

Black History Month in Black and White

Black History Month honors the struggles, triumphs, and contributions to American society by its citizens of African descent. The month-long acknowledgment of these accomplishments began in 1926, conceptualized and brought to fruition by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, a Black lecturer, scholar, historian and founder of the Journal of Negro History.

What we have come to term Black History Month began life as “Negro History Week”, launched in the second week of February, so chosen because it fell between the birthdays of Fredrick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, two men whose contributions were invaluable to the individual identity of African Americans as well as our collective consciousness as a nation.

Dr. Woodson saw the necessity of documenting the multitude of accomplishments and struggles which were a part of the African experience in America. Though replete with the narrative of our White brethren, save for anecdotal references to the Negro in an inferior characterization, the history books were glaringly devoid of any substantive, critical, meta-analytical documentation of the African American experience.

They were rarely if ever mentioned in your history books, but If you’ve ever turned on an electric light (Louis Lattimer, inventor and assistant to Thomas Edison), put on that new sweater, turned on your lawn sprinkler, ironed your clothes on an ironing board (Elijah McCoy, inventor), lay in a folding bed (Sarah Goode and first Black woman to hold a patent), stopped at a traffic light (Garrett Morgan), received a blood transfusion (Dr. Charles Drew), turned on your home security system (Marie Van Brittan Brown), used the automatic doors on an elevator (Alexander Miles) felt a chill and turned on your central heating furnace (Alice H. Parker) or bought produce delivered to your local grocery store by a refrigerated truck (Fredrick McKinley Jones) you are indebted to a Black inventor.

Dr. Woodson understood the symbiotic historical relationship between Black History and American History. Nevertheless, he expressed that although the struggles and triumphs of persons of African descent in America are in some respects the struggles and triumphs of America there remained a need to highlight the accomplishments of a heretofore marginalized people from an Afrocentric point of view. He realized the value of the promulgation of the accomplishments of Americans of African descent and their potential inspirational effect on the lives of other African Americans in their fight for self-definition, self-determination and empowerment.

In today’s proclaimed conflict-ridden climate, Black History Month has been termed both unnecessary as well as potentially divisive and as such, several questions have been posed- Does Black History Month still matter? Who does it matter to and what does it serve to represent?

To put it succinctly, yes, Black History Month still matters.

For Black Americans, Black History Month continues to matter as it represents a dedicated time to reflect and remember. It is a time to not only celebrate, but to declare. We can celebrate many of the aforementioned accomplishments made in the face of limited support and cooperation. We celebrate and champion “Black Excellence”, a construct borne of the mindset that holds irrespective of outside influences, we will continually seek to both prosper and thrive.

We also take this time to declare. We declare we are still standing. We are still here. We will continue to make our voices heard and our desires known. We declare we are the inheritors of a tradition of a centuries long struggle against injustice. No amount of intimidation, harassment or imposed victimization will stop us from uncovering and telling the factual truth of who we were, who we are and how these findings impact who we state we desire to become as a people and as a nation.

We take this moment to reflect upon a time in the not too distant past where we were forbidden opportunity speak up making it all the more important to pay attention as we move forward to the manner in which intentionally historically marginalized voices will be heard in the future.

Black History Month serves as a reminder of what has been endured and the need to continually educate ourselves in recognition of the fact that the less regard you have for educating yourself, the less demonstrable capacity you have to think for yourself and the less ability you have to think for yourself, the greater the likelihood you will be manipulated and swayed by those who desire to think for you.

Black History Month has specific implications for White Americans as well.

For White Americans, the month of February provides opportunity to consider and examine your own values, attitudes and biases as they relate to race. Black History Month can be a time where you reflect upon the value system you were born into and the life experiences which have contributed to your understanding of race and how those beliefs play out in your day to day life.

Finally for you as a White person, Black History Month can exist as a starting point, a marked beginning for developing a personal action plan for addressing issues of social justice as they relate to disrupting oppression of all forms.

Many of us, Black and White I confess were appalled to recently learn of the massacre that occurred in 1921 in the Tulsa Oklahoma town of Greenwood. And in our collective disbelief of the atrocities committed, we asked “why were we not taught this in school. The reason is quite simple, if something is not deemed historically important or valued, it is not historically represented. Black History Month serves as a time to uncover hidden history and afford us an opportunity to learn the multiple ways in which the history continues to impact us all.

In Montana, I’ve come to learn Black History Month is also an opportunity to contemplate some of our shared experiences with our Native American brethren and sisters in understanding what University of New Mexico professor Dr. Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart defines as “historic trauma”, the experiences of displacement, marginalization and their modern day impact. She argues unresolved grief and loss in the context of the Native experience in America continues to negatively impact their chances to move forward. She further emphasizes the necessity of understanding historic trauma as it is only through this lens whereby reconciliation of these issues may be addressed, and movement forward may commence. She writes “First is confronting the historical trauma. Second is understanding the trauma. Third is releasing the pain of historical trauma. Fourth is transcending the trauma.”.

In terms of the Black experience, I see Dr. Yellow Horse Brave Heart’s methodology in dealing with historic trauma as one manner of dealing with race-based trauma, i.e., the impact of years of racialized epigenetic stressors and how they affect who we are today. It’s my sense this healing process provides a lighted pathway forward for us all.

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