

# An olive branch grown from black soil: Teaching truth in the time of erasure

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## ABSTRACT

When history is rewritten to comfort the powerful, classrooms become battlegrounds for justice and truth. This piece examines the political erasure of Black history in Florida, where teachers are directed to frame slavery as beneficial to the enslaved. It names the weight of the Black Tax, the exhaustion of racial battle fatigue, and the ease of white fatigue that too often excuses silence, while calling on ancestral memory as a guide for truth telling. Teaching, as bell hooks reminds us, remains an act of liberation even under constraint. Reclaiming the classroom as a site of resistance and protection, the author extends an Olive Branch Petition for our time, not of quiet compliance, but of peace rooted in justice and honesty. Without truth, there is no peace. Without peace, there is no justice.

## KEYWORDS

*Black tax, racial battle fatigue, white fatigue, Florida state standards, education as liberation, teaching to transgress*

When I entered my first classroom in 2012, I never imagined my greatest challenge would be walking a tightrope between teaching history and engaging in political games. I was prepared to learn how to reach all children, regardless of their circumstances. I was even ready to advocate for resources while teaching at a school that received Title I funds. However, throughout this time, I never thought I would have to draw a firm line in the sand, rejecting revisionist history. Nothing prepared me for the day when the State of Florida would tell me and other history teachers we must lie to our students and tell them enslaved people benefited from the system of slavery. I could handle budget cuts. I could handle standardized tests. But I never expected to stand in front of my students and be told to lie.

Florida State Standard SS.68.AA.2.3 examines the various duties and trades performed by enslaved people, with the benchmark clarification stating, "Instruction includes how slaves developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit." When I read this change to the standards, I saw it was not a mistake. This was a deliberate decision by the state to rewrite history. Florida has chosen to rewrite history, insinuating that people were not taken from their villages for the very skills enslavers sought to exploit. Florida wants us to believe that the stolen people of Africa immigrated for their well-being instead of being torn from their families and forced to labor for someone else's profit. By instructing educators to teach that enslaved people somehow benefited from a system built on their pain, in the stroke of a pen, an attempt was made to silence Black voices and gaslight us into thinking the stories we have carried in our bones and passed down over time from generation to generation since before freedom came were all fairytales. I refuse to let the state of Florida repackage that pain as something palatable. I could hear my great-grandmother, Elmira, whispering in my ear, don't let anyone silence our truth. Don't let them tell you who you are.

What does all of this realistically look like in a classroom? I am glad you asked. I find myself teetering on a thin line; expected to teach the state's version of whitewashed history, but morally obligated to tell the truth. When lesson planning, I am consciously aware that I am doing twice the work, thinking about how to fulfill my contractual obligation to teach the standard and the weight of shielding my students from such egregious inaccuracies. And that may look like asking critical thinking questions to allow students to draw their own conclusions and continue the conversation at home over dinner with their families. This added burden, the Black Tax, falls heavily on my shoulders. The Black Tax is the additional burden that some Black professionals carry

every day. For me, that looks like the need to be twice as careful, twice as prepared, and twice as protective of my students in a system that was not built for us. This shows up in seemingly small things, rewriting lesson plans to balance truth with state mandates, and in the bigger fights, like navigating DEI rollbacks that strip away the hard-won language of equity and justice. Language that not only affects Black people, but also all populations that are not a part of the homogenous majority. In recent months, I've felt the weight of this tax grow even heavier. With each new policy that erases the truth of Black history or bans honest conversations about race, my work becomes more than teaching; it becomes a daily act of resistance and protection.

Friends, we cannot disengage just because this conversation is exhausting. The implications of doing so are frightening. Some of us may be carrying the weight of what Dr. Joseph Flynn, Jr (2018) calls *white fatigue*, the urge some white people feel to back away from difficult conversations about race. It may be easier to lean into white privilege and ignore this educational crisis. At the same time, many could be shouldering what Dr. William Smith et al. (2016) describe as *Racial Battle Fatigue*; the heavy, spiritual exhaustion that Black people know all too well from having to constantly stand in the gap when all many of us want is to ...be.

bell hooks (1994) reminds us that teaching can be an act of liberation, even when it's heavy or unfair. So, in my classroom, I lean into this truth-telling work to honor my students and my ancestors. We cannot do this alone. Black educators must keep teaching to transgress, but we also need white educators to overcome their white fatigue. We need you to lean in and do the work of unlearning, so that the burden of teaching and protecting doesn't fall solely on Black shoulders. Because yes, it's exhausting and it's unfair. Marginalized communities are cleaning up messes we didn't make and are fighting lies we didn't write. But the alternative, letting education slip back to the days of Jim Crow or worse, is not an option.

Much like the Olive Branch Petition (1775) written by the American framers, I extend this call for peace. This is not just to those in power, but to everyone who cares about the future of education: restore truth, and with it, restore peace. Not the kind of peace that comes from silence, but the peace that grows from the honest telling of our full, complicated history. Without truth, there can be no peace. And without peace, there can be no justice.

I refuse to let history be rewritten by the wealthy few with the stroke of a pen. My classroom will remain a place where truth is spoken, no matter the cost. In this space,

we plant seeds of justice that grow into forests of freedom, so that every child will rise to claim their own powerful voice and hold space in this world.

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