

# Reworking of AP African American Studies Course Represents a Triumph Over Radicalism

It's a solid blueprint for a serious, objective, and comprehensive course in black American history.



Jurnee Smollett (Samantha), Nate Parker (Henry Lowe), and Denzel Whitaker (James Farmer Jr) star in Denzel Washington's *The Great Debaters*.

by Bruce Bawer

During the past few decades, so-called "identity studies" programs – such as women's studies and black studies – have proliferated in American colleges, with extraordinarily deleterious consequences.

Why deleterious? Because, as I discuss at length in my [book](#) *The Victims' Revolution*, which is about to be published in paperback, they're not about education – they're about indoctrination. It need not be this way. Women's studies, for example, might profitably examine, in a scholarly and dispassionate way, the roles and contributions of women in various cultures; black studies might cover the history of Africans and of the African diaspora, with serious courses on, say, black American literature, a corpus that is at least the equal of many national literatures.

But that's not what "identity studies" is about. Instead of introducing students to high culture, to complex ideas, and to aspects of the world previously unknown to them, these programs encourage narcissistic navel-gazing and lockstep thinking. They teach students to view themselves and others not as unique individuals with minds of their own but as members of groups – groups of either victims or victimizers – and to see group victimization all around them, in every nook and cranny of their lives.

Consequently, these programs breed resentment and division and a feeling of impotence in kids who, during their college years, should instead be pumped full of excitement, ambition, and hope. Moreover, the programs eat up valuable time that could be better spent learning math, science, history, geography, and other traditional subjects – in which today's college students are doing far, far worse than previous generations.

In short, these courses would do well to disappear. But they're proliferating. And they've spread into secondary and even primary schools, doing damage to more and more – and younger and younger – Americans. And there's been precious little pushback – at least not on a significant scale.

Until now. In mid-January, Florida's Department of Education [rejected](#) a curriculum submitted by the College Board

for a proposed Advanced Placement high school course in African American studies. The [declared reason](#) for the rejection was that the curriculum was historically inaccurate, pushed an ideological agenda, and lacked “educational value.”

All of which was absolutely correct. But black studies activists went berserk, accusing the Florida officials of racism. And the corporate news media backed them up, attributing the Florida action to Gov. Ron DeSantis’s purported eagerness to appease right-wing white supremacists who don’t want their children hearing about slavery.

Which, needless to say, is nonsense. There’s no survey course in American history, in Florida or anywhere, that doesn’t cover slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the civil rights movement. If the only phenomenon in all of world history that many young Americans know about is Nazism, the only phenomenon in American history that many of them know about is slavery.

Two weeks after Florida rejected the College Board’s curriculum, the College Board returned with a [revision](#). Florida accepted it. I’ve perused it, and with some exceptions (e.g., it’s too nice to the black Panthers) it’s a solid blueprint for a serious, objective, and comprehensive course in black American history.

But that wasn’t good enough for the black studies activists, whose outrage persisted. On Feb. 3, the *New Yorker* ran a 2,800-word [harangue](#) on the topic by Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, who is (according to Wikipedia) “a long-time member” of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization. Taylor’s three degrees – she received her Ph.D. in 2013 – are all in African American studies, and she has spent the last decade teaching that subject at the University of Illinois, Princeton University, and Northwestern University. Imagine the contents, and the workings, of a mind that has been immersed exclusively in African American studies for the last 20 years!

Taylor's piece included an exchange with University of California Los Angeles professor Robin D. G. Kelley, a former member of the All-African People's Revolutionary Party and Communist Workers Party who calls himself a "Marxist surrealist feminist" and who bonded with Taylor over the fact that their writings had been included in the original curriculum but omitted from the revised version. Also removed were the writings of University of California Santa Cruz professor Angela Davis, the world-famous winner of the Soviet Union's Lenin Prize, two-time Communist Party candidate for vice president, and supplier of a gun [used to kill](#) a federal judge.

Academics like Taylor, Kelley, and Davis aren't interested in acquainting students with black history, black literature, black music, or any other legitimate body of knowledge. Their only goal is to transform those students into radical ideologues. Kelley even admitted as much. "To say that we're not radical," he told Taylor, "would be a lie. What does radical actually mean? What it means, what black studies is about, is trying to understand how the system works." It's about "understanding," in short, that "no matter what policies and procedures and legislation are implemented, the structure of racism, embedded in a capitalist system, embedded in a system of patriarchy, continues to create wealth for some and make the rest of our lives precarious."

The fact that these three radicals were represented in the College Board's original curriculum is perhaps all you need to know about why Florida officials rejected it; and the fact that they were all absent from the revised version seems a promising indicator that the revision was reasonably sensible and serious.

By forcing that revision, Florida's Board of Education appears, then, to have done an admirable thing. You wouldn't have known that from a Feb. 4 *New York Times* opinion [piece](#) by Mara Gay, a member of that newspaper's editorial board, who

described the revision as “Erasing Black History.” The revision, she charged, had removed “a handful of vital Black thinkers” and “downgraded the study of Black Lives Matter, of reparations, of queer life and of incarceration.” For Gay, the revision was the work of an “anti-democratic, sometimes violent political movement” of MAGA right-wingers who believe in “white supremacy” and who, “terrifie[d]” by many aspects of black American history, oppose its “re-centering ... at the heart of the nation’s story.”

This is the same Mara Gay who, three months before the 2022 elections, [said](#) on MSNBC that she’d recently been “disturbed” by the sight of “dozens of American flags” flying outside the Long Island homes of people who she assumed were Trump supporters. In her view, the flags were intended to send the message: “This is my country, not your country.” Those MAGA whites, she claimed, equate “Americanness ... with Whiteness” and resent “having to share the democracy” with non-whites. It’s no surprise that this woman preferred the original version of the College Board curriculum.

Taylor, Kelley, Davis, Gay: these people’s views aren’t just foolish; they’re dangerous. In the year 2023, too many young black Americans are in peril. Too many of them grow up without fathers and drop out of school. Too many black teenage boys join violent gangs; too many black teenage girls have babies out of wedlock. Black Lives Matter propaganda to the controversy, these young black Americans are far more likely to die at the hands of other blacks than at the hands of whites or Asians or Latinos. And of those who actually stay in school, too many, instead of pursuing coursework that might prepare them to be well-informed citizens and valued employees, take black studies classes that turn them into know-nothing radicals who hate capitalism, hate America, and hate white people.

How far all of this is from W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963), who is often considered the father of black studies, but whose

highest objective – at least before *he*, alas, became a Communist – was to convey to students that the cultural heritage of Western civilization belonged to them every bit as much as it did to anyone else. “I sit with Shakespeare,” he famously wrote, “and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm and arm with Balzac and Dumas... I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension.”

While I was following this story about the AP course in black studies, I happened to come across a reference to a 2007 [movie](#) called *The Great Debaters*, produced by Oprah Winfrey, written by Robert Eisele, and directed by Denzel Washington. I sought it out. Based on a true story, it stars Washington as the real-life Melvin B. Tolson, who in 1935 is a teacher at Wiley College, a black institution in Marshall, Texas. Tolson (who would go on to become a noted poet) encourages his pupils, all of them well-dressed and well-behaved, not to see themselves as victims – even though in that time and place they most assuredly were – but as American citizens, fully equal to anyone else. The goal of antebellum slave masters, Tolson tells them, was to “keep the slave physically strong but psychologically weak. Keep the body, take the mind.” By contrast, his own goal is “to help you to find, take back, and keep your righteous mind.”

He is a wonder of a teacher, opening his first class by reciting the Langston Hughes [poem](#) “I, Too” (which ends “I, too, am America”), by rhapsodizing over the black writers and artists who were, at that moment, creating the cultural flowering known as the Harlem Renaissance, and by interacting in stimulating fashion with a student, Henry Lowe (Nate Parker), who turns out to know Greek mythology cold and to be able to quote intelligently from James Joyce and D.H. Lawrence. Later we meet another professor, the real-life James L. Farmer Sr. (Forest Whitaker), who, we learn, “walked from Florida to Massachusetts to go to college.”

The movie tells the inspiring story of how Tolson took a small group of his students, the products of humble Texas schools, and turned them into a first-rate debating team that ended up defeating its Harvard counterpart. (In real life, Wiley beat USC, which at the time had the nation's top-ranked team.) No, Tolson doesn't sugarcoat racism – on the contrary. But his message to his students is not to be cowed or embittered or radicalized by it but, rather, to beat the racists at their own game; instead of viewing American society as your enemy, build yourself up into someone who's able to triumph on society's own terms – and who's in a position to help change society for the better.

In short, *The Great Debaters* teaches a healthy lesson in personal empowerment – the very opposite of the dead-end victimization mentality encouraged by today's black studies. How ironic that in the depths of the Depression, in the heart of racist east Texas, black students were being taught how to lift themselves up and make valuable contributions to a nation that oppressed them, whereas today, in a far less racist America, people like Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor are passing on to their students a cynical formula for acrimony and defeat.

And here's another depressing thought: it's almost impossible to imagine *The Great Debaters*, which was released a mere 16 years ago, being made today by a major Hollywood studio. In the post-George Floyd era, when race is everything and racism supposedly everywhere, the movie's message is utterly incompatible with the toxic racial zeitgeist.

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