

# OUR HISTORY HAS ALWAYS BEEN CONTRABAND IN DEFENSE OF BLACK STUDIES

“The centuries-long attack on Black history represents a strike against our very worth, brilliance, and value. We’re ready to fight back. And when we fight, we win.”

—Colin Kaepernick



## ABOUT THE BOOK

Since its founding as a discipline, Black Studies has been under relentless attack by social and political forces seeking to discredit and neutralize it. *Our History Has Always Been Contraband* was born out of an urgent need to respond to the latest threat: efforts to remove content from an AP African American Studies course being piloted in high schools across the United States. Edited by Colin Kaepernick, Robin D. G. Kelley, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Our History Has Always Been Contraband* brings together canonical texts and authors in Black Studies, including those excised from or not included in the AP curriculum.

Featuring writings by: David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, Zora Neale Hurston, W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, James Baldwin, June Jordan, Angela Y. Davis, Robert Allen, Barbara Smith, Toni Cade Bambara, bell hooks, Barbara Christian, Patricia Hill Collins, Cathy J. Cohen, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Saidiya Hartman, Khalil Gibran Muhammad, and many others.

*Our History Has Always Been Contraband* excerpts readings that cut across and between literature, political theory, law, psychology, sociology, gender and sexuality studies, queer and feminist theory, and history. This volume also includes original essays by editors Kaepernick, Kelley, and Taylor, elucidating how we got here, and pieces by Brea Baker, Marlon Williams-Clark, and Roderick A. Ferguson detailing how we can fight back.

To read *Our History Has Always Been Contraband* is to be an outlaw for liberation. These writings illuminate the ways we can collectively work toward freedom for all—through abolition, feminism, racial justice, economic empowerment, self-determination, desegregation, decolonization, reparations, queer liberation, cultural and artistic expression, and beyond.

## ABOUT THIS GUIDE'S AUTHOR

**Rachael Zafer** is a writer, educator, and social change consultant. Rachael provides creative and technical consulting to nonprofits and institutions across the country. She is the author of discussion guides for over thirty books, available for free download and use at [www.rachaelzafer.com](http://www.rachaelzafer.com).

## Preface | Colin Kaepernick

1. What is the significance of recent laws and policies restricting the teaching of Black Studies? How do these laws and policies attack Black people and social justice movements? How can you use your skills and resources to defend the movements you believe in?
2. Why is it important to draw connections between past and present struggles? How can you do as Colin Kaepernick asks and “defend our stories, our community, our humanity, and our future no matter the cost”?

## PART ONE: HOW WE GOT HERE

### On Racial Justice, Black History, Critical Race Theory, and Other Felonious Ideas | Robin D. G. Kelley

3. How did students, teachers, and community organizers resist the College Board’s attempts to change curriculum? Were their efforts successful? Why or why not? How is this book a response to the latest war on Black Studies? How can you actively oppose the rising tide of fascism in your community?
4. Why is the right’s opposition to Black Studies expected? How do bans on Black Studies emerge from feelings of guilt and shame? How do they generate fear? What can you do to resist fear, in yourself and in others?

### Black Studies Is Political, Radical, Indispensable, and Insurgent | Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

5. How did the Black liberation movement on college campuses demand that Black politics be integrated into academic studies? How did recent attacks on schools, education, and curricula emerge from a concern about the radicalization of young white people?
6. Why is it important to protect Black Studies? How can Black Studies serve as a “springboard for ongoing exploration, debate, and study of history”? What does it mean for Black Studies to be insurgent?

## PART TWO: THE HISTORY THEY DON'T WANT YOU TO KNOW

### *Walker’s Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World (1829)* | David Walker

7. What did David Walker risk in distributing this text as a pamphlet? Why were his words inflammatory to Southern enslavers?
8. Walker asserts that “Americans may be as vigilant as they please, but they cannot be vigilant enough for the Lord, neither can they hide themselves, where he will not find and bring them out.” How is this statement relevant today? What must we refuse and resist?

### “The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro” (July 5, 1852) | Frederick Douglass

9. What contradiction between the celebration of freedom on the Fourth of July and the reality for Black folks across the country does Frederick Douglass articulate? Why does he state that he must be in mourning on this date?
10. Why does Douglass believe that “the nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July”? How does he articulate the meaning of the day to enslaved people? Does this speech change how you think about the US holiday? Why or why not?

**“The New Master and Mistress” from *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) | Harriet Jacobs**

11. What is the significance of having an early and comprehensive narrative written by an enslaved woman? Have you previously read any narratives by enslaved people? Why or why not?
12. How does Harriet Jacobs describe the violence of slavery? What were some of the perceived reasons for this violence? Why is it important to learn about this history?

**“Our Raison D’être” from *A Voice from the South* (1892) | Anna Julia Cooper**

13. How does Anna Julia Cooper describe the “Silent South”? Describe recent attempts to mute the voices of Black women. How have Black women and their allies resisted?
14. What demands does Cooper have for including Black women’s voices in the US narrative? How can you commit to studying the scholarship of Black women?

**“Introduction” from *Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo”* (1931) | Zora Neale Hurston**

15. Who was Cudjo Lewis? Why did Zora Neale Hurston publish her personal interviews with Lewis? What did she learn about Lewis’ experience?
16. What does Lewis mean when he shares of himself that he is “partly a free man, partly free”?

**“Political Education Neglected” from *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933) | Carter G. Woodson**

17. What critiques of the US education system does Carter G. Woodson write about? How does he critique the ways that US government is taught?
18. How is education taught as a form of social control? Why are separate histories written and taught? Why is this still happening today?

**“The Propaganda of History” from *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935) | W. E. B. Du Bois**

19. How does W. E. B. Du Bois argue that the teaching of US history helped to uphold the status quo? How does he describe the unique shames of the American South and the American North?
20. What aspects of American history were falsified or eliminated at the time of Du Bois’ writing? What has changed and what has stayed the same? Why is it important to pay attention to omissions, particularly within the teaching of US history?

**“The San Domingo Masses Begin” from *The Black Jacobins* (1938) | C. L. R. James**

21. What is the significance of the revolt that C. L. R. James writes about? How does this essay serve as a critique on liberal reform for the purpose of Black freedom?
22. What strategy did Louverture and his Black followers take? Why was learning the art of war more impactful than resisting with higher numbers?

**“The Origin of Negro Slavery” from *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) | Eric Williams**

23. Why does Eric Williams argue that the reason for slavery was economic, rather than based on race? How did the ideology of race rationalize economic exploitation?
24. How did patterns of migration and white flight reinforce Williams’ belief that climate was not a rational argument for enslavement? How do you see this continuing today?

**“A Talk to Teachers” (October 16, 1963) | James Baldwin**

25. What is the paradox of education that James Baldwin writes about? What does Baldwin believe is the purpose of education?
26. What approach does Baldwin urge teachers to take, particularly when teaching about history and US society? What responsibility do teachers and other educated people have to influence and change the status quo?

**Black Panther Party “Ten-Point Program” (1966) | Huey Newton and Bobby Seale**

27. What were the core demands of the Black Panther Party’s “Ten-Point Program” authored by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale? How are these demands still reflected in organizing movements today?
28. What were the core beliefs of the Black Panther Party’s “Ten-Point Program”? Which belief resonates most with your own principles?

**“Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” from *Black Women’s Manifesto* (1969) | Frances Beal**

29. Why does Frances Beal assert that an analysis of capitalism must be present for revolution? What does it mean to live for revolution?
30. In Beal’s view, what active role should women take in revolution? What traditional relationships between men and women need to be rewritten? Why will the revolution fail without women?

**“Black Studies: Bringing Back the Person” (1969) | June Jordan**

31. According to June Jordan, what does Black American history prepare people to do? What does it prepare Black students and Black people for?
32. How does Jordan describe the function of US universities? What changes does Jordan demand? How can you join her call to resist universities “where the people become usable parts of the whole machine”?

**“Toward a Black Psychology” (1970) | Joseph White**

33. Why is it of critical importance to develop a theory of Black psychology that is developed from the experiences of Black people? What are some of the limitations of utilizing a Euro-centric psychology to describe and understand the mental wellness of Black Americans?
34. How have compensatory and enrichment educational programs failed to support Black young people? What are some of the skills and talents that Joseph White describes that a white researcher in a Black home would fail to recognize? How is this replicated today?

***Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves* (1971) | Angela Y. Davis**

35. Why is it important to study the history of Black women who resisted enslavement? How did women define themselves through their many acts of resistance? What are some of the rebellions that Angela Y. Davis writes about?
36. Why is it important to study the history of the Black woman “transcending, refusing, fighting back, asserting herself over and against terrifying obstacles”? How does the erasure of her experience uphold male supremacy?

**“Politics of the Attack on Black Studies” (1974) | Robert Allen**

37. How did Black Studies develop from the Black student movement? Why is it important to study this interest, demand, and expansion? What was unique about this movement in the 1960s?

38. How was the demand for Black Studies democratic and integrationist? What can we learn from this movement in order to confront white power structures today? What are some of the historical tactics Robert Allen writes about that could be employed today?

**“A Black Feminist Statement” (1977) | The Combahee River Collective**

39. How did the Combahee River Collective think about Black women’s liberation and identity? How does the collective write about the connections between race, class, and sex oppression? How do they write about the intersections between feminism, capitalism, and imperialism?

40. Why does the collective articulate the importance of understanding class while fighting for liberation for Black women? Why do they assert that “a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation”?

**“Toward a Black Feminist Criticism” (1977) | Barbara Smith**

41. What is the invisibility that Barbara Smith writes about? What is the source of blindness to this invisibility? How did Smith break the silence about Black women’s existence, experience, and culture?

42. Why is it important to create spaces for Black woman-identified art to flourish? Have more of these spaces been created since Smith’s essay? How can you support this visibility and art-making?

**“The Lost Races of Science Fiction” (1980) | Octavia Butler**

43. What critique of science fiction does Octavia Butler share? Why was there so little representation of Black people within the genre?

44. In what other mediums and genres do you see “whites representing all of humanity”? How has this changed since Butler’s writing in 1980? How has it stayed the same?

**“Foreword, 1981” from *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981) | Toni Cade Bambara**

45. Why does Toni Cade Bambara argue for political alliances led by women of color? What was her vision for *This Bridge Called My Back*?

46. How does Bambara propose that we “make revolution irresistible”? How can you contribute to and participate in revolution?

**“Introduction: The Politics of Black Women’s Studies” from *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies* (1982) | Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith**

47. Why do Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith assert that using the term “Black women’s studies” is charged with political significance? What is the importance of Black women naming themselves within the academy? How have Black women been separated from recognized intellectual work?

48. Why can the field of Black women’s studies only expand with a Black and feminist analysis? What are some of the difficulties and risks that Black women face within academia? Why do Hull and Smith assert that doing the work of creating Black women’s studies requires both intellectual intensity and the deepest courage?

**“Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory” from *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984) | bell hooks**

49. How did bell hooks’ lived experience lead her to question the politics of male supremacy and sexist socialization? How has your lived experience shaped your relationship to feminism?
50. What did hooks experience with her white colleagues and peers? Why is it important to pay attention to attempts by white feminists to silence Black women? How can this behavior be interrupted and shifted?

**“The Race for Theory” (1987) | Barbara Christian**

51. What is “the race for theory” that Barbara Christian describes? How does this race for theory impact Black writers and scholars?
52. How has Black theory, often in narrative forms, been excluded from recognition and inclusion as theory? Why does Christian assert that theory must have some relationship to practice? What is the value of literary criticism? What are some of its limitations?

**“The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought” (1989) | Patricia Hill Collins**

53. What is the tradition of Black feminist thought that contributed to Patricia Hill Collins’ writing? What is the difference between a Eurocentric masculinist epistemology and an Afrocentric feminist epistemology? Who is often granted academic credentials and who is not?
54. What are some of the conflicting standards on Black feminist thought for Black women, Black women scholars, and epistemological requirements within academia? How does an Afrocentric feminist epistemology challenge current truths and the process of arriving at those truths?

**“African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race” (1992) | Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham**

55. How have Black people sought to “dismantle and deconstruct the dominant society’s deployment of race”? What is the cultural identity of race for Black Americans that Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham writes about?
56. What is the “two-ness” of being American and Black, written about by both Du Bois and Higginbotham?

**“White Lines” from *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (1996) | Ian Haney López**

57. How does Ian Haney López assert that the law is used to create and uphold the construct of race? How have you witnessed connections between the law and race today?
58. How does race impact the physical, social, and material levels of social systems? If the law is used to construct and maintain race, can it also be used to deconstruct race? Why or why not?

**“Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” (1997) | Cathy J. Cohen**

59. What is the intersectional analysis within queer theory and queer politics that Cathy J. Cohen calls for? What are some of the difficulties of developing a more nuanced understanding of power?
60. What does it mean to have identities and communities “complicated and destabilized through a recognition of the multiple social positions and relations to dominant power found within any one category or identity”? How can you commit to doing this work?

**“Race: The Floating Signifier” (1997) | Stuart Hall**

61. Why is classification a cultural impulse? How is classification used to determine who has power and who does not have power? What happens when something breaks or defies classification? How does this apply to race?
62. What does Stuart Hall argue is the function of politics? Why is it important to focus on politics when working to end the oppression of Black people?

**“Color Blindness, History, and the Law” from *The House That Race Built* (1997) | Kimberlé Crenshaw**

63. How does Kimberlé Crenshaw make the argument that the law upholds oppression? How does the law grant and deny social power?
64. What is the “doctrine of color blindness” that Crenshaw writes about? How does color blindness intertwine with the social discourse of victimhood, victimology, and invisibility of the law?

**“Introduction: Black Studies and the Racial Mountain” from *Dispatches from the Ebony Tower* (2000) | Manning Marable**

65. How does Manning Marable characterize the Black intellectual tradition as descriptive, corrective, and prescriptive? Why is it critical to connect the Black intellectual tradition to Black Studies?
66. According to Marable, what is the purpose of Black scholarship? Is this similar to your own beliefs about the purpose of Black Studies? How does Black Studies have the power to dismantle racism and white supremacy?

**“Venus in Two Acts” (2008) | Saidiya Hartman**

67. What questions does Saidiya Hartman pose about who can create and retell narratives of violence and suffering? Why does she believe that narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of the present?
68. What is the “terrible beauty” that Hartman writes about? What are some examples of scenes of subjection today? How can these scenes be revisited and viewed without replicating violence?

**“Conclusion: The Conundrum of Criminality” from *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America* (2010) | Khalil Gibran Muhammad**

69. How was the concept of Black criminality integral to the formation of modern America? What does Khalil Gibran Muhammad mean when he asserts that this idea “shaped the ‘public transcript’ of the modern urban world”?
70. How did the idea of Black criminality constrain the growth of Black Studies? Why is it important to consider options when using and interpreting crime statistics? What are some of the limitations of using this kind of data?

**“Introduction” from *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010) | Michelle Alexander**

71. Why is it a false notion that the War on Drugs was launched in response to crack cocaine? How was this false idea bolstered by media narratives that circulated negative racial stereotypes?
72. How did the War on Drugs explode the US prison system? How has this expanded since Michelle Alexander’s writing? How has this war created an undercaste of young Black men locked out of mainstream employment and subject to legalized discrimination?

**“The Case for Reparations” (2014) | Ta-Nehisi Coates**

73. How are Black families impacted by the racial wealth gap? How are Black people segregated by neighborhood? How does this concentrate disadvantage?
74. Why does Ta-Nehisi Coates advocate for reparations? What would it require to successfully advance reparations for Black people? What is needed to close the racial wealth gap in the US?

**“Black Study, Black Struggle” (2016) | Robin D. G. Kelley**

75. How does Robin D. G. Kelley follow the reminder to “Love. Study. Struggle.”? How are these concepts interconnected? Which word resonates most with you?
76. Whether in the classroom or outside of it, how can you study with others for the sake of building a better world? Who are some of the people and institutions Kelley has learned from? Are there authors on Kelley’s list that you would like to learn more from?

**“Barack Obama—The End of an Illusion” from *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (2016) | Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor**

77. How was President Obama different from presidential candidate Obama? How did he speak about race during his campaign?
78. What were some of the ways that Obama failed to meaningfully advance racial justice? What potential does a US president have to effect change? How did the murder of Trayvon Martin shift national rhetoric about racial justice?

**“Introduction” from *Abolition. Feminism. Now.* (2022) | Angela Y. Davis, Gina Dent, Erica R. Meiners, and Beth E. Richie**

79. How did George Floyd’s murder catalyze a new wave of abolitionist demands? What radical movements were a precedent to these demands? Why is it important to learn the history of Black, queer, and trans radical movements and organizers?
80. How did Du Bois forecast current abolitionist approaches? Which of the four approaches included in this text feel most attainable? Which approach feels most challenging?

**“Introduction: Black Health Matters” from *Black Disability Politics* (2022) | Sami Schalk**

81. How did James Baldwin’s writing about the Harlem riots of 1943 connect individual emotional reactions to deeper systemic issues? How does systemic racism (the ways that society perpetuates racism through systems) impact the psychological and emotional health of a community? What are some of the harmful ways that white people react to Black rage or distrust?
82. How did the 2014 uprisings in Ferguson, Missouri reveal some of the impacts of systemic oppression and discrimination? What were Black residents forced to endure? What are some similarities between the Harlem riots, demonstrations in Ferguson, and the 2015 protests in Baltimore?

## **PART THREE: HOW WE FIGHT BACK**

### **When Black Studies Is Contraband, We Must Be Outlaws | Brea Baker**

83. How was Brea Baker guided by her ancestors and elders? What are some of the texts she has been influenced by? What are some texts that have shaped you and your understanding of history?
84. How can we continue movement work with “those currently in the belly of the beast”? How can you commit to “read, learn, and organize our way to a more just future”?

### **History Is a Beautiful, Ugly Story, and We Must Teach It | Marlon Williams-Clark**

85. How can Black history be taught accurately and responsibly? Why is this history our history, regardless of our racial identities? How can critiquing our country be an act of love?
86. What does it mean to become curators of our history? What actions can you take to hold school systems in your community accountable to an accurate and responsible education?

### **In the Spirit of the Midnight School | Roderick A. Ferguson**

87. What was significant about the midnight school that Roderick A. Ferguson writes about? What were some of the “crucial principles needed for this historic challenge” found within the school?
88. What can we learn from the history of social movements? Why is it important to build and commit to the power of non-elites? Ferguson provides examples of how to take action, from coordinating curricular efforts to supporting Black bookstores and libraries. How can you take action?