

# Current Protagonists in the Cultural War

In 2020, writer Ibram X. Kendi gave Dickinson's Winfield C. Cook Constitutional Day Address, titled after his *New York Times* bestselling book, *How to Be an Antiracist*. Using his experiences as a focal point, he examined racism through the layers of biology, ethnicity, culture, crime statistics, educational inequalities and more. *How to Be an Antiracist* has had a huge influence since its publication in 2019, and perhaps especially so in education. However, the positive reception given to this book is by no means unanimous. Critics like Erec Smith, our speaker this evening, believe that Antiracism and/or Critical Race Theory pedagogies can essentialize Black victimhood. In an article published in the ejournal *Areo*, Smith affirms that, "People like Nicole Hannah-Jones, Ibram Kendi and Robin DiAngelo insist that racism is baked into the American way of life, part of America's DNA. If we are not careful, we may bake victimhood into what it means to be black."

Developed in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, Antiracism Theory refers to any measures taken to oppose and disentangle individual and systemic forms of racism. It is the parent to Critical Race Theory and subsequent projects surrounding it. Critical Race Theory was founded in the field of legal studies, and it examines how the foundations of society and the structures in law work to maintain tenets of racism. These frameworks have not been easily accepted, and until recently, remained on the margins of United States education. The attention they have received recently is most notable in the many states that have passed or are debating legislation that limits the ways that public school teachers can discuss issues of race and identity.

The main criticism of these racial frameworks is that they are a divisive approach that tries to reframe the country's history. In a broader context, this discourse on education and history is the current focus of the "culture wars," an ongoing dispute on social issues such as abortion rights, women's sexuality, school curricula, libraries, cancel culture, identity issues, patriotism, and more.

The phrase "culture wars" was brought to the forefront during the 1992 presidential campaign, when Republican primary candidate Pat Buchanan stated that "there is a religious war going on in this country. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we shall be as was the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America." This cultural war is the lack of agreement between traditionalists, who are more guided by religious faith, and progressives, who define their morality through the values of the times. In the modern era, terms like "Critical Race Theory" and "Antiracism" have become the key protagonists of the ongoing culture war.

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Information gathered from: Beverly Cross's "Antiracism Theory" in *Encyclopedia of Curriculum Studies* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2010); Erec Smith's "The Loss of the Black Individual," *Areo*, November 20, 2020 (areomagazine.com); "How to Be an Antiracist" in *Kirkus Reviews*, May 2019; James Davison Hunter and Alan Wolfe's *Is There a Culture War?: A Dialogue on Values and American Public Life* (Brookings Institution Press, 2007); Jennifer Simpson's "Antiracism" in *Encyclopedia of Identity* (Sage Publications, Inc., 2010); John Scott Hammond et al's *Campaigning for President in America, 1788-2016* (ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2016); Sara Schwartz's "Map: Where Critical Race Theory Is Under Attack," *EducationWeek* (edweek.org); Michael Conway's "The Problem with History Classes" in *The Atlantic*; Olivia Waxman's "Trump's Threat to Pull Funding from Schools Over How They Teach Slavery Is Part of a Long History of Politicizing American History Class" in *Time*, Sept. 17, 2020; Richard Delgado et al's *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York University Press, 2001); Terry Hong's "How to Be an Antiracist" in *Booklist*, vol. 116, no. 4, Oct. 2019.