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“A More Beautiful & Terrible History”

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I grew up in the midlands of South Carolina. The first time I remember learning about Black History Month was in my 8th grade Earth Science class. I’m sure I had heard about Black History Month before, but that eighth grade class was the first time I experienced a sustained, month-long focus on black history that included substantive assignments, requiring us to research and make presentations on black scientists.

Part of why I didn’t have a substantive experience with Black History prior to eighth grade is that I didn’t have an African-American teacher prior to eighth grade. Of course, any of my white teachers could have emphasized Black History Month in a substantial way, but they didn’t.

Black History Month started in 1926 as a weeklong cultural celebration created by the African American historian Carter Woodson. But it took another five decades to be officially recognized at the national level—when President Gerald Ford designated “Black History Week” in 1975. “The next year, Ford officially recognized Black History Month, calling it a moment for the public to ‘seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history” (5).

Setting up systems that institutionalize the inclusion of diverse perspectives can make a difference. Indeed, even worse than the story I shared about my lack of early experiences with black teachers and Black History Month, I’m reminded, from my study of the life of The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., that in the early 1950s when King was pursuing a Ph.D. in systematic theology at Boston University, **"he never had an African**

American instructor or took a course in which a black author was assigned”

([Dorrien](#) 271).

One of the ways that I have come to think about this dynamic of cultural obliviousness is that our problem has never been merely lacking a Black History Month, nor just the absence of black teachers or courses on black history, womanist theology, Asian-American literature, LGBTQIA+ ethics, or any other identity-centered focus. The problem is the lack of self-awareness and transparency around the courses that have traditionally named themselves simply “history” or “theology” or “literature”—yet every single teacher or assignment or activity in these “history” classes, is about (or by or for) men or white people. Whenever that is the case, let’s be honest and call such courses what they are: “Rich, White, Heterosexual Male History,” “Rich, White, Heterosexual Male Theology,” or “Rich, White, Heterosexual Male Ethics.”

When we aren’t honest in our label, the default position is that historically privileged groups become perceived as the norm (as “basic,” as “real”), and attempts to become more inclusive get branded as “deviant” and “catering to special interests.” I should add that I am not trying to unduly cast aspersions on professors from past decades who have not had the training widely available today in anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism. But in the words of Maya Angelou: **“Do the best you can until you know better. When you know better, do better.”**

One of the people helping me know better—so that I can do better—is Dr. Jeanne Theoharis, a distinguished professor of political science at Brooklyn College. A few years ago, I shared some insights from Dr. Theoharis’s brilliant book, [The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks](#), which debunks the conventional wisdom about Parks as someone “quiet,” “humble,” “dignified,” and “soft-spoken.” This romanticized version of Parks masks the fullness of her life that included “nearly seventy years of activism” (vii)—as well as her involvement in nonviolent activist training, and as secretary of her local branch of the NAACP both prior to and after her refusal on December 1, 1955 to give up her bus seat. And although she recognized the strategic value of nonviolence, Park’s hero was rather more Malcolm than Martin. She “loved and admired King greatly, but Malcolm’s boldness and clarity, his affirmation of what needed to be done for black people, made him her champion.... Indeed, the Parks family, like

many black Southerners, had long kept a gun in their home, even as they participated in the nonviolent movement” (207-8). As inspiring as the meek and mild Parks of my childhood history lessons were, I find a fuller history of Park’s life to be even more fascinating, compelling, democratic, and empowering.

In this spirit of sharing more about the fullness of black history, last year Dr. Theoharis published a new book (with our own UU Beacon Press) titled, [A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History](#). How we write and propagate our historical narratives matters.

Some of the influences behind Dr. Theoharis’ choice of title are shown in the two epigraphs at the beginning of her book:

- The first is from the late Uruguayan writer **Eduardo Galeano** (1940 - 2015), who wrote, “[History] is a system of power that is always deciding in the name humanity who deserves to be remembered and who deserves to be forgotten... We are much more than we are told. We are much more beautiful.”
- The second epigraph is from African American writer and social critic **James Baldwin** (1924 - 1987) who said, “American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible than anything anyone has ever said about it” (x).

I first began to grasp this broader perspective and definition of “history” when I read Howard Zinn’s [The People’s History of the United States](#), which tells “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.”

I can understand the appeal of telling romanticized versions of U.S. history that make us feel good about ourselves by virtue of ignoring, overlooking, and dismissing as irrelevant the uncomfortable parts of our shared historical heritage. But the more I learn about the history of this country, the clearer it is to me that **the story of white supremacy in the U.S. is not merely about “the south way back when,” and about a few great black leaders** who made all the difference. Systemic racism has always endemic been nationwide and still is today, despite the many hard-won contributions and successes of legions of folks working for the success of the Civil Rights Movement. As a native son of South Carolina, I will confess that there is obviously, abundantly and shamefully a lot to say about the history of racism in the South. But as I learn more

about the history of white supremacy in our country, there is also much to say about systemic racism in the North (and West) both then and now. Dr. King said it this way in 1965, “In my travels in the North I was increasingly becoming disillusioned with the power structures there...who welcomed me to their cities and showered praise on the heroism of Southern Negroes. Then when the issues were joined concerning local conditions only the language was polite; the rejection was firm and unequivocal” (82). Another stark example from earlier that same year was California governor Edmund Brown’s comment after he learned about the Watts Uprisings: “California is a state where there is no racial discrimination” (90). Tell that to Rodney King, who in an ironic twist of history was born on April 2, 1965, just a few months prior to the Watts Uprisings. And here’s another example of how we often overlook significant events in black history today. Almost three years ago in March 2015, there was (rightly) a lot of focus on the fiftieth anniversary of the Selma-to-Montgomery March. But a year earlier there had been almost no commemoration to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the largest civil rights protest of that decade. That protest was not in the South. On February 3, 1964, **“Nearly half a million students and teachers stayed out of school to challenge the New York City Board of Education’s refusal to make a plan for comprehensive desegregation”** (32). Part of the reason there was no celebration is that to this day New York City has never comprehensively desegregated its schools—which is also true of many, many other school districts across our nation.

The difference was framed as the South having reprehensible, *de jure* racial segregation proscribed *by law* in its schools—and the North having mere *de facto* racial segregation—that is, schools segregated by so-called happenstance (otherwise known as local zoning laws) (34). Strenuous efforts were made to avoid assertive legal enforcement of the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in *Brown vs. the Board of Education*—which struck down segregation *by law* in the South. Why? Because of the scary implications for the North which proactively assigning students to public schools in order to overcome racial imbalance” would also have had upon popular racist practices in the North (46). The problem still stands today.

The failure here was in only going halfway. There is some improvement in moving *from* “conscious, aspirational white supremacy” such as we saw in the South,

while moving toward rejecting both personal prejudice and explicitly racist law as practiced during southern Jim Crow era segregation.

But if we stop at conscious and overt racism, the tendency is to perpetuate and legitimize systems of oppression. So schools continue to be, for the most part, segregated *in fact* even though full segregation is no longer the mandated law of the land. That's why the language of the UU 8th Principle calls us to consciously and "accountably dismantle systems of oppression." It is precisely at this point that our aspirations to be "colorblind" fail us, because "not seeing race" prevents us from being honest about the devastating current facts of systemic racism and classism in our present culture (39).

This prevalent racist dynamic is related to another point I wanted to be sure to highlight: **too often our histories of social justice are told in the passive voice.** For anyone who is having bad flashbacks to English class, stick with me. Here's what I mean: too often we're told that, "leaders 'get assassinated,' patrons are 'refused service,' women are 'ejected' from public transportation. So the *objects* of racism are many but the *subjects* are few. In removing the instigators, the historians remove the agency and, in the final reckoning, the responsibility" (83). And the problem is, it's not only the so-called southern redneck—who is a conscious, aspirational racist—but also the so-called moderate who politely (or silently) claims indifference or unwillingness—or who outright refuses to support the pro-active dismantling of systems of oppression and racial separation (84).

As Dr. King wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail:

the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice.... Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

Today the same dynamics of lukewarm participation are often at play in criticisms of the leaders and participants in the #BlackLivesMatter movement, criticism which sometimes uses Dr. King's words to condemn today's activists. Such critics sometimes echo the

exact words that white moderates once used to deter King: “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action” (99). I am, of course, not saying that either the Movement for Black Lives or any other social movement is above criticism. But I am inviting us to notice the ways that resistance to social change can insidiously repeat itself if we are not self-aware.

The third and final point I wanted to highlight is the problems with the “**Great Man**” **version of history** that focuses almost exclusively on male leaders to the exclusion of the broader spectrum of “we the people”—particularly women—who have forever made male leadership possible. Among many examples, I will focus for now on Coretta Scott King, who died thirteen years ago this past Wednesday. She used to say, “I am made to sound like an attachment to a vacuum cleaner: the wife of Martin, then the widow of Martin, all of which I am proud to be. But I was...always more than a label” (156).

Indeed, she was. When she and Martin first met, she was more politically active than he was(157). And I’ve also always loved that it was Coretta who rightly insisted in removing the sexist word “obey” from her wedding vows (158).

She was always a significant force. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Coretta was often the one who would answer their frequently ringing phone. And when they received frequent hate calls during the night, she began saying, “**My husband is asleep... He told me to write the name and number of anyone who called to threaten his life so that he could return the call and receive the threat in the morning when he wakes up and is fresh**” (158).

As the movement continued, “she spoke up earlier and more forcefully against American involvement in Vietnam than her husband” (157). To give one specific example, “Late in 1965, when Dr. King backed out of an address to a Washington, DC, peace rally, she kept her commitment to speak. Following her appearance, a reporter asked Martin if he had educated his wife on these issues. He replied: ‘She educated me’” (159-160).

And less than a month after a white supremacist assassinated Dr. King, Coretta Scott King stood on the balcony where he was shot and shared her dream, “**where not some but all of God’s children have food, where not some but all of God’s**

children have decent housing, where not some but all of God's children have a guaranteed annual income...." (162). She went on to be active in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, the protests against the second Iraq War, and the struggle for LGBT rights, including supporting same-sex marriage (164).

There is so much more to say, but I hope I have given you some further insights and tools to move us from the "histories we have often gotten" toward the "history we need" to build the world we dream about—and turn our dreams into deeds.

Earlier I shared the wisdom of Maya Angelou: "When you know better, do better." And although I do not think that we or I will be perfect—remember: "You are already saved from perfection!"—I do think that we are moving in the right direction. And I was honored to be invited recently to the annual meeting of the AfricanAmerican ResourcesCultural and Heritage Society of Frederick County, where I and Lynn Wagner, one of the co-chairs of UUCF's Dismantling Racism Team, had the opportunity to accept on behalf of this congregation a Certificate of Appreciation from AARCH to UUCF.

From furthering the work of AARCH, to partnering with the local NAACP, to helping serve meals each month at Asbury United Methodist (one of the oldest African-American churches in Frederick, with roots dating back to 1818) and more, we are increasingly becoming known outside of these walls for our commitment to building a beloved community and acting for peace and justice. But even as we are becoming known, if we don't keep moving in this positive direction, rest assured that our work and commitment can just as quickly be forgotten. May we continue our commitment to know better—and to do better. I am grateful to be with you on that journey.