call to action by demonstrating that the Black mind has been continuously wounded by the unjust desire of whites to mold and shape the brains of those they deemed as “inferior.” In other words, he suggests that slavery is not only a physical conquest, but also a mental one. Controlling the thinking of individuals is the most powerful *commodity*. Woodson writes: “If you can control a man's thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do. If you make a man feel that he is inferior, you do not have to compel him to accept an inferior status, for he will seek it himself. If you make a man think that he is justly an outcast, you do not have to order him to the back door. He will go without being told; and if there is no back door, his very nature will demand one” (Chapter IX: Political Education Neglected).

The schooling system possesses immense responsibilities, and often this power has been misused; an example of which includes the widespread dispersal of propaganda resulting in the littering of young Black children's minds and intellectual confidence. This abuse of power reminds me of a James Baldwin quote in *The Fire Next Time* (1963, p. 8), “The details and symbols of your life have been deliberately constructed to make you believe what white people say about you. Please try to remember that what they believe, as well as what they do and cause you to endure, does not testify to your inferiority, but to their inhumanity and fear.” Woodson importantly acknowledges that the school curricula imposed on Black students are carefully curated by the minds of *so-called* men who can justify slavery, segregation, and maltreatment toward people they regard as inferior. To believe such labels is to accept inferiority and failure before even trying to combat the race issue in America.

In Woodson's *The Education of the Negro Prior To 1861*, he speaks to the inception of the systems of education. Education, historically, was linked to servile insurrection; effectively, the gaining knowledge renders "the Negro" incompatible with the "condition" of servitude. Through this certainty, laws were passed to silence Black intellectuals and to make it nearly impossible to learn, an approach that has contemporary chilling echoes today. To teach Black students became illegal and heavily scrutinized, disincentivizing teachers. Woodson writes (p. 13), "Thereafter, the documents which mention the teaching of Negroes to read and write seldom even state that the southern white teacher was so much as censured for his benevolence." The ability to have open conversations based on mere intellectualism was determined dishonorable or illicit, eerily akin to contemporary conversations in higher education that challenge intellectual freedom, and disproportionately affect marginalized students, all based on Trump's 2025 Compact, which uses the illegitimate justification of eliminating "Cultural Marxism." Although expressed in modern language and context, the policies reflect a similarity in their attempt to regulate knowledge as a means of preserving power.

The contemporary resurrection of intellectual censorship is horrifying, and it poses the question: *Did educational suppression as a means of preserving white supremacy ever really die? In other words, has educational censorship been resurrected from non-existence or merely adapted to fit our present moment?* The answer seems clear with current enactments of anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, LGBTQ+ restrictions, and the abolishing of Critical Race Theory, all while simultaneously defunding schools that support intellectual freedom. We are living in a critical time for higher education, as the current federal administration has deliberately put *our* education under attack.

We, as students at Vanderbilt, face cosmic implications straddling the burden of our complicity at this institution (which bears a grave history of maltreatment) while concurrently paving the way for its new legacy that embody the values of community and growth. Vanderbilt has instituted tools such as "institutional neutrality," defined as the "university's neutrality with respect to free inquiry, while retaining the obligation to cherish a diversity of viewpoints" as stated in the University of Chicago's 1967 *Kalven Report*. However, this poses the question: *Is institutional neutrality ever fully neutral?* In just this past year, the African American Diaspora Studies Department faced the prospect of ceasing to exist, *and* on December 8th, 2025, MOSAIC, a student organization that partnered with the Office of Undergraduate Admissions to support cultural and ethnic diversity in the admissions process, was abolished. All due to the Supreme Court's ruling against universities' use of race as a factor in admissions, followed by executive orders limiting diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. These legal precedents demonstrate that we are at a critical inflexion point in higher education where regression has become the norm and progress towards academic excellence is shunned. Our use of critical thinking is a tool; some may even say a *weapon*, and the federal administration is doing everything in its power to *disarm* us.

This year's issue of the *African American Diaspora Studies Undergraduate Research Journal* aims to serve as a direct opposition to our current times. The theme was chosen in response to the current state of higher education, which reflects a broader attempt to narrow what knowledge is considered legitimate, whose histories are preserved, and whose voices are allowed to exist within educational spaces.

Rooted in history, our special issue journal acknowledges that both historically *and* contemporarily, Black voices have been excluded, erased, and actively silenced within higher education through policies that intentionally restrict(ed) access, criminalize(d) knowledge, and devalue(d) Black intellectual traditions. Contemporary attacks on DEI initiatives echo these same patterns of exclusion by framing equity-focused work as unnecessary or harmful, despite its critical role in creating access, representation, and belonging for marginalized communities. Centering Blackness in higher education is an act of resistance against this erasure, asserting the importance of preserving the narratives that challenge institutional power, exposing systemic inequities, and affirming Black presence within academic spaces.

In this year's special issue, we have chosen to employ art in all its forms, from creative writing and photography to visual art, with pieces that sit at the crossroads of these genres. Art through *all* mediums is immensely powerful and provides an avenue for sociopolitical change.

“But art is not simply works of art; it is the spirit that knows Beauty, that has music in its being and the color of sunsets in its headkerchiefs; that can dance on a flaming world and make the world dance, too.”

— W.E.B. Du Bois

This is *your* call to action.

Works Cited

ACLU. “Project 2025, Explained.” *American Civil Liberties Union*, 14 Aug. 2024, www.aclu.org/project-2025-explained.

Baldwin, James. *The Fire next Time*. New York, Laurel/Dell, 1988.

Givens, Jarvis R. ““There Would Be No Lynching If It Did Not Start in the Schoolroom”: Carter G. Woodson and the Occasion of Negro History Week, 1926–1950.” *American Educational Research Journal*, vol. 56, no. 4, 13 Jan. 2019, pp. 1457–1494, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831218818454>.

NAACP. “Carter G. Woodson | NAACP.” *Naacp.org*, naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/civil-rights-leaders/carter-g-woodson.

“Report on the University’s Role in Political and Social Action | Office of the Provost.” *Provost.uchicago.edu*, provost.uchicago.edu/reports/report-universitys-role-political-and-social-action.

“Universities Adopt Institutional Neutrality Policy to Promote Free Speech - American Legislative Exchange Council.” *American Legislative Exchange Council*, 26 Feb. 2025, alec.org/article/universities-adopt-institutional-neutrality-policy-promote-free-speech/.

“The Vanderbilt Hustler.” The Vanderbilt Hustler, vanderbilthustler.com/.

Woodson, Carter Godwin. *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861: A History of the Education of the Colored People of the United States from the Beginning of Slavery to the Civil War*. 2nd ed., Associated Publishers, 1919

Woodson, Carter G. *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. 1933. Africa World Press, 1990.