

GUEST ESSAY

Black History Month Is About Seeing America Clearly

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Growing up, I didn't know anyone who did the kinds of jobs featured at career fairs or depicted on television shows. I had never met a Black doctor, lawyer, professor or scientist. Where does a young Black man go when looking for hope? My teachers, overworked as they were, pointed me toward Black luminaries from the past.

The first Black History Month project I recall was about George Washington Carver. I was enthralled with the idea that the early-20th-century agricultural scientist, born into slavery, came up with hundreds of uses for peanuts. By the time Black History Month rolled into full swing, my ode to the master of peanuts sat alongside posters lauding the accomplishments of such stalwarts as Martin Luther King Jr. (he always inspired multiple posters), Rosa Parks, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington and Sojourner Truth.

Black history, in this frame, is the story of exemplars. We learn about the first Black surgeon, Supreme Court justice or astronaut. This version of Black history endeavors to show Black capability and challenge stereotypes. The lesson is clear: If this Black person from history overcame racism, so could we. With enough grit, determination and patience, we too could go to space or invent hundreds of uses for a common crop.

These exemplars were helpful. But the exercise also left me with a feeling that there was a long list of things Black people had never done and my job was to find one of those things and check it off the list. Then we could stand before the world and say: We have done all the things. Can we have justice now?

This exemplars-based approach to Black history also produced an unintentional consequence. It gave those outside our community license to use Black accomplishment against us. They told us that we needed more exceptional Black people, instead of questioning a society that required such greatness of us. Our very victories were transfigured into condemnations of those still languishing.

I was exposed to a second form of Black History Month when I got older: Black history as corrective. In this version, we learned about Black achievement that had been erased from the historical record. It points us to the African American female mathematicians involved in the space race, as recounted fictionally in the film "Hidden Figures" or the Tuskegee Airmen, whose contributions during World War II were long underappreciated. This is important. One reason that we are still chasing "firsts" is because too many of our accomplishments have been stolen from us. But the problem is that this way of teaching history is about amending a story, instead of telling a more truthful one.

It was not until I got to college that I began to see African American history for what it truly is. It is not a series of heroics or forgotten contributions. It is a different telling of the American story altogether.

What happens when we do not begin with the Mayflower but the slave ship, and tell American history from that perspective? The explicit aim of The Times's 1619 Project was "to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of our national narrative." This powerful, challenging idea led to a still-raging debate about racism in America that is playing out in school boards and local elections all over the country, with certain books and ideas being ruled out of bounds.

Americans have not been taught enough about anti-Black racism in our past and present. This, to my mind, is beyond dispute. We are poorer as a nation for these omissions. It is also true that scholars of good will can disagree when making sense of the lives of figures long dead. People are complex, and getting at the complexity is no small thing. Education should be a place where such matters are debated openly.

But endless discussions about the intent of the founding fathers miss a fundamental point. History is not merely the study of intent; it encompasses effect. Whether or not every founding father intended to create a government that sanctioned slavocracy, and later Jim Crow, those were the outcomes. To limit the question to the intent at the expense of the experience of the enslaved and their descendants is to prioritize white American intentions or ideals over Black bodies, a mistake our Republic has made over and over.

What cannot be doubted is that for African peoples brought to this land against our will, slavery and anti-Black racism are defining characteristics of our American experience. This is why Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I have a dream" speech draws upon the Declaration of Independence in its opening movement. He highlighted the fact that this declaration had little purchase in the lives of Black folks:

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men — yes, Black men as well as white men — would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked insufficient funds.

Black history, then, should be a challenge to our Republic and its core narrative. Instead of quibbling with this detail or that, it must raise a fundamental question about the quality of life Black people have been allowed to experience. If we are indeed a part of this nation, then our lives and experiences have a claim on our national narrative. African American history forces us to view the Black experience of injustice not as the interruption of or caveat to an otherwise grand narrative, but as a compelling story in its own right.

Would this leave us with only a tale of woe? No. There is a dark beauty to the American story. The beauty is not in our innocence. We have been party to too much death and terror for that. African American history requires the recasting of our central figures, where those on the sidelines are brought to the forefront. The enslaved must be allowed to unbend their backs and step into the light and claim the glory due to them. Washington and Lincoln must give way to Truth and Douglass as American marvels.

What makes America a wonder is that this is the land upon which my ancestors, despite the odds, fought for and often made a life for themselves. We are great because this land housed the poetry of Phillis Wheatley and Maya Angelou, the advocacy of Fannie Lou Hamer, the urgency of Nina Simone's music, and the faith-inspired demand for change in Martin Luther King Jr.'s sermons.

This way of telling the story allows us to speak of American ideals even if the norm is failure rather than accomplishment. It allows our history to chronicle progress without diminishing the suffering necessary to bring it about. This means, too, that to tell the American story well, the contributions of us Black folks cannot be limited to February.

Black history offers America a chance to see itself both as what we have failed to become and as we wish ourselves to be. It is not to inspire hate for one race or to foment division. America seeing itself clearly is the first step toward owning and then learning from its mistakes. The second step is the long journey to become that which we hope to be: a more perfect — and just — union.

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