

Every Month, Black History Month

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As Black History Month comes to a close, African Americans once again joke about the irony of being assigned the shortest month of the year to celebrate our history. “It figures,” the joke runs, “that they give us February.”

As with most jokes, this one is underscored by some truth. That is to say, many African Americans question the scope of America’s commitment to a fully inclusive democracy. Choosing February to celebrate Black History Month, then, is consistent with a perceived national inclination to reserve the fewest days possible to address the history, culture, strivings, and aspirations of peoples of African descent.

But a truly inclusive democracy should not have to rely on a truncated annual discussion of “black history” to showcase the varied contributions of its African American citizens to the experiences of all Americans. These contributions should be an ambient feature of American history, not a compartmentalized footnote to American historical narratives. In short, Black History Month, properly conceived, should be celebrated during all twelve months, not just in February.

At the upcoming State of the Black Union meeting in Houston (February 25), Tavis Smiley will unveil what he calls a *Covenant Curriculum: A Study of Black Democratic Action*, which will go a long way toward locating the contribution of African Americans in its rightful historical context. This curriculum, written by Princeton professors Cornel West and Eddie Glaude, provides an impressive reading list that situates black democratic strivings with and into a larger narrative of American democratic strivings.

The Covenant Curriculum recommends a broad range of readings, including diverse works from W.E.B. DuBois, Thomas Jefferson, Toni Morrison, Walt Whitman, Lorraine Hansberry, and a host of others. This Curriculum makes the implicit point that it is, quite literally, nonsensical to talk about the American democratic tradition without engaging the particular ways in which African Americans have enriched our national democratic experiment. So, this Curriculum tells not simply a black story, but a richer, more textured story of America’s continuing struggle to create a more perfect union.

This effort to tell a more inclusive history corrects deficiencies in America’s public education system. Currently, our schools treat black history month as an addendum to be studied as a module in a history curriculum, if at all. The current public education curriculum reflects a dated historical pedagogy that spends a few weeks per year and a few paragraphs of text on the lives of Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood

Marshall, Harriet Tubman, and, perhaps, Malcolm X. This disjointed model fails to weave the story of black America into the American story.

The better way to think about black history, culture, and literature is as part of a grand mosaic that defines what it means to be an American. The Covenant Curriculum, for instance, links Thomas Jefferson's eloquent plea that all men are created equal to Ella Baker's efforts to define "all men" to include all of humanity. It links de Tocqueville's impressions of race and democracy in America to DuBois' descriptive and normative accounts of how race insinuated itself into nearly all aspects of American life. The curriculum illustrates the ways in which the black struggle for freedom improved, enhanced, and animated the American struggle for freedom.

The ideal of America is the result of causes for which its citizens of African descent played an instrumental role. The black struggle for freedom against persistent, systemic, and state-sponsored subjugation strengthened America's commitment to individual dignity, personal autonomy, and freedom. The search for equal opportunity that defines the American ideal would have been mere words without the agitative force and impact of the African American journey from slavery to freedom, however imperfectly realized.

The Curriculum encourages robust discussions about our complicated shared history and culture, one in which democracy and freedom and the scourges of slavery and colonialism existed side by side. But the Curriculum also shows the promise inherent in our democratic experiment. By using concrete historical examples of black democratic action as reference points, the Curriculum provides guidance for other, diverse individuals seeking to apply the struggles of black folk to their own experiences.

Our education system has allowed Black History Month to become a checklist item. We need to get out of this trap and teach about race and democracy in a way that will benefit every citizen.

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