



Beyond physical and representational violence: the violence of Black children's invisibility in public spaces

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ABSTRACT

George Floyd's May 2020 murder by police underscored the interconnectedness of violence, systemic racism, and white supremacy in the US. This essay explores violence against Black children as an historical extension of the violence against Black adults and communities that is often at the centre of social justice and anti-racism work. We connect recent social media posts of Black children being ignored, waved away, or pushed by public amusement park performers with the current conservative political climate legislating the erasure or censoring of US history in K-12 schools allegedly to 'save the [white] children' from the misnamed 'Critical Race Theory'.

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Introduction: invisibilizing violences against Black children

Signifying on Margaret Wise Brown's popular rhyming and naming bedtime storybook *Goodnight Moon* (1947), anti-racist scholar Ibram X. Kendi's picture book *Goodnight Racism* (2022) features a Black father tucking his Black daughter into bed and encouraging her to dream of a world free of injustices and woe:

Dream, my child; imagine, my child.

A new world—a new future—awaits.

A world where all people are safe, no matter how they look, how they worship,
or how they love.

A world where all kids have the same chance
to have peace,
to have joy,
to have a childhood. (n.p.)

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In Brown's white bunny-child's cozy, safe room, post-WWII middle-class white parents lulled their children to sleep by naming items from nature and objects related to comfortable capitalist materialism, ritualistically calling out these things within and beyond the little one's bedside lamp-light: red balloon, bears, chairs, kittens, mittens, clocks, socks, little house, mouse, comb, brush, mush, stars, air, and 'Goodnight noises everywhere' (1947, n.p.). Unquestionably, the white rabbit characters are stand-ins for white people. The white children and parents who remember reading and/or having this book read to them are likely not to have experienced, or perhaps even thought about, injustices done them because of their skin colour. As a direct address to the parents and guardians of marginalized children, Kendi's (2022) message, post-George Floyd's murder and the protests that followed, is one that articulates race-based injustices done to children and adults around the world. Kendi asserts that serious and often violent social problems that affect Black children must not be ignored and minimized. The 2022 social media rash exposing the excluding, ignoring, and seeking to erase Black youth presence at amusement parks and other public spaces is but another reminder that the US past is the present.

Because of what seems now the alleged 'racial reckoning' that was the response to George Floyd's murder at the hands of police in May 2020, this essay explores the direct link to Black community unity and social belonging denied Black lives due to the educational, social, and personal trauma experienced by Black children. Compounding this trauma, fearful responses to the 2020 worldwide demands for police and wider social accountability in the US have led to renewed interest in educationally erasing the history of 'race' and the lives of Americans of colour, an awareness that had initially been brought to light during the 1950s–1970s social revolution.

Under the guise of rejecting 'Critical Race Theory',¹ white Americans' fear of confronting the history of race in the US has led to legislative bills in at least thirty-five states that seek to ban discussing or studying US history through an anti-racist, inclusive perspective, allegedly because talking about race 'makes white children feel bad' and teaches that white people are the oppressors and Black people the oppressed (McCormick 2022).^{2,3} Until racial injustice and systemic racism against Black children, adults, and communities are exposed, carefully examined, and systemically addressed, there can be no real dismantling of white supremacy that affects everyone. All children and their families and communities – all of US history and experience – must be acknowledged and represented in an un-whitewashed education system to ensure the present and future functioning of our democracy.

Some of the most popular whitewashed children's books commonly used in American education include Blanche Fisher Wright's *The Real Mother Goose* (1916)⁴; the Dick and Jane readers, used in schools 1930–

1970s (Elson et al. 1927–1965)⁵; Dorothy Kunhardt's *Pat the Bunny* (1940); Brown's *Goodnight Moon* (1947); and Robert Munsch's *Love You Forever* (1986).⁶ All are absent of any nods towards racial and social justice or inclusivity,⁷ yet they have long been used as the literary foundation upon which middle-class childhood and whiteness are constructed for children and adults. Leaving out any acknowledgment of Americans of colour denies the dailyness, joys, and sorrows – the reality – that Black and Brown adults and their children experience. Former First Lady Michelle Obama (2020) acknowledges this unjust foundational educational discrepancy:

Imagine how it feels to have suspicion cast on you from the day you were born, simply because of the hue of your skin, to walk around your own country scared that someone's unjustified fear of you could put you in harm's way Living with the knowledge that no matter how hard we try, how much good we do in the world, there will be far too many who will never see our humanity, who will project on us their own fears of retribution for centuries of injustice and thus only see us as a threat to be restrained.

To function as a productive democracy, the US must actively and thoroughly acknowledge, appreciate, and serve all its members.

Black children in the US have never been exempt from the complexity of adult politics. A 1662 legal classification initiated in Virginia decided that Black children inherited the slave 'condition' of their enslaved mothers. This legislation served white patriarchal capitalist purposes, ensuring increased enslaved numbers and generational profits. Lifelong 'chattel slavery', with attendant practices akin to livestock ownership, deeply engrained in the minds of white people the objectification of Black adult and child bodies. For white US authorities, such as police and teachers, this objectification/disposability of Black children has 'adultified' them, making Black children vulnerable to all manner of racist assaults – including the violence of invisibilization – for 500 years.

The physical violence that beset Black adults and children in the earlier decades of the twentieth century is demonstrated in Richard Wright's autobiographical 'The Ethics of Living Jim Crow' and his short story 'Big Boy Leaves Home' from his volume *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938). In these pieces, Wright reveals how Black children are forced to navigate the political landscape of Jim Crow laws and the racist customs of the Deep South to survive. Black children and youths, in Wright's world, are denied the illusion of innocence – and their own presence/humanity – that white children experience in the early 1930s Dick and Jane readers, or in the real, exclusionary world beyond these pages of childhood alphabet literacy. Instead, Black children of Wright's era experienced much of the same physical and psychological trauma they witnessed happening to the Black adults in their lives.

The Jim Crow rules, post-Reconstruction 1877 through at least the 1970s, thrust Black children into adult politics of segregation, desegregation, and integration. Black children and youth active in the 1950s–1970s Civil Rights Movement were subjected to violence and intimidation under the proverbial white police/government gaze, including during the 1963 Children’s March against racial segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. Trained in peaceful resistance, thousands of Black school children ages six to eighteen protested, because their parents would have lost their jobs had they participated. With the city of Birmingham inundated by the children and other peaceful protestors, white police chief Eugene ‘Bull’ Connor infamously set police dogs on demonstrators and ordered firemen to shoot water at the protestors from high-pressure hoses. He subsequently arrested and jailed hundreds of children and adults. Images and reports of the brutality appeared globally on television, in newspapers, and in the widely read *Life* magazine (Moore 1963). As had photographs of earlier school desegregation actions of the teen Little Rock Nine and six-year-old Ruby Bridges, images of the violence against the Birmingham child protestors stirred the nation and world, marking a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement that ultimately spurred federal civil rights legislation and passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (NMAAHC n.d.).

Current news reports and visual imagery have awakened the nation and world to everyday violence and social injustices still experienced by Black children. Beyond the disproportionate number of physical assaults on Black children, families, and communities, the prevalence of racially informed ‘curriculum violence’ occurring in classrooms across this country traumatizes Black and Brown children (Lester 2021). Dehumanizing and objectifying classroom lessons have included, to name just a few, a Black child being subjected to a white teacher’s use of the Nword and trying to convince a Black student that it is okay to do so because the word is ubiquitous today (Dreilinger 2017); a teacher-endorsed slavery simulation game about an antebellum enslaved teenaged ‘laborer’ escaping a plantation (Polletta and Cano 2017); and a California high school maths teacher in a plastic headband with cut-out paper feathers (to imitate a Native American headdress) ‘jumping around the room screeching “SoCahToa”, a shortened phrase for teaching trigonometry functions, and “tomahawk chopping”’ (Cohen 2021). The Othering of Black and Brown students is at the heart of these assignments guided by persons of authority who demonstrate minimal cultural sensitivity and awareness.

When the learning environment of a child of colour is disrupted by culturally insensitive or ignorant teachers and pedagogies, so also is the child’s family and community adversely affected. The personal and communal violence enacted systemically through enduring US educational bias is further underscored by the lack of diversity in teaching and educational administration personnel, which denies full representation of people’s – and thus children’s – present and familial, as well as ancestral and historical,

experience. That approximately eighty percent of teachers in K-12 classrooms are white means that the majority of Black and Brown students are denied access to teachers, counsellors, and administrators who look like them and have comparable life experiences (NCES 2020). That Black and Brown children are excluded from – when allegedly included in – this nation’s education system is a primary method of violent erasure of their bodies and psyches. The trauma of not seeing oneself reflected in one’s education is a violence enacted daily upon families and communities of colour.

Research shows, as do the preceding teaching examples, that Black and Brown children disproportionately encounter adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including in educational institutions, creating what researchers deem ‘a critical public health issue’ (Sacks and Murphey 2018). ‘[P]otentially traumatic experiences and events’ that ‘can have negative, lasting effects on health and well-being’, ACEs accumulate during childhood and affect development, as well as having effects later in life. Additionally,

[c]hildren of different races and ethnicities do not experience ACEs equally. Nationally, 61 percent of black non-Hispanic children and 51 percent of Hispanic children have experienced at least one ACE, compared with 40 percent of white non-Hispanic children and only 23 percent of Asian non-Hispanic children. In every region, the prevalence of ACEs is ... highest among black non-Hispanic children. (Sacks and Murphey 2018)

Physical violence in one’s childhood, such as that which has been experienced when Black and Brown families settle into previously predominantly white neighbourhoods, obviously continues to affect one’s life. The effect on adults of such early traumatic experience is clearly shown in the *New York Times* report ‘A Racist Attack on Children Was Taped in 1975. We Found Them’ (Nir 2020).⁸ Violent social rejection in the realm of one’s familial home adds another layer of complexity to Black and Brown children’s existences in a world that they soon learn or already know, from myriad educational and social media sources, chooses both to invisibilize and to punish, violate, and psychically traumatize Black and Brown people simply because they are not white.

“You don’t see her?”: white supremacist cultural/systemic exclusion

During colonial-era slavery, white Westerners evolved a system of wholesale exploitation that denied enslaved persons the dignity and self-worth of childhood, parenthood, and family, engendering a lingering systemic denial of Black children’s humanity, including in educational and recreational settings.⁹ Black access to an inclusive sense of belonging and contributing to the US democracy has historically been delimited by traditions, laws,

policies, beliefs, attitudes, and actions intended to disempower, invisibilize, and ghettoize Blacks to keep them physically and ideologically in 'their place', and unwelcome in white spaces.¹⁰

One type of racially informed public entertainment space defined largely by European American education, culture, and economics is the World's Fairs, amusement parks, and theme parks conceptualized and constructed from the mid-nineteenth century to the present.¹¹ Education scholar Carol Jeffers (2004) notes that theme parks are 'sites of experiential learning Worthy of serious study, the theme park can be explored as a cultural vortex whose swirling forces contribute to the construction of knowledge [T]heme parks are clues about the experience of life . . . ' (221) – whether inclusive or exclusive, affirming or denying patrons' humanity.

In addition to the historically segregated access to such public recreation sites, exclusionary practices have also created a violent exclusion within inclusion. A constructed environment like the theme park is culturally produced and, as such, includes norms of attitude and behaviour that are part of the racialized dimensions and experience of the lived space¹²:

Despite twenty-first-century historians' claims that amusement parks were democratic playgrounds, amusement parks promoted identification and unity with American nationalist values while spatially and structurally maintaining social divisions of race and class: they more often upheld social segregation over social integration. The phenomenon of the amusement park was always a local ideological drama (Rabinovitz 2012, 64)

Even today, the drama of the racist society is highlighted in the drama of theme park performance and interactions.

Extracurricular education experienced in predominantly white public entertainment spaces augments American classroom education that has historically included racist caricature and stereotypical representations as part and parcel of US folklore, songs, games, jokes, literature, film, television, household products, and pedagogy. From early childhood, children are 'inundated with [racist] images and messages that influence how we think about and respond to one another . . . ' (Allen et al. 2021). In the executive summary of the 2008 American Psychological Association (APA) report on *Resilience in African American Children and Adolescents: A Vision for Optimal Development*, the task force found that 'Continued cultural oppression places all African American youth, including well resourced youth, at some degree of risk for pervasive, yet subtle, forms of racialized discrimination and oppression As children move through their developmental tasks, the role of cultural factors cannot be ignored . . . ' – both positive and negative (APA 2008, 1, 4).

Though rife with misrepresentation, US curricula have long omitted study of the history of race and racism. Acknowledging racism-related issues

beleaguering our country, the APA Council of Representatives adopted and issued in 2021 a multipronged resolution on the 'Role of Psychology and the American Psychological Association in Dismantling Systemic Racism Against People of Color in the United States' (APA 2021). Under 'Education', the 'APA affirms the importance of teaching the history of racism in the U.S. and will continue to provide resources to support the teaching of this history to prepare all students to think critically about identity, community, and civics, fostering both educational success and solidarity to build a more just future' (APA 2021, 3). While some states and schools may be developing and implementing curricula to address this dearth, recent legislative backlash in many states has halted and regressed efforts to educate children about the history of race and systemic racism. Such whitewashed education does not empower American children (and thus also adults) with the critical ability to understand pervasive US constructions and experiences of race and racism. With that lack of understanding in mind, recent occurrences brought to public attention by concerned parents who have visually documented their Black children being ignored, shunned, and assaulted in the ideologically white spaces of theme parks are not so surprising.

Widely distributed on social media by parents and other concerned adults, their videos capture the blatant racist denial of Black childhood and humanity by employees of amusement parks and similar entertainment venues. @_TheShawn prefaces his 18 July 2022 tweet compilation of several of these videos thusly: 'So apparently the Sesame Place has a history of ignoring black kids ... Here's a thread of the proof'. He features Jodi Brown's 16 July 2022 Philadelphia-area Sesame Place theme park video that ignited this social discussion of racism towards/exclusion of Black children ("Disgusting" 2022). In the video, Brown's daughter and niece hold out their arms for a hug from the passing Rosita character.¹³ The character gives someone else nearby a high-five, then, looking directly at the girls, waves them off while shaking her/his head no. As the performer walks away, without having touched these girls, the children have confused, upset looks on their faces. As heated news and social media discussion ensued following Brown's video post, a Baltimore family sued the venue, since they had experienced a similar incident at a Sesame Place 'meet-and-greet' event one month prior, when their five-year-old was ignored by several character actors while "performers readily engaged with numerous similarly situated white customers" ("Black Family" 2022).

@_TheShawn's 2022 tweet includes four more of the most widely shared similar videos. Those reacting to his tweet uploaded additional videos, all of which are familiar to those who watched this news cycle, making a total of at least ten distinct incidents of performers ignoring Black children seeking contact with them, some showing the character actor having direct contact with white children very close to the Black children and others showing no

one else around when the Black children are being ignored.^{14,15} One of the replies to @_TheShawn is a video shot by a father at a Chucky Cheese, the popular indoor amusement arcade and birthday party venue, in which his Black toddler is ignored, despite the father's protestations as he stands inches away filming and commenting on what is occurring. When the Chucky Cheese character ignores the Black girl and hugs white children, we hear in the background the child's father register what is happening, speak to the character, and comment to someone next to him about what he is watching unfold. 'Hey', the father says to Chucky, trying to get the performer's attention as they move away from his daughter. The dad then says to a person near him, 'You saw that, right?' Then he asks the Chucky character as they continue to ignore them, 'You don't see her? Look. Right here. You don't see her?' with the little girl still trying to get Chucky's attention. The performer finally moves back to them and waves at the child. With the toddler upset and tearfully saying, 'Daddy!' the father again asks, 'You don't see her?' (@_TheShawn 2022). He then asks his daughter if she wants a hug from the character and the video cuts off. Like all the videos in which Black children are ignored, this child's distraught reaction and the father's indignation are painful to witness.

In addition to the personal erasure by performers who ignore Black children, people who reacted to @_TheShawn's 2022 compilation tweet also shared videos of theme park actors' violent contact with Black children, violence that the persons inside the costumes may have felt was humorous to them, but which is obviously upsetting for the Black children and parents. In one video, a tall purple character with a big stomach (rings/hoops inside the suit forcing the mid-section to balloon all around) takes long, fast strides right over (no other people are around) to a Black child about three years old, knocking her to the ground with their costume and onto the child's mother's feet. The performer then seems to lean over to help pick up the assaulted little girl as the video cuts off. In another example of dehumanizing violence by a theme park actor, a video shot from behind a row of children shows a Sesame Street parade going by with the Ernie character high-fiving several kids of various skin colours. Then the actor does not offer a high-five but, instead, slaps (not hard) the face of a taller Black girl around nine years old as the character moves away from the group to continue in the parade. We cannot see the front of the girl's face as she reacts, but what is visible from the side of her face registers as bewilderment. These violent and dehumanizing objectifications render these Black children's and families' physical and emotional being irrelevant.

In a final example in which invisibilizing avoidance and violence mar what should be as joyful an opportunity for a Black child as for a white child, a reply to @_TheShawn's 2022 compilation tweet shares a video shot in daytime New York City – likely Times Square, since numerous persons in costume

appear in the background. In the video, a white boy around eleven years old stands by himself right next to a short Black boy (or perhaps a teen/young man with dwarfism) and a young Black woman. The Black boy has his arms straight out to the character. After the Elmo character allows the white boy to give him a big hug, the character moves away. The young Black woman then physically forces the character actor to hug the Black boy, smacking and berating the performer as she pushes them to hug the boy – i.e. trying to make the actor feel ashamed for having blatantly ignored him. After the hug, still visibly upset, she takes the boy's hand and briskly walks the two of them away.

Videos like those above have garnered a wide range of reactions from concerned persons as well as from indifferent and racist trolls. The thread of tweets reacting to @_TheShawn's 2022 compilation and additional posted videos, for example, run the gamut, from *there is no proof of racism, they're just doing their job with tons of kids around, you're making it a race thing . . . to white kids are ignored too and I as a white kid was waved off . . . to get over it, grow up . . . to we should file a suit, the character actors should be fired, the business should be shut down, or the character actors should be beat down . . . to I thought it was just an overreaction but this is a pattern, it's obvious, and a whole new level of messed up . . . to it's heartbreaking . . . to what did you expect, it's always been like this*. From the responses that gaslight to those that express outrage, such assertions further situate Black children in the adult politics that interconnect violence, race, and public spaces. In classrooms and entertainment venues designed expressly for children, yet steeped in unexamined systemic racism, Black children's bodies, like Black adult bodies, are 'marginalized, disregarded, and disdained' (Dumas and Ross 2016, 417).

Yes, it's always been like this

Nineteenth-century imperialistic white Western 'freak hunters' searched the world for children and adults whose skin colour, hair, skull shape and facial features, body shape, language, and culture were different from their own (hence, not quite human) to display for profit. Sideshows (freak shows), early museums, carnivals, circuses, and World's Fairs employed and/or exploited Black and Brown people as Wild Men, savages, and the fantastical 'missing links' between animals and humans that obsessed nineteenth-century pseudoscientists. Two of the most popular and profitable of these performers were the young South African Khoikhoi woman Sara Baartman and the hirsute young Mexican Indigenous woman Julia Pastrana, who were displayed alive and then also in varied ways for decades after their deaths (Baartman's death cast and skeleton displayed in France's Museum of Man; Pastrana and her newborn taxidermied for travelling exhibition by Pastrana's

former manager-husband).¹⁶ In addition to their various standard roles in sideshows, Black people also served as commonplace white entertainment fare as caricatures (again, not actually human) in jokes (e.g. Black babies as 'gator bait'); stage productions; folk songs¹⁷; minstrel shows (another staple of American culture); literature (e.g. the animalistic Topsy in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* 1852); common children's ditties; children's literature (e.g. Helen Bannerman's 1899 character Little Black Sambo, and other characters whose lives are threatened or ended); film and animation from the earliest days of these hugely socially influential visual genres; board games; the common violent African Dodger carnival game; commercial ads (e.g. for soap – a Black baby depicted as having the black washed off to gain the norm/ideal of whiteness); educational materials; dolls; household ceramics, glassware, and product containers (e.g. salt and pepper shakers, syrup bottles, mouth wide-open change banks, and so on).¹⁸

Common in the history of US entertainment and education, racist domestic kitsch and grotesque caricatures have marked white and ableist attitudes towards those routinely rendered voiceless and faceless, and animalized – like the burly Black labourers with no facial features and the Jim Crow singing and signifying black crows of Disney's *Dumbo* (1941) that reflect common racist perspectives of the period. The caricaturing erasure of Black children's and families' lives has permeated US society and in fact has been a cornerstone of the American white supremacist cultural imagination and educational system. This centuries-long US objectification of Black children's and adults' lives is a pervasive, largely unexamined violence.

Conclusion: who are the children and whose children matter?

Activist Ruby Bridges Hall's 1960 photo as a six-year-old desegregationist escorted by white male federal marshals into and from a previously all-white New Orleans elementary school visually burned the courage of a Black child into the world's eye (Asmelash 2020). Decades later, in 2016, Bridges Hall spoke to an overflow crowd at a New Jersey high school, telling them, "[B]abies come into the world . . . with a fresh, clean heart. It is grownups who pass along racism. You are robbing your child of that clean heart. Racism is a grown up disease and it is time we stop using kids to spread it. We have come a long way but we all have to contribute" ("PHOTOS" 2016). The politicization of children at the centre of the current conservative-liberal divide ignores the Truth of complex US histories and the documented lived experiences of violence against Black and Brown Americans.

Arizona Republican Tom Horne, the 2022 State Superintendent of Schools candidate who won his election, used 'STOP CRITICAL RACE THEORY' as a political tag to signal the value of white children in US schools and in society in the same ways that white people's lives have historically mattered

more than the lives of Black and Brown children and adults. According to his election website, Horne contends that ‘Liberals are trying to indoctrinate our school children to hate America. They want our children to believe we are a racist country . . . Tom Horne will stop them’ (Kunichoff 2022). This same scare tactic to ‘save the [white] children’ (Paul 2022) was also used by losing Arizona Republican senate candidate Blake Masters in oversized campaign signs that read ‘BLAKE MASTERS WILL PROTECT CHILDREN IN THE U.S. SENATE’ (*Blake Masters for U.S. Senate* n.d.).¹⁹ Is there any question whose children Masters was referencing as he aspired to a legislative policy-making position? Horne did not need to state ‘white children’, since objections to the alleged teaching of Critical Race Theory are framed about protecting white children, not all children. While teaching US histories might well be a source of self-validation and empowerment for children of colour and queer children, their well-being is not the focus of the conservative resistance. Instead, the default white child is the child who needs to be protected and saved from an inclusive history. Naming without naming is precisely the reason we can think ‘white people’ without saying white people, as Damon Young (2020) points out in his social bias exercise ‘55 Ways White People Say “White People” Without Actually Saying “White People”’: ‘Americans’, ‘Real Americans’, ‘Middle America’, ‘Patriots’, ‘Working-Class Americans’, ‘Southerners’, ‘Millennials’, ‘Christians’, ‘Evangelicals’, ‘Conservatives’, ‘Soccer Moms’, and ‘Hardworking Americans’. To this inexhaustive list, we can easily add ‘Children’.

In addition, at least in the state of Arizona, this ‘Save the Children’ trope does not bear out in terms of the legislation of social responsibility. The 2022 Annie E. Casey Foundation *Kids Count Data Book* annual report found the state’s lowest scores in the category of education:

The report says 69% of Arizona fourth graders are not proficient in reading and 69% of the state’s eighth graders are not proficient in math. 22% of Arizona high school students do not graduate on-time, a figure that has not improved in more than a decade.

The state also scores poorly in several measures of health. Arizona is among states with the highest percentage of children without health insurance. And Arizona’s child and teen death rate has also risen. In 2010, the state saw 28 deaths for every 100,000 children and teens; now the rate is 36 per 100,000. Only three other states have higher rates. (Davis-Young 2022)

Yet the threat here in the political divide has allegedly been the teaching of Critical Race Theory. Journalists and scholars alike have repeatedly debunked the myth that Critical Race Theory has ever been taught in K-12 schools.²⁰

Recent state elections remind us that children are at the centre of today’s current political divide among progressives and conservatives. In November 2021, for example, Virginia’s then conservative candidate and

now Governor Glenn Youngkin ran and won on the mythical boogey man that has come to be Critical Race Theory (“Virginia Governor” 2023). Many states have adopted legislation that allegedly ‘protects the children’ from what became, as a response to the 2020 murder of George Floyd, a tsunami of anti-racism justice work. The gist of this anti-racist work is about the unfiltered and unadorned US history that counters ‘master narratives’ about Americans and American exceptionalism. Unsurprisingly, the anti-CRT backlash has coincided with the backlash against Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones’s (2019) groundbreaking *1619 Project* that reframes the beginning of this country as being when the first twenty enslaved Africans landed on this soil. The cry of foul play from conservatives then centred white children as the objects and subjects of trauma who needed to be kept from studying and understanding the US colonies and nation pluralistically. North America was a place of refuge and rugged individualism – nothing more. To question why colonial-era ‘Founding Fathers’ are given credit for beginning this country, while failing to acknowledge ancient Indigenous societies whom those colonial-era whites genocidally sought to erase, is to make white children feel bad. To date, there has been no published evidence suggesting or proving that pointing out historical truths and untruths has negatively impacted the psyches of white children. To point out the history of antebellum slavery in this country, to challenge the fact that the residuals of slavery persist in the present, economically, psychologically, educationally, socially, and politically, is not to attack white people – adults or children – but to acknowledge white supremacy and the idolization and privilege of whiteness as a key social construct in the capitalist US society. Hence, it is this backdrop of denial of the facts of history and its direct systemic connections to present US society that furthers this conversation on and commentary about Black children being erased or otherwise violated in public spaces beyond classrooms.

As these social media viral videos and news stories attest, the blatant visibility of Black invisibilizing is an everyday occurrence for Black folks. Recall the bevy of stories of Black celebrities, such as weather anchor Al Roker and actor Danny Glover who, in separate incidents, were unable to hail a taxi, not because there were no taxi cabs available, but because drivers drove past them to pick up white passengers (Harris and Ahuja 2009). On Twitter, Roker commented how this moment of alleged invisibility affected him and his young son: ‘What really hurts, my 13 yr. old boy was with me and asked why the cabby passed us. I said, “Nick, ignorant people make dumb choices”’ (Kunkle 2015). Roker also tweeted that he ‘Filed a complaint today after getting passed up again by a NYC Yellow cab. Cabbie picked up a white guy a block away. Wonder why Uber wins?’ Contextually, this racial slight is common:

More than 15 years ago, actor Danny Glover took similar action when an instance of 'Hailing while black', or HWB, happened to him in Harlem. Civil rights organizations over the years have periodic studies to document the practice by taxis in Washington, too.

A study earlier this year by researchers at Portland State University and the University of Arizona suggests that because of pervasive, sometimes subtle racism, motorists are more likely to ignore African Americans who are waiting to cross the street at a crosswalk than whites, a form of bias that might be dubbed 'walking while black'. (Kunkle 2015)

W. E. B. Du Bois (1903/1965), in *The Souls of Black Folk*, recounts an autobiographical moment from his childhood that showed him the reality of racial profiling, what Du Bois identifies as 'the Veil' that Black children and adults cannot remove but only rise above situationally. Meanwhile, the emotional and psychological intensity a Black child feels at being dismissed, slighted, or treated negatively by a white child registers deeply. Du Bois explains:

[B]eing a problem is a strange experience, —peculiar even for one who has never been anything else, save perhaps in babyhood and in Europe. It is in the early days of rollicking boyhood that the revelation first bursts upon one I was a little thing In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards . . . and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. (1903/1965, 214)

Inarguably, children are not exempt from the reality of race and the experience of US racism. Du Bois's account can easily be the experience of the Black children in the recent theme park videos who were bewildered, embarrassed, erased, and potentially traumatized by what some may see as innocent slights. For Black parents and Black communities, historically and today, these incidents mean considerably more, are more familiar and experienced far more often than a handful of invisibilizing experiences caught on video might suggest – and their effects, individual and cumulative over a lifetime, are immeasurable.

Notes

1. See Alfonseca (2022).
2. McCormick (2022) asserts the historical racial double standard this way: 'This centering of white students' feelings is the very definition of systemic racism. Where were all these [white adult] "do-gooders", now suddenly concerned about students' feelings, when white adults were terrorizing Black children?'
3. CNN reported on this censorship 7 September 2022, with the phenomenon only continuing to escalate since:

Dozens of books have been pulled from shelves in Texas, new policies expanding oversight of books are being drafted or already passed in multiple states, a Florida school district halted library purchases, and a teacher resigned in Oklahoma over the censorship of books in classroom libraries.

With new laws that restrict teaching about race, history and gender identity in effect in more than a dozen states, students are starting to see changes in the classroom and more might be coming in the next months.

In a recent analysis, the literary and free expression advocacy organization PEN America found that 19 states have laws targeting discussions of race, gender, and United States history; and 36 other states introduced 137 similar bills in 2022, marking a significant increase compared to the 54 bills proposed last year (Chavez 2022).

4. See Merriam's satirical *The Inner City Mother Goose* (1969) that challenges this middle-class white ideal by featuring life experiences riddled with illicit drugs, crime, violence, homelessness, and food insecurity, thus acknowledging another world not aligned with Mother Goose's.
5. The most recent Dick and Jane story is Marchesani's *Dick and Jane and Vampires* (2010).
6. On the whitewashing of children's literature, see Donnelly (2014); Gray (2021); Lester (2014).
7. An exception: the final 1965 publication of the original reader series introduces a Black family, Dick and Jane's neighbours.
8. Through *NPR's StoryCorps*, Francine Anderson, a Black woman, recounts another commonplace type of negative race experience that has had lifelong effects. In 1950s Jim Crow Virginia, she witnessed a white man mistreat her Black father after they ran out of gas one night, with just a whites-only gas station nearby. The terror of what she, as a little girl, saw and felt continues to haunt her (Hillman and Davis 2017).
9. See Asmelash (2021).
10. See Anderson (2022).
11. See Rydell, Findling, and Pelle (2000) on the relationship between race and the World's Fairs. Celebrating Industrial Age technological advances and colonialism, the fairs limited Black American self-representation while featuring live 'villages' of people of colour from around the world. Billed as educational ethnological exhibits, these were actually 'human zoo' spectacles of imperialistic white superiority. Theme parks, though purportedly more strictly about entertainment, have likewise been ideologically as well as physically constructed to achieve a particular cultural experience. Access to white-dominated spaces of World's Fairs, theme parks, carnivals, municipal pools, national parks, and other forms of outdoor public recreation has also been racially delimited, thus carrying additional dehumanizing messages to non-white recreation seekers. See Rabinovitz (2012).
12. See Lipsitz (2007).
13. Brown writes, 'I'm going to keep posting this, because this had me hot. We were on our way out of sesame place and the kids wanted to stop to see the characters. THIS DISGUSTING person blatantly told our kids NO then proceeded to hug the little white girl next to us! Then when I went to complain about it, they looking at me like I'm crazy. I asked the lady who the character was and I wanted to see a supervisor and she told me SHE DIDN'T KNOW! I will never step foot in @sesameplace ever again!' (O'Kane 2022).

14. A later video example of this same invalidation shows two seated Black children at a Little League parade in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, in which white adults give goodies to the white children as the Black children, one even extending her/his hand out, are passed by. The adult filming the scene narrates her disbelief and upset. Naya Baby posts: 'Racism still exist I WILL NEVER ATTEND ANOTHER LITTLE LEAGUE PARADE!! THIS HAPPENED THE ENTIRE PARADE!!!! Rewatching the videos bring tears to my eyes to watch these ADULTS mistreat children because of their skin color. And these people work for big companies that we are suppose to trust. I WILL NEVER ATTEND ANYTHING IN WILIAMSPORT AGAIN!!' (honeybnaya 2023).
15. One widely shared video missing from the tweet and reactions shows an excited little Black girl at a theme park running after a Rapunzel character. The performer pays attention to white children but ignores this Black child (DiCologero 2022).
16. See Adams (2001); Bogdan (1988); Holmes (2007).
17. See Abad-Santos (2014).
18. See Jim Crow Museum of Racist Imagery (n.d.); Lester (2022).
19. No mention of 'children' appeared on the landing page of this 'TRUMP ENDORSED' website (*Blake Masters for U.S. Senate* n.d.). Instead, his banner video showing Masters with his white wife and young children signalled that he is a 'family man' out to protect and save other white children and their families from the dangerous liberals.
20. For stories about teacher consequences for engaging anti-racist teaching pedagogy that underscore the ways in which children are at the centre of adult political division that we identify as 'culture war', see Elbeshbishi (2021); Folmar (2022); Zimmerman (2022).

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