

“Research & Practice” features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. Here, I invited LaGarrett J. King to share his research on teaching Black histories. He dismantles the notion of “Black history as American history” and offers instead a conceptualization of teaching Black histories through Black historical consciousness principles.

—Patricia G. Avery, “Research & Practice” Editor, University of Minnesota

# Black History is Not American History: Toward a Framework of Black Historical Consciousness

LaGarrett J. King

“Black history is American history,” is a popular phrase used by a multitude of people seeking to legitimate Black history to the general population.<sup>1</sup> Notable personalities such as award-winning journalist and creator of the *New York Times*’ 1619 project Nicole Hannah Jones, civil rights activist and poet Maya Angelou, actor Morgan Freeman, and the “Father of Black history,” Carter G. Woodson, have communicated versions of this slogan to emphasize that Black people’s histories are deeply rooted within the America story.

The motto is usually a two-fold response to concerns about the disregard of Black history. First, “Black history is American history” is used to criticize (and in some cases educate) Black History Month’s utility. The slogan is used as a reminder that Black history education should be a yearly project, not a novelty taught only during February. Second, the phrase is used to discourage plans for separate K-12 Black history courses in schools. If segregated, a Black history course may be perceived as less important than the required history classes. Plus, many believe that the only way Black history should be taught is to seamlessly infuse Black history within the general American history narrative. Dr. Herron Keon Gaston captures the essence of the phrase when he states:

The fact of the matter is—Black history is American history. The African American impact

on history is far-reaching and is deeply etched in the social fabric of America. We cannot talk about American history without talking about African American history. These two stories are intrinsically intertwined. African Americans have made significant contributions to every field of the human endeavor, including science, technology, engineering, mathematics, theology, arts, literature, athletics, politics, and especially to the American economy. In every facet of the American experience lies the story of African Americans.<sup>2</sup>

While the sentiment, “Black history is American history,” is factual, we cannot tell America’s story without the story of Black America; in practice, the axiom can be problematic. While well intended, the saying

is a non-controversial, palatable, and whitewashed discourse that maintains the status quo and interferes with truly improving Black history education. It is a feel-good phrase because it celebrates and identifies the country’s diversity and supposed inclusive mission as a democratic nation. Most problematic is that the phrase insinuates a sort of shared historical legacy between white and Black people, which is not entirely accurate.

In general, I have argued elsewhere that what is historically significant to white people may not be historically significant to Black people.<sup>3</sup> For example, July 4, 1776, is insignificant to the majority of Black Americans who are descendants of enslaved people. Yet July 4th is considered U.S. Independence Day despite the reality that around 20 percent of the population was still enslaved. The official social studies curriculum rarely explores historically important Black independence days such as Juneteenth, National Freedom Day, and the many Emancipation days celebrated throughout the Americas.<sup>4</sup> The exclusion of these histories (whether innocuous or not) leaves the idea that Black history, and more specifically Black independence and

**Thirty-one people gather at a Juneteenth Celebration in Emancipation Park in Houston's Fourth Ward in 1880.**

(Houston Public Library Digital Archives/Wikimedia Commons)



traditions, are insignificant to the American story and not worthy of studying.

When we say Black history is American history, we ignore a multitude of historical experiences and perspectives. History education continues to be largely Eurocentric, where diversifying the subject has been cosmetic and based on quantitative measurement. Vasquez, Brown, and Brown have called this phenomenon an “illusion of inclusion,” in which Black historical actors and events might be present in the narrative but, qualitatively, their voices and experiences are ignored. For example, the narratives about *Brown v. Board of Education* celebrate aspects of integration yet fail to explore Black counter-narratives.<sup>5</sup>

The curriculum teaches us that the U.S. Supreme Court case was important because it helped force integration and end segregation, which was immoral and unequal. We learn of the complicity of “all deliberate speed” and how many states and school districts moved slowly to comply with the federal law. Yet the *Brown* narratives imply that predominantly Black schools were deficient,

and Black students had to integrate with white students who attended superior schools.<sup>6</sup>

Research, however, has shown that predominantly Black schools were not academically inferior to white schools.<sup>7</sup> In fact, oral histories reveal that many African Americans believed their schools were equal to or even superior to the integrated schools they then had to attend. While the NAACP’s legal strategies proved effective, many Black community members disagreed with the organization’s tactics, as they simply wanted equitably funded schools, not integration. Additionally, integration was one-sided—where Black students were inconvenienced and bused to white schools. Most importantly, Black teachers and administrators lost their jobs or were demoted, an issue that continues to plague us today.<sup>8</sup>

Independence Day observances and *Brown v. Board* are just two examples of ways the history curriculum presents Black histories only if the narratives closely align, or can be manufactured to align, with the attitudes, dispositions, and characteristics of white-centered historical narratives. “Black history is

American history” promotes a singular historical consciousness, which centers white people as the main protagonists and Black people and other non-Blacks as outliers of the American narrative. How we have taught Black history is through European contact or white people’s importance. In other words, we have mostly only taught *about* Black history and not *through* Black history. Teaching *about* Black history and people means that our knowledge of Black history comes from the perspectives of white people, not Black people. Teaching about Black history sends a message that Black histories are defined through oppression and liberation.

The oppression and liberation paradigm is represented through the three major topics that have traditionally defined Black history: first, enslavement; secondly, the trials and tribulations of the post-Civil War and Reconstruction periods; and finally, the 1960s civil rights movement. Through these narratives, we learn three aspects about Black history. First, we “learn” that Black people as a whole, beginning with their kidnappers in West and Central Africa, were essentially passive, powerless, and ultimately

accepted their oppression. Second, we learn that only certain Black people (or what some scholars termed “Black messiahs”) are acceptable Black people to learn about and study. Third, we learn little about Black agency or how Black people fought for their liberation, but when we do, Black agency is contingent on a certain way to fight for liberation and typically includes behaviors that favor non-violence.<sup>9</sup> These themes are largely predicated on how white people wish to see or imagine Black people to be through history education. They represent an effort to sanitize the ugliness, diminish achievements and contribution, ignore the diversity of Blackness, and pigeonhole Black people as monolithic in an effort to continue to empower, not to offend, or assuage white people about America’s legacy.

While curricular change has been incremental, Black history continues to be applied in this manner because of a systematic refusal to accept diversity, equity, and multiple voices in K-12 history education. Additionally, the lack of quality K-12 Black history education; limited opportunities in teacher education and professional development; inadequate K-12 Black history policies at both the state and federal levels; and a lack of accountability/enforcement of Black history mandates have hindered true improvement of how we learn and teach about Black people.<sup>10</sup> This white-washed approach to history education, leaves students with a limited and oversimplified Black history knowledge—one that favors a certain type of Black history and ignores the many Black historical perspectives that make up what I call a Black historical consciousness.

### **What is Black Historical Consciousness?**

Black historical consciousness is an effort to understand, develop, and teach Black histories that recognize Black people’s humanity. It emphasizes pedagogical practices that seek to reimagine the legitimacy, selection, and interpretation of historical sources. To describe Black

historical consciousness is to alter our ideology and redefine Black history. It is to seek alternative principles that effectively explore Black people’s humanity and dismantle the white epistemic historical logic that has long dominated much of K-12 official social studies policy. White epistemic logic is the rationalization of Black historical experiences and ways of knowing/doing through traditional Western European perspectives. The concept allows Black agency in history to be partnered with whiteness or narratives that highlight Black historical actors who appease whiteness.<sup>11</sup>

White epistemic logic situates history as just that: history, and not the multiple histories that help develop a historical consciousness. Therefore, Black histories are our goal instead of Black history. The “ies” denotes that multiple histories are present within the subject. The singular “y” indicates one historical narrative which is, therefore, a more hegemonic history based on curriculum developers’ tendency to focus on the history of the powerful. When Black history is viewed through white epistemic lenses, we truly do not understand the Black experience because it is the white experience and perspectives that are defining Blackness. To be clear, this does not mean that white people cannot be included in some narratives if historically pertinent; what it means is that whiteness does not drive the Black history narratives.

In dismantling white epistemic logic, we should ask the question: are we developing Black history through the oppressor’s historical lens, or do our histories represent and center Black perspectives and voices? To be clear, I am not arguing for an essentialization of Blackness; Blackness and Black people are complex and multifaceted; but I am interested in throwing away the Eurocentric ways we think about Black people throughout history. Black history constructed in such a way is essentially foreign to Black people’s existence. Through a Black historical consciousness approach, a true Black history program is naturally contentious to what we know to be the

traditional official history curriculum because our Black history derives from a Black epistemic knowledge.

### **Black Historical Consciousness Principles**

How do we teach and come to conceptualize a Black historical consciousness within Black histories in classroom spaces? A Black historical consciousness approach to Black history is to develop and learn Black history as its own genre of historical thought that is independent of Western knowledge. Redefining Black history is to explore Black identity through complex and nuanced narratives that attempt to get at the full humanity of Black people. I suggest that we incorporate these six principles into our curriculum and pedagogies: systemic power, oppression, and racism; agency, resistance, and perseverance; Africa and the African Diaspora; Black joy and love; Black identities; and Black historical contention. The first three themes—power, oppression, and racism; agency, resistance, and perseverance; and Africa and the Diaspora—are common themes found in all Diaspora Black history programs. The last three themes—joy/love; Black identities; and Black historical contention—are not as widely adopted and might be perceived as controversial in many educational spaces.

#### *Power, Oppression, and Racism*

Power, oppression, and racism are important concepts for understanding how systems and institutions have victimized Black people throughout history. Central to the theme of power and oppression is understanding how values surrounding justice, freedom, equality, and equity have been intentionally ignored throughout Black history. An essential component of these missing ideas is to focus on the role race and racism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness have played in Black lives. The social construction of race helped classify human beings and developed as enslavement’s economy began to spread throughout the Americas. These ideas

helped set the country's social, economic, and political foundations and were the official policy for centuries. These ideas of power, oppression, and racism have to be understood as systemic and institutional, not individual or cosmetic.

Without examining power, we miss the ways that institutions and structures have dictated life decisions. Without examining power, we tend to be critical of groups who struggle. We tend to make value and moral judgments and believe that individual and group decisions are independent of society. In turn, we begin to believe that Black people are naturally deficient compared to white people because we do not understand the systemic oppression that has limited and, in some cases, controlled Black life histories. Black history curriculum needs to contextualize race, racism, white supremacy, and anti-Blackness to follow how power and oppression are created and sustained throughout society. A few curricular topics connected to power and oppression are the enslavement period (European slave trade, the middle passage, the development and sustainability of race-based enslavement); the emergence of Jim Crow segregation and political disfranchisement; the nadir of race relations (lynching, race riots, and the defamation of African American culture and humanity); red lining; the impact of Reaganomics and the War on drugs; and mass incarceration.

#### *Black Agency, Resistance and Perseverance*

Black agency, resistance, and perseverance are concepts that differentiate between Black victimization and Black victimhood. It is important to understand that Black people have been victims or victimized by oppressive structures, but have never been *solely* victims (i.e., helpless, defeated, and begging for charity, especially from white people). Black agency, resistance, and perseverance help us understand that, throughout history, Black people could act independently, made their own decisions based on their interests, and fought back

against oppressive structures. This concept recognizes that Black people have a spirit of freedom and revolt as each generation has fought against oppression. Without Black agency to balance oppression, Black history falls into the trap of victimhood, accompanied by a Black suffering narrative.

A Black suffering narrative has three parts. First, Blackness is defined through its pain and may imply that suffering is the very fabric of Black life histories. Black suffering becomes normalized and infers a certain passive acceptance of these conditions. Black suffering also constructs a sympathetic lens. Black history is not about developing sympathetic figures; instead, it exposes how their humanity shaped and constructed world ideologies and practices. Black people can be filtered through a paternalistic lens seeking to fix and correct Black pathology instead of seeking from Black people solutions for U.S. democracy that uphold egalitarian ideas. Black suffering also implies that white people are naturally dominant over Black bodies. Black agency, resistance, and perseverance topics may include: African resistance to slavery (Stono Rebellion, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner); the abolitionist movement; experiences of free Black people; Black military experiences; the maroon experience; Black reconstruction; the development of social institutions; two great migrations; the long civil rights movement; Supreme Court cases (*Dred Scott to Brown*); NAACP and the courts; the Black power movement; and Black inventions.

#### *Africa and the African Diaspora*

Africa and the African Diaspora are important to Black history because they remind people that Black history did not begin with enslavement. They establish the concept that Black histories should not begin with European contact but with ancient African civilizations. This is an approach that allows students to understand Africa, its people, and the many cultures and countries that inhabit

the continent. Black history as African history highlights histories that help students see Africa, in many cases, as the originator of global histories and an example of the interconnection of the world. Connecting Africa and its Diaspora is about teaching the similarities and differences of Black histories and cultures worldwide. It is about interrogating the history of Blackness and how its meaning shifts based on geography. Topics may include the African origins of humanity, civilization, kingdoms and dynasties; African explorers and pre-colonial/enslavement presence; the anti-colonial movement in Africa; the African presence in New Spain, France, and English colonies; the significance and impact of the Haitian Revolution; and slavery in Africa vs. other forms of enslavement.

#### *Black Joy*

Black joy is an extension of agency, resistance, and perseverance. Its purpose is to counter the acts of white oppression and power. Black joy is a liberation and radical project that defied oppressive structures of the time. Black joy as Black history encompasses narratives that offer knowledge about Black culture that are not focused on hardship but sustain Black people's spirits. While joy can infer happiness, Black joy is more than that. It is Black people's resolve in the face of oppression that grief need not be the dominant attitude or disposition. Black joy is the love, collegiality, and collectiveness that Black people have exhibited throughout history. Black joy resists the notion that Black people are unworthy and sub-human. It is what makes Black culture, Black culture.

Black joy through Black history is defiant. Without Black joy, we cannot define Black humanity. The challenge for teachers and policymakers, however, is how to represent joy without trivialization? Topics covered through Black joy and love may include African and African American family dynamics; Black music, dance, and expression; African American cuisine; the arts,

**Table 1: Black Historical Consciousness Principles\***

Themes	Definition	Possible Compelling Questions
<b>1. Power and Oppression</b>	Power and oppression as Black histories are narratives that highlight the lack of justice, freedom, equality, and equity of Black people experienced throughout history. Central to these narratives is how Black people have been victims to racism, white Supremacy, and anti-Black societal structures as well as individual actions.	How did enslavement undermine democratic principles? How did racism divide the country? How did slave owners use the government to their advantage? Why did the United States abandon Reconstruction? How did the “nadir of race relations” rival the horrors of enslavement? How do the Los Angeles riots of 1992 compare to Ferguson in 2014?
Possible topics	Slavery in North and South America; the development and sustainability of racialized and chattel slavery; emergences of Jim Crow; the nadir of race relations (lynching, race riots, and the defamation of African American culture and humanity); impact of Reaganomics; the war on drugs; mass incarceration	
<b>2. Black Agency, Resistance, and Perseverance</b>	Black agency, resistance, and perseverance are Black histories that explain that although Black people have been victimized, they were not helpless victims. These narratives highlight that Black people have had the capacity to act independently, have made their own decisions based on their interest, and have fought back against oppressive structures.	How do African Americans make social change? How do you adapt to change? What makes movements successful? Was the civil rights movement successful? Should Black people be considered founders of the United States of America? What was Great about the Great Migration?
Possible Topics	African resistance to slavery (Stono, Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vessey, and Nat Turner); the abolitionist movement and the emergence of Black abolitionists; the experiences of free Black people; Black military experiences; the maroon experience and early freedom movements; the development of Black social institutions; two great migrations; the long civil rights movement; NAACP and the courts; the Black Power movement	
<b>3. Africa and the African Diaspora</b>	Africa and the African Diaspora as Black histories stress that narratives of Black people should be contextualized within the African Diaspora. A course in Black history should begin with ancient African history and connect the various Black histories around the globe.	What are the legacies of Black Diaspora freedom movements? Are we all Africans? How did trans-Saharan trade lead to West African wealth and success? How did the Haitian Revolution influence American enslavement? How have African Americans/Black people drawn from their African heritage in civil rights struggles?
Possible Topics	African origins of humanity; African civilization, kingdoms and dynasties; African explorers and pre-colonial/enslavement presence; the anticolonial movement in Africa; the significance and impact of the Haitian Revolution; slavery in Africa vs. race-based slavery	
<b>4. Black Joy</b>	Black joy narratives are narratives of Black histories that focus on Black people’s resolve during oppressive history. These histories focus on times of happiness, togetherness, and the fight for freedom for generations both past and present.	Were the 1920s a time of cultural change? How do you adapt to change? How does African American cultural expression define society? What is the lasting legacy of African Americans in sports? Is Black joy agency and resistance? How did sports provide a source of pride?
Possible Topics	African and African American family dynamics; Black music, dance, and other cultural expressions; African American cuisine; the Black Arts Movement; the Harlem Renaissance; African Americans in sports; the making of African and African American holidays and tradition; the Black Arts Movement	
<b>5. Black Identities</b>	Understanding Black identities as Black histories promotes a more inclusive history that seeks to uncover the multiple identities of Black people through Black history. History should not only be about Black men who are middle class, Christian, and heterosexual, and able-bodied.	Who is Black? How does intersectionality change how individuals were treated within groups seeking equality? Why do we ignore Black women in Black history? Who wins and loses through Black liberation movements? How did the Stonewall riots influence the Black LGBTQ+ community?
Possible Topics	Black and Tribal experiences; Black conservatism; Black identities around the Diaspora; Black HERstories; Black LGBTQ+ history; Black class conflict; Black political thought; Black feminists; the anti-apartheid movement; the Caribbean Black Power movement; Black Lives Matter; Afro-Latin cultural movements in South America and the Caribbean; Black nationalism; Combahee River Collective	
<b>6. Black Historical Contention</b>	Black historical contention is the recognition that all Black histories are not positive. Black histories are complex and histories that are difficult should not be ignored. Additionally, the principles highlight the differences in Black history. Black people were not a monolithic group; they had various ideas of how to solve issues.	Are Africans to blame for the transatlantic slave trade? How did African Indigenous populations fight against 1800s U.S./Canadian colonization efforts? Do Black ethnic groups in the U.S. deserve reparations? How does sexism diminish the way we remember women’s leadership roles during the civil rights movement?
Possible Topics	Colonizing Africa; Black socio-political-cultural Global Movements (Pan-Africanist Movements, the Garvey Movement (UNIA), Black Marxism, Black separatism, the Reparations movement, Rastafarianism, Black Consciousness movement)	

\* See endnote 1. Some of the compelling questions are used in the Jefferson County Schools (KY) African American Studies Curriculum. Some of the topics for each principle are used in the Fort Worth Independent school district’s African and African-American history and culture curriculum.

literature, and popular culture; carnival; the Harlem Renaissance; African Americans in sports, and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s.

### *Black Identities*

Black identities seek to provide a more complete, diverse, and equitable Black history. Black histories consist of multiple identities that inform Blackness and look at each positionality as important in gaining a total understanding of Black history. Black histories in schools are largely geared towards Black males who are middle class, heterosexual, Christian, and able bodied. We need to expand those narratives. We need to include history narratives of Black women, the Black LGBTQA communities, the Black poor and working-class, Black radicals and conservatism, and the various Black ethnic groups worldwide. To be clear, it is not enough that we simply include these groups; their voices need to be heard. This approach is vital because Black people are not monolithic. Exploring Black identities is important because it helps us explore Black history fully.

### *Black Historical Contention*

Black historical contention warns instructors that Black people are not a monolithic group. They disagree on many issues pertinent within Black histories. Additionally, Black histories are not pristinely filled with perfect messiahs who always demonstrated appropriate actions. Black histories have been problematic and susceptible to the evils of sexism, capitalism, and Black ethnic subjugation. To represent Black humanity, Black historical contention stresses that we should not merely teach and present positive Black histories and images. We need to introduce a complete history that addresses humanity that includes Black people's deficiencies and vulnerabilities. We need to be mindful that many of our civil rights activists may have been sexist, classist, and homophobic, and acknowledge that the 1800s brought about recolonizing projects on the African

continent by Black people from the U.S. and Canada. These recolonizing efforts (aided by the British government and American Colonization Society) brought enslavement practices to the indigenous groups, which have continued to influence the socio-political-economic realities of today. The point here is not to proclaim a "see, you do it too" attitude, but to recognize that Black people have complex and human dimensions.

### **Conclusion**

There is so much to learn about how we should build a Black history program. Improving Black history in K-12 schools will need a concerted effort from policymakers and K-12 educators. For policymakers, we need to alter the way we desire to construct the history curriculum. That means we need to move away from policies that promote historical uniformity (all histories are the same) and historical integration (add Black people into history without taking serious consideration of their voices and perspectives) to more historical contentiousness (a history that is comfortable with competing perspectives about the ethos of America). For school administrators, a detailed professional development plan is needed. This plan should consist of curriculum audits and ongoing professional learning plans for staff and the community that include sessions on Black history content and pedagogical content knowledge as well as teacher's dispositions and identity.

For teachers, learning about Black history and how to implement it is important. Some great foundational texts for content and instruction are *From Slavery to Freedom* (9th edition) by John Hope Franklin; *A Black Women's History of the United States* by Daina Berry and Kali Gross; *The Civil Rights Movement*, edited by Hasan Jeffries; and *Engaging the African Diaspora in K-12 Education*, edited by Kia Caldwell and Emily Chávez.<sup>12</sup> I also warn teachers that a K-12 Black history course is not simply a traditional history course in "Black face." Teachers have to decon-

struct and reimagine how to teach Black history. That means that we will have to reconcile that Black history has its own historical entry points, its own historical timelines, historical perspectives, and historical people. Primary sources with race-neutral guiding questions are not enough.<sup>13</sup> Revised assessments where rote memorization is the goal are not sufficient. Project- and problem-based assessments, media development, community engagement, and action research might be more appropriate goals.

Efforts to improve K-12 Black history have been an enduring concern since the late 1800s. Yet as a profession, we have refused to listen to and implement policies (and give them a chance to be fully developed) suggested by Black history educational reformers. We continue to hold onto the idea that Black history is American history when we know that it is simply not true. Yes, the desired destination is for Black history to be American history, but that ideology reminds us that society simply does not take Black history or people seriously. Society ignores Black people's ideas, perspectives, pain, joy, and culture, all for assimilation. The process will take much time as we have been miseducated about Black people for centuries. Yet if K-12 educators truly teach through Black history, history will be totally transformed. Hopefully, our society will transform along with it. ●

### **Notes**

1. Black history and African American history are not used interchangeably. Black history is defined as the histories of Black people who are descendants from Africa and located throughout the African Diaspora. Black history is a global term and not situated in any geographical region. African American history is the history of Black persons located in America. American history encompasses all the histories of the Americas (North, Central and South America, and the Caribbean). I purposely use "United States history" for the United States; it is not interchangeable with American history.
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  - John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 9th edition (New York: 2010); Daina Berry and Kali Gross, *A Black Women’s History of the United States* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2020); Hasan Jeffries, Editor, *The Civil Rights Movement* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019); Kia Caldwell and Emily Chávez, Editors, *Engaging the African Diaspora in K-12 Education* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2020).
  - A good resource for Black history primary source documents is the Black encyclopedia site run by Dr. Quintard Taylor of the University of Washington-Seattle, [www.Blackpast.org](http://www.Blackpast.org).

**LAGARRETT J. KING** is the Isabelle Wade Lyda and Paul C. Lyda Professor and Founding Director of the Carter Center for K-12 Black History Education at the University of Missouri. His research focuses on the teaching and learning of Black history in schools and society. His edited book, *Perspectives on Black Histories in Schools*, is part of the *Research in Social Education* series and is published through Information Age Publishing. The Black Historical Consciousness Framework has been adopted by Jefferson County Public Schools in Kentucky, Francis Howell Public Schools in Missouri, and Muskegon Heights Public Schools Academy System in Michigan.

## The Korean War and Its Legacy: Teaching about Korea through Inquiry

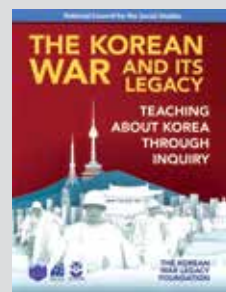
Korean War Legacy Foundation. 231 pages. 2019

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