ONTRACK PROGRAM RESOURCES | WINTER 2026

SOUL SPACE

CALIFORNIA REDUCING DISPARITIES PROJECT
KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

BEGINNING AGAIN IN THE TIME OF MONSTERS

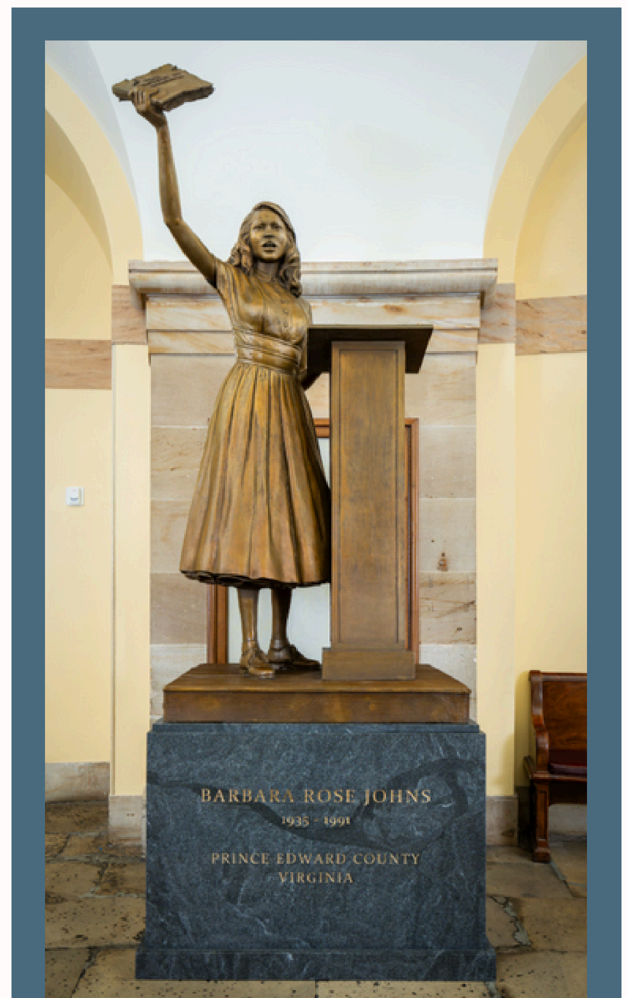
By Will Walker, PhD

> *"Are we going to just accept these conditions, or are we going to do something about it?"*
>
> *-Barbara Rose Johns, 1951 (age 16)*[1]

INTRODUCTION

On April 23, 1951, 16-year-old Barbara Rose Johnson led 450 students to walk out of their segregated high school in Farmville, Virginia, to protest its terrible conditions. The strike lasted two weeks and attracted the NAACP's attention. Lawyers Spottswood Robinson and Oliver Hill filed a lawsuit that became one of the five cases the Supreme Court reviewed in Brown v. Board of Education.

On December 16, 2025, an 11-foot bronze statue of Barbara Rose Johns was unveiled in the United States Capitol. The statue replaced the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee.[2]



INTRODUCTION

The symbolism of Barbara Rose Johnson's courageous act, and the placement of a statue of her in the halls of Congress at this particular moment, is clear. In a time when diversity efforts are under constant attack, and Confederate monuments are being restored in public places under the false claim of "restoring truth and sanity to American history," the statue of a Black teenage girl now stands in the halls of power. This is the heart of the African American tradition. Everyday people, making a way out of no way. This is what we do. We refuse to accept conditions that deny our dignity. We organize. We act. We not only change history, we make history. And all oppressed groups, such as LGBTQ+, women, Indigenous people, and immigrants of color, have looked to our struggle for inspiration—and strategy.

In the Summer Edition of Soul Space, Racial Identity and Mental Health In the Time of Monsters, hyperlinked here, we identified four key features of the assault on the dignity of Black people and communities. The key features identified were the weaponization of language, which inverts equity language; "data erasure" of the data that supports the need for community-defined interventions; the "federal funding strangulation" that pressures capitulation; and the "historical erasure" that denies our struggle. The paper outlined the historical pattern of the progress and expansion of freedom and dignity, the social and political backlash that followed, and the attacks on our sense of belonging.

DIGNITY AND BELONGING

"Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity."

- Frantz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth

Contemporary belonging theory, which could be seen as a way to avoid discussions of race, suggests that people need to feel included, valued, and connected to thrive. However, for Black Americans, belonging has always been provisional and subject to attack. What has remained consistent, and has driven every fight for freedom, is not the pursuit of belonging for belonging's sake, but the demand for dignity. Dignity preceded belonging.

Frederick Douglass understood that dignity precedes belonging when he addressed a white audience in Rochester on July 5, 1852, and refused to mouth a script that wasn't his own. Instead, he asked the audience: "What, to the American slave, is your Fourth of July?" His answer was direct. He asserted that Black people possessed dignity independent of whether America chose to recognize it, that Black humanity didn't require their validation, and that the failure was the nation's, not ours.[3]

Douglass, like Barbara Rose Johns after him, didn't ask permission for full citizenship rights, to belong. He asserted the inherent dignity of Black people and demanded that institutions uphold the dignity principle inscribed in the Declaration of Independence. The lesson for us is that when institutions fail to recognize our dignity and attack it, the work is not to beg for recognition but to build power.

Every major Black freedom movement has focused on dignity and built power. The Underground Railroad was not mainly about 'belonging' in the North; it was about actualizing the dignity of freedom. The Civil Rights Movement didn't just fight for integration. It demanded the recognition of our inherent worth. Sit-ins at lunch counters weren't just transgressive for transgression's sake; they were tactical assertions that dignity couldn't be segregated.

For us in 2026, this distinction is crucial. The current pressure is on us to frame racial justice and community-defined practices in "universal" terms to survive political scrutiny and to continue our work. The invitation sounds collaborative: Just adjust your language. Broaden your frame of reference for whom you serve. You can be funded. You can belong.

Just last month, an Oakland-based organization received guidance from two national foundations not to include in its proposal that its work was aimed at addressing the needs of a specific racial or ethnic group. Both funders said their lawyers advised them to avoid any language that could be seen as race-based programming. The organization followed the recommendation. They removed the racial specificity from their application and received the funding.

From one perspective, this appears to be success. The work advanced. The community will keep being served. A win, a big win, we survive to serve another day.
But something's lost in this concession, and we should honestly acknowledge what it was. The proposal no longer accurately explained why this program exists. The data now reflect a universal intervention rather than a program designed specifically for a given racial group, given its unique history and needs. The funder realized that this organization would comply, making future requests to do the same easier.

This is how erasure occurs, not through a demand, but through suggestion, not through a complete rewrite, but through small adjustments, both seeming reasonable on their own. The program continues, but the story about the program shifts. The community is helped, but the need for services is erased. The organization is part of the funding system, but under conditions that compel it to deny its true purpose. The question for us isn't whether the Oakland organization made the wrong choice. We must survive to serve our communities. The real question is whether we recognize the pattern. Each accommodation may be justifiable, but the cumulative effect of accommodations undermines a field rooted in resistance, eroding its ability to articulate what it knows.

COMPLIANCE

The current regime has been clear about its strategy. Steve Bannon called it "flood the zone."[4] The strategy is to "overwhelm the opposition with so many actions, so fast, that no coordinated response is possible." While organizations evaluate one threat, the landscape shifts again. The goal is not to win every battle but to drown resistance, making compliance seem like the only logical choice.

And the strategy's working. A study by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) of nearly 800 foundation websites found that 73 percent remained silent amid the attacks. Nearly 10 percent have actively scrubbed their websites of content that might attract scrutiny around Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and immigration. Those who scrubbed their websites account for a disproportionate share of giving ,roughly 20 percent of annual philanthropy and nearly 25 percent of contributions to oppressed communities.[5] According to NCRP's Senior Research Manager, the silence is loudest where it matters most, "so silence is really when, in a really difficult moment, the leaders of our sector are not saying anything."

Two-thirds of nonprofits surveyed expressed concern about retaliation if they spoke out. According to Pro Publica, in an article titled "Deleting DEI," more than a thousand organizations have removed language related to diversity, equity, and inclusion from their IRS filings. This preemptive compliance, capitulating before being asked, may be more harmful than direct enforcement.

Karl Weick's concept of the "cosmological episode," discussed in the Summer Black Paper, describes what happens when meaning-making systems that define professional identity become contested. When the frameworks you have mastered are labeled "divisive" and "racist," and the language you use to describe your mission is weaponized, you face not just professional challenges but also existential disruption.

You may recognize this feeling. The grant application where you hesitated before typing "racial equity." The board meeting where someone asked if the website should be "updated." The late-night wondering whether the work you trained for, the work you believe in, will survive this moment. This is the cosmological episode, not an abstraction but a lived experience that practitioners across California are currently navigating.

Yet our ancestors faced even greater contradictions. They built freedom movements in states that criminalized their literacy. They organized unions in company towns. They created cultural institutions under Jim Crow. California in 2026 offers more protections than Mississippi in 1955. The question is not whether navigation is possible but how to do so wisely, protecting what matters while refusing to abandon our dignity.

OUR NUMBERS, OUR STORY

Data erasure is among the most insidious monsters of this moment. When the federal government removes disaggregated racial data from its websites and declares data collection itself to be racist, it attempts to render Black communities invisible. Without data demonstrating disparities, there is no documented justification for reducing them or for community-defined programs.

This is not new. The census has consistently undercounted Black people and other people of color, while overcounting the white population. Data has always been a weapon in the hands of those who would deny our presence and our claims, but it has also been a tool of liberation.

Ida B. Wells carefully documented lynchings to challenge the false idea that Black men were being killed for crimes rather than because of the threat they posed to white economic and political dominance.[6] W.E.B. Du Bois's sociological studies provided a factual basis for civil rights arguments. The Civil Rights Movement's records of discrimination became evidence in courts and Congress.

The response to data weaponization against us is to affirm data sovereignty, the right of a community to govern the collection, ownership, and application of its own data. Indigenous communities worldwide have developed comprehensive frameworks for this. The CARE Principles (Collective Benefit, Authority to Control, Responsibility, Ethics) and OCAP principles (Ownership, Control, Access, Possession) provide guidance that is consistent with Black communities' needs.[7]

In East Oakland, the 40x40 Community Data Trust builds this kind of infrastructure—a community-controlled repository for "community-level insights, action, advocacy, and system accountability."[8] This exemplifies what data sovereignty looks like when it takes institutional form: the community decides what questions matter, what gets measured, who sees the results, and how findings are used. And in the colloquial of the initiative's founders, it "ground-truths" publicly available data.

The thousand organizations that edited their IRS filings made a decision about data concerning what record would exist of their work and its purpose. The decision may have felt protective. But over time, as the record diminishes, as the language disappears, and as the reason for the work disappears from official accounts, the field loses its archive. Future practitioners will look for proof of what we did and find silence. Data sovereignty means refusing that silence and insisting on a record that tells the truth, held by the community and accessible for the work that comes next in the aftermath of the backlash.

SPEAKING TRUTH IN HOSTILE TIMES

The belonging trap has a linguistic face. When institutions offer inclusion only if you change your language, requiring us to stop saying "equity," stop naming race, stop documenting disparity, they are not offering a workaround. They demand that you give up the assertion of dignity in exchange for provisional belonging.

This is the dilemma practitioners face today. Funders tell us to frame our work in universal terms. Lawyers recommend that funders remove references to race from their websites. Colleagues suggest we should just say "underserved communities" instead of "Black communities." The advice seems sound. But follow it to its logical conclusion. If we can't name who we serve, we can't fully explain why our methods work. If we can't document disparities, we can't justify disparity-reduction efforts. If we can't say "race," we can't address racism. The workaround ultimately undermines the work.

This is not just coincidence. The current regime understands that language carries power. When they say that "equity" is divisive, they are not criticizing the word itself; they oppose the analysis the word represents: that disparities exist, that these disparities result from policy, and that policy must address them. When they advocate for race-neutral language, they are promoting race-neutral thinking—an agreement to ignore the influence of history and to believe that the present remains unaffected.

Few people, however, have understood the power of language like Black people. We've always navigated hostile linguistic terrain, not by accepting the terms offered but by repurposing them. The spirituals encoded geography. "Wade in the Water" instructed escapees to use waterways to throw off tracking dogs; the folksong "Follow the Drinking Gourd" mapped the route north by having escapees follow the Big Dipper.[9] The dozens trained young people in verbal combat, teaching them the capacity to absorb assault and return it with wit when physical retaliation could mean death.

African American blues expressed our suffering without letting it define us. As Cornel West puts it, it was our collective "groan made gay." Jazz turned instruments that weren't originally ours into vessels of improvisational Black brilliance. Hip-hop took the language the dominant culture used to justify our subjugation and made it the most influential cultural force on the planet.

The history of Black America often involves rejecting what is offered, but with a blue-note-filled nod and grin. This history matters now because language is once again being

used to deny Black dignity and label others as not belonging. The terms we use—such as structural racism, community-defined practices, and disparity—are now targeted not through literacy laws but through threats to funding, website surveillance, and the slow strangulation of what can be said in official documents. By December 2025, more than 1,000 nonprofits have removed such language from their mission statements in tax filings.[10] The method has changed, but the pattern remains the same. We know what to do because we have always known: we translate, we work the code, and we speak past surveillance to those who can hear and organize.

And yet, within a week of writing the previous section, the EEOC announced that it will use web-archive searches to target organizations that have "only changed how they've talked about DEI."[11] Scrubbing our websites and changing the language we use to describe our work doesn't guarantee funding.

This is part of the Bannon playbook tested in states before going federal. In 2023, Tarrant County, Texas, defunded Girls Inc., which received. $115,334 for their "Girl Power" program that served girls ages 5-18 with a curriculum focused on self-esteem, hygiene, relationships, and stress management. The county judge stated that "the county government should not be funding an organization that is so deeply ideological and encourages the children that they are teaching to go advocate for social change."[12] The funding cut led the leaders of Girls Inc. in Tarrant to reconsider its affiliation with the national organization. They decided not to capitulate and due to the "media coverage of the cuts, parents, educators and more than 200 unique donors, made contributions that ranged from $5 to $50,000.[13] Additionally, the Fort Worth Independent School District Girls' expanded its work through a new partnership with the Fort Worth Independent School District.[14]

In July 2024, Tarrant County ended a 32-year partnership with another nonprofit that served court-involved youth over language on their website, which included offensive terms such as "policy advocacy," "systemic racism," and "LGBTQ." Due to the contract cancellation, 53 youth lost access to intensive services. However, this organization used the evidence they'd been collecting on the effectiveness and shared their story. Within a year, a donor provided funds to replicate the program in five states outside Texas.

In February 2025, 826 Boston, a Roxbury-based nonprofit that provides free writing and tutoring to over 3,000 students, received an email from AmeriCorps informing them that their grant application included the terms diversity, equity, and Inclusion, and needed to be rewritten. Instead of changing the language to meet Americorps' request, the board unanimously voted to withdraw their application for the 2025-26 funding year. In a letter to the community, 826 Boston's executive director wrote: "This decision, ultimately, allows us to advance the work many of you have come to love about our organization amplifying youth voices and sharing diverse stories… through writing without fear. The prospect of avoiding certain topics that teachers and/or students want to explore through writing runs counter to our mission statement. Moving forward, 826 Boston will apply for more grants and cultivate new relationships with donors and foundations that align with our values. We are withdrawing our AmeriCorps application on our own terms to preserve 826 Boston's integrity, values, and mission, which we hope will help us build a stronger community with staff, students, guardians, volunteers, and donors."[15]

826 Boston didn't accommodate. They made the call to the community and told their story. The community responded. By July, they'd raised $260,000 from 600 donors with "85 percent new to the organization."[16]

The stories of these organizations reveal what the compliance narrative erases. The majority of people are not with the regime. According to an April 2025 University of Massachusetts Amherst poll, two-thirds of Americans support DEI training across professions, including 69 percent of police officers, 68 percent of healthcare workers and 66 percent of teachers.[17] A May 2025 AP-NORC Center poll found that support for DEI's actual components remains strong even when the acronym "DEI" polls poorly. Nearly half of Americans (48 percent) support mentoring and clubs for underrepresented students, and only 15 percent oppose them; 45 percent support scholarships for underrepresented groups, with just 19 percent opposed.[18] This is encouraging, since these are components of the very programming that define community-based practices.

Another study by the Siena College Research Institute found that eight out of ten Americans support the core principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion when questions

don’t clearly mention those terms, but only 50 percent favor "efforts to promote DEI" when the acronym is clearly stated. This represents a significant 30-point difference.[19] The majority isn’t on their side. Additionally, October polling by Bentley University and Gallup shows that 69% of Americans believe it’s important for businesses to promote diversity. Republican support, however, has dropped from 49% to 33% over the past year.[20]

When Tarrant County withdrew its support for Girls Inc., the Fort Worth community responded with $450,000 in support within a year—nearly four times what Tarrant County had contributed. Communities and individuals who believe in our work will stand with us. There’s no evidence they have left. We need only to showcase our efforts and share our story.

On February 1, 2026, Tarrant County, for the first time since 1991, sent a democrat to the state Senate. The Texas Tribune attributed the victory to a “backlash of Latino and suburban voters” against the muzzle velocity of the regime’s policies. What goes around comes around is the historical pattern. It’s time for another backlash, and word is that some of the funding that was stripped may be restored.

BEGINNING AGAIN

"We are not responsible for what breaks us, but we are responsible for what puts us back together again."

- Desmund Tutu

We return to where we began with Gramsci's observation that monsters lurk between the death of an old world and the birth of a new one. We’ve named these monsters: the flood, the overwhelm, the exhaustion, the silence they are meant to create. And we’ve seen that when people refuse to accommodate their demands, tell their story, and ask others to rise up and stand with them, they can break their hold. This is the way we can work together to meet the needs of the people we serve.

WE HAVE A STORY

For years, we've collected community-defined evidence. We've recorded what works. We've measured outcomes that matter to the people we serve in language they understand, through methods that respect their experience. We've built an archive of healing that exists nowhere else. It is our story. The intakes that treat people as dignified and whole. The staff who share the real experiences of the families they serve. The outcomes that confirm what you knew before the numbers proved it. Community-defined practices are effective. Being close to the problem means being close to the solution. Expertise exists within the people often dismissed as "clients."

The California Reducing Disparities Project didn't fund us to copy someone else's model. It funded us because we already knew something. This knowledge is our story. And no executive order can erase it… unless we let 'em.

On December 16, 2025, an 11-foot bronze statue of Barbara Rose Johns was unveiled in the United States Capitol, replacing the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee that had represented Virginia for 111 years. Johns' 1951 student walkout helped end school segregation. Her statue now stands in the U.S. Capitol.

The Fifth American Republic, if we are to build it, can't be built by people who've erased themselves, conformed, and not shared their stories. It will be built by practitioners who show up with excellence. By coalitions that choose solidarity over isolation. By those who tell their stories out loud.

WHAT DO WE KNOW?

We understand that dignity precedes belonging. Compliance doesn’t ensure safety. Community is the funding source they can’t cut. They are the minority. Our community is larger.

Barbara Johns asked the question in 1951. We ask it again now:

Are we going to just accept these conditions, or are we going to do something about it?

We have our story.

The community is waiting.

We begin again. Together.

ENDNOTES

1. Inscription on the Barbara Johns statue unveiled at the U.S. Capitol, December 16, 2025.
2. Rachel Treisman, "Her 1951 Walkout Helped End School Segregation. Now Her Statue Is in the U.S. Capitol," NPR, December 16, 2025.
3. National Museum of African American History and Culture, https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/nations-story-what-slave-fourth-july.
4. CAPX, 'Flood the zone with sh*t': Steve Bannon's guide to influence, https://capx.co/flood-the-zone-with-sht-steve-bannons-guide-to-influence.
5. "Study Finds Widespread Self-Censorship in the Philanthropic Sector," Nonprofit Quarterly, August 13, 2025, https://nonprofitquarterly.org/study-finds-widespread-self-censorship-in-the-philanthropic-sector/
6. Ida B. Wells, Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases (1892).
7. Stephanie Russo Carroll et al., "The CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance," Data Science Journal 19, no. 1 (2020): 43. OCAP principles developed by the First Nations Information Governance Centre, Canada. See https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training
8. Rise East, "Investment Areas: Knowledge Power," https://www.riseeast.org/investmentareas
9. Harriet Tubman Historical Society, http://www.harriet-tubman.org/songs-of-the-underground-railroad/
10. Pro Publica, (December 17, 2025), "Deleting DEI," https://www.propublica.org/article/deleting-dei-language-nonprofits-irs-forms?utm_source=chatgpt.com.
11. Reuters, December 20, 2025, https://www.reuters.com/sustainability/society-equity/corporate-america-faces-dei-reckoning-2026-eeoc-chair-says-2025-12-19/.
12. Dallas Morning News, October 4, 2023, "Tarrant County drops funding for Girls Inc., citing its support for LGBT, abortion rights," https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2023/10/04/tarrant-county-drops-funding-for-girls-inc-citing-its-support-for-lgbt-abortion-rights/

ENDNOTES

13. The Non Profit Times, November 2, 2023, Donors Rally Around Girls Inc. Of Tarrant County After Grant Cut, https://thenonprofittimes.com/npt_articles/donors-rally-around-girls-inc-of-tarrant-county-after-grant-cut/?__cf_chl_tk=xvKf9YzaG_lbZTgLaUP8AtBlTOQDedoAoPn71TqiKzQ-1768419057-1.0.1.1-Ny5ks01xWOA8.iNvOGdsSPIh_5toMS8R5LjXHdtgzU4.
14. Fort-Worth Report, July 23, 2024, “Nearly a year after nonprofit lost county funds, FWISD approved $350K+ for Girls Inc. of Tarrant,” https://fortworthreport.org/2024/07/23/nearly-a-year-after-nonprofit-lost-county-funds-fwisd-approved-350k-for-girls-inc-of-tarrant/.
15. 826 Boston, April 2025, https://826boston.org/news/826-bostons-response-to-federal-funding-changes/
16. 826 Boston, https://826boston.org/news/826-boston-honored-as-bostonian-of-the-year-2025/
17. University of Massachusetts Amherst Poll, April 4-9, 2025, https://www.umass.edu/news/article/national-umass-amherst-poll-finds-increased-awareness-and-continuing-support-diversity.
18. AP-NORC Poll, May 1-5, 2025, https://apnorc.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/may-2025-Higher-Ed-topline.pdf.
19. Siena College Research Institute, "Beyond DEI: Understanding Public Opinion on Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion," released March 2025, https://aapor.org/newsletters/beyond-dei-understanding-public-opinion-on-diversity-equity-inclusion/.
20. Gallup, October 2025, “Fewer Americans See Diversity as a Business Priority,” https://news.gallup.com/poll/696221/fewer-americans-diversity-business-priority.aspx.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 826 Boston. "826 Boston Honored as Bostonian of the Year 2025." 2025.
- 826 Boston. "826 Boston Response to Federal Funding Changes." April 2025.
- AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. "Higher Education Poll." May 2025.
- Broussard, Kailey. "Tarrant County Drops Funding for Girls Inc." Dallas Morning News, October 4, 2023.
- California Department of Health Care Services. Community-Based Practices Resource Guide.
- Carroll, Stephanie Russo, et al. "The CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance." Data Science Journal 19, no. 1 (2020).
- "Donors Rally Around Girls Inc. of Tarrant County After Grant Cut." The Nonprofit Times, November 2, 2023.
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence. "We Wear the Mask." Poetry Foundation.
- Gallup. "Fewer Americans See Diversity as a Business Priority." October 2025.
- Gibson Dunn. "DEI Task Force Update." December 30, 2025.
- Harriet Tubman Historical Society. "Songs of the Underground Railroad."
- McCambridge, Ruth. "Study Finds Widespread Self-Censorship in the Philanthropic Sector." Nonprofit Quarterly, August 13, 2025.
- Philip, Agnel, Andrea Suozzo, and Ken Schwencke. "Deleting DEI." ProPublica, December 2025.
- Rise East. "Investment Areas: Knowledge Power."
- Sanchez, Jacob. "Nearly a Year After Nonprofit Lost County Funds, FWISD Approved $350K+ for Girls Inc." Fort Worth Report, July 23, 2024.
- Siena College Research Institute. "Beyond DEI: Understanding Public Opinion on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion." March 2025.
- University of Massachusetts Amherst. "National UMass Amherst Poll Finds Increased Awareness and Continuing Support for Diversity." April 2025.
- Walker, Will, ‘James Baldwin and the Racial Formation of the United States” in Eddie Glaude, Jr. Is it Nation Time. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Walsh, Kelsey. "Trump, Echoing Project 2025, Using Flood the Zone Strategy to Push Agenda." ABC News, April 29, 2025.
- Wang, Hansi Lo. "The 2020 Census Had Big Undercounts of Black People, Latinos and Native Americans." NPR, March 10, 2022.
- Weick, Karl E. "The Collapse of Sensemaking in Organizations: The Mann Gulch Disaster." Administrative Science Quarterly 38, no. 4 (1993).
- Wells, Ida B. Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases. 1892.