

MARA GAY

# Erasing Black History Is Not the Role of the College Board

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By Mara Gay

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In the nation's capital, blocks from the White House, scores of sharply dressed Americans mingled Thursday night over cocktails and collard greens, a glittering coming-out party for the College Board's first advanced placement course in African American Studies.

At the party, a formal affair of educators and donors held at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, jazz was played, and a woman in a gold dress sang "Lift Every Voice and Sing," known as the Black national anthem. And then the topic on everyone's mind came up.

Board officials tried to assure the crowd that they had not bent to censorious political pressure from the country's increasingly brazen right wing. "If this were true, it would be a terrible stain on this country and on the College Board," said the College Board's C.E.O., David Coleman.

But in fact, when the College Board unveiled the final curriculum for the AP course the day before, it turned out that the board had removed from the core material a handful of vital Black thinkers and some important subject matter. They downgraded the study of Black Lives Matter, of reparations, of queer life and of incarceration. They removed prominent writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates and bell hooks, who have helped so many people understand the relationship between race, class and feminism.

Gov. Ron DeSantis, Republican of Florida, had earlier vowed to ban the course, which the state's Department of Education has said, "lacks educational value." He had objected to much of the material the board removed. The board issued a statement denying that its action was in response to Mr. DeSantis, saying it determined on its own that the course was too dense and needed fewer secondary sources.

The College Board, though a nonprofit, is a fixture in the country's education infrastructure. Taking its courses and succeeding on its exams has long been a way for savvy high school students to make themselves more attractive to the most selective colleges and, upon acceptance, win college credit.

The inclusion of Black history into this enterprise is a meaningful act.

The Black scholars who pioneered the teaching of Black history long before it was popular to do so understand this. "We have to tell the truth," one of those scholars, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, a professor of African and African American Studies at Harvard University, said Thursday evening. "The truth is we helped to build this country."

Those opposed to the re-centering of Black history at the heart of the nation's story instead of its periphery understand it, too, which is why they have mobilized against it.

As we listened to the music and were held in thrall by Henry Louis Gates Jr., the Harvard professor whose television show about tracing American ancestries has made him a household name, I thought about the students in dozens of states where books and other subject material, often recognizing the dignity of Black and transgender people, have been banned.

I thought about the teachers in Florida I had spoken to in recent days, who were being asked for the first time to document and report their Black History Month activities to administrators. I thought about the bravery of Kenneth McElroy, a Black middle-school civics teacher in the Tampa area, who told me he had no plans to stop sharing the truth of the nation's history with his students, regardless of what the state law said.

"I come from Martin Luther King and Malcolm X," Mr. Elroy said. "I'm not going to change how I teach." Martha Elena Galindo, another Tampa-area educator, described an environment hostile to Black and transgender students. "Miss, we're not bad people," she recalled a transgender student telling her one day. "It brought tears to my eyes," she said.

The College Board could have sent a powerful message by standing with these Americans. Instead, its gestures at accommodation threw them under the bus, right along with bell hooks. A basic reading of the history board officials say they champion would make it clear that such accommodation will satisfy no one.

The question now is whether the majority of Americans in the middle, and at institutions like the College Board, are able to see the backlash clearly, not as some kind of culture war sideshow, but as the very lifeblood of the anti-democratic, sometimes violent political movement gaining currency in the United States.

Black history is a direct threat to this movement. It humanizes the enslaved and their descendants. It lays bare the terrible cost of white supremacy, not only to Black Americans, but to the nation. It opens the door for exactly the reckoning that makes interracial coalitions possible, giving life to democracy and pluralism and stripping would-be tyrants of their power.

The problem is that looking directly at this history is a prospect that terrifies many white Americans. Viewing the exhibits at the National Museum of African American History and Culture — which include the instruments played by enslaved people and shackles made for a small child — it's not hard to understand why. But the way forward is to confront this history, not bend it to our will, or whitewash it, or wish it away.

It is no coincidence that the Black writers under assault, like Mr. Coates and Ms. hooks, have been militant in refusing to allow America to forget. “The time to remember is now,” Ms. hooks wrote. “The time to speak a counter hegemonic race talk that is filled with the passion of remembrance and resistance is now. All our words are needed.”

Until then, we may look away, but the history lives on, gnawing at our national sanity.

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