

DAY 8: The Dangers of Whitewashing American History

“History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again” -Maya Angelou

“By teaching a ‘whitewashed’ version of American history, we ignore the oppressions that are an integral part of our past and that have left a legacy that haunts us today. And we rob our college students and future leaders of the ability to understand, contextualize, and think critically about all aspects of our history. Without a full understanding of our past, how can we expect to solve the problems this past has created?”-- [Association of American Colleges and Universities, Liberal Education Blog](#)

What do we mean by “white washing”? One prime example has to do with how the history of enslavement in America is typically taught in schools. [As noted by Nikita Stewart in this article from the 1619 project.](#) “Elementary-school teachers, worried about disturbing children, tell students about the ‘good’ people, like the abolitionists and the black people who escaped to freedom, but leave out the details of why they were protesting or what they were fleeing . . . that means students graduate with a poor understanding of how slavery shaped our country, and they are unable to recognize the powerful and lasting effects it has had.”

What we fail to learn as a result of whitewashing are the powerful, positive impacts of Black empowerment movements and the omission of great historical achievements by Black people such as Black Wall Street, [medical achievements and space and science discoveries](#). We have not had to grapple with the truth of our Country’s history of lynching, the Tulsa Race Massacre, or the false narrative that the fight for civil rights is over. Pause and consider the narratives that these examples prompt for you, and what you learned of them (if anything) in school.

Why is this happening? Yes, some of it has to do with the actions of individual teachers and their bias. What you may not be aware of is that what version of our nation’s history that’s taught in public schools is also influenced by the largest purchasers of textbooks-- the states of California and Texas. [You can explore their outsized influence on the content of student textbooks through this interactive resource.](#)

Today’s Challenge:

Option 1: [Check out 10 Examples of Whitewashing You Never Thought About](#), by Jeremy Helligar, who details whitewashing through advertising, school textbooks, childrens’ toys, and more.

Option 2: [Watch The real story of Rosa Parks-- and why we need to confront myths about Black History](#), An 18-minute TedTalk, Professor David Ikard, Professor of African American and Diaspora Studies at Vanderbilt University.

Option 3: Read this blog from University of Michigan Athletics entitled [Black History Month: Where Do We Go From Here?](#) which articulates a call to action by staff member, Whitney Tarver. Then enjoy this [Q&A from "Voices of the Staff"](#) series which highlights members of the Michigan Athletic Department and what Black History month means to them.

Option 4: [Listen to this interview of Harvard Professor Dr. Khalil Gibran Muhammad](#), who explains how the way in which we've taught American history, a form of civic nationalism, has led to the predominant view that Black history is separate, rather than inextricably linked, to the telling of our nation's history.

Option 5: Read about Critical Race Theory (CRT), a term that's made its way into the mainstream media of late. Some would contend that it is a framework which serves as an antidote to the whitewashing of our nation's history. [Click here to learn more about what it is, and isn't.](#)

Option 6: Take Action. As a parent or caregiver to school-aged youth, you could begin examining the content of textbooks and instruction materials for what is left out. And, because we know whitewashing happens not only in schools, [we invite you to read and begin practicing the tenets of anti-racism to be better able to see, and change, white washing when it occurs.](#)

Share your reflections on today's topic on social media using the hashtag **#unitedforequity** and tag **@uwwashtenaw**.

