

The Politics of Perception

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Access to education for Black people in America has been deliberately polarized since the founding of the United States. Black people were not considered citizens, but rather chattel, and were not granted access to education. Education is not only a social good, but a powerful mechanism for civic participation, autonomy, and influence. Restricting Black access to education has thus long functioned as a means of preserving social and political hierarchies. The narratives surrounding Black access to education have persisted across centuries, adapting to new contexts while maintaining their core function: to question, limit, or delegitimize Black participation in learning. From laws forbidding enslaved people to read, to segregationist rhetoric portraying Black intellect as insufficient, to contemporary attacks on affirmative action and DEI initiatives, these narratives have evolved but never disappeared. They continue to shape how society views Black students and professionals, influencing who is seen as deserving, who is considered capable, and whose education is valid.

Education as a Threat

During slavery, anti-literacy laws explicitly prohibited education among enslaved Black people. These laws were rooted in white anxieties surrounding potential insurrection, as literacy was understood to be a pathway to autonomy, communication, and resistance. The *South Carolina Negro Act* of 1740, enacted in the wake of the Stono Rebellion, sought to keep the enslaved “in due subjection and obedience” by criminalizing their access to education (Keyser, 2020; Rasmussen, 2010). Early anti-literacy laws thus reflect the emergence of the “education as threat” narrative, which worked alongside beliefs in Black intellectual inferiority to justify the systemic denial of educational access.

In the post-*Brown v. Board of Education* era, this narrative persists but is adapted to contemporary norms. Rather than outright prohibition, it operates through the delegitimization of Black-centered educational spaces. Programs such as ethnic studies, diversity initiatives, and Black student organizations are often framed as exclusionary or unnecessary. This framing reflects discomfort with spaces in which Black students develop critical consciousness and community, again suggesting that an empowered, educated Black identity is destabilizing. This tactic is evident in state-level responses to AP African American Studies, particularly in Florida, where officials have rejected or restricted the course on the grounds that it lacks “educational value” or promotes particular viewpoints (Kim, 2023; Kolluri, 2023). A curriculum designed to center Black history, thought, and culture is thus recast as inappropriate, revealing an underlying resistance to Black intellectual autonomy.

Similarly, contemporary attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives reinforce this narrative. Organizations such as The Heritage Foundation, in projects like *The Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise 2025*, frame what they term a “Great Awakening” as a threat to national values and outline plans to dismantle DEI and discussions of race in all levels of education (The Heritage Foundation, 2023). The Heritage Foundation argues that “the noxious tenets of ‘critical race theory’ and ‘gender ideology’ should be excised from

curricula in every public school in the country.” This language is significant not only for its content, but for its framing. The Heritage Foundation broadly, and inaccurately, applies the term “Critical Race Theory” to K–12 discussions of racism, inequality, or even basic Black history. By characterizing discussions of race as “noxious,” disruptive, and fundamentally un-American, the document positions education about systemic racism as a threat to social cohesion. In doing so, it mirrors earlier narratives that framed Black literacy and intellectual development as dangerous. Rather than explicitly prohibiting education, it delegitimizes specific forms of knowledge by casting them as ideological corruption. The labeling of critical race theory as harmful or divisive functions as a contemporary extension of the “education as threat” narrative. It shifts the focus away from structural inequality and instead constructs the *study* of that inequality as the problem, reinforcing the idea that certain forms of Black-centered knowledge must be controlled to preserve existing social order.

Cultural Deficiency and Meritocracy

The cultural deficiency narrative reframes educational inequality by shifting responsibility away from structural barriers and onto Black communities themselves. Rather than explicitly denying access, this narrative suggests that Black students underperform because of deficiencies in culture, family structure, or values, such as a supposed lack of emphasis on education, discipline, or intellectual engagement. In doing so, it transforms systemic inequities into cultural shortcomings, allowing institutions to avoid accountability while maintaining existing disparities.

Segregationist rhetoric made this logic explicit. Figures such as Thomas R. Due argued that, “The two races are not only distinct, but... so different in their physical and moral constitution, that they can never be placed on an equality,” (1832). Likewise, Alexander H. Stephens asserted that racial inequality was a “natural” condition (1861). Although contemporary discourse rarely makes such claims explicitly, similar logic persists in more coded forms. For example, Charlie Kirk, when addressing disparities in educational outcomes, attributes them to culture, stating that “it is a cultural norm that has then turned into the cycle of poverty,” (2024). While this argument does not directly assert intellectual inferiority, it shifts responsibility for inequality away from structural conditions and onto Black communities themselves. It mirrors earlier cultural deficiency narratives by framing the consequences of systemic inequity as evidence of cultural failure.

This narrative frequently operates alongside the meritocracy narrative, which claims that Black students or professionals have not legitimately earned their positions. The evolution of this logic is evident in the rhetoric of Charlie Kirk, who states:

If we would have said that Joy Reid and Michelle Obama and Sheila Jackson Lee and Ketanji Brown Jackson were affirmative action picks, we would have been called racists. Now they’re coming out and they’re saying it for us ... You do not have the brain processing power to otherwise be taken really seriously. You had to go steal a white person’s slot to go be taken somewhat seriously...it is very clear you could not make it there on your own." - The Charlie Kirk Show, July 2023 (Daily Kos, 2025).

Such statements exemplify how meritocracy is invoked to question the legitimacy of Black success, framing achievement as contingent on institutional support rather than individual ability. These narratives permeate American society and inform political action, including efforts to dismantle affirmative action policies. In doing so, they devalue Black educational access and systematically exclude Black identity from being recognized as intellectual or academically legitimate.

Co-Editor's Curatorial Statement

To occupy educational spaces as a Black person is to carry history into every room. From the criminalization of literacy during slavery, to the enforced separations of segregation, to contemporary debates over affirmative action and diversity initiatives, there persists a throughline: a persistent questioning of whether Black students belong, whether we have earned our place, or merely been permitted it.

Because of this characterization and its contemporary manifestations, the narratives we produce and circulate demand careful attention. Narratives are not passive; they shape the conditions of our reality. They inform policy, justify exclusion, and seep into the interior lives of students who must navigate institutions that simultaneously admit and interrogate them. When our presence is politicized, when our legitimacy is made conditional, it does not remain external. It fractures inward.

W. E. B. Du Bois names this fracture *double consciousness*, the experience of seeing oneself through the eyes of a society that regards you with suspicion or diminishment (Bruce, 1992). In academic spaces, this manifests as a constant negotiation between self-definition and imposed perception, between intellectual authority and the lingering demand to prove it.

This third edition of AADSJUR positions itself as a refusal of that demand. It is a form of protest not through opposition alone, but through presence, through the deliberate articulation of Black thought, experience, and scholarship. By foregrounding these narratives, we seek not only to affirm Blackness within academia, but to make space for those still in the process of claiming it. For the Black scholar who has not yet secured a stable sense of scholarly identity, this journal insists: you are not an anomaly within these institutions. You are part of a lineage, and your presence here is neither accidental nor undeserved.

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