

ON THE ADVANTAGE AND DISADVANTAGE OF BLACK HISTORY MONTH FOR LIFE: THE CREATION OF THE POST-RACIAL ERA

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ABSTRACT

This article takes the Nietzschean dictum that history must “serve life” as a point of departure for an analysis of the American institution of Black History Month. Many continue to place great faith in the power of historical education to solve problems of race in America. Against this common-sense view, this article argues that the excessive historicization of the problem of racism is at least as oppressive as forgetting. The black history propagated during this month has mostly been a celebration that it is history and thus a thing of the past. The article makes the claim that it is precisely a surfeit of black history that has encouraged the view that racism is vanishing in the river of time. The constant demand to view American racism through a historical frame has led to the perception that racism is a problem that must be historically transcended rather than solved. In other words, it is through the widespread dissemination of black history during Black History Month and elsewhere that the historical category of the post-racial era has been constituted. The post-racial era is not, as is so often claimed, a denial of historical context. On the contrary, it is an assertion that the horrors of racist discrimination were once real but are now over and done with.

Keywords: post-racial, presence, Nietzsche, Black History Month, de Certeau

Reflections on the politics of history tend to revolve around the simple opposition between remembering and forgetting: the voice of the oppressed is swept under the rug while victorious oppressors recall their own heroic deeds. But many people place great faith in the power of historical education to interrupt this dynamic and serve as an emancipatory tool that can retrieve the victims’ stories from obscurity. This logic often reemerges in discussions about the place of black history in the United States: for hundreds of years the country has expertly ignored the most horrific episodes of the black past and done its best to forget black history altogether. Many politicians and observers of racial issues have argued that current racial problems are largely caused or exacerbated by a general ignorance of black history among the American population, and that proper historical education can provide an antidote to current racial problems.

In the twenty-first century, however, it is no longer correct to say that black history has been forgotten. There has been a marked shift in the visibility of black

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history in the United States. Black history is now widely discussed and referred to in public discourse. Just think of the numerous Hollywood films on black history.² Just think of how the election of America's first black president has prompted discussion and reflection on racial history.³ But it is the tradition of Black History Month (BHM) that has been one of the most important sites for the wide dissemination of black history for several decades. Every year in February, Americans are encouraged to reflect on black history in a practice that has been called BHM. The tradition that originated in the African American community upon the initiative of the historian Carter G. Woodson has now become an important American institution. BHM has been widely embraced in the United States and is disseminated by all of the country's major communications media: politicians on both ends of the political spectrum speak of it in public speeches, schools devote class time to studying African Americans, the news media devotes air time to it, libraries organize events about black history, publishers release books by black authors on black issues, and even advertisers refer to great moments in black history in their TV commercials.

Perhaps as a consequence of this increased dissemination of African American history, many Americans today recognize and condemn the injustices of slavery and Jim Crow. Few would seriously deny the history of racial oppression in America. However, even though it is well known that blacks were treated heinously throughout American history, many people continue to deny that there is a link between that historical oppression and the present day. This denial is often phrased as an argument that the country has entered a "post-racial era." The term has become something of a catchphrase in contemporary discussions about race. In the last few years the sheer quantity of journalistic articles and opinion pieces in the media discussing the "post-racial president" and the post-racial era has been astonishing. It is one of the few historical periods to have its own *Twitter* hashtag.⁴

2. *12 Years a Slave*, *Django*, and *Lincoln* are the most recent examples, but the long list of Hollywood black history films goes back to the 1990s, for example *Glory*, *Amistad*, *The Great Debaters*, and *Beloved*. For an interesting analysis of the political effects of Hollywood black history films in the 1990s, see Jennifer Fuller, "Debating the Present through the Past: Representations of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1990s," in *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory*, ed. Renee Romano and Leigh Raiford (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2006).

3. This is the thesis of Michael Tesler and David Sears, who argue that despite his campaign tactic to avoid explicit engagement with race, race was "chronically visible" to Americans. Michael Tesler and David O. Sears, *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post Racial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). During the term of his presidency as well, Barack Obama has often referred to black history. His second inauguration ceremony was jam-packed with historical symbolism: he was sworn in on two bibles, one having belonged to Martin Luther King and the other to Abraham Lincoln, a line of continuity thus drawn from the Emancipation Proclamation through the March on Washington to the first black president.

4. You can find the hashtag by typing #postracial on Twitter. For the scholarly debate on the post-racial era, see, for example, Catharine R. Squires, *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Roy L. Brooks, *Racial Justice in the Age of Obama* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Randall Kennedy, *The Persistence of the Color Line: Racial Politics and the Obama Presidency* (New York: Pantheon, 2011); Mark P. Orbe, *Communication Realities in a "Post-Racial" Society: What the U.S. Public Really Thinks about Barack Obama* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011); Mark Ledwige, Kevern Verney, and Inderjeet Parmar, *Barack Obama and the Myth of a Post-Racial America* (New York: Routledge, 2014); F. Michael Higginbotham, *Ghosts of Jim Crow: Ending Racism in Post-racial America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); Tim Wise, *Colorblind: The Rise of Post-*

But the claim that America is in a post-racial era is also widely contested. Again, many appeal to the capacity of black history to counter the insidious idea that the country has moved beyond race. If only people were more aware of black history, they would realize the folly of the post-racial view.

But is more history really the antidote to the persistent problems of racism in America? Now that black history is being remembered on a large scale we should ask whether it has had the emancipatory effect that the advocates of historical education had hoped for. How has the widespread discussion of black history affected consciousness of racial issues in the United States? How does this black history serve people in the present? These are the questions that are addressed in this article. I take the tradition of BHM as the focal point of my analysis. The study of the tradition of BHM is the most obvious way to begin an evaluation of the rise of black history in the contemporary United States, and this for two main reasons: First, BHM undoubtedly offers one of the most representative examples of the way in which black history is talked about in the United States, and indeed, many have claimed that the month of February is the time of the year during which black history is most widely discussed. Second, for several years now a public debate has called the tradition of BHM into question. In fact, the very questions that I have said will guide this article have already been posed in the debate around the continuing relevance of BHM.

For these two reasons I will begin my analysis of the rise of black history with an examination of the main arguments offered by each side of the BHM debate. We can divide the discussion around the continuing importance of BHM into two camps: On the one hand, critics of BHM claim that the traditional month-long “celebration” of black history is no longer necessary; they argue that since racism is vanishing in America, and the racial problems of the past have largely been solved, it would be better to “integrate” black history into the American history curriculum in schools since an integrated American history would better serve contemporary American citizens. On the other hand, supporters of BHM insist that the tradition is still necessary, and they point to the persistence of racial problems in the United States as evidence of the need for special emphasis to be placed on black history in February. For the latter group, educating Americans about black history is one of the keys to solving the race problem that continues to haunt the country. Both sides advocate using historical education to improve the lives of contemporaries; the debate about BHM, then, is not about the choice between remembering or forgetting; rather, the issue is which type of history serves us best.

The question is then how to choose between these two types of history? At its heart, the debate about BHM is one about how history should be used and how it serves people living in the present. It is not primarily a debate about the past, but about the advantages and disadvantages that different types of history offer us today. In order to clarify what is at stake in the choice between integrated and

Racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity (San Francisco: City Light, 2010); *Beyond Discrimination: Racial Inequality in a Post-Racist Era*, ed. Frederick C. Harris and Robert Lieberman (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2013); Howard McGary, *The Post-Racial Ideal* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2012); *The Obamas and a (Post) Racial America?*, ed. Gregory S. Parks and Mathew W. Hughey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

separate black history, I turn to the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Because these debates focus on the utility of history, they are reminiscent of Nietzsche's famous writings on history in his *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life*. In an essay widely remembered for advocating forgetting, Nietzsche criticized the hypertrophic historical sense of his contemporaries. In an era obsessed with history, Nietzsche was one of the few to condemn the pursuit of historical knowledge for its own sake and argued that history should serve life in the present. It is useful to return to Nietzsche's text today, since it often seems as though education in black history is considered a panacea for problems of race in America.

Nietzsche's theory of history can help us to clarify the difficult issue of *how* exactly BHM serves people in the present and, more specifically, what effect the celebration of black history has had on the problem of race in the United States today. Nietzsche outlined a tripartite typology of historical modes, each of which serves life in different ways. In this article I read the debate about BHM against the background of these modes. I begin by explaining how BHM has evolved from what Nietzsche would call a form of "critical history," where history is used as a tool to undermine the roots of current injustices faced by blacks in the United States, into a form of "monumental history" that looks to the black past for examples of heroic and patriotic deeds and then encourages contemporary blacks to imitate these acts. I argue that the debate about integrating black history into American history or keeping a separate BHM can also be read as choice between monumental and critical forms of history.

But Nietzsche's theory can only bring us so far, for it cannot tell us how to choose between integrated black history and BHM. Nietzsche would ask us to choose the history that best serves our needs in the present, but the debate about BHM has reached an impasse precisely because there is no agreement on the boundaries of the present and the nature of its needs. While one side sees the present as a "post-racial era," the other sees it as still haunted by the legacies of slavery and Jim Crow. If America is indeed post-racial, then the integration of black history into American history might serve life better than BHM, but if racism persists, it is essential to use traditions like BHM to identify and combat the legacies of systemic racial oppression. Here a problem arises: on the one hand, how can we follow Nietzsche's dictum and choose the history that serves the needs of the present if we are unsure about what those needs are in the first place? On the other hand, how can we resolve this conflict about the periodization of the present and the nature of its needs if not by means of historical argument? An aporetic circularity at the heart of the Nietzschean recommendation is thus exposed by these questions: our present needs should guide our choice of history, but it is through the act of writing history that a society furnishes itself with a present time.

In the second part of this article I turn to the work of a number of philosophers of history who have written about the power of history-writing to create a present time. For these thinkers, the present is not a self-evident and naturally occurring phenomenon; it is a category that is the product of acts of historicization. Following the arguments of Michel de Certeau and Berber Bevernage, I claim that celebration of black history during BHM has in fact been creating a present all along;

it has created a post-racial present, that is to say, an era in which racism and injustice against African Americans are considered things of the past. The ritual celebration of black history every year during February has produced a widespread historicization of even the most recent events in the black past. During BHM, the racist episodes of the past are certainly talked about, but they are talked about as historical phenomena: racism in the form of slavery and Jim Crow are presented as things that have been historically transcended. BHM has thus played a major role in constructing the post-racial era, and hence has ironically established the very conditions for its own irrelevance.

I. HISTORY FOR LIFE

Nietzsche began his famous treatise on history by setting out the imperative that history should serve life. Let us begin by reviewing the three ways Nietzsche understood history to benefit those in the present: First, past great acts can provide an inspiring example to people of action in the present. The history that reminds us “that the great which once existed was at least possible once and may well again be possible sometime,” Nietzsche called *monumental* history.⁵ Second, he who “with loyalty and love looks back on his origins; through this reverence . . . gives thanks for his existence” and preserves the past so that the conditions and customs in which he has grown up will be available for future generations, practiced *antiquarian* history.⁶ Third, the oppressed of the present turn to history to make “clear how unjust is the existence of some thing, a privilege, a caste, a dynasty for example, and show it deserves destruction.”⁷ This last type Nietzsche calls *critical* history.

All three modes of history can be beneficial for life in the present depending on the situation at hand. But Nietzsche also warned against the dangers of a surfeit of history: If the past invades the present, action is stifled. A culture overburdened by history is like a man suffering from insomnia and endless rumination; being overwhelmed by the past makes it impossible to live in the present.⁸ Life in the present moment is suffocated if the past invades the present to the point that they become indistinguishable. The glut of continuity and context is always at the expense of the present moment. A society with an excessive historical sense is like a man who cannot forget and loses himself in “a stream of becoming.”⁹

It is for this reason that Nietzsche saw the “hypertrophic” historical sense of his contemporaries not as life-serving, but as stifling. The “idolatry of facts” about the past, the quest for knowledge for knowledge’s sake, the consumption of historical knowledge in excess of hunger, had rendered modern man idle. Modern man was weak because he had not mastered the past: “were one to conceive of the most powerful and colossal nature, it would be known by this, that for it there would be no limit at which the historical sense could overgrow and harm it; such a nature

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, transl. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1980), 16.

6. *Ibid.*, 19.

7. *Ibid.*, 22.

8. *Ibid.*, 10.

9. *Ibid.*, 9.

would draw its own as well as every alien past wholly into itself and transform it into blood. . . .What such a nature cannot master it knows how to forget.”¹⁰ For Nietzsche, History is important for life, to be sure, but, he added, so too is forgetting. “All acting requires forgetting.”¹¹

The American superpower is a country that has been known for its propensity for forgetting, especially with regard to the history of its black inhabitants. Forgetting may have been beneficial for the lives of white Americans, especially if we understand life as the will to power. The practice of cherishing the democratic *form* of the nation while disregarding the incongruous *content* of the oppression of blacks may indeed have succeeded in clearing the conscience of the country so that, with great conviction and verve, it could undertake bold action in the form of aggressive gestures around the world in the name of democracy and justice.¹² But we cannot say that this forgetting has been beneficial for black life.

African Americans have often turned to history precisely because of its power to invigorate life in the face of oppression. Carter G. Woodson, the so-called “father of black history,” fully understood the potency of historical education in this regard. This Harvard man was no “spoiled idler in the garden of knowledge.”¹³ Many a historian today would do well to look to him as an example of how a brave scholar can affect the “real world.” He was certainly a man of action: having founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History (ASNLH) in Chicago in 1915, and the *Journal of Negro History* in 1916, Woodson introduced Negro History Week in 1926: a week-long educational initiative devoted to the study of black history. He believed in the emancipatory power of history and was thoroughly convinced that historical education could reshape the present. In an early pamphlet introducing Negro History Week, he appealed to what Nietzsche would have called *monumental history*: “history is the depository of great actions, the witness of what is past, the example and the instructor of the present, and the monitor to the future.”¹⁴ For Woodson, the claim to the past, to tradition, was essential for the very survival of the black race because “if a race has no history, if it has no worth-while tradition, it becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world, and it stands in danger of being exterminated. The American Indian left no continuous record. He did not appreciate the value of tradition and where is he today?” According to Woodson, the virtues of what Nietzsche would have called *antiquarian history* were best illustrated by the Jews whose devotion to tradition had maintained them in spite of centuries of persecution.¹⁵

However, black history was at its most powerful when manifested as *critical history*. Woodson invented Negro History Week as an exercise in critical engagement with the common-sense view that history was white. Challenging this perception of history was, in Woodson’s eyes, essential to the amelioration of the condition

10. *Ibid.*, 10.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Nietzsche criticizes his contemporary culture for its prioritization of content (knowledge) over form. For Nietzsche this was no real culture at all, “only a knowledge about culture . . . [it] stops at cultured thoughts and cultured feelings but leads to no cultured decisions.” *Ibid.*, 24.

13. *Ibid.*, 7.

14. Carter G. Woodson, “Negro History Week,” *Journal of Negro History* 11, no. 2 (1926), 238.

15. *Ibid.*, 239.

of blacks in the present. This was because an ignorance of black history facilitated the abuse of African Americans in the present: “And what if he [the negro] is handicapped, segregated, or lynched? According to our education and practice, if you kill one of the group the world goes on just as well or better; for the Negro is nothing, has never been anything, and never will be anything but a menace to civilization.”¹⁶

The original Negro History Week fell in the second week of February, between the symbolic dates of the birthdays of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln. Initially the project was organized by black civic organizations, schools, and private negro history clubs. Woodson’s idea proved popular and spread across the country. During the 1940s some expanded the week into a month-long celebration.¹⁷ In 1975 Gerald Ford became the first American president to make an address in honor of Black History Week, and one year later in the context of America’s bicentennial, he endorsed the expansion of the week into a month.¹⁸ Since then BHM has grown into an American tradition, observed both inside and outside of the African-American community. Public institutions, especially schools and libraries, participate annually. Lately, corporate-led BHM celebrations have become the most visible manifestation of the tradition, because of advertising’s capacity to reach large audiences. Yet these manifestly financially motivated initiatives have been criticized by many and led some to question the sincerity of BHM as a time for serious historical reflection.

In the last decade, the question has been raised whether BHM is “still relevant” to the needs of the present. Insofar as it explicitly poses the question about what form of black history is most beneficial for life in the present, this debate is one that Nietzsche would surely approve of. Nietzsche’s tripartite typology of historical modes is absent from these debates. Instead, the choice is between two options: a separate BHM or an “integrated” American history.

Although the actor Morgan Freeman is routinely credited with having ignited debate about BHM when, in an interview in 2005, he stated that he did not want one, the argument is actually much older.¹⁹ The criticism dates at least to 1950 when a newscaster, S. W. Garlington, argued against the “sideshow” that was Negro History Week. His remarks aroused discussion in the *New York Amsterdam News*. An article reviewing Garlington’s comments claimed that “Fortunately his blast was not altogether negative: he did not demand the abolition of research and studies in Negro History or the writing and teaching of Negro History in our schools and colleges.” Garlington actually simply said, “what the Negro does is part of America and must be fitted into the American historical pattern or it is not the nation’s history.” Garlington argued that energies would be better spent promoting an unbiased and unprejudiced *American* history. “The

16. *Ibid.*, 240.

17. Robert L. Harris, “The Flowering of Afro-American History: Review Article,” *American Historical Review* 92, no. 5 (1987), 1154.

18. Gerald R. Ford, “Message on the Observance of Black History Month” (February 1976), in Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=6288> (accessed December 11, 2015).

19. Morgan Freeman, cited in “Showbiz Tonight” (December 19, 2005), <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0512/19/sbt.01.html> (accessed December 11, 2015).

balanced perspective in historical research, writing, and interpretation, and teaching is one of democracy's major assignments for the present and future."²⁰

Today, similar claims about the virtues of fitting what the "Negro" does into "the American historical pattern" are formulated as pleas for the "integration" of black history into American history. This line of argument quite provocatively paints BHM as "segregated" history. For example, in 2013, Charles Cooke wrote against BHM in the conservative *National Review*, cloaking his criticism in a plea for an integrated, and therefore superior, history:

Things, mercifully, have changed. Education should follow suit. Rather than being treated as a separate and limited discipline, divorced by the pigmentation of its subjects from "mainstream" American history, the teaching of black history should hew to the principle of integration. Black Americans are not visitors putting on a cultural show, nor are they legally separated. They are an integral, inextricable part of the country's past, present, and future. The curriculum should treat them as such.²¹

Of course, Cooke's exhortation to "hew to the principle of integration" is actually a dubious inversion of Garlington's point: For Cooke, "integrated" history is not a measure to bring about change in the present, rather it is the already changed present that mandates the retrospective integration of history.

The argument for integrated history is often articulated as a plea for a more objective history, a taking into account of all sides of the story by incorporating the black perspective, as Garlington said, a noble and democratic initiative. But integrated history is now also expressed as an appeal to make history answer to the needs of the present, because life in America today is different than it was when Carter G. Woodson proposed the idea of BHM in 1926. Cooke's remarks reproduce the single most common criticism of BHM, which, formulating itself as a question, asks whether a separate BHM is "still necessary" in an America where the major obstacles blacks once faced have now been removed. Many doubt the "relevance" of BHM because they see it as a tool designed to fix specific problems in American society, problems that are no longer pressing.

An interesting exchange between linguist John McWhorter and economist Glenn Loury in the *New York Times* illustrates this point. McWhorter argued that the month has outlived its usefulness: "here in 2011 . . . America is as aware of black history as it's going to be. . . ." Indeed, McWhorter stated that having a month for black history may be something more suited to the years 1945 or 1975 than today. Similarly, Loury described BHM as an "anachronistic ritual" in which "septuagenarian" Civil Rights survivors retell the same old stories; BHM is not suited to the realities of America in the twenty-first century, or as he put it: "Everything is moving so fast that the relics of the racial history of the United States seem passé in a lot of ways. None of this is meant to be disrespectful to the sacrifices of our forebears but . . . maybe part of growing up for African Americans, a

20. "Do We Want Negro History?," *New York Amsterdam News* (February 18, 1950).

21. Charles C. W. Cooke, "Against Black History Month," *National Review Online* (February 4, 2013), <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/339649/against-black-history-month-charles-c-w-cooke> (accessed December 11, 2015).

part of growing fully into our own is to . . . not cling quite so hard to the security blanket of public recognition.”²²

For Loury, McWhorter, and Cooke, “things have changed” in America and BHM is more suited to the past. But its supporters argue the reverse point: it is precisely because blacks continue to face discrimination and oppression that BHM remains relevant. For example, in a passionate defense of the Woodsonian tradition, Lonnie Bunch, director of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), refers to black history’s power to change things:

I would like to suggest that despite the profound change in race relations that has occurred in our lives, Carter G. Woodson’s vision for black history as a means of transformation and change is still quite relevant and quite useful. African American history month, with a bit of tweaking, is still a beacon of change and hope that is still surely needed in this world. The chains of slavery are gone—but we are all not yet free. The great diversity within the black community needs the glue of the African American past to remind us of not just how far we have traveled but lo, how far there is to go.²³

In Bunch’s view, as long as all blacks are not yet free, BHM remains an important emancipatory tool that cannot be abandoned. By reminding those in the present of “how far there is to go,” BHM serves a critical function: throwing the light of the past on the present to reveal its imperfections, its cracks, its persistent racial divide. The claim that there has been an amelioration of the conditions of black Americans is not totally rejected, it is merely qualified. Bunch recounts how he had to warn his daughter that Colin Powell’s face on TV was not the death knell of racism. It is deceptive to extrapolate from the great successes that a minority of African Americans have had in overcoming the obstacles of American racism.²⁴

What is not addressed by either the proponents or opponents of BHM are the terms and conditions intrinsic to any historical “integration.” We could ask whether the integrated history will be critical, monumental, or antiquarian? Though it is certainly possible to conceive of an integrated American history in the critical mode, is it not the case that where black history has most successfully been integrated into American history it has taken on a monumental tone? Considering the ideological commitments of nationalist historiography, we would be right to be skeptical about the chances that the integrated black history opponents of BHM advocate could ever serve a critical function. On the contrary, it seems more likely that the “integration” of black history necessarily signals the forfeiture of said history’s critical stance. Meanwhile the alternative—the introduction of critical black history into the American narrative—can only threaten the coherence of the monumental narrative of American history.

No one who examines BHM discourse today can deny that the black history found there has already been integrated into the national narrative. Black figures are

22. John McWhorter and Glenn Loury, “Dump Black History Month?,” *New York Times Video* (February 22, 2011), <http://www.nytimes.com/video/2011/02/22/opinion/100000000655713/bhblackhistory.html> (accessed December 11, 2015).

23. Lonnie G. Bunch, “Knowing the Past Opens the Door to the Future,” http://go.si.edu/site/PageServer?pagename=oas_black_history_month (accessed February 13, 2014).

24. Or as Cornel West poetically puts it, “black faces in high places.” Cornel West, *Hope on a Tightrope* (New York: Hay House, 2008), 115.

honored as characters in the American story: Civil Rights leaders are not heroized for challenging of the American system, they are thanked for their contribution to the process of bringing the country one step closer to fulfilling its pre-ordained goal. The 2012 presidential statement in honor of BHM reproduces a well-known narrative of integrated African American history:

In America, we share a dream that lies at the heart of our founding: that no matter who you are, no matter what you look like, no matter how modest your beginnings or the circumstances of your birth, you can make it if you try. Yet, for many and for much of our Nation's history, that dream has gone unfulfilled. For African Americans, it was a dream denied until 150 years ago, when a great emancipator called for the end of slavery. It was a dream deferred less than 50 years ago, when a preacher spoke of justice and brotherhood from Lincoln's memorial. This dream of equality and fairness has never come easily—but it has always been sustained by the belief that in America, change is possible.²⁵

Martin Luther King's "dream" speech—already having achieved the status of the quintessential black historical event in the national narrative—is here rendered as the flowering of a seed planted in 1776. It is unsurprising that the radical Martin Luther King is absent from this story and his criticisms of the country that issued blacks a "bad check," casually ignored.²⁶ It is not the radical King, but an American King who stands in American history as a monument to "our" democracy, both literally and figuratively:

Today, Dr. King, President Lincoln, and other shapers of our American story proudly watch over our National Mall. But as we memorialize their extraordinary acts in statues and stone, let us not lose sight of the enduring truth that they were citizens first. They spoke and marched and toiled and bled shoulder-to-shoulder with ordinary people who burned with the same hope for a brighter day. That legacy is shared; that spirit is American. And just as it guided us forward 150 years ago and 50 years ago, it guides us forward today. So let us honor those who came before by striving toward their example, and let us follow in their footsteps toward the better future that is ours to claim.²⁷

According to Nietzsche, monumental history unites the great acts of mankind in a historical continuum; BHM also ties action in the present to great patriotic acts of the past, linking them in a narrative of American progress. Here, BHM reveals itself as fully monumental: great African Americans are recalled so that they may serve as an example for citizens of today.

It is this historical continuum that Obama referred to, and inserted himself into, during his famous "more perfect union speech." Delivered in 2008 in the midst of his electoral campaign, Obama offered a grand narrative to unite a divided country. For Obama, black Americans were those heroic citizens "who were willing to do their part—through protests and struggle, on the streets and in the courts, through civil war and civil disobedience and always at great risk—to narrow that

25. Barack Obama, "Proclamation on National African American History Month (January 31, 2013), <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2013/02/20130201141926.html#axzz2tGFIt9iX> (accessed December 11, 2015).

26. For more on the interpretations of MLK's famous speech, see the introduction to David Blight's book on Civil War memory: David Blight, *American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

27. Obama, "Proclamation."

gap between the promise of our ideals and the reality of their time.”²⁸ Beginning his speech by referring to the “nation’s original sin,” Obama did not ignore slavery; he merely cast the story of its abolition as a fulfillment of the country’s destiny. Election figures may give some indication of this narrative’s appeal to Americans in general. Historian Thomas Sugrue has commented, “Barack Obama has become both America’s first African American president and the nation’s most influential historian of race and civil rights.”²⁹ The story of the ever-perfecting union may have reinvigorated many people’s faith in American exceptionalism, but Obama cannot take full credit for crafting this integrated narrative of American history. In fact his words echo someone else’s:

In the Bicentennial year of our Independence, we can review with admiration the impressive contributions of black Americans to our national life and culture. One hundred years ago, to help highlight these achievements, Dr. Carter G. Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Afro-American [sic] Life and History. We are grateful to him today for his initiative, and we are richer for the work of his organization. Freedom and the recognition of individual rights are what our Revolution was all about. They were ideals that inspired our fight for Independence: ideals that we have been striving to live up to ever since. Yet it took many years before ideals became a reality for black citizens. The last quarter-century has finally witnessed significant strides in the full integration of black people into every area of national life. In celebrating Black History Month, we can take satisfaction from this recent progress in the realization of the ideals envisioned by our Founding Fathers. But, even more than this, we can seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history. I urge my fellow citizens to join me in tribute to Black History Month and the message of courage and perseverance it brings to all of us.³⁰

This advocate of a monumental black history is none other than Gerald Ford, the first president to honor BHM officially. The narrative of ideals becoming a reality is shown here to be already present in 1976, two hundred years after the declaration of independence but fewer than ten years after the assassination of Martin Luther King. Ford was already taking satisfaction in great strides toward racial harmony one year after Bostonians broke out into violent protest in reaction to busing programs intended to integrate schools. From the very beginning of BHM’s endorsement by mainstream American politicians, it has offered a version of black history that is thoroughly integrated into the American historical narrative. The recent civil rights movement is given a place in this narrative as a process of historical fulfillment of prefigured ideals.

An integrated black history in the monumental mode serves life in the present very differently from a critical BHM. Integrated monumental history is a tool for citizens; it offers role models from the past to inspire action that is in line with American tradition. Critical history, however, “attack[s] the historical roots” of current injustice and systemic oppression. It should come as no surprise, then, that American presidents prefer the former to the latter. But which of these modes of

28. Barack Obama, “A More Perfect Union,” campaign speech (March 18, 2008), <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/03/18/obama.transcript/> (accessed December 11, 2015).

29. Thomas Sugrue, *Not Even Past: Barack Obama and the Burden of Race* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 3.

30. Ford, “Message on the Observance of Black History Month.”

history serves the majority of African Americans best? Deciding which of these tools serves life best depends on our appraisal of the needs of the present.

II. CREATING THE POST-RACIAL ERA

In the discussion about BHM's continuing relevance, *the central point of contention is not the past but the category of the present*. Whether BHM is relevant depends on the status of the problem of race in the US today. In this sense it is useful to view the controversy around BHM as a facet of a much broader ongoing debate about the status of America's infamous "race problem" as either *past* or *continuing*. This discussion is often referred to as the question of the "post-racial" society, a nomenclature that has become especially popular since Obama emerged as a prominent candidate for the presidency.

Although the post-racial debate may have entered the limelight of public discourse in 2008, discussions about the end of racism or its declining significance in the "post-civil rights" era are much older.³¹ Divergent understandings of the pastness or continuity of racism in contemporary America are at the heart of most major controversies about race, most notably the debate on affirmative action.³² Supporters of the measures argue they are still necessary. But opponents argue in favor of taking a "colorblind" approach to race problems. According to the "colorblind" argument, if Americans would stop positive discrimination, or even better stop discussing race altogether, then racism, already on its deathbed, would finally disappear for good. But "colorblind" political rhetoric and jurisprudence is called "racist" by its opponents because it relies on the manifestly false assumption that all significant racial problems have already been solved and promotes an interest in preserving the status quo. As Ashley Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argue, colorblind rhetoric is actually the opportunistic occupation of an antihistorical standpoint in which all context is denied.³³

Many argue that historical education and traditions like BHM can provide the context to undermine the "colorblind" argument. In 2009 Eric Holder expressed

31. See, for example, Dinesh D'Souza, *The End of Racism* (New York: Free Press, 1995) especially 245: "The contemporary division between whites and blacks in America arises out of the white conviction that the civil rights movement achieved its antiracist objective and recognized the basic rights of blacks, and the black conviction that despite changes in the law, racism remains the central problem. Many whites do not deny the existence of racism, but view it as greatly abated, more a case of 'the way we were' rather than 'the way we are now.' Blacks, by contrast, tend to see racism as different in appearance today but not in reality; for them, racism may have burrowed underground but it remains deeply embedded in the national psyche and in American institutions."

32. Like Black History Month, the continuing relevance of this policy is frequently questioned and evaluated in chronological terms. In 2003, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of affirmative action in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, stating that policies of positive discrimination were useful at that time, but they might not be necessary in twenty-five years when the historical circumstances will have changed. "Race-conscious admissions policies must be limited in time. The Court takes the Law School at its word that it would like nothing better than to find a race-neutral admissions formula and will terminate its use of racial preferences as soon as practicable. The Court expects that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today." *Syllabus GRUTTER V. BOLLINGER* (02-241) 539 U.S. 306 (2003) 288 F.3d 732.

33. Ashley Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 276.

this point in emphatic fashion during a speech delivered to mark the occasion the first BHM under the Obama administration. The first black Attorney General reminded Americans, “one cannot truly understand America without understanding the *historical experience* of black people in this nation. Simply put, to get to the heart of this country one must examine its racial soul.”³⁴ He argued that despite the progress made in recent decades, racism was not a problem solved. In fact, America still remained divided along racial lines. Despite the remarkable achievement that was the election of Obama, many of the same race-related problems that afflicted the black community in past decades persist. The central point of Holder’s speech was the suggestion that “we should use BHM as a means to deal with this continuing problem.” Holder argued that BHM should not merely be a conversation about the past, rather Americans should use this “artificial device” to engage in dialogue with “the other side of the (racial) divide.” But this “dialogue,” in order to be truly successful, would need to include serious reflection on the historical dimensions of current racial issues: “It is . . . clear that if we are better to understand one another the study of black history is essential because the history of black America and the history of this nation are inextricably tied to each other. It is for this reason that the study of black history is important to everyone—black or white.”³⁵

To this he added the warning that those who are ignorant of history can never fully understand the present: “people who are not conversant in history still do not really comprehend the way in which that [civil rights] movement transformed America. In racial terms the country that existed before the civil rights struggle is almost unrecognizable to us today.”³⁶

Holder’s concise explanation of how historical discourse sheds light on the present is paradoxical but revealing: his explanation of history’s relevance to the present is simultaneously a declaration of its irrelevance. Holder, himself a historian by training, is quite right to refer to history’s ability to account for *transformation*: in history the form of the present is radically different from the form of the past, so separate as to be almost unrecognizable. And it is precisely because the past is so foreign to the present that there is a need for history, for historical explanation and understanding. An explanation is truly historical when it proceeds from the question: how did one form (the past) transform into another (the present)? But in asking how we got “here” from “there,” the historical account implicitly affirms that “there” is no longer “here.” Insofar as history accounts for the present, it appears as the *other* of the past, and vice-versa. Ironically, this is the very logic upon which “colorblind” arguments are founded. Because racism is no longer “here” in the present but safely “there” in the past, we no longer need to find remedies for it. Far from being ahistorical in its logic, “colorblindism” is actually an ultra-historical position. The idea of a post-racial era cuts between present and past time

34. Eric Holder, “Attorney General Eric Holder at the Department of Justice African American History Month Program” (February 18, 2009), <http://www.justice.gov/ag/speeches/2009/ag-speech-090218.html> (accessed December 11, 2015).

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

in a way that severs racism from the triumphant contemporary age, but it can only do so because it relies on a modernist conception of history.

Let us consider that the intellectual tradition of historicism has its roots in a change in the consciousness of time during modernity. In Reinhart Koselleck's well-known argument, the emergence of *Neuzeit* (modernity) was marked by the emergence of a *neue zeit* (new time).³⁷ The modernist chronosophy, which historicism draws upon and contributes to, views time as a forward-flowing stream, bringing change and radical novelty. Koselleck employs two transcendental categories: the "space of experience" (*Erfahrungsraum*) and the "horizon of expectation" (*Erwartungshorizont*) to detect a change in the experience of time in Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For Koselleck, *Neuzeit* is marked by a split between the space of experience and the horizon of expectation; the rate of technological and political change produced a situation in which individuals expected the future to be completely different from the past. This view is the opposite of the experience of time before *Neuzeit* when nothing fundamentally new was expected to ever occur; the horizon of expectation was essentially the same as the space of experience.³⁸ Koselleck shows that this development in temporal experience had ramifications for history by way of a semantic analysis of the topos "Historia Magistra Vitae." This phrase gradually lost its meaning and force in modernity.³⁹ History could teach by example as long as the student's horizon of expectation was aligned with their space of experience. This is not so in *Neuzeit*, when history, under the influence of historicism, sought to respect the idiosyncrasies of the past.

Koselleck's quasi-materialist argument assumes that the recognition of widespread socioeconomic changes produced a new temporality, but Peter Osborne notes that modernity is more than just a chronological concept, it is a qualitative designation: for Osborne, modernity is a historical period characterized by a "qualitatively new" temporality, which is "self-transcending" and which "distan[ces]" the present from "even (the) most recent past."⁴⁰ One of the remarkable traits of this temporality is its "exclusive valorization of the historical (as opposed to the merely chronological) *present over the past, as its negation and transcendence*, and as the standpoint from which to periodize and understand history as a whole."⁴¹ According to Osborne, modernity has a triple status as at once a declaration, a demand, and a command to "be modern."⁴² Thus modern temporality is not only the cultural product of the collective experience of rupture between space of experience and the horizon of expectation, it is an insistence on that split and a command to keep on splitting: to overcome, move on, and progress.

37. Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 232.

38. *Ibid.*, 131.

39. *Ibid.*, 32.

40. Peter Osborne, "Modernity is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological, Category," *New Left Review* I/192 (1992), 73.

41. *Ibid.*

42. Peter Osborne, "Global Modernity and the Contemporary: Two Categories of the Philosophy of Historical Time," in *Breaking up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Past and Present*, ed. Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 71.

As a modernist discourse, history-writing—describing or explaining things as historical—introduces a historical “before” and “after,” a historical “beginning” and “end,” a “historical past” and “present.” History no longer teaches life, it establishes the present as a space outside of the past. In the words of Michel de Certeau, history “fait des morts pour qu’il y ait ailleurs des vivants.”⁴³ For Certeau, historical writing “ne parle du passé que pour l’enterrer.”⁴⁴ The historical past is an entombed past. Though the dead are represented, they are represented *as dead*, that is, precisely as those no longer in the realm of the living. History, far from blurring the distinction between past and present into a stream of becoming as Nietzsche suggested, is the very means by which a present time is delineated as a separate venue for new life to unfold. “Une société se donne ainsi un présent grâce à une écriture historique.”⁴⁵ The designation of “the present,” as distinct from the past, is a product of the *performative* character of history-writing: “Substitut de l’être absent, renfermement du mauvais génie de la mort, le texte historique a un rôle *performatif*. Le langage permet à une pratique de se situer par rapport à son *autre*, le passé.”⁴⁶ Certeau explains that the act of writing gives a scriptural place to the dead in order to free the living from an “anxiety.” The power of this act is actually to remove the dead from the realm of life; by inserting them into narrative, the historian gives the dead *a place outside of existence*. “Par sa narrativité elle fournit à la mort une représentation qui, en installant le manque dans le langage, hors de l’existence, a valeur d’exorcisme contre l’angoisse.”⁴⁷ History does not resurrect, it does not bring the dead into the realm of life; it exorcises the dead. The dead of history are *outside existence* and thus truly dead.

Yet despite its historicism and its modernist concern for transition, development, and negation, is it not the case that historical works at least purport to conserve or represent the past even if, as many scholars readily admit, it can never fully succeed? If history is not interested in resurrecting the dead, surely, as an act of entombment, it is interested in preserving the memory of the dead. Paul Ricoeur makes exactly this argument in an essay on history and death. Following Gadamer, he describes *death as a paradigm of historical distance* and the split between past and present. He then revisits Certeau’s metaphor of history-writing as an act of the “sepulcher.” Ricoeur argues for an “elevation of the burial act to some sort of act of devotion pledged by the historian to the main players of a bygone era.”⁴⁸ He argues, “the living of the past were once alive and that history, in a certain way, reduces the distance to their having-been-alive. Today’s dead are yesterday’s living, complete with their actions and sufferings.”⁴⁹ Thus Ricoeur argues that although history cannot resurrect the dead, history can overcome the

43. Michel de Certeau, *L’écriture de l’histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 141. “History makes the dead so that the living can be elsewhere” (all translations of Certeau are mine).

44. *Ibid.*, 140. “only speaks of the past in order to bury it.”

45. *Ibid.*, 141. “A society gives itself a present through its historical writing.”

46. *Ibid.*, 141. “Substitute for the absent being, container of the evil spirit of death, the historical text has a *performative* role. Language allows one to situate oneself in relation to the other, the *past*.”

47. *Ibid.* “Through its narrativity it furnishes death with a representation that inscribes the absence in language, outside of existence, and hence functions as an exorcism.”

48. Paul Ricoeur, “Temporal Distance and Death in History,” in *Gadamer’s Century*, ed. Jeff Malpas (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 248.

49. *Ibid.*, 250.

vergangen character of the past, where the past is ontologically demoted because it is no longer at hand, that is, it is *absent*, and can give it some ontological significance by reintroducing the dead as the having-been-alive.⁵⁰ For Ricoeur, this ontological demotion of the past is *the* problem that historians must try to overcome.⁵¹

Berber Bevernage has also written about the relationship between history-writing and burial; he, however, focuses on the act of mourning. He points to a difference between modern Western rituals of mourning and nonmodern mourning rituals and notes their starkly divergent ways of relating to loss and absence. Bevernage finds that in nonmodern concepts of mourning, while “death . . . is experienced as a form of loss . . . non-modern practices of mourning reflect a widespread belief that death does not (immediately, in itself) render the deceased person (entirely) absent and that, accordingly, the boundaries between life and death are not absolute.”⁵² Bevernage shows how the modern concepts of history and mourning associate the past with absence, while the chronological present becomes conflated with physical presence. Following Jacques Derrida, Bevernage argues that because the modern Western conception of time is steeped in a metaphysics of presence, often overstating the absence of the past, it has difficulty accounting for spectral presences.⁵³

Bevernage goes much further than Certeau in theorizing how history is used to break up time performatively. Following the work of anthropologist Johannes Fabian, he shows how history is sometimes used as an *allochronistic* practice.⁵⁴ When the time of history is applied in situations of transitional justice, the past is often designated as bygone. In Argentina, South Africa, and Sierra Leone, Bevernage shows how some have turned to the time of history in order to make a clean break between the absent past and present present. This tactic is used and abused during processes of transitional justice. The clean break between the past and the present works to the benefit of the perpetrators of historical crimes; because historical time views the past as precisely that which is absent, it can be claimed that the crimes of the past are gone and no longer reparable. Victims often view

50. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 363-365.

51. Ricoeur argues against what he sees as Heidegger’s ontological demotion of *Vergangenheit*. Heidegger sees the past (*Gewesenheit*) as having continuing ontological presence; the past (*Vergangenheit*), though often present-at-hand (in for example, a trace), has only ontic significance. For Heidegger, *historiology* (his term for the study of history) has the task of disclosing the “past” or *Vergangenheit*, which stands over and against his neologism “*Gewesenheit*” (which is translated as “having-been”), as characterized by being “gone,” no longer at hand. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 445.

52. Berber Bevernage, *History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence: Time and Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 154.

53. Berber Bevernage, “Time, Presence, and Historical Injustice,” *History and Theory* 47, no. 2 (2008), 149-167.

54. “[H]istory’s contribution to the project of simultaneity has side effects: Often the construction of national simultaneity comes at the cost of the exclusion of people who cannot or do not want to leave the past ‘behind.’ Borrowing a term from the anthropologist Johannes Fabian, I will therefore argue that the discourse on the irreversible time of history sometimes tends to become an ‘allochronistic’ practice: a practice that (symbolically) allocates into another time or treats as non-simultaneous all those who refuse to participate in the process of nation building or reconciliation.” Bevernage, *History, Memory, and State-Sponsored Violence*, 16. See also 129-130.

things differently, however, and unsurprisingly have little desire to move on and let time heal all wounds.

In these instances, the act of the sepulcher is premature, the living are buried alive. The historical tool is often employed not to overcome the ontological demotion of the past, but, on the contrary, to ontologically demote what is phenomenally or spectrally present. Although the United States has never had a truth commission to deal with the past of slavery and Jim Crow, a similar process of allochronic distancing is produced by the widespread dissemination of a patriotic and monumental black history over recent decades. During BHM in particular, distance is created between the “present” and events in the chronological vicinity. This performative historicization of the more and more recent past has produced the so-called post-racial era.

BHM celebrations almost always feature a narrative of racial progress. By emplotting African American history as the story of a declining racism, slavery and Jim Crow are recognized as horrible crimes indeed, but ones that have been overcome and are now historically distant. In a statement on BHM, Ronald Reagan likened them to tests of character that the American nation has passed: “Black history in the United States has been a proving ground for America’s ideals. A great test of these ideals came with the Civil War and the elimination of slavery. Another test came a century later in the struggle for practical recognition of the rights already won in principle—the abolition of legalized segregation and second-class citizenship.”⁵⁵

Reagan’s American *Bildungsroman* is nearly identical to Obama’s story of the “ever-perfecting union.” This narrative of black history is perpetuated by Democrats and Republicans; President Bill Clinton’s February 1994 BHM address toed the same line:

We’ve come a long way since the days when white-only and colored-only signs disfigured our country’s landscape and demeaned too many of our citizens. African Americans have made great strides in recent years, commanding leadership positions in the public and private sectors in record numbers. Opportunities for education advancement, election, and mobility to continue to expand among black Americans, and our country’s moving ever closer to fulfilling its fundamental promise of equality for all.⁵⁶

Clinton’s statement reflects a widespread sentiment about the current condition of African Americans. These days, blacks are (or should be) making up lost ground and “making strides.” Although there still may be some way to go until full racial equality, to paraphrase Obama’s BHM message, Americans can take heart in the fact that history is on their side. According to this logic, in an era in which major racial barriers have been overcome, all that is left for blacks to do is to take their chance, buckle down, and dare to succeed in a society now open to them. Thus a recent question in the State of Florida Black History Month Essay

55. Ronald Reagan, “Proclamation 5443 – National Black (Afro-American) History Month, 1986,” in Peters and Woolley, *The American Presidency Project* (February 24, 1986), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=36910> (accessed December 11, 2015).

56. William Jefferson Clinton, “Statement on the Observance of National African-American History Month, Feb. 4, 1994,” 1 Pub. *Papers* 183. <http://www.loc.gov/law/help/commemorative-observations/african-american.php> (accessed December 21, 2015).

Contest drew a connection between historical progress and individual achievement of youth in the present:

The recent election of our nation's first black president demonstrates how far racial equality has advanced since the Emancipation Proclamation was penned by Abraham Lincoln 146 years ago. In his acceptance speech, our new president-elect encouraged all citizens to work together for our nation's continued growth and prosperity. As a citizen of Florida, one of the nation's most diverse and culturally rich states, what will you do to contribute to a brighter future for Florida and all its citizens?⁵⁷

Masquerading as a "question" about black history, this assignment actually offers a ready-made narrative of the past and then requests the student to write about the future. There is no need to ask the student to reflect critically on the past since the answer is already fixed; the meaning of black history is a story of advancing racial equality. The student is to look to the past as a monumental history, consider how far we have come, and write about how they can do their part to perpetuate the teleological unfolding of American history.

The question is consistent with the dominant trend in BHM celebrations that honors great blacks primarily for their role in perpetuating racial progress. The plaudits are no longer reserved for great blacks of the past; increasingly, living African Americans are commemorated during BHM. For example, a Coca-Cola commercial in honor of BHM 2008 focused exclusively on three young African Americans, depicting these successful professionals as "history-makers."⁵⁸ The advertisement featured Kareem Campbell, a skateboarder, Lisa Price, an entrepreneur, and Maurice Marable, a filmmaker, drinking Coca-Cola while a voice narrated:

What do you see when you look at me, someone ready to have a dream? Or a millionaire already living one?
Do you see the girl next door? Or the global businesswoman?
Do you see a guy from the block? Or a filmmaker making blockbusters?
When you look do you see history being made?
Black history! To be continued.

The commercial condenses not only the march on Washington, but the entirety of black history into the single signifier "dream." It is not the past that is celebrated here; it is the historical process itself, the transition from the past. These youth represent nothing less than the transcendence and negation of the past; they are literally "making history." Just like the Florida State Essay question, this commercial asks us to embrace the future and take note of the growing distance of the past.

The insistence on celebrating "history-makers" is no coincidence; BHM performatively creates a distinction between past and present by using these individuals as mileposts along the road of racial progress. The history-maker par excellence is of course Barack Obama, who was deemed to have "made history" even before

57. "5th Grader Morgan Smith of Ocoee Wins Governor's Black History Month Essay Contest and 4-Year Scholarship from Prepaid College Foundation," <http://app.myfloridaprepaid.com/news/detail.aspx?n=18&t=F> (accessed February 16, 2014).

58. Coca-Cola Black History Month Commercial 2008 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mlYnyxHjgg> (accessed December 14, 2015). Also see "Coke's Black History Month spot launches 2008 African American marketing plan," <http://targetmarketnews.com/storyid01280802.htm> (accessed February 16, 2014).

having taken a single action in office. In an article in the February 2009 issue of *Time Magazine*, Joe Klein said of Obama, “he stands as a singular event in our history.”⁵⁹ As a historical event Obama incarnates not the past, but the conversion of present into past. Obama’s election can be called a historical event inasmuch as it is considered a watershed: that which was previously impossible became possible. Speaking in Koselleckian terms, we may say that the description of the election as historical introduces a split between the space of experience (in which blacks could not be president) and the horizon of expectation (in which anything is possible). Was not Obama’s ambiguous campaign slogan “Hope” actually the promise of a new horizon of expectation?

But BHM does not only register the deeds of history-makers; rather, it encourages others to further racial progress and often takes the tone of a pep-talk advising young African Americans to “dream” of future success and achievement in a post-racial era. Indeed it is now commonplace to tell black youth to “make history.” The phrase “celebrate black history” has actually become an imperative: as one AT&T commercial commands us, we must “celebrate how far we’ve come and how far we’ll go.”

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion I would like to underline the important point that relegating things to the historical past can be at least as oppressive as forgetting. Whereas racism and the systemic oppression of blacks were traditionally ignored in the United States, they are now entombed safely and in the past: no longer considered a contemporary issue, when racism arises it is treated as a specter from another age or dismissed as anachronism. The insidious power of this excessive historicization is well illustrated by the discourse on the post-racial era in the United States. In recent years we have seen its detrimental effects. The post-racial logic underpinned the recent Supreme Court decision to strike down a key part of the Voting Rights Act—one of the main legislative victories won by the civil rights movement—as Chief Justice John Roberts claimed “40-year-old facts hav[e] no logical relationship to the present day.”⁶⁰ When in 2014–15 a series of well publicized incidents of unarmed blacks being killed by police officers led to massive protests and cries that black lives continue to be treated as worth less than those of whites in the United States, the response of many commentators was to accuse African Americans of bringing an anachronistic racial frame to contemporary events.⁶¹ It is blacks, they claimed, who insisted on seeing these killings as having something to do with racism, it is blacks who remain nostalgic for the racist era of American history.

59. Joe Klein, “Obama Promises New Destiny, Work Begins Today,” *Time* (January 21, 2009).

60. John Roberts, cited in Adam Liptak, “Supreme Court Invalidates Part of the Voting Rights Act,” *New York Times* (June 25, 2013), <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/26/us/supreme-court-ruling.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed December 11, 2015).

61. Police in the United States killed at least fourteen unarmed African Americans in 2014 alone. The most publicized cases were those of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and Eric Garner in New York City. Many protests arose in the wake of these killings. One of the slogans chanted during the protests was “Black Lives Matter.”

One of these incidents occurred in the town of Ferguson, Missouri. A policeman called Darren Wilson shot an unarmed black man, Michael Brown. A heated controversy emerged around the shooting itself and the question of whether to indict the police officer. There were many large protests both in Ferguson and around the country following this incident. The way in which these protests were policed also became a point of controversy. The question of race was raised by the protesters, many of whom were African American. The shooting, the treatment of the white police officer, the perceived vilification of Michael Brown in the media, and oppressive police tactics were widely perceived as “racially motivated.” However, the suggestion that racism was involved in the incident was consistently attacked by many on the right of the political spectrum in the United States, who charged that those who claimed that racial prejudice played a role in the events surrounding the death of Michael Brown were themselves “stirring up racial tensions,”⁶² or that they were insisting on seeing everything “in terms of race” in spite of “the facts”:

Truthfully, the angry and sullen reactions of those who wanted Wilson tried *are* understandable. They’re understandable because most Americans live in the evidence-free narrative created by malicious media liars, and the politicians they enable. They live in the evidence-free world of the political left, which maintains that America remains deeply racist, that every white cop is Bull Connor, and that every black man shot by police is a Selma marcher. So long as they live in that world, racial reconciliation will remain a dream, and racial polarization will remain a tool of the political and media elite to sell papers, raise cash, and drive votes.⁶³

The same point was summed up in a single headline on Fox News: “Activists, journalists, stuck in 1960s racial resentments.”⁶⁴ For another commentator writing in the *National Review*, drawing parallels between the events and Ferguson and the racism that protesters faced during the civil rights movement is absurd:

The temptation for the Left to live perpetually in 1965 is irresistible. It wants to borrow the haze of glory around the civil-rights movement of that era and apply it to contemporary causes. It wants to believe that America is nearly as unjust as it was then, and wants to attribute to itself as much of the bravery and righteousness of the civil-rights pioneers as possible. All of this is understandable. It just has no bearing on reality.⁶⁵

The message is clear: blacks must stop living in the past and “get with the times,” so to speak. According to these commentators, what many thought was a racist incident was really not racist at all, and the fact that some perceived the incident as racist is a testament to their anachronistic understanding of America. Those

62. Donald R. May, “Police Blood is on the Hands of Obama, Holder, Sharpton, and de Blasio,” *Lubbock-Avalanche Journal* (December 21, 2014), http://lubbockonline.com/interact/blog-post/donald-r-may/2014-12-21/police-blood-hands-obama-holder-sharpton-and-de-blasio#.VL_Jp8blc4s (accessed December 11, 2015).

63. Ben Shapiro, “Ferguson Verdict Explodes Media’s Lying Racial Narrative,” *Breitbart* (November 24, 2014), <http://www.breitbart.com/big-journalism/2014/11/24/media-narrative-implodes-michael-brown/> (accessed June 30, 2015).

64. Fred Siegel, “Ferguson Fury: Activists, Journalists Stuck in 1960s Racial Resentments | Fox News,” *FoxNews.com* (August 19, 2014), <http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2014/08/19/ferguson-fury-activists-journalists-stuck-in-160s-racial-resentments.html> (accessed June 30, 2015).

65. Rich Lowry, “The Real Lesson of Selma,” *National Review Online* (January 1, 2015), <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/395589/real-lesson-selma-rich-lowry> (accessed June 30, 2015).

who claim that we are in a post-racial era argue that racism no longer exists, and the fact that many blacks claim to suffer from racism is evidence only of their own pathological insistence on clinging to the past.

Of course, many people treated these sorts of criticisms with incredulity. Many asked how one could possibly think that these killings had nothing to do with racism? Many scholars and commentators have criticized the notion that America is in a post-racial era. Numerous opinion pieces appeared in the media explaining that one has only to look at the long history of racism in America to understand that systemic American racism played a role in the killing of these African Americans. Once again the argument was made that if Americans only knew their black history, then the seriousness and reality of the problem of race in contemporary America would become obvious.

In my view, however, these arguments misunderstand the way the post-racial era functions. Post-racial periodization is not a denial of the racist past, it is a denial of the connection between the past and the present. Those who speak about the post-racial era frequently highlight and condemn the horrors of the past. Moreover, it is a mistake to think of the post-racial era as an antihistorical position. On the contrary, the post-racial era works by indicating that racism is a problem that must be seen through a historical lens. In the post-racial era, fully present racism is rendered an impossibility; where racism appears it exists only as a trace of a previous era, a last vestige of an old America. Racism is thought of as a problem that must be historically transcended rather than solved. If black history is the story of an inexorable movement toward freedom, what need is there to act in order to combat racism? The logic of colorblindness is founded on the belief that history is doing the hard work of expunging racism for us. We only need to lean back and let the passage of time do its work.

This way of thinking about racism in America is not accidental. There could be no post-racial era without the excessive historicization of the problem of race. The post-racial argument relies upon widespread recognition of a dominant narrative of black history as a story of racial progress. In the twenty-first century, therefore, black history is no longer ignored; if anything the opposite is true: it often seems as if the issue of racism and the condition of black people in America can only be discussed *as history*. BHM has offered an example of a third option between the poles of remembering and forgetting: through the process of historicization, black history is recalled precisely in order to remind us that it is in the past. In this way we can say that the surfeit of black history in the monumental mode has been at least as oppressive as the systematic forgetting of the black past that has characterized previous eras of American history: the celebration of black history during BHM has been a celebration *that it is history* and thus no longer present.

Those who call for more history in the face of racism should also recognize the extent to which historical education itself has contributed to the view that racism is a thing of the past. In order to combat the discourse of the post-racial, it is therefore not enough to just teach black history: the greater problem may very well be that when the problem of racism in American society is discussed, it is frequently through a historical frame. Perhaps instead of teaching the history of racial progress every BHM, it would be better to spend the month of February

discussing the problems faced by blacks in America today. Instead of celebrating history-makers, we should seek to highlight and discuss current injustice, and indeed to trace back its deep roots. Black history in the monumental mode must be questioned by a critical history. This critical history must take an explicit moral and political stance on the problems of racism today, and reflect on ways to resolve these. Such a history would truly serve life.

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