



Why History Matters

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The year 1976 transformed my mundane, humdrum ten-year-old life for the better. A native of Detroit, Michigan, I grew up on the city's Near West Side, four miles west of downtown Detroit and three miles south of the blind pig afterhours nightclub (inside the United Community League for Civic Action office) where a police raid and subsequent arrests inspired the bloody 12th Street Riot, better known as the 1967 Detroit riot, which ended in forty-three deaths. I had always attended school with neighborhood youths who were Black, first at Columbian Primary School on Vinewood and Hancock, and then Columbian Elementary School on West Warren Ave and Roosevelt St. This, however, would change, at least for the next 5 ½ years.

On Monday, January 5, 1976, I took a school bus to Maybury Elementary School on 4410 Porter St., only three miles from my home. I knew about school busing as a child. The busing crisis in 1970s Boston, which set off protests, anger, and violence, gripped the nation, especially in April 1976, when a White adolescent, Joseph Rakes, injured Black civil rights attorney Ted C. Landsmark using a flagpole carrying a United States flag (Photojournalist Stanley Forman's "Soiling of Old Glory" captured the moment and earned the photographer a Pulitzer Prize in 1977). Busing in Detroit, fortunately, did not evoke this type of controversy. Nevertheless, I do remember a White parent being interviewed on the evening news commenting that she did not want Blacks or "niggers" attending her daughter's school. Even though White residents occasionally spewed racist rhetoric, Detroit did not witness violent incidents, at least to my knowledge. Besides, we attended school in a working-class, ethnically diverse Southwest Detroit neighborhood, not an affluent, mostly White community, although the two-parent, nuclear families still earned more money than most of the single mothers and grandmothers living on the city's Near West Side.

The neighborhood, known as Mexicantown (previously called La Bagley), is part of an area demographers and city planners today call Southwest Detroit. The Mexican Revolution of the 1910s inspired migrations north into the Midwest. Mexican nationals fleeing their native homeland, along with Mexican Americans moving north in search of decent work, who ended up in Detroit settled this community. Subsequent migrations from the 1970s through the 1990s brought tens of thousands of new Latinx immigrants from abroad into Mexicantown. Interestingly, many other groups lived in this diverse section of Southwest Detroit as well. When I arrived on the school's campus that Monday morning, I met a fascinating admixture of religious, ethnic, and racial groups. For the first time I attended school with non-African Americans alongside African American peers from my neighborhood. I went to school with Puerto Rican Americans, Indian Americans, Pakistani Americans, Mexican Americans, Iraqi Americans, Iranian Americans, Lebanese Americans, Greek Americans, Polish Americans, Turkish Americans, German Americans, Russian Americans, Jewish Americans, and White Americans whose ancestors fled the old Austria-Hungary (later comprising the Eastern bloc) and Russian empires (later comprising the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). I also developed new friendships with African American classmates who lived in adjoining neighborhoods near mine. I found this extraordinary and treasured the new relationships I developed!

Attending Maybury Elementary School and, later, Amelia Earhart Middle School (today Amelia Earhart Elementary-Middle School) gave me a lot of joy. I loved the classmates I met from the Mexicantown neighborhood, and fell in love with history, biology, physical science, and prealgebra. I attended school with some brilliant students of all races and nationalities, classmates who inspired me to succeed, especially in middle school. I also enjoyed my schoolteachers. Mr. Shanks, the science teacher, and I always discussed the Emmy award-winning *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*, a show that highlighted species of exotic, wild animals. I particularly loved the episodes on aquatic animals, insects, and arachnids.

History, however, more than any other subject, touched my soul. In middle school, I learned about the Jewish Holocaust, read the *Diary of a Young Girl* by Ann Frank (1947), and later saw the play, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the 1977 version. My homeroom teacher whose loved ones survived the Holocaust, Mrs. York, taught the class to value history and the painful lessons it taught society. Mr. Ronald Peart, a mathematics teacher who taught social studies, also incentivized my love of history. His lectures on the causes of the American Revolution, the making of the Constitution, and the origins of the Civil War made United States history come alive. His lectures on the American Revolution, admittedly, sometimes confused me. When

Mr. Peart discussed, for example, British Parliament, I often wondered if that legislative body had a connection with the popular funk band with the same name, Parliament- Funkadelic. Eventually I realized that musical artist George Clinton borrowed the band's name from Britain's Parliament. History just made sense to me and stood out as something priceless. I therefore wanted to learn more.

Paradoxically, we rarely learned about the ancestors of contemporary African Americans who mostly lived and died as slaves, not even from Black educators like Mr. Peart. I began learning about African American history in the fifth grade. *Roots*, the ABC miniseries that aired January 23, 1977, introduced me to African American history. Millions of Americans of the United States watched the unforgettable dramatization based on Alex Haley's Pulitzer Prize winning historical novel, *Roots*, a story that depicted his American family lineage that began in the Gambian village, Jufureh (also spelled Juffure). This miniseries and novel, along with the second miniseries, *Roots: The Next Generations* (1979), and third miniseries, *Alex Haley's Queen* (1993), created in me an insatiable appetite for Black history, my own family history, and history in general. Yet, even as I matriculated to high school in 1980, I never truly learned African American history, not as a subspecialty of United States history.

I learned history, principally Western Civilization and United States history, and loved it. Nevertheless, Black students in the Detroit Public Schools—all students—desperately needed to learn the totality of United States and world history. We needed to know how our ancestors contributed to world civilization. They needed to learn Africa's relationship to world history. On the other hand, classes taught me that Europeans only mattered, that Whites transformed the world, created inventions, built cities, fought against democracy and autocracy, and served as the default for everything moral, pure, and righteous.

This indoctrination did not end in school. Each Sunday in church I saw a painting of Jesus Christ, a White man with blue eyes, fair skin, and straggly, blond hair. Even in my Black household, my grandmother's décor plates of Jesus Christ and God displayed a White man. (The basis of these depictions are Leonardo da Vinci's fifteenth- and sixteenth-century paintings, *The Last Supper* and *Salvator Mundi* and Christian iconography that originated across Christian Europe also in the late Middle Ages). Of course, this should not matter, but it does. It matters because it teaches African-descent youths and adults that they are inferior; and education and community constructions socialize the world that non-Blacks, especially Whites, are superior to Black people. *Roots* did capture the soul of most African American youths.

Most Black schoolchildren expressed outrage when called “Kunta Kinte” or “Kizzy” by classmates. They did not see these individuals in favorable terms.

Black youths today—certainly not all but many—continue to see the world in a binary construction, one that places African Americans against others, even other African-descent peoples, or other peoples of color. Last month I had a conversation with a thirty-four-year-old cousin about the tragic events playing out in Israel. She felt frustration that the world only cared about Jews and Palestinians when Black peoples around the world faced discrimination of all types daily by all non-Black peoples all the time. I mentioned the Jewish Holocaust and its devastating consequences—the genocide of two-thirds of the world’s Jewish population. I also discussed the harmful segregation and discrimination Palestinians lived with daily in Israel, their own homeland. Nevertheless, this college-educated young Black woman could only see the daily oppression African American Detroiters face daily when driving in suburban communities, when shopping in suburban stores, when purchasing gas at convenience stores owned by non-Blacks, when discussing their health concerns with condescending physicians, when being talked down to by educated IT personnel, when questioned by attorneys, when criticized by accountants, when critiqued by professors, when stopped by police officers when driving, when denigrated to by social workers and case workers, when in heated exchanged with neighbors, etc.

They experience these realities daily. They see this because of a global tenet that espouses the rhetoric that African-descent peoples, especially African Americans who are the descendants of slaves, are criminal, evil, intellectually lazy, incompetent, and unrighteous. And they feel that all of humanity believes these myths and stereotypes. This complicated, multidimensional binary is a result of history—the way educators teach history in schools along with centuries of societal racialized neglect and ostracization and its impact on generations of African-descent peoples.

African Americans have successfully compensated for some of this neglect. As a teenager, I also learned African American history as an adolescent from another surprising group of sources: family elders. Eavesdropping on my grandmother’s conversations with her friends in the late 1970s and early 1980s introduced me to the Black-White binary in the South. My grandmother and her friends, all homeowners, wives or widows, and Christian matriarchs who fled the South during the Great Migration, still had an affinity for their hometowns and cities back south. Their only criticism pertained to Black-White relationships. They hated the treatment they and their loved ones faced daily. If Jim Crow segregation and rural poverty had not infiltrated their lives, perhaps they would have endured the South.

In truth, they did not care much for Detroit, midwestern winters, urban politics, and, sometimes, Mayor Coleman A. Young, (a Tuskegee Airman mechanic in World War II and union activist who became one of the longest-serving mayors in US history) although they did feel pride that a Black man led the city and local government. Moreover, during family reunions on my dad's side of the family in Detroit and Mississippi, elders talked about life in Kemper County and Meridian, Mississippi. My cousin Vera, Dr. Vera Hayden, now eighty-five-years-old and a retired biology professor at Alcorn State University and a real estate developer, hosted family reunions for my dad's paternal side of the family (the Pruitts) in Meridian every two years. Family reunions for my father's maternal side (the McKenzie family), however, took place in rural Kemper County. My extended families had enormous pride for our familial lineage. Even though most of the ancestors and elders alive in the seventies and eighties never completed high school, everyone felt enormous satisfaction for the growing families, their ability to read and write, had worked hard for most of their lives to acquire the material possessions they had, and emphasized the importance of education and land ownership. These reunions infused a sense of purpose in our hearts and minds, an inner peace that other groups relied upon daily.

I knew that then as a teenager and know this now as a middle-aged woman on the brink of turning sixty. I visited the gravesites of my grandparents and great-grandparents in Kemper County last summer and could only reflect on the stressful life they lived as African American farmers, both sharecroppers and farm owners. I own land in Mississippi, land my paternal grandfather purchased and land my paternal grandmother's father bought as a young man around the turn-of-the-century.

It is because of their struggles, prayers, and hopes that I live today as a professional historian and college professor. It is the integral lessons I learned from my parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and older cousins about humility, thrift, service, self-sacrifice, community service, family, and God that ensures that I remain resolute as a historian of Black Texas history and public servant in higher education. And yes, I eventually learned African American and African history in school—in undergraduate school under the tutelage of Merline Pitre, Howard O. Beeth, Greg Maddox, and Cary D. Wintz at Texas Southern University in the 1980s and early 1990s; I continued to learn this history under the guidance of Linda Reed, Joe Pratt, Tyrone Tillery, James Kirby Martin, and Steven Mintz at The University of Houston in the 1990s; and I first learned to write original history while researching and writing my dissertation. This love for Blackness through history, however, truly began with my fascination with *Roots* and genealogy. Family history is especially essential to identity, self-preservation, gratification, selflessness, and intellectual application.

Knowing that my ancestors sacrificed to provide for their offspring and remembered the life principles set forth by their ancestors and elders inspires me to get out of bed each morning, instruct students, and serve humanity as a caring soul.

If society prioritizes certain histories over others, this will only move everyone in the wrong direction. It is imperative that the East Texas Historical Association recognizes the value of Texas history—all Texas history. Elementary schoolers learning about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Ruby Bridges, Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Carter Wesley, Clifton Richardson, Sr., Prince Hall, James Forten, Lulu B. White, Thelma Scott Bryant, Hazel Hainsworth Young, Samuel Walker Houston, Percy and Alice Howard, Naomi Lédé, Joreen Waddell, Wendell and Augusta Baker, LaGuana Glaze, and others will know the sacrifices of all Texans.

In fact, it is imperative that Texas schoolchildren learn about all Texans, all United States citizens and residents, and all of humanity throughout the world. Finally, young people must understand the correlation between the past and present. This means that young people should read about all Texans, their shared hopes, and dreams, as well as the ways their goals and intensions have often diverged throughout the centuries. This shared educational awareness about the state, nation, and world's past, again, will lead young people, I think, toward restorative truth, reconciliation, harmony, empathy, forgiveness, and love.

This is why history matters to me. Thank you and Happy Holidays.