



## EDUCATIONAL LIBERTY ALLIANCE

*“The teacher ought also to be especially on his guard against taking unfair advantage of the students' immaturity by indoctrinating him with the teacher's own opinions before the student has had an opportunity fairly to examine other opinions upon the matters of question, and before he has sufficient knowledge and ripeness in judgment to be entitled to form any definitive opinion of his own.”*

-American Association of University Professors Declaration of Principles, 1915

### **OPPORTUNITY FOR SELF-DISCOVERY**

**By Erec Smith**

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I firmly believe that the opportunity for self-discovery in K-12 education—that is, the opportunity to determine for oneself who one is and wants to be—is endangered by contemporary social justice endeavors, especially the ones deemed “anti-racist.” For anti-racist educators, most saliently those inspired by Critical Race Theory (CRT), group affiliation is the primary way to define oneself and others. As a black man, I am happy that anti-racism has become centralized in Western society, but as an individual, I think robbing each other, particularly students, of the opportunity of self-discovery is too large a price to pay.

I learned to appreciate individuality on my own road to self-discovery. As a teenager in school, my reading of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Self-Reliance” confirmed the power and fulfillment that goes hand-in-hand with acquiring individual agency. I thought of this essay as some kind of sacred text that set me on a path toward discovering my life’s meaning. Regarding this, perhaps the most significant statement in the essay is this: “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind. Absolve you to yourself, and you shall have the suffrage of the world.” This statement, which concisely renders the message and spirit of the essay, was not just *permission* to live my own life; it gave me *a* mission to do so. It was my duty, to myself and the world, to define myself how I want to be defined.

So, when I see a new movement in which individuality is purposefully erased in the name of group affiliation, I bristle. Much contemporary anti-racism deprives students of the mental, emotional, and potentially spiritual experience of self-discovery. Contemporary CRT-

inspired anti-racism postulates that group affiliation is more significant than one's individual sense of self. At worst, it prompts teachers to indoctrinate rather than teach, to tell students what they should think rather than let them arrive at their beliefs and opinions on their own. What's more, the reification of race as the executive descriptor of humanity demonizes those who insist on embracing and valuing their respective individuality.

CRT-inspired anti-racism blocks the path toward self-discovery by eliminating the most important necessities for the journey: individuality and critical thinking. In fact, individuality and critical thinking—the heart and soul of self-discovery—are anathema to CRT-inspired teaching. Thinking for oneself and cultivating self-reliance could have students reach conclusions that may not fit a preferred ideology. I will put it simply: much CRT-inspired pedagogy and student self-discovery are inimical. Like light and dark, the two cannot coexist in the same space.

Carl Jung, marking his place in the intellectual lineage of self-reliance (Jung was influenced by Nietzsche, who was influenced by Emerson), had this to say: “Why are you looking around for help? Do you believe that help will come from outside? What is to come is created in you and from you. Hence look into yourself. No other way is like yours. All other ways deceive and tempt you. You must fulfil the way that is in you.” To embrace individuality is to take initial steps toward discovering who one is, who one wants to be, and how one wants to make a meaningful life. No one can do that for another. It is a personal and individual endeavor.

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Erec Smith is an Associate Professor of Rhetoric at York College of Pennsylvania and a co-founder of Free Black Thought. His primary work focuses on the rhetorics of anti-racist activism, theory, and pedagogy. In his latest book, *A Critique of Anti-racism in Rhetoric and Composition: The Semblance of Empowerment*, Smith addresses the detriments of anti-racist rhetoric and writing pedagogy based on identity and prefigurative politics and suggests that a more empowering form anti-racism be considered.