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**The Stories We Tell Matter:
“An African-American and Latinx History of the United States”**

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This morning is the final Sunday of Black History Month, an annual reminder to spend some time reflecting on our past through the lens of African American experiences. Black History Month is also a more general reminder that **history is never neutral**. It is always told from some point of view even if that point of view is not always acknowledged. Let me give you an example of what I mean. If you sign up for a class on African American history, you know what you are signing up for. Similarly if you sign up for a class on Women’s history, Latin American history, Queer history, etc., there is truth in the advertising. But too many courses simply have the allegedly neutral title “history,” when they might be better called “White, Rich, Heterosexual, Able-bodied Male History.” The truth is that it matters what stories we *choose* to tell. **Who decides, and who benefits?**

Along these lines, a few month ago I preached a sermon inspired by the writings of Dr. Ibram Kendi, the Founding Director of The Antiracist Research & Policy Center at American University in Washington DC. I recommend his work highly, starting with his shorter and more accessible book, *How to Be an Antiracist*. And I want to risk sharing with you a provocative tweet from Dr. Kendi that powerfully reflects this truth—that honesty about historical perspective matters.

As someone who has dedicated his life to helping us better tell the stories of racism and anti-racism, Dr. Kendi posted the following two tweets earlier this month as an example of interpreting current events from the perspective of black history:

- “On this first day of #BlackHistoryMonth, I can’t stop thinking about Black history as I recall those 51...Senators refusing to allow witnesses and documents last night. **I can’t stop thinking about how so many obviously guilty White men have gone free.**
- “I can’t stop thinking about how, historically, to be Black in this country is to be a criminal even when we are obviously innocent. **I can’t stop thinking about this #JimCrowTrial from the standpoint of Black history.**”

I find this perspective so powerful: adding the depth dimension of history to your prophetic condemnation of current events. Dr. Kendi is challenging us to see this recent episode, not as an isolated incident, but as another in a long line of injustices supporting what bell hooks has called the “White supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”

The stories we tell matter. Do the stories we have been taught—that we *choose* to retell—help to raise awareness of marginalized groups, and help to dismantle oppression? Or do the stories we have been taught—and *choose* to retell—help maintain injustices in the *status quo*, or even increase inequity?

This idea that we have a choice in the stories we tell—and how we tell them—isn’t something I thought about much growing up. **I thought history was history: dry facts in a book to be memorized and tested on.** A turning point came when I had the opportunity to go on a backpacking trip along the Pacific Coast Trail with a friend I had grown up with in South Carolina. He had moved to Houston for our senior year in high school. After the trip, we were wandering around Seattle, and happened to stumble upon an independent bookstore called Left Bank Books, which specializes in “anti-authoritarian, anarchist, independent, radical and small-press titles.”

I needed a book to read for the flight home, and as we meandered through the aisles of the book store, my friend asked me if I had ever read Howard Zinn’s *The People’s History of the United States*. It had been a required reading for his U.S. History class to supplement the standard textbook, and had been a huge influence on

him. Fortunately, the bookstore had a copy in stock, and I read on the back cover that **this history book chose to tell “America's story from the point of view — and in the words of — America's women, factory workers, African Americans, Native Americans, working poor, and immigrant laborers.”**

My friend was right. It is a powerful book that I have thought of frequently in the years since. The stories we hear and retell matter. And asking, “Who is telling the story? Who decides? Who benefits?” also matters.

There’s a good reason that my friend’s history teacher in Houston chose to assign Zinn’s *People’s History* to augment that state’s U.S. history textbook—because our nation’s history is not taught the same way across the country. For instance, did any of you read the analysis that The New York Times published a little more than a month ago, examining how a standard high school history textbook from the widely used publisher McGraw-Hill is **altered in various ways into editions suitable for different state boards of education?**

I’ll give you a few examples:

- In a section about the Bill of Rights, the California edition includes a sidebar annotation detailing that, “[court] rulings on the Second Amendment have allowed for some gun regulations. In the same place, the Texas edition of the textbook contains only a blank white space.” **Anyone reading the Texas edition alone would not know that anything was missing.**
- Or related to Black history, here’s an instance of Texas adding a line that isn’t present in either the California edition or the standard edition: “Teenagers in both states will learn about the Harlem Renaissance and debates about the movement’s impact on African-American life. But Texas students will read that some critics ‘dismissed the quality of literature produced.’”
- Another example is that, “California notes the suburban dream of the 1950s was inaccessible to many African-Americans. Texas does not.”
- “Whole paragraphs on redlining and restrictive deeds appear only in the California editions of textbooks.... **Texas’ social studies guidelines do not mention housing discrimination at all.**”

- “Both states say that breaches of ‘racial etiquette’ led to lynchings after Reconstruction. But only California, whose edition was written more recently, makes clear that the perpetrators of lynchings also hoped to discourage black political and economic power.”

One my best friends is a high school history teacher in South Carolina. She accounts for similar issues with that state’s history textbooks by strategically assigning particular Primary Source texts. But not all teachers do that. The stories we’ve been told and choose to retell matter. They shape us, they shape how we are in the world, they shape all those we touch.

To adapt the words of author Brian McClaren, are we telling stories of "social control [or] social transformation? Are we telling stories to “hold people down [or] to lift them up?” Are our history books more of an “opiate to pacify people into compliance, [or] a stimulant to empower people to imagine a better world, a better future, a better life — giving them the courage to live in peaceful defiance of violent, corrupt, and greedy powers-that-be.” Our call for such a time as this is to **become better storytellers of social transformation and solidarity with the marginalized, better tellers of tales that inspire ourselves and others to join together to build the world we dream about: a world with peace, liberty, and justice—not merely for some—but for all.**

Here’s another example that relates back to Julia’s important sermon last Sunday about lessons she learned spending a week at UU Tulsa, the largest in-person UU congregation in the world. In her sermon, she shared about the Tulsa Race Massacre in 1921, which is a suppressed story in our country’s history. Many citizens of this country (especially in Oklahoma) have grown up with history textbooks that skipped over that tragedy. The good news is that this past Wednesday—maybe Julia’s sermon was more wildly impactful than she anticipated—there was an announcement that Oklahoma:

will be moving forward with embedding the story of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre into the curriculum of all Oklahoma schools.... And while school districts have begun teaching about the massacre...the state's education department will be releasing a curriculum framework this April

to bolster those efforts throughout the state. Starting this fall, students from elementary through high school will learn about the event.

I suspect there are at least two reasons behind this shift. First, as I mentioned last week, the HBO series The Watchmen has helped raise public awareness about the Tulsa Race Massacre. Second, and even more importantly, next year will be the 100th anniversary of the 1921 event. (So a future sermon is likely forthcoming on that occasion.)

Part of what I have done this Black History Month for my own edification is set aside time to the book An African American and Latinx History of the United States by Paul Ortiz, a professor of history at the University of Florida. This book is the fourth in a series called ReVisioning American History, published by our own Beacon Press. And over the past few years, I've preached previous sermons about the first three books in the series:

- A Queer History of the United States
- A Disability History of the United States
- An Indigenous History of the United States

I encourage you to check out those sermons in our online sermon archive (or read the books!), depending on your time and interest. A fifth book in the series was just published earlier this month (A Black Woman's History of the United States), so I look forward to sharing that book with you too, likely around this time next year.

For now, there a lot to be said about Paul Ortiz's An African American and Latinx History of the United States, but I'll limit myself to sharing a few representative examples. He is particularly valuable for the ways that he moves across national borders to weave a complex tapestry of history. For instance, he highlights that too often, the Mexican abolition of slavery is neglected in nineteenth century histories about our country. But the truth is that in 1829, more than three decades before enslavement was ended in the U.S., Mexico abolished slavery on the anniversary of Mexican Independence Day. I love that Mexico chose to link the individual freedom from slavery to their own country's celebration of freedom from Spain.

Moreover, after the Mexican abolition of slavery, when the U.S. attempted to negotiate a fugitive slave treaty with Mexico for the "surrender of such fugitive slaves

as might seek refuge on the soil of that Republic,” the Mexican Congress not only rejected the appeal, but also denounced the continued practice of slavery in the U.S. or anywhere as a **“palpable violation of the first principles of a free republic”** (40-41). Go, Mexico! Even more importantly, I love this example of learning to tell our history better by including this Mexican perspective. And although I do not have time to go into details, I should note that this episode is further complicated by the U.S. annexation of Texas in 1845, followed by the Mexican–American War.

A similarly neglected story is that in 1791, the enslaved people of then Saint-Domingue led “history’s only successful slave revolt.” A few years later in 1804, “the revolutionaries christened their new nation Haiti in honor of the original Indigenous inhabitants’ name of the island” (20). Thomas Jefferson—flaunting everything he hypocritically wrote in the U.S. Declaration of Independence—first tried to undermine the slave uprising in Haiti, then after its success “urged Napoleon Bonaparte to re-enslave the upstart Haitians” (28). The stories we tell matter. We need to tell the full truth about Jefferson, which, of course, includes much more than this episode, as we’ve explored previously. And we need to be more familiar with these powerful stories of oppressed groups all over the world throwing off the yolk of oppression.

Paul Ortiz, reflecting on all he has learned in researching, writing, and teaching about An African American and Latinx History of the United States, writes that:

If American exceptionalism is a harmful fable, then what do we replace it with? We can begin by continuing to **learn more about ordinary people’s capacity to create democracy in action**...the capacity of workers, immigrants, and marginalized people to organize for social change.”

Dr. Ortiz also points to a quote from Frederick Douglass in the wake of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation: **“We are not to be saved by the captain, at this time, but by the crew.** We are not to be saved by Abraham Lincoln, but by that power behind the throne, greater than the throne itself. (186)

Douglass, and Ortiz after him, are cautioning us to beware of the “great man theory” of history that neglects the role of we the people. Although President Lincoln’s

words were important, the actions of a multitude of people were needed to turn those words into a reality. That's the kind of history I want to continue to get better at telling.

And here's the thing: a focus not on the the elite—not on the “king”—but on *we the people* is a foundational American value. Remember that powerful opening part of the second sentence in our Declaration of Independence that, “Governments are instituted among Men, **deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed....**” In a time when history was often told from a perspective supporting the “divine right of kings,” asserting the *consent of the governed* was radical.

From this people's perspective, I do think we can look backward into our country's past to be reminded of some of our core values, ideal, and aspirations. But I also need to be honest that the perspective of Black History Month is quite clarifying in helping us see afresh that we cannot remain content with a nostalgic longing to go backward in time.

Black History Month, I think it is fair to say, is not in alignment with a call to “Make America Great Again.” That longing arises from the corrupted nostalgia of White Supremacy and Male Supremacy. Instead, if you look back at The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech, he doesn't talk about making American great again. He says, “*If America is to be a great nation...let freedom ring.*” And he goes on to list all the places in this country where freedom must ring if we are to all truly be *free at last*, if our nation is truly to become great.

When Dr. King spoke those words on the national mall, I suspect he had in mind the final stanzas of a Langston Hughes poem, written almost three decades earlier. Hughes too rejected the malignant nostalgia of looking back fondly on a past in which not everyone was free. Writing out of the experience of living through Black history, Hughes calls us to a future with hope:

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free....

O, yes,
I say it plain,

America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

And don't miss the power of this final stanza that so tragically and accurately still describes our nation even 85 years after Hughes first penned these words:

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!

May we each do what we can within our spheres of influence to work in coalitions for collective liberation that we all might be free.