

A CURRICULUM WITH ONLY FRAGMENTS OF BLACK HISTORY

Students and teachers want to be taught and teach history that integrates Black voices every step of the way

By ANI TUTUNJYAN
THE MIRROR EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

States across the country are trying to ban books about race. Proposed bills target Black authors such as Toni Morrison, most notably known for “Beloved,” and Nikole Hannah-Jones, developer of The New York Times “The 1619 Project.” Bans aren’t just going after books that talk about racism but also books that express the Black experience. “Banning access to information doesn’t work because people, especially young people, will always find a way around it and if you have the entire internet at your disposal, what good is banning a book in a class?” AP U.S. History (APUSH) teacher Ms. Aditi Doshi said. “I think it’s really important to frame texts that can be problematic with their use of language or their reference to material that could be disturbing or traumatic to some students. If we frame those texts appropriately, they allow us to place

ourselves inside the minds and inside the shoes of people who lived in this era that we don’t have a reference point for.” Black history is often taught in condensed form, being just a chapter in a U.S. history book and almost always only about slavery. Nothing more is required by the curriculum. “Reconstruction is actually a standard that California has to teach, which, yeah, that’s great, but the textbook has one paragraph on it when it might actually need a whole chapter,” U.S. history teacher Mr. Robert Docter said. “That’s what’s frustrating because an accurate look at U.S. history is Black History. It’s not a category in itself; it should be interwoven throughout the entire history of the country, rather than being a unit, and you get a test on it, and then it’s done.” Ms. Doshi also believes that Black history shouldn’t be taught as just one unit. “As a teacher and a student of American history, Black history and American history are one in the same,” Ms. Doshi said. “They are synonymous you cannot understand narrative or themes or connections throughout American history without understanding Black history.” She thinks teaching anything less is a silencing of Black voices. “If you’re truly trying to understand American history accurately, black history has to be incorporated every step of the way, in every historical era, in every

time period in every major theme, and this is not just limited to the topics that we traditionally associate with history, like example slavery or the civil rights movement,” she said. “We have to understand that African Americans have been president America since the country’s founding since the first slave ships landed in 1619, and if we remove both people’s voices and their stories from the curriculum, that means that we are erasing them from a history that they were actually part of.” Black students are tired of only being taught about the pain and suffering of Black people. “A lot of people when they talk about black history, it’s just Black struggle. There’s more to Black people than us struggling,” Samara Augustine said. “Everyone was raving about ‘The Hate U Give’ and yes that’s a great book, great movie but why is it all just struggle? It’s all movies show, it’s all the media shows.” “I’ve only ever seen one movie come even a little bit close to actually talking about black successes in a black struggle and that movie was ‘Hidden Figures,’” Djaeda Hall said. And even in that movie, the woman was still struggling, not only because she was a woman, but also because she was Black.” And even when teaching about Black struggle, the lessons often fail to capture just how bad it was. “In school, they would just say they made

them [slaves] pick cotton but I learned on TikTok that white owners also used to eat slaves and do other cruel stuff to them,” Brianna Fenders said. “We never learn about these things in school. They just say, oh, it’s [slavery] bad and move on.” Students want to learn more about Black empowerment and current issues, not just slavery. “I have one teacher who teaches us about current popular Black figures and also the Black LGBT community and he teaches it in an empowering way,” Devin Brown said. “He’s the only teacher that I’ve really seen do that. I think that should be part of the curriculum, and we should learn from what he’s doing. The curriculum should require teaching more Black figures, historical and present, rather than just being optional.” Ms. Doshi believes teachers are responsible for making up for the content the curriculum lacks. “I’d say that that’s a constant struggle probably for most AP history teachers, but especially for APUSH where the curriculum is so wide and there is so much to cover. The College Board framework is actually quite frustrating because it de-emphasizes aspects of Black history that I think personally deserved more importance and more time and that in an honors US history class we would absolutely delve into more detail,” Ms. Doshi said. “So I think as a teacher, you have to realize that the APUSH framework is inherently limited, that it does not encompass all of the people or themes that make up like history, and that if you’re going to teach

American history, it’s your responsibility as a teacher to acquire that knowledge on your own and then bring it into the classroom.” In the early 1900s, African American leaders such as Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois began the Black Freedom movement which was the beginning of the long Civil Rights movement. The College Board framework only has a brief reference to the framework without any mentions of the figures involved in it. If students are to learn about these individuals from their textbooks, it is typically a short-paragraph description of each. “My teacher hasn’t gone over anything related to Black History Month and February is almost done,” Nathan Harkless said. “It’s not just the curriculum to blame.” “Some teachers treat Black history as something they just have to teach because it’s part of the curriculum and they want to get it out of the way and skim through it,” Brown said. “Some teachers would just go into a topic relevant to Black history they thought was important then decide that’s all you need,” Mohanna Finnikin said. “But there’s way more than just that one topic we’re talking about.” Mr. Docter tries to find a balance between meeting the standards while also teaching history he deems valuable by providing a diverse amount. “My job is to teach those standards by the state of California, that’s what I’m hired to do. What’s great about teaching history is you can bring in a lot of topics that still fit those standards,” he said. “I’m able to fit in a lot of things that I personally find interesting and important, that also fit those standards.” Teaching or learning Black history doesn’t

have to be comfortable. “The more we try to sugarcoat things, the less that’s getting done, because we can try to explain it in the simplest of terms, but that will never get the point across,” Augustine said. “We got to make them uncomfortable. There’s no other way to get the point across because we’ve been sugarcoating all of our struggles, all of our history and where are we right now? We’ve barely made progress.” “A little discomfort is nothing like what we go through on a daily basis. When I walk out of the house I think that if I get angry or if I make a mistake or if I get pulled over, I could die,” Elom Attipoe said. “So some discomfort for non-black people to learn about our history and I don’t have to worry about dying every day, it’s a trade-off I’m willing to make.” Mr. Docter agrees that his lessons should challenge his students’ ways of thinking and get them out of their comfort zone. “Learning anything is a sense of discomfort. Learning is when you’re experiencing something that is different than what you’ve been introduced to,” Mr. Docter said. “That would include Black history too, but learning, in general, should do that.” California is adjusting the curriculum to include more thorough and empowering Black history by being the first state to require students to complete an ethnic studies course to graduate high school. While African American history isn’t the only course to choose from, it’s an option students have when trying to learn more than the history taught in regular history classes.

BLACK HISTORY IS MORE THAN WHAT’S IN THE HISTORY TEXTBOOKS

By ELOM ATTIPOE
THE MIRROR STAFF

When Black History Month begins, non-Black people often think of only two people: Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. And if you were to ask them what they associate with the two civil rights figures you’ll often only hear “I have a dream” for MLK and “sat in the front of the bus” for Rosa Parks.

While MLK advocated for nonviolent protests, he was also a strong critic of the white moderate for their passive acceptance of racial inequality and was against the Vietnam War and other forms of militarism. This isn’t common knowledge for most people because schools teach us Black history written by white Americans. The US history curriculum frames slavery as something that happened a long time ago and racism as something that has been eradicated. That’s because teaching sugarcoated Black history makes white people more comfortable in the fact that their ancestors were oppressors and that they continue to perpetuate this oppression by not speaking up or fighting for equity. Teachers who do not go beyond teaching basic Black history are part of the problem. Teachers are responsible for progressing the younger generation beyond the mistakes of the past and that means actually acknowledging them. Education shouldn’t be American propaganda, it should teach students real facts. They expect every black student to drop to their knees and say “thank you so much for verbalizing my own oppression to me because I lack the cerebrum and vocabulary to explain something that happens to me on a daily basis.” When it comes to the surface-level topics, teachers are usually able to

explain them well enough, but when it comes to the more complex roots of our oppression, they are unable to understand. They are speaking about an experience that I and every Black person have known since our first breath and will know till our last. We sit in class listening to teachers word vomit misinformation about the Black experience in America. Black history shouldn’t exclusively be talked about in the month of February, nor should it exclusively focus on our

oppression and subsequent trauma. When we hyper fixate on only this part of our history, it becomes all we are known for. We are much more than our enslavement. We are artists, musicians, writers, poets and athletes. Black people are left to correct white ignorance but are quickly shut down by white fragility. “How dare you! I’m not racist. It’s because of Black people like you, there’s division in this country.” So while you may have not been taught this at school, here are some systemic issues harming Black people that need to be addressed. In Los Angeles, 1.2 million people live near toxic waste facilities, 90 percent of whom are people of color.

Living near these facilities causes a high risk for cancer, birth defects, developmental disabilities and other physical and mental health challenges. African Americans are 5.9 times more likely to be incarcerated compared to white people and we make up 50 percent of the miscarriages of justice, in which people are convicted of crimes they did not commit. This statistic doesn’t include Black people assigned to a public defender with an overload of cases, who convince them to take plea deals for a shorter sentence. We also need to combat racism in the medical field. According to a 2016 study by the Association of American Medical Colleges, 40 percent of first- and second-year medical students thought that Black skin was thicker than white skin. Black history is American history and should be treated as such. We need to teach the good, the bad and the ugly.

WHAT IS A MICROAGGRESSION?

Microaggressions are everyday verbal and nonverbal slights or insults that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative attitudes toward marginalized groups whether intentional or unintentional. They can make a snide at someone’s race, gender or sexuality. A common racial microaggression used by non-black people is “I’m not racist. I have Black friends.” Having a Black friend, neighbor or relative does not disqualify a person from being racist. Being a gender or sexual minority also does not mean you’re safe from making racist remarks. Racial oppression is different from other types of oppression. People should still be educating themselves about racial discrimination but not trying to insert themselves into conversations about race they do not understand to feign sympathy.

TEACHERS NEED TO DO MORE Black Student Union board members Samara Augustine, Trace Hernandez, Lavarra Henry, Java Darrington and Elom Attipoe (L to R) want teachers to make a greater effort to teach the Black history missing from books.



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A WHITEWASHED HISTORY

The curriculum of black history that mentions only Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., top, and Rosa Parks censors the struggle of Black people.