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## A Colorblind Approach to Silencing African American Voices Through the Banning of Critical Race Theory

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A COLORBLIND APPROACH TO SILENCING AFRICAN AMERICAN VOICES  
THROUGH THE BANNING OF CRITICAL RACE THEORY

by

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A THESIS

Submitted to the graduate faculty of The University of Alabama at Birmingham,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

2023

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THROUGH THE BANNING OF CRITICAL RACE THEORY

MIA J. FREEMAN

ENGLISH

ABSTRACT

This thesis focused on addressing the framing of criticisms of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in the state of Virginia through the context of African American Criticism and Critical Race Theory. The methodology undertaken addresses the central research question, How might African American Criticism and Critical Race Theory provide a theoretical framework for responding to recent criticisms about *Beloved*? The researcher approached *Beloved* by historicizing select passages from the novel and situating those passages and the realities they reflect in the context of criticisms waged by parents and politicians. The thesis also explained how tenets of African American Criticism and Critical Race Theory were apparent in criticisms of *Beloved*. Finally, the thesis utilized Edbauer's notion of "rhetorical ecologies" to demonstrate how criticisms of *Beloved*, political rhetoric, police brutality, and the debate on Critical Race Theory are interrelated.

Keywords: book banning, critical race theory, urban education, curriculum

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAC	African American Criticism
CLS	Critical Legal Studies
CRP	Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
CRT	Critical Race Theory

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## CHAPTER 1

### **TAKING ON RACISM IN THE ERA OF MODERN VIOLENCE AND OPPRESSION: SETTING THE SCENE**

The topic of race and racism in America has been debated for quite some time. Within the last four years, a sundry of events has brought the debate of race and racism to the forefront of discussion. The emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement of 2020 brought all Americans' attention to the life-ending tragedies and racial injustices Black people, especially African American men killed due to police brutality. For instance, on May 25, 2020, an African American male named George Floyd was pinned on the ground by three police officers, one of whom knelt on Mr. Floyd's neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds, depriving him of oxygen. Emergency services footage and bystander cellphone recordings captured Mr. Floyd's horrific death and posted on all social media platforms. For several days, millions of people nationwide watched Mr. Floyd pleading to police that he could not breathe and calling out to his mother for help in agonizing pain. These hurtful words by Mr. Floyd struck a nerve in many Americans and led to several protests during Summer 2020.

With the help of Black Lives Matter, the protests gained nationwide attention and “shifted the conversation around racism, raising awareness of issues and laying the foundation for social change” (Eckart). Moreover, “at least 62 Fortune 500 companies posted about Black Lives Matter on Facebook in the wake of the summer's protests” (Adams). With the BlackLivesMatter hashtag generating across media platforms, several companies and the federal government enforced cultural sensitivity trainings for their

employees. Amid the racial injustices, Black people and other people of color face came to be negatively viewed with the influence of Christopher Rufo, “a senior fellow at the right-leaning Manhattan Institute” (Schwartz), and then-President Donald Trump. Rufo’s appearance on *Tucker Carlson Tonight* on September 2, 2020, discussing cultural sensitivity trainings correlation to Critical Race Theory (CRT) contributed to the negative connotations surrounding the CRT debate. While on the show, he said that CRT “has pervaded every aspect of the federal government” (qtd. in Wallace-Wells) and is a doctrine used in cultural sensitivity trainings. He urged President Trump to end this problem by issuing “an executive order to abolish [CRT] training from the federal government” (qtd. in Wallace-Wells).

On September 3, 2020, Mark Meadows, Chief of Staff to then-President Trump, contacted Rufo to inform him the President saw his segment on the show and “instructed [him] to take action” (Wallace-Wells). Rufo “flew to Washington D.C. to assist in drafting an executive order” (Wallace-Wells). Shortly after Trump issued executive order 13950, along with Rufo and Trump’s rhetoric on CRT, the debate on the theory’s usage in K-12 education emerged. Because of Trump and Rufo’s comments on CRT, many state legislators started banning the theory’s use in some school districts' curricula and even removing books written by African Americans and other people of color that discuss race or racism.

### **What is Critical Race Theory?**

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, legal scholars Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberlè Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado, among others (Sawchuk), constructed a



school of critical theory named Critical Legal Studies (CLS). According to Crenshaw, legal studies scholars have “challenged the notion that “the civil rights struggle represents a long, steady march toward social transformation” (qtd. in Ladson-Billings, “Just What is Critical Race Theory,” 10). Crenshaw also asserts that “Critical [legal] scholars have attempted to analyze legal ideology and discourse as a social artifact which operates to recreate and legitimate American society” (10). Above all, “the contribution of CLS to legal discourse is in its analysis of legitimating structures in the society” (10). Therefore, “(CRT)] is, thus, both an outgrowth of and a separate entity from an earlier legal movement called critical legal studies” (10). Scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings expanded the scope of CRT by tying it to the field of education, proclaiming that:

The connection between law and education is relatively simple to establish. Since education in the USA is not outlined explicitly in the nation’s constitution, it is one of the social functions delegated to individual states. Consequently, states generate legislation and enact laws designed to proscribe the contours of education. (17)

CRT challenges the status quo of race and racism in America by detailing how racism “goes far beyond just individually held prejudices, and that it is, in fact, a systematic phenomenon [woven] into the laws and institutions of this nation” (Robinson).

Additionally, “the use of voice, sometimes known as ‘naming your reality,’ is a way that CRT [connects] form and [content in] scholarship [through] parables, chronicles, stories, counterstories, poetry, fiction, and revisionist histories (Ladson-Billings, “Just What is Critical Race Theory,” 13) to provide another worldview and challenge false narratives. To grasp the complexity of racism and to start the process

of judicial reform, the "voice" component of CRT offers a mechanism to articulate the lived experiences of the oppressed (14). Delgado (1989) believes that the dominant group justifies its authority with tales and stock explanations that create reality in ways that sustain its privilege. As a result, tyranny is justified, leading to minimal introspection on the part of the oppressor. People of color's lived experiences can disrupt unconscious racism (14) by "...provid[ing] the necessary context for understanding, feeling, and interpreting" (13) their struggles.

Likewise, the telling of people of color's, particularly African Americans, struggles in literature has some parents in a rage about what novels are being taught to their children and has contributed to the banning of books by numerous Black authors. These parents' concerns, along with the decontextualization of CRT, have caused much outrage among politicians and education policymakers. The negative connotations about CRT intensified by Rufo and Trump have caused multiple conservative states to draft legislation to ban CRT in schools, creating a culture war in America. Trump and Rufo's actions are an exemplar of the primary tenets of CRT as well as the theory's connections to education.

### ***What are the Tenets of CRT?***

1. Whiteness as Property: "rights of disposition, rights to use and enjoyment, reputation and status property, and the absolute right to excuse—make the American dream of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' a more likely and attainable reality for White as citizens" (qtd. in Ladson-Billings, "Just What is Critical Race Theory," 15).

2. Counterstory: By occasionally using narrative to examine “the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdom that make[s] up the common culture concerning race and that always reduce Blacks and other minorities one-down” (qtd. in Ladson-Billings, “Just What is Critical Race Theory,” 11).
3. Critique of Liberalism: “civil rights crusade as a long, slow, but always upward pull is flawed because it fails to understand the limits of current legal paradigms to serve as catalysts for social change and its emphasis on incrementalism” (qtd. in Ladson-Billings, “Just What is Critical Race Theory,” 12).
4. The Permanence of Racism: “The approach takes the form of revealing racism in all of its manifestations (11).
5. Interest Convergence: “Communities of color will experience gains when their interests converge with the self-interest of whites individually and/or whiteness systematically” (12).

### **How are Identity and Power Used to Push False Narratives?**

According to Lundberg and Keith in *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, “rhetoric helps us understand how certain identities are persuasive and why certain identity practices and labels seem to facilitate political power” (10). Former President Donald Trump utilized his political power to persuade Americans in a memorandum issued from the Executive Office of the President that “it has been brought to his attention that Executive Branch agencies have spent millions of taxpayer dollars to date ‘training’ government workers to believe divisive, anti-American propaganda” (qtd. in Gómez). This response from Trump about cultural sensitivity trainings led many conservatives and

other Americans to believe the misinterpretations about the meaning of CRT. Trump referring to CRT as “anti-American” is a definition that struck a chord with some Americans and compelled them to be against CRT without further independent investigation into the theory. Without a thorough understanding of the theory, several Americans and Trump decontextualized the theory’s central idea.

Both Rufo and Trump used rhetorical strategies to convince conservatives that CRT is to blame for political and societal issues in America. Trump used deliberative speech, rhetorical language, and his credibility as President to persuade conservatives that CRT is un-American, racist, and divisive, which are the exact terms used by Rufo to describe CRT. Rufo stated, “the phrase critical race theory connotes hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, [and] anti-American” (qtd. in Wallance-Wells). These terms became newsworthy, spread across all news and social media platforms, and even displayed on posters during anti-CRT protests.

Trump and Rufo’s usage of these words led to severe concern for some parents and what they do not want to be taught to their children. Also, Trump’s false narratives about CRT are blinding conservatives from understanding the meaning of CRT. CRT’s purpose in law and education is not to spread untruths about America’s structural founding but to further explain the truths about disadvantages experienced by African Americans and other people of color in a country not built for their benefit. Rufo, Trump, and other conservatives’ actions toward ending CRT suggest how race and racism “are normal, not aberrant, in American life” (qtd. in Cornish). In the CRT debate, Rufo, Trump, and conservatives are the dominant group, who are dysconsciously silencing

African American experiences by attempting to end the discussion of race and racism in law, especially education. Similar comments were made about CRT in the 1990s:

Most people in the USA first learned of critical race theory when Lani Guinier, a University of Pennsylvania Law Professor, became a political casualty of the Clinton administration. Her legal writings were the focus of much scrutiny in the media. Unschooled and unsophisticated about the nature of legal academic writing, the media vilified Guinier and accused her of advocating ‘un-American’ ideas. The primary focus of the scorn shown by Guinier was her argument for proportional representation. (Ladson-Billings, “Just What is Critical Race Theory,” 10)

Similar to this occurrence, Trump, Rufo, and some other conservative viewpoints of CRT are compelling because they imply how terrified they are for the vile truths of America's history to be divulged. This fear has led to several school districts banning CRT and books that mention race or racism from their curriculum.

Another example parallel to Guinier’s backlash from CRT is Trump’s perspective about the 1619 Project. The 1619 Project is an initiative inaugurated by the *New York Times Magazine* to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the first ships of Africans arriving in Virginia. Also, the initiative “focused on the role slavery played in the country’s founding, especially during the American Revolution” (Brewster). Two years after the initiative's launch, it was constructed into an anthology of essays and poems that highlight the longstanding ramifications of slavery. The launching of this initiative received backlash from critics, especially conservatives and former President Donald Trump. Trump proclaimed that the 1619 Project “warped, distorted, and defiled the

American story with deceptions, falsehoods, and lies” (Watson and Segers). Former President Trump's perspective of the 1619 Project is congruent with his perspective on CRT, which led to further disdain for the theory. The disapproval of CRT gave rise to several conservatives drafting legislation banning CRT in schools and even removing books written by African Americans and other people of color.

### **How are Black Voices Concealed Through the Banning of Books in Education?**

Several books written by African American authors have been removed from school curricula, including *Brown Girl Dreaming*; *The Story of Ruby Bridges*; *The Hate U Give*; *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*; and *Something Happened in Our Town: A Child's Story About Racial Injustice*. These books describe African Americans' lived experiences by detailing the struggles of young Black girls, police brutality, and racial injustices from historical and current events. These stories are imperative for both Black and non-Black students to read; however, this thesis underscores the importance of reading these books for African American students. Nevertheless, when African American students read these books, they will be more likely to envision themselves “in the word (literature) and the world” (Ladson-Billings, “Liberatory Consequences of Literacy,” 383) since “people of color speak with experiential knowledge about the fact that [their] society is deeply structured by racism. That structure gives their stories a common framework warranting the term voice” (qtd. in Ladson-Billings, “Just What is Critical Race Theory,” 13). African American authors write books that reflect their truth, and banning these books is a way to silence Black people's voices.

Furthermore, “these books and others have been challenged by parents and community members under the guise that [they are] promoting critical race theory” (Will). Even “Republican legislators in more than 20 states have introduced bills restricting how teachers discuss racism, sexism, and controversial issues. In eight states, the bills have been passed into law. The same language echoes throughout much of the legislation, from bans on ‘divisive or sexist concepts’” (Schwartz). These books are documented stories of the harsh truths of America’s reality that some conservative groups likely fear acknowledging. Some conservatives fear might derive from their inability to admit that the cruelest events during American enslavement are identical to oppressive forces that still exist in various structural systems. The unwillingness to address contemporary oppressive forces leaves these conservatives complacent because “they do not want to have to turn and face and confront their history of this country” (qtd. in Will). Confronting untold or ignored stories about people of color outside and especially inside the classroom benefits White and Black students. Cooke proposes that after reading Black literature in the classroom, some pupils might read it independently. If schools’ American literary curriculum is to represent society’s multiculturalism, Black literature must be taught. If White and Black students are supposed to accept and understand one another, they can read Black literature in the classroom. If not, White and Black students may think Black literature is practically nonexistent or utterly pointless. Black students should especially study Black literature to embrace their cultural heritage and self-identification (132-133). As a result, I suggest that banning works by African American writers is an attempt to perpetuate cultural domination.

### **What is African American Criticism?**

Established in the late 1970s, African American Criticism “acknowledges and incorporates the writings of past and often suppressed and forgotten African American literature, the major historical movements that have influenced African American writings, and both historical and current attitudes toward African Americans themselves” (Bressler 210). According to Bressler, “since Derridean deconstruction and other poststructuralist theories emerged, African American criticism frequently employed binary oppositions, viewing the White American as the oppressor of Black art and Black people” (210). Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass are two of the most notable individuals whose writings highlight the binary opposition of the oppressor and the oppressed with their lived experiences of American enslavement.

Kidnapped from her native land and sold into slavery, seven-year-old Phillis Wheatley (given name) was forced to assimilate into the conventions of a white-dominated society. The Wheatley’s (enslavers) named Phillis after “the human cargo transported from West Africa aboard the slave ship *Phillis*” (Gates et al. 138). Soon after purchasing Phillis, the Wheatley family detected “...early indications of intellectual precociousness in Phillis, [so] the Wheatley family encouraged her to study the Bible and to read English and Latin literature, history, and geography. After only four years of exposure to the English language, Phillis began to write poetry” (138). Phillis's poems brought her great fame; however, “many people questioned how a black woman could be so intelligent as to write such ‘good’ poetry, leading to her being taken to court so that she would be forced to recant her ownership of [one of her] poems” (Bressler 212). At the time, White Americans found it difficult to comprehend how someone of



African heritage could be so intelligent. Their opinions of those with darker complexion were prejudiced and unfavorable. Phillis's experience best shows some White Americans' misperceptions about African American literature.

The dehumanization Frederick Douglass experienced while on his journey of self-discovery contains similarities. Frederick Douglass was reared by his grandmother after being born into slavery. He never met his father, a white slaveholder (Gates et al. 132). Douglass learned appropriate slave behavior from his granny. Douglass' grandmother taught him how to behave appropriately as an enslaved person. Douglass did not run with opposition until he tried to learn to read and write. He took "the first step [in learning to read and write by studying] the alphabet" (132) and continued to be driven to further his education to escape from enslavement. His tenacity enabled him to endure several attacks and be held under observation for a prolonged time in a room. This isolation "had handed [him] the inch, and no precaution could prevent [him] from taking the ell" (132). Douglass was adamant that nothing would stop him from educating himself to gain freedom.

Douglass was aware of the repercussions he may incur if his effort to educate himself was discovered. He employed various strategies to obtain the knowledge he sought, including making friends with underprivileged White boys and turning them into his instructors. Douglass fed them in return for the wisdom they possessed. He discovered a method to gain his independence when he started reading the book *The Columbian Orator*. "I discovered a conversation between an [enslaved person] and his [enslaver] in it" (135), he claimed. The dialogue led to the master's voluntary liberation of the [enslaved person] when the [enslaved individual] was forced to respond with some

extremely remarkable and intelligent words (135). The book further stirred Douglass as he read it. He learned more about the truth of slavery. Douglass compared his captors to bandits who had successfully traveled to Africa and taken enslaved people, just as in the narrative. Douglass was freed from the ignorance of his mental darkness—captivity. After being freed, Frederick Douglass wrote a narrative about his life. Like Phillis Wheatley, White Americans were astounded by a Black man's great writings. Similarly, in their quest for freedom from the evils of slavery, Frederick Douglass and Phillis Wheatley utilized literature to break the bonds of tyranny.

Banning books by African American authors is a form of oppression. Book banning inflicts cultural dominance that disempowers Black authors and students. Some politicians' use of domination sustains a standard knowledge of what literature is acceptable to teach in schools and which is not. The effort to censor works by Black writers has a stifling effect on the academic development of African American students and exacerbates the inequality that permeates many Urban school systems. Since Urban schools have encountered many inequalities for decades, banning Black authors' literature heightens these inequities.

### **What are Some Existing Inequalities in Urban Educational Settings?**

Urban school students have confronted racial inequities in the education system for many years, including location, inadequate resources, and a prescribed curriculum. Green et al.'s study analyzing the effects of site restrictions on educational inequality in urban school districts claims that the geographic location impacts students' access to equitable opportunities and resources and that spatial limits exist in urbanized school systems and have an adverse impact on the educational achievements of minority

students (779-782). In addition to this disadvantage, “an increasingly large wealth gap exists between predominantly Black and majority White school communities” (Francis and Weller). A further impediment to the educational performance of minority students is the disparity in academic achievements between urban and White school districts, including taxation patterns and state expenditure reductions. Urban school districts' socioeconomic limitations impede Black students' learning outcomes, leading to urban schools not receiving enough governmental financing for instructional supplies.

In addition, a prescribed curriculum is another racial inequality that often impairs the success of students of color in urban schools. In the book, *Curriculum and Students in Classrooms: Everyday Urban Education in an Era of Standardization*, W. S. Gershon examines the curriculum taught in urban school districts and how involvement in standardized curricula marginalizes historically disadvantaged people along racial and economic lines (5). The curriculum in urban schools constricts Black students' academic performance. A curriculum with different academic tracks does not benefit minority students either. The “complex manifestation of curriculum differentiation in schools has multiple academic tracks that respond to student's differences, including comprehensive learning groups, subject-specific groups, and temporary learning groups used for test preparation” (Harris 884). From standardized test results, minority students are placed in groups to prepare them for college or teach them survival skills. Students are placed on separate educational tracks according to their performance on standardized tests, focusing on college preparedness and work readiness. These classes “concentrate heavily on classical literature, literary analysis, and expository writing--in short, the traditional,

college preparatory curriculum, which constitutes high-status knowledge in the discipline” (Finley 234).

In contrast, low-scoring students are typically placed in “remedial courses [which] are designed to improve literacy and teach survival skills such as job application format--the low-status, non-college curriculum” (Finley 234). In brief, individuals who score above average are put in more advanced courses, while those who may perform less than average are placed in remedial courses. Enrolling students in certain class based on their test scores is ineffective and may encourage some minority students to accept the position society has assigned to them instead of striving to transcend it. Overall, racial inequities prevent many minority students from attaining academic and personal success.

### **What is Culturally Relevant Pedagogy?**

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP), coined by Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, is “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (Ladson-Billings, “Liberatory Consequences of Literacy,” 382). When Ladson-Billings began researching a pedagogy for teaching African American students, she “centered on talking with, observing, videotaping, analyzing, and interpreting the practice of successful teachers of African American students”(382) to acquire knowledge about which teaching methods yielded the best learning outcomes for their students. Ladson-Billings interviewed several teachers during her investigation; however, one of these teachers, Ann Lewis, an Italian American, is primarily mentioned in her research. Below are the principles Ladson-Billings developed from her analysis:

### ***What are the Principles of Teaching Through a CRP?***

- “The students whose educational, economic, social, political, and cultural futures are most tenuous are helped to become the intellectual leaders of the classroom” (386).
- “Students are apprenticed into a learning community rather than taught isolated and unrelated skills” (387).
- “Students' real-life experiences are legitimated as part of the ‘official curriculum’” (387).
- “Teachers and students participate in a broad conception of literacy that incorporates both literature and orature” (387).
- “Teachers and students are engaged in a collective struggle against the status quo” (388).
- “Teachers engaged in this broad vision of the curriculum are cognizant of themselves as political beings” (388).

Because students' ages, locations, and backgrounds differ from classroom to classroom, it is the teacher's job to learn about their students' diverse backgrounds and determine how best to integrate these principles into their pedagogy. In Ladson-Billings's observation of Ann Lewis, she wanted to understand how Lewis practiced culturally relevant teaching. Ladson-Billings discovered that Lewis lived in the community where she taught for many years and that Lewis “worked for the school district as an instructional aide before teaching in the classroom. Lewis attended schools in the urban school district as well. Because of this, Lewis understood the community environment

where she worked and how the students she taught were affected by it. Ladson-Billings wrote about how Lewis chose books with characters that related to her students' backgrounds to allow them to see themselves "in the word (literature) and the world" (383). Using books that related to her student's lived experiences, Lewis kept them engaged during the learning process.

Also, Lewis told her students that "the good books are tied to the author's experiences. The boring books are about things the authors do not experience. She then asked the students to name the kinds of things they felt qualified to write and listed their responses on the chalkboard" (385). Lewis taught her students about the extent to which writers' works were more engaging if they had lived through the things they wrote about. She encouraged them to think critically by considering the most intriguing themes based on their lived experiences.

Lewis also used the classroom configuration as a teaching strategy. Ann set her kids' desks in groupings of four or five, which she calls teams. Ann walked around the room frequently and seldom sat at her desk, which was put to the side of the classroom (384). This room arrangement was beneficial to the student's learning outcomes. Due to Lewis's room arrangement, the students could discuss the information taught in class. The classroom setup was effective because it enabled Lewis students to explore newly-learned content through the prism of experiential learning. Lewis's ability to move freely within the classroom gave her students a sense of urgency and purpose in their education. Ann reassured her students that they were not alone in the learning process and that she would guide them through it.

Finally, Ladson-Billings' observation of Lewis demonstrated how culturally relevant teaching could be integrated within the classroom. In doing so, Ladson-Billings examined how culturally relevant teaching could be used through techniques that align with her teaching principles to produce the best educational outcomes for the students. Ladson-Billings found that the commonality was that all the "exceptional teachers," including Ann Lewis, possessed a "strong sense of purpose" (382). All the educators exhibited sociopolitical consciousness and cultural competence to assist students in gaining knowledge about their cultural backgrounds and how to become change agents in society. Altogether, teaching pedagogy, educational disparities, and criticisms of CRT are critical elements in the CRT debate that make up a "rhetorical ecology" (Edbauer 20).

### **What are the Bitzer Model and Rhetorical Ecologies?**

In 1986, Lloyd Bitzer introduced the rhetorical situation model, defining the term "as a specific combination of exigence, audience, and constraints" (Lundberg and Keith 31). In the model, exigence is a person's motivation to speak on an issue or an opportunity for change; when individuals participate in rhetorical discourse, they typically do so to solve a problem. The audience is the collective that must be convinced to do something, and the constraints are the obstacles that prevent coping with the exigence. They may be attitudes or actual institutions, such as regulations or socioeconomic restraints (31). The Rhetorical Situations is assumed to trigger rhetorical conversation in Bitzer's paradigm; however, this is only sometimes the case.

According to Bitzer, rhetorical discourse is made possible by the presence of a problem (or exigence) the audience already knows about. However, speakers may also

generate exigences; in these instances, the speaker's primary objective is to convince the audience that a problem exists (32). Many events and occurrences are thrown together in a rhetorical scenario; neither the audience, the text, nor the rhetorician is clearly defined. Therefore, there is a need to consider whether or not popular models are used to portray how rhetoric functions in the public sphere. A rhetorical ecology is a collaborative process operating within the same social environment and emotional frameworks (Edbauer 20). While rhetorical situation models help consider rhetoric's contextual nature, they must be revised to track a specific rhetoric's amalgamations and changes within its larger ecological environment.

In contrast to the rhetorical situation models that have been valuable, ecological augmentation takes a broader perspective of processes and occurrences (20). Bitzer's model does not go far enough when examining the complexities of the debate on CRT and book banning alone. Instead, the conversation surrounding CRT consists of several features of rhetorical ecologies that take into account the opinions of school-board members that must determine which books to omit from school libraries and curricula, parents' perspectives on CRT, and what reading selections parents want in school curriculum to how the conversations on CRT affect education policy and the response from local politicians upon the subject-matter. These are all critical aspects that make up their own "rhetorical ecologies"(20), thus making it highly complex to fine-tune a resolve that meets everyone's interests; however, this study does not seek to find a solution that satisfies all parties involved but to recontextualize the meaning of CRT, to serve as an essential document that advocates for African American students as well as Black writers and their works that illustrate Black people's lived experiences both historical and



contemporary. This project aims to unveil a counter perspective on the topic of book banning and CRT.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I describe the methodology undertaken to address my central research questions: How might African American Criticism and Critical Race Theory provide a theoretical framework for responding to recent criticisms about *Beloved*? My approach is to address the framing of these criticisms in the context of AAC and CRT. For instance, several of CRT's principles are evident in examining the novel. Throughout the novel, tenet two corresponds to Morrison's narration of American enslavement from a different perspective, contrasting with the whitewashed version that some politicians, education policymakers, and parents do not want to be told. These stories reflect negatively on America's dominant race because they illustrate how Whites attained their domination and even encourage readers to consider another viewpoint on social structures, especially school curriculum.

Furthermore, the fourth tenet of CRT explores how African Americans sustained inequality through the systems and institutions stemming from structural racism that Delgado proposes are "normal, not aberrant, in American society" (qtd. in Ladson-Billings, "Just What is Critical Race Theory," 11). In particular, reframing the critiques and censorship discourse surrounding *Beloved*, I will demonstrate how the novel connects to multiple disparities and the dehumanizing treatment enslaved people faced and how the consequences of these historical injustices' have contributed to current struggles among African American. I approach the novel and censorship discourse as

“social artifacts” to reveal rhetorical positions at a particular socio-historical moment. Also, I expound on AAC’s culture dominance tenet and how it is expressed through criticisms of *Beloved* in the state of Virginia since an incident regarding the novel nearly twelve years ago further gained nationwide attention during a pandemic and a political campaign. I will demonstrate how the Virginia incident, political campaign, police brutality, the debate on CRT, and criticisms of *Beloved* are interconnected.

### CHAPTER 3

#### **VOICES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS “IN THE WORD AND THE WORLD”: A CRITICAL RECONTEXTUALIZATION OF CRT IN THE COMMONWEALTH OF VIRGINIA**

A former Fairfax County student summarized the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Beloved* by saying, "It was disgusting and gross. It was hard for [him] to handle. [He] gave up on it" (qtd. in Shapiro). The novel, *Beloved*, written by *New York Times* bestselling author Toni Morrison, chronicles the narrative of Margaret Garner and is portrayed by the protagonist, Sethe, who chooses to murder her two-year-old daughter to shield her from the evils of slavery. As a whole, the book further "forces [readers] to reckon with the ugly truths of American enslavement, [and] racial violence" (Williams). The book was prescribed reading for Blake Murphy's Advanced Placement English class. While reading the novel, he was so horrified by its content that he had "night terrors...episodes of screaming, intense fear, and flailing" (qtd. in Shapiro). His experiences compelled him to alert his mother, Laura Murphy, about the book's substantial impact on his well-being.

After reading Blake's assignment, his mother said her "heart sunk" (qtd. in Villarreal). She added that it was some of the most obscene content imaginable (qtd. in Villarreal). Murphy informed the Fairfax County School Board of her impressions regarding the novel's graphic nature. She remarked that the book's content was "too intense for teenage readers" (Shapiro) and recommended implementing a policy that would notify parents about their children's reading assignments. If the books contained

material that parents considered inappropriate for their children in any capacity, the children could select alternative novels. By a vote of 6-2, the board decided against Murphy, and the book was allowed to continue being used in the district's Advanced Placement (AP) English courses (Villarreal).

Nonetheless, Murphy's tenacity on the subject reached the Republican-controlled Virginia General Assembly after her unsuccessful effort with the board. She characterized the legislators' responses to the book's content as "bright red with embarrassment" (Villarreal). Some members of Virginia's Legislative Black Caucus endorsed two versions of a bipartisan bill in 2016 and 2017 that would have granted parents the ability to prevent their children from reading some sexually graphic reading material. However, the then-Democratic Governor of Virginia, Terry McAuliffe, essentially rejected both bills (Merica and McKend). Former Governor McAuliffe's decision to reject these bills is now a part of the discussion about CRT and divisive ideologies in Virginia, where he was running for re-election. Glenn Youngkin, who was his opponent at the time, referred to himself as the parent's rights candidate. "[Youngkin] has also declared his intent to ban critical race theory the day he is elected" (Williams), and this is in response to some "Conservatives hav[ing] falsely claimed that Virginia schools are teaching [CRT]," (Lerer and Epstein).

To influence voters' perception of McAuliffe, Youngkin uploaded a campaign ad to a social media platform highlighting controversial ideas taught at a Fairfax County school, which Youngkin claimed were approved by McAuliffe. In the Youngkin-supported advertisement, Laura Murphy wore a bright red blouse, which signified her affiliation with the Republican party. To clarify, mentioning Murphy's

political affiliation is not an attack on her political views, morals, or beliefs. However, the information is shared to connect the sequence of events surrounding the CRT debate and people's connections to one another. In Youngkin's political advertisement, Murphy stated, "as a mother, it [i]s tough to catch everything" (Youngkin 00:00:00-00:00:03). Then, she recounts the time her son read a book with sexually explicit content and how she took the matter to lawmakers, prompting them to draw up legislation that would have given parents a say. She claimed that "[McAuliffe] does [not] think parents should have a say. He said that; he shut us out. Glenn Youngkin, he listens. He understands parents matter" (Youngkin 00:00:44-00:00:52). "Parents Matter" is a slogan Youngkin's gubernatorial campaign created to represent how his (Youngkin) platform focuses on his support for parents who have opposed education policies at previous state board meetings (Villarreal).

Youngkin uses Laura Murphy's past incident and role as a mother to establish his credibility as a potential Governor who would guarantee that parents have a choice. Murphy's appearance in the ad, I suggest, might be a rhetorical strategy used in politics to appeal to some people's preferences through the rhetoric of parenthood. For instance, Friedman asserts that "[the book-banning] movement has gained momentum from local and national advocacy groups with conservative leanings, as well as political pressure from elected officials" (31). In his research findings, he discovered "at least fifty of these groups working locally and nationally to advocate for book bans—some of which already have hundreds of independent chapters, like Moms for Liberty, a conservative 'parental rights' organization that was founded in December 2020" (31). He also mentions how "these groups pressure schools and school districts to circumvent established guidelines

for determining which books should be used in curriculums or available in school libraries. [These groups even] use the rhetoric of ‘parental rights’ to trump the expertise of educators and librarians, while notably ignoring the differing views of other parents, guardians, and students” (31). Thus, Youngkin’s use of Murphy adds to this notion that parental rights rhetoric heavily impacts the book-banning debate.

Furthermore, a detail omitted from the ad is that Murphy's son was a high school student enrolled in an Advanced Placement course when the incident occurred. The challenging subject matter is covered in the types of courses that fall within this category. Murphy also did not explicitly state in the ad that her son was, at the time, in his twenties and "working as the associate general counsel for the Washington D.C.-based National Congressional Committee" (Villarreal). Two more details not shared in the ad are the book in question, *Beloved*, and that the incident she referenced transpired in 2011. Murphy’s and Youngkin’s comments surrounding parents' rights and books with explicit content fueled the campaign trail, having Youngkin, McAuliffe, and some critics speak out about *Beloved*. McAuliffe expressed his disdain for Youngkin’s ad in a written statement. He contends that Youngkin had fallen in line with some conservative political views surrounding divisive concepts at his campaign’s conception and that banning books by prominent African American authors is an act of concealing their voices (qtd in. Villarreal). McAuliffe adds that Youngkin is “doubl[ing] down on the same divisive culture wars that have fueled his campaign from the beginning, [which is] a racist dog whistle designed to gin up support from the most [influential members] of his party—mainly his top endorser and surrogate, Donald Trump” (qtd in. Villarreal). Furthermore, this chapter presents select excerpts from, *Beloved* to recontextualize the

book in the context of recent criticisms from parents like Murphy and politicians like Youngkin. I also argue for the novel's significance in challenging several historical ideologies about American enslavement. I suggest that *Beloved* has the potential to enlighten readers by "challen[ing] American myths and forc[ing] stories to be told in a way that only great literature can tell" (Williams).

### **Motherhood and Murder: A Brief Characterization of Sethe**

According to Hirsch, in *Representations of Motherhood*, enslavement amplifies and accentuates emotions of closeness and detachment within families and among mothers. It challenges us to consider what it is to be an individual and what it means to dedicate oneself to another, what this implies for families, and how nuclear configurations persist as sources of reference even in systems in which they have been uprooted (95). In *Beloved*, the concepts of family, love, and sacrifice serve as central values. These crucial elements are used to show the harrowing realities of slavery and its degrading impact on the minds and bodies of enslaved mothers. Notably, the novel depicts how the protagonist, Sethe decides to kill her daughter to protect her from the mental and physical afflictions of American enslavement. The novel positions itself at the cornerstone of what it means to be a mother during enslavement, the never-ending struggle between selfishness and altruism, and individuality and collectivism. All these battles are indispensable because they delve deeply into the barbaric consequences of Sethe's decision and the factors that led to it. Not only does the novel use these portrayals of slavery as a storytelling technique, but it also forces readers to consider how the story



of Sethe and all the events in the book should remain in the past and serve as lessons for the present: lessons, not to burden, but to reflect and learn.

Firstly, Sethe's decision to murder Beloved caused her to undergo severe psychological trauma. Sethe's poor mental health indicates the depth of her grief and devotion to her daughter. Sethe would have preferred to mourn the loss of her daughter at her own hand rather than as a result of slavery. The return of Sethe's deceased daughter is a powerful metaphor for the abyss of her maternal love and vulnerable mental condition. In the novel, "Sethe's dead daughter, the one of whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her. Sethe was worn down, speckled, dying, spinning, changing shapes, and generally bedeviled. That this daughter beat her, tied her to the bed, and pulled out all of her hair...." (Morrison 300). The position of a mother entails several obligations, the most prominent of which is the responsibility to protect. Sethe had endured the horrors of slavery, from bearing several children for the advantage of her enslaver to having her milk taken away as if she were an animal. Sethe realized that it was her primary duty as a mother to safeguard her children from the afflictions of captivity. She did not want them to take a path she had already traversed. Sethe reflected on her love for her daughter when she said, "BELOVED, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will, and I don't have to explain a thing. I didn't have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe, and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough, and she back now. I knew she would be...." (Morrison 236). Enslaved mothers were breeders who gave birth to lucrative assets instead of human beings (Hirsch 101), a role that an enslaved woman did not choose nor want but one that was imposed on her. To compare, some parents' backlash on *Beloved*, like Murphy,

further drives the point that Black voices in literature are being concealed. In retrospect, some parents' actions to “protect” their children could possibly, steer them away from the truths about American history and potentially be a form of contemporary oppression.

Also, slaveholders depended on mothers' love for their children and the need for them to labor in a way that pleased their masters while also suppressing this love by selling off their children. Enslaved mothers' primary role was to train their children to be excellent laborers for their owners, only to have the children taken from their care and auctioned off to the highest bidder, never to see their mothers again. So, Sethe's decision to kill her daughter was based on the life lessons she had learned. She knew her daughter would one day be the woman slaveholders desired, to breed her and seize her children one by one, sexually assault her, take her milk, and devour her humanism and righteousness. Sethe opted to deny her beloved daughter these worldly experiences. Her daughter's return signifies Sethe's anguish and the psychological suffering she experienced as a contributor to her decision. Even though Sethe believed it was right to end her daughter's life, her action adversely impacted her.

In addition, the spirit of Sethe's daughter appeared because Beloved was not at peace, a comfort only Sethe could provide. The dead daughter's soul longed to know why Sethe had murdered it, and this notion demonstrates how restless, bewildered, and lost the spirit felt without its mother. Thus, Sethe, feeling an obligation to her late daughter, attempted to plead her case:

Sethe began to talk, explain, and describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children, waving away flies in grape arbors, crawling on her knees to a lean-to. None of which made the impression it was supposed to...And

Sethe cried, saying she never did or meant to—that she had to get them out, away, that she had milk all the time and had the money too for the stone but not enough. That her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side forever. (Morrison 284)

Sethe wanted Beloved to understand all the struggles undertaken to give her a better future, a future filled with a freedom that would have been nonexistent if Sethe had not sacrificed herself for Beloved and the rest of her children. Because of Sethe's decisions, she is cut off from her children and her husband, Halle, for good when she sends them to freedom without her. During American enslavement, not even one's own body could be considered their own property. An enslaved woman's body belonged to her master, since enslaved persons were labeled as property rather than human beings. The white masters could steal everything from Sethe, even her mother's breast milk. Her pregnancy and childbirth are not intended to be hers but rather theirs (Hirsch 98-99). As the novel states, "slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them" (Morrison 247).

Also, murdering Beloved symbolizes Sethe's love for her daughter and the transference of her independence. Sethe chose Beloved's path instead of the predetermined one for her, which would have been a journey of perpetual terror, agony, suffering, demoralizing treatment, and potentially rape. To Sethe, Beloved would not be the target of an enslaver's sexual fantasies, nor would she be condemned to relive the traumatic sexual aggressions inflicted on her constantly, nor would she hate herself or other men due to the psychological effects of rape victimization. Sethe said, "...[she

would] explain to her, even though [she does not] have to. Why [she] did it. How if [she] hadn't killed her, she would have died, and that is something [she] could not bear to happen to her. When [she] explains it, [Beloved would] understand because she understands everything already...." (Morrison 236). Because of the institution of slavery, wherein mothers were not permitted to claim their kids, the alienation and despair they underwent were amplified (Hirsch 99). Sethe's experiences serve as the epitome of the meaning of mothering and denote how she reclaims her children by sending them off to the freedom possible only through death.

Sethe's mothering involved sacrifice, grief, wrath, spite, and, most prominently, love and a willingness to prioritize her children's well-being and liberation above hers. Sethe was a mother with grit and resolved to consider the long-term consequences of slavery on her children's lives, and she determined the best path to take for them. She hoped for her children to experience a life of individual freedom, love, and the ability to be human, as opposed to a demoralizing life in slavery. Sethe exemplifies what it means to be a mother and a powerful woman during enslavement. Her decision to murder her daughter was aimed at bettering her destiny. This story is unpleasant and staggering; this novel is not meant to be neat; it is intended to rouse readers and should be shared. Overall, the novel is designed to educate and enlighten readers about American enslavement to aid in contemporary society's progression.

### **Skin to Kin: An Examination of the Role of Gang Rape in '*Beloved*'**

During slavery, it was not illegal to rape an enslaved woman. Because captives were viewed as property rather than people, enslavers had sole authority to rape the

women they owned. The issue of property rights played a significant role in court decisions when enslaved women were raped. The courts defended that enslaved women belonged to their enslavers and that their masters' sexual acts were legitimate (Pokorak 8). Also, the absence of recourse for raped enslaved women existed long before African enslaved peoples were imported into the United States. During the Transatlantic Slave Trade, women captives were raped by ship personnel before being sold into slavery (Muhammad 899). As a byproduct of sexual assault, many enslaved women became pregnant, which increased their value to enslavers because it enhanced their enslaver's fortune. Subsequently, enslavers rejected surrendering their power and influence and the right to rape enslaved women because they reaped financial advantages from the institution of slavery ("Sexual Violence Targeting Black Women"). On the other hand, the raping of Black women did not avoid controversy.

A white mob gang raped a group of Black women in 1866, which led Black women activists to speak out against rape violence (Greensite 1). Maria Stewart, Ida B. Wells, and Sojourner Truth, among others, advocated for the equality of Black women despite the courts' opposition. Wells orchestrated anti-lynching initiatives, and Truth became the first woman to connect Black condemnation with women's sexual objectification in her "Ain't I a Woman" speech ("Sexual Violence Targeting Black Women"; Greensite 1). These ladies' efforts and many others were instrumental in forming the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence. Significant progress has been made on black women's issues over the years, but much remains to be done.

Regarding *Beloved*, the motif of rape depicts the tragedies and marginalization enslaved women experienced while in captivity and represents contemporary Black

women's adversities. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself*, Jacobs proclaims, "slavery is terrible for men[,] but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own" (qtd. in Louis 277). Louis explains, "Jacobs offers stories of mothers who experienced a great deal of sorrow, agony, and even thoughts of suicide because they were separated from their children" (288). *Beloved* demonstrates this concept by explaining Ella's trauma with gang rape:

[Sethe] told Denver she believed Beloved had been locked up by some white man for his own purposes and never let out the door. That she must have escaped to a bridge or someplace and rinsed the rest out of her mind. Something like that had happened to Ella, except it was two men—a father and son—and Ella remembered every bit of it. For more than a year, they kept her locked in a room for themselves. (Morrison 140)

At that moment, Sethe thought of the possibility that her dead daughter, if she had not murdered her, would also have been a victim of rape. She recalls Ella's traumatic effects of being gang-raped, signifying most enslaved women's horrendous experiences. As a result of being raped, Ella was mentally disturbed. She said, "you couldn't think up...what them to had done to me" (140). Ella's victimization amplifies how deeply affected the female psyche is damaged after being sexually assaulted. Accordingly, "sexual assault can have mental, psychological, and spiritual effects for survivors. These effects can be both short and long-term. Short-term symptoms typically included anxiety and arousal symptoms that were not present before the traumatic event..." (qtd. in

Tillman et al., 60) Psychological trauma varies in rape victims, and Ella's experiences mirror the possible mental disturbances of actual rape victimization.

Moreover, Murphy's comment that *Beloved* is "too strong for teenage readers" (qtd. in Shapiro) is understandable; however, it is essential to note that Black literature contains vivid imagery, unconventional language, and even mature themes (Stanford and Amin 6), a writing style used to describe Black people's experiences best. With African American literature having close ties with African heritage, it departs from British literature's linguistic, argumentative, and storytelling conventions (Stanford and Amin 7). In conjunction with this idea, writing about a topic such as enslavement is not easy or enjoyable for African American writers, but it is essential. The stories reflect the uncomfortable truths of Black people's lived experiences in the past and modern society, serve as learning tools for younger generations and act as glimmers of hope and innovation for the future. In part, Black literature pertains to stories of horror, traumatization, and triumph, and when authentically written, can cause readers to feel the emotional depths of characters; these stories are meant to pull the reader along the journey to understand the endless trauma that Black people endured historically and in modern-day America.

### **The Representation of Bestiality in Enslavement**

In an interview with the *Washington Post* in 2013, Murphy expressed concerns about her son reading *Beloved*. She stated that "to [her] mature references mean slavery or the Holocaust...[she did] not [think that her] kid [would be] reading a book with bestiality" (qtd. in Shapiro). Murphy's statement suggests that while mature themes are

appropriate for her child to read, what she interprets as bestiality is not. Also, Murphy's comment indicates she may lack some essential knowledge about the dehumanizing treatment enslaved people endured during slavery, or perhaps she has not educated herself sufficiently about the subject matter or considered the significance of animalistic themes in the novel. It is important to recognize that enslaved individuals were treated inhumanely before their exportation to West, South America, and Western Europe. While *Beloved* includes animalistic themes, it is more important to recognize what these themes represent. Thus, this section provides an overview of enslaved people's unjust treatment at the Elmina castle in Ghana to illustrate and correlate to the scenes of bestiality in *Beloved*.

In 1482 the Portuguese built the Elmina castle to serve as slave-holding quarters (Richards 622). Elmina was a vital station in the slave trade and a form of imprisonment for those captured as European countries started to overrun Africa for enslaved people (Deb and Segun). Today, the Elima castle and others alike can be toured to honor those enslaved, serve as a physical representation of the Slave Trade, and a place of origin and self-identification for African Americans. One scholar describes the castle as having no furniture on the upper level. The depiction of the empty rooms was as though visitors stood in for the room's absence; they became the individuals it needed to complete its narrative, allowing the void to seize control of their minds and transfer them to an alternate reality where they might see the inhumane treatment of enslaved people without being discovered. The lower level holds the slave dungeons reside. Enslaved people were held in dungeons that had no proper restrooms. An Elimina Castle tour guide, Afful, recalled that "...there were no toilets [or] bathrooms. In some cases, [enslaved people]



had straws on the floor, which they used as a mattress and so on...in all these dungeons, they were given buckets, which they were expected to ease themselves...But because of [their conditions], the chains they had on their feet made it almost impossible for them to get to this bucket” (qtd. in Deb and Segun). Consequently, captives would urinate in the exact place they slept. This notion carries over to the novel when the captive men undergo harsh conditions in bondage:

It was decided to lock everybody down in the boxes till it either stopped or lightened up so a whiteman could walk, damnit, without flooding his gun, and the dogs could quit shivering. The chain was threaded through forty-six loops of the best hand-forged iron in Georgia. It rained. In the boxes, the men heard the water rise in the trench and looked out for cottonmouths. They squatted in muddy water, slept above it, [and] peed in it. (Richards 129)

This scene is grueling and might be challenging to read, but it mirrors actual occurrences. The scene also highlights the significance of Morrison's usage; I suggest that Morrison's depiction of this scene is intended to explain captives' lived experiences consisting of all the dimensions of emotion and discomfort necessary to tell the story of captives in the rarest and authentic forms.

On the castle's second floor were the officers' quarters, attached with a balcony overlooking the women's dungeons. Officers chose an enslaved woman to indulge their libidinous urges (623-624). If the enslaved woman refused them, the officers would chain her to a circular weight figure that latched onto her, so she could never move more than a few millimeters before being reminded of her entrapment. As part of her punishment, the misbehaving woman was forced to starve while also braving inclement weather.

Moreover, the pathway between the male and female chambers led to the "door of no return," which required visitors to Elmina Castle to re-imagine some of the captives' sufferings, thereby perpetuating memorable affiliations. The environment is murky, so tourists must crouch down and go single-file toward where the captives would have boarded the transporter ships during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It is believed that those enslaved who walked considerable distances from the enclosure saw the first glimpse of the ocean and continued their fall into the unfathomable (625). In a system where the purchaser had little to no power over how each enslaved person was identified, consumers felt compelled to mark their new property most cruelly. Notably, [the enslavers placed an enslaved person's body part] in [a] fire, already hav[ing] some oil on their body (to) prepare them for the journey. [The enslavers] burn[ed] them on the skin" (qtd. In Deb and Segun). Afterward, the captives boarded ships by the Door of No Return, labeled and subdued (Deb and Segun). Similar to this event is Morrison's description of Paul D's realization of his worth to the enslavers who captured him:

Shackled, walking through the perfumed thighs honeybees love, Paul D hears the men talking and, for the first time, learns his worth. He has always known, or believed he did, his value—as a hand, a laborer who could make a profit on a farm—but now he discovers his worth, which is to say he learns his price. The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future. (Morrison 267)

Since "normally [enslavers] want[ed] the healthy captives, so first, they [would] have an instrument that they use[d] to open [captives mouths] to count the number of teeth that they had" (qtd. in Deb and Segun). Upon completing this task, they would send them to

their chambers (Deb and Sugun). Paul D's experience explains enslavers' perception of captives as property rather than people, which is an imperative scene because of the utilization of animalist themes to illustrate this notion best. Another scene that furthers this point is when Sixo sings moments before he is executed. In the novel, "He begins to sing...Five guns are trained on him as they listen...Finally, one of them hits Sixo with a rifle, and when he comes to, a hickory fire is in front of him, and he is tied at the waist to a tree. Schoolteacher has changed his mind: 'This one will never be suitable (Morrison 265). This scene is used to invigorate readers' comprehension of the depth of Black people's feelings [historically and presently] despite the insanity of their subjugation. This scene is where compassion resides. The white men who seized Sixo on his last effort to flee Sweet Home burned him to death. Still, he kept his faith in the prospect of the advent of the kid he was expecting with Thirty-Mile Woman, so he smiled and shouted, 'Seven-O!' (Williams). Sixo's faith and death were influential because they exemplified his hope that his current oppression would serve as a sacrifice for his son's freedom. In comparison, the scenes written in *Beloved* parallel historical events where captives endured harsh treatment in hopes that one day future generations would not undergo the same subjugation.

Teaching about slavery and the harmful adverse effects on enslaved people means going beyond the surface-level version of enslavement to address the particularities of gang rape and inhumane treatment. It is possible that learning about crucial events might cause discomfort. However, this discomfort allows discourse on challenging or controversial topics to explore more fully and urges people to think critically about America's past to learn and evolve. The debate over *Beloved's*

"appropriateness" or "suitability" offers an opportunity for us to think about the goals of education in a democracy. As a society, we need to decide whether to teach students historically accurate, albeit disturbing, narratives. And understand that it is essential to tell the unvarnished truth of slavery's brutality if educators are going to teach about enslavement.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis expounds on the current debate surrounding the censorship of African American authors in the wake of the pandemic, specifically focusing on critiques of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in Virginia. Two theoretical frameworks guided the research: AAC and CRT, which sought to explain the importance of reading stories like *Beloved* and the impact of works by Black authors on American readers, particularly young readers. The researcher also draws on Edbauer's notion of "Rhetorical Ecologies" (Edbauer 20) to demonstrate how the debate on CRT, censorship, criticisms of *Beloved*, police brutality, and the pandemic are all part of the argument to show a cause and effect of events, how these factors are part of larger ecologies driving the debate, and more so how these occurrences are interconnected.

Moreover, the research addressed the following questions: How might AAC and CRT provide a useful framework for reframing criticisms about *Beloved*? How might criticisms about *Beloved* contribute to censoring African American writers? Within the thesis, the researcher found that the criticisms, particularly those waged by parents like Laura Murphy, against *Beloved* may not be couched in hostility. Rather, they might come from a parent's desire to protect their child and ensure them the best possible education, which is understandable. Still, I suggest that some interpretations of CRT and criticisms of *Beloved* are taken out of context, perhaps due to a lack of knowledge critics have about CRT and the lived experiences of enslaved people during enslavement. For this reason, I

suggest that more, not less, education is needed to fully understand the depths of American slavery, the emotional and psychological effects on enslaved people, and the numerous traces of oppression that persist in contemporary society.

Some key takeaways from this thesis are that what students are taught in school is crucial because it affects how they view the world and other people. To teach students about American slavery means teaching unvarnished truths about slavery by finding suitable approaches to the subject matter. Black students reading books like *Beloved* is vital so they can begin to envision themselves in the world and the world. Reading works like *Beloved* to learn about enslaved people's experiences is essential.

With atrocities that have occurred during the pandemic, from millions of people witnessing the murder of George Floyd among countless others, Black Lives Matter protests, banning African American authors' works, and current efforts to ban African American history. Slavery was the initial oppression of Black people, and the debate surrounding banning African Americans' history and literature is another. I suggest these actions imply that African Americans are still viewed as second-class citizens whose voices are suppressed 158 years after the end of slavery; however, some people, I propose, fail to acknowledge that enslavement built the foundation of this country, and Black people still play a central role in America today.

As I demonstrated in this thesis, Black people's stories are undeniably raw and authentic; our voices are loud and will not be ignored; our history is important; our literature is essential; we are worthy of being heard. So, African American writers will not stop writing “challenging” literature because their work is worth sharing and serve educational value.

As a message to my people: Enslavement didn't break us; Jim Crow made us stronger; segregation made us resilient and more powerful, so police brutality and censorship will not bind us because we are survivors like our ancestors, and we will stop at nothing until a change comes.

***Several recommendations for keeping *Beloved* and other Black literature in the classroom are below:***

1. Adopt a culturally relevant pedagogy for teaching Black students so teachers, especially non-Black, attain a better understanding of students' lived experiences to get to know students beyond the surface level.
2. Educators could find creative approaches to introducing novels like *Beloved*. For example, before reading a novel, teachers could present challenging themes in the book to get students' thoughts and concerns during a class discussion. After gaining student feedback, the teacher can assess how best to navigate the novel. The teacher could break the novel into sections, where students read two or three chapters at a time and then have a group discussion to reflect on the readings. Assigning the students a few chapters at a time allows them to thoroughly read the novel and reflect on what they have learned. The class discussions will allow the students to ask questions or voice their concerns about the novel and gain clarification so the book is not taken out of context.
3. Create opportunities for experienced educators with expansive knowledge of teaching challenging literature to assist new teachers or other teachers having

issues with teaching challenging literature to help them implement these teachings in the classroom.



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