



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**A Black Women's History of the U.S.—
Past, Present, & Future**
The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg
21 February 2021
frederickuu.org

I would like to invite us to reflect on the difference it makes if we consider the past, present, and future from the perspectives of Black women. One might be tempted at first to ask, “Wait, isn’t history just the same facts, regardless of who is telling it?” The truth is that **sharing “history” is never neutral; it is always a subjective process.** There is no pure, objective perspective—whatever that would even mean. I’m not saying that there’s no reality out there; rather, I’m inviting you to notice that **we human beings are always experiencing reality from our own particular points of view.** I suspect you can think of examples when you and one or more others remembered the same experience differently. Everyone notices and judges different details uniquely, based on their different social backgrounds, life experiences, gender, race, class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and more.

As a result of these influential human factors, written histories are necessarily always told from a particular perspective, even when that bias is not explicitly acknowledged—or even consciously held. (As Jung said, “The problem with the unconscious is that it’s *unconscious*.) Every time a story is told, choices are constantly being made, sometimes deliberately and sometimes unconsciously, about **which details to emphasize, which to set aside, and even which to ignore, censor or repress.**

For example, if you sign up for a class in *African American* history, you can reasonably assume that the perspectives and experiences of some Black people will be emphasized. Likewise, you can reasonably anticipate what the focus will be if you sign up for a class on *Women's* history, *Latinx* history, *LGBTQ+* history, *Indigenous People's* history, etc.

In each of these cases, there is some truth in advertising. But too many “general” history books and courses have seemingly neutral titles, like “American History,” when might more transparently be titled “*White, Rich, Heterosexual, Able-bodied Male* History.”

Toni Morrison said it this way: “**In this country, American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate.**” It matters what stories we *choose* to tell. And regarding those choices, we should be sure to notice *who decides, and who benefits* from that particular telling. As the saying goes, “If you aren’t at the table, you might be on the menu.”

Here’s a recent example about why it matters that we notice the biases of whomever is writing our history books. I don’t intend to spend a lot of time discussing our last President, but you may have seen a few recent headlines along the lines of “Donald Trump Was on the Wrong Side of History” or “History Will Judge Trump’s Enablers.” From the perspectives of Black women’s history, the jury is still out as to whether history will judge him well or ill.

As we have been exploring, history is neither neutral, nor necessarily progressive as much as we might wish that it were. **History doesn’t bend toward justice on its own, and sometimes it shifts tragically toward in favor of injustice and oppression.**

George Orwell’s novel *1984* is one example of what can happen when historical events are recorded by propagandists. In the totalitarian world of Orwell’s *1984*, the “Ministry of Truth” produces propaganda, the “Ministry of Peace” wages war, and the “Ministry of Love” imprisons dissidents. Along similar lines, the regime’s gaslighting slogans are:

WAR IS PEACE
FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH (91-92).

claims are, of course, false on their face, and that's the point. When dictators force citizens to act like they believe such obvious lies is incredibly harmful to our mental health. And we've all experienced far too much of such gaslighting from both government officials and some parts of the media in recent years. As Orwell writes in the quote that has stuck with me most strongly from *1984*: **"The heresy of heresies was common sense.... The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command."** (162-3). When the public is repeatedly fed a steady diet of "alternative facts, sometimes they start believing them!

In this country (and in other places around the world that have experienced rising authoritarianism), vying political leaders compete for the privilege of telling how history unfolded. George Orwell said: **"Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past."** Who controls the narrative *matters*. There are many examples I could name, but I will limit myself to one—both recent and poignant.

The so-called *1776 Report* calls itself a guide intended to "restore patriotic education," an Orwellian phrase that could have come right out of the pages of *1984*. This report was released by the White House last month precisely on Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, a holiday all about telling U.S. history from increasingly wider circles of inclusion. The *1776 Report* criticizes the more-honest telling of U.S. history from Black person's perspectives, specifically targeting influential historical works such as the *New York Times*'s Pulitzer Prize-winning 1619 Project, and Howard Zinn's book, *A People's History of the United States*, which tells "America's story from the points of view — and in the words of — many American women, factory workers, African Americans, Native Americans, working poor, and immigrant laborers."

So as we consider what Black women's perspectives on American history might be, I want to highlight that it really does matter how we learn U.S. history. Studies have shown that:

Black and Latino teenagers who read [excerpts of Howard Zinn's *People's History*] reported greater willingness to participate in

protests, voting and campaigning for political candidates than did those who read [a] more traditional text. Although these texts did not affect how White students intend to participate, it did make them more likely to report that people of color had made important contributions to U.S. history. In other words, who is represented, and how, in school curriculums affects how young people think about their role within U.S. democracy. (The Washington Post)

The good news is that the new administration removed “The 1776 Report” from the White House website; but there is never a guarantee as to what would happen if a different set of folks were in charge of setting standards for writing our histories. And there are still a lot of terrible history textbooks out there, approved at state levels for use in public schools.

My point is to encourage all of us to be skeptical when we hear that someone is “on the wrong (or right) side of history” or that “history will judge them.” Maybe it will, and maybe it won’t. So much turns on who is in charge, on who is writing the history books, and the extent to which *we the people* do or do not work together to bend the arc of history toward peace, liberty, and justice. It also matters how well-informed citizens are in making such political decisions.

When I think about telling recent U.S. history from Black women’s perspectives, I need to do so as truthfully as possible, even though these truths can be hard to hear. So here is an example of what that can look like from The Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, author, activist, and Senior Minister at the innovative Middle Collegiate Church in New York City. Her comment on the recent Presidential Impeachment verdict was: **“Acquitted like a Jim Crow jury.”** Notice that she is doing more than condemning cowardice and nihilistic will-to-power—as important as both those condemnations are. She is bringing an historical *depth* to her prophetic critique, reminding us that this recent trial was about so much more than one person’s guilt or innocence. It is about systems and structures that have been in place for a long time, and that have created a pattern. This particular Black woman’s historical perspective remind us that that verdict was only the most recent in a very long line of Jim Crow trials in which obviously guilty white men have gone free and obviously innocent people of color have gone to jail.

(Keep The Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis in mind, because we're going to come back to her at the end.)

To share just briefly about some of my own processes, I was raised in South Carolina with a version of history that primarily reflected the experiences and perspectives of powerful white men. A significant turning point in my own understanding of history came about two decades ago when I first read Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. And in more recent years, I have been learning a lot from the ReVisioning American History series published by our own Beacon Press. And over the past few years, I've preached several sermons about the first four books in that series:

- *A Queer History of the United States* (2014)
- *A Disability History of the United States* (2015)
- *An Indigenous History of the United States* (2015)
- *An African American and Latinx History of the United States* (2020)

And although all the books are fairly short, and are written accessibly, our own UU Beacon press has also released some that are shorter and even more accessible— young [people's versions of some of these excellent histories.

A sixth book in that series, [An Afro-Indigenous History of the United States](#), the first intersectional history of the Black and Native American struggles for freedom in our country” will be published near the end of this year, I look forward to sharing that book with you in the future. As Beacon Press said in response to the 1776 Report: “We don't need more ‘patriotic’ histories. We need more radical histories.”

To continue our journey through the past, present, and future from the perspectives of Black women, I'll begin with the *past* by sharing just a few highlights from the fifth book in our series, *A Black Women's History of the United States*, by Daina Berry (a history professor and Associate Dean at the University of Texas at Austin) and Kali Gross (a history professor at Rutgers University). In previous years, we've focused a number of Sunday Services on specific Black women in history— including Rosa Parks, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lorraine Hansberry, Octavia Butler, and Harriet Tubman. Other Black women I look forward to focusing on in future Sunday services include Ella Baker, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, Dorothy Pittman Hughes,

and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, as well as the incredible life and legacy of the African American singer and activist Odetta Holmes. For now, I'll share with you just a few highlights from Berry and Gross' important recent book.

In previous writings, I mentioned that *The New York Times's* 1619 Project, led by African American journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, invites us to notice that the story of U.S. history is very different if you tell it as beginning in 1776 with the American War for Independence as compared with beginning that history in 1619, when the first enslaved Africans arrived in Virginia, thus emphasizing all the people who remained *unfree* after the U.S. War for Independence.

And as much as I continue to admire the importance of the 1619 project, an important takeaway from Berry and Gross' book, is that it expands the framework of U.S. history even further, by exploring the history of Black women in this land well *before 1619*. When I saw that chapter's title, I thought: "Ok, you have my attention."

And I was fascinated to learn, for example, about **Isabel de Olvera**. In the year 1600, more than four hundred years ago, she was part of a Spanish expedition that explored present-day New Mexico, Arizona, and Florida. We have a fascinating record of her petition, written before she embarked on her journey, sent to the Mayor of Mexico asking for protection. In her words, "I have reason to fear that I may be annoyed by some individuals since I am [of mixed race]." Her father was from Africa, and her mother was a member of an Indigenous tribe in the above regions. She was born a free person, and was requesting an affidavit affirming that she was "free and not bound by marriage or slavery." Her closing three-word sentence is powerful: "I demand justice" (10). She did, by the way, get her affidavit!

There are various other references to Black women in this land before 1619, most of them unnamed or included in fragmentary documents (11). Even though the records are partial, they are fascinating and make all the difference in how history is understood. While we certainly need to tell the story of the brutal Middle Passage that began in 1619, it is also powerful to tell this earlier part of the story—the story of free Black women in this land before 1619 (12).

I also appreciated being reminded of the inspiring story of **Alice Coachman**, who was born in 1923 in rural Georgia, one of the middle children of ten siblings. Her

father always said that daughters should be “dainty, sitting on the front porch,” but Alice was drawn to sports even though they were considered to be mainly for boys at the time. *Nevertheless, she persisted*, and in 1948, she not only qualified for the London Olympics, but also set a new high jump record of five feet, six inches.” Moreover, “she was the only woman on the U.S. women’s track and field team to bring home the top honor that year, which also made Alice the first Black woman to receive an Olympic gold medal” (144).

To trace a few other pathbreaking firsts of Black women in recent history, I have to mention the inimitable **Shirley Chisholm**, who in 1969 became the first Black woman elected to the United States Congress. And in 1992, **Carol Moseley-Braun** became the first Black woman elected to the U.S. Senate (199). And of course, last month, **Kamala Harris** became the first Black and South Asian woman U.S. Vice President. Looking to the near future, President Biden has promised to nominate the first Black woman to the Supreme Court when a vacancy opens. (Hint, hint: Justice Breyer....)

And although there is so much more to say about the value of having a Black’s women’s perspectives on the past, I want to take what we’ve learned and apply it to the present and the future. To again take the risk of being too direct, there is an argument to be made that if you want to know whether you would have been an ally to Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, and other Black women activists had you been alive in their day, arguably the best test available to us is to notice the extent to which you are an ally to Black women activists in our own day--from Stacey Abrams to the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement, all three of whom are Black women.

Turning to Stacey Abrams, she has written and spoken about at least three major actions we need to take. She is speaking from a Black woman’s perspective on the *present* moment that is a deeply informed by a Black women’s perspective on history. Abrams has urged us to

1. **Overhaul the filibuster in the U.S. Senate**, which allows “a minority of senators, who represent 41.5 million fewer people than the Senate majority, to block progress favored by most Americans.” (For more details, I recommend the book *Kill Switch: The Rise of the Modern Senate and the Crippling of American Democracy*.)

2. Pass the **For the People Act** to protect and expand voting rights, fight gerrymandering and reduce the influence of money in politics; the **John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act** to restore the full protections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act; and the **Protecting Our Democracy Act** to constrain the corruption of future Presidents who deem themselves above the law.
3. **And grant D.C. statehood, and self-determination to the people of Puerto Rico.**

I would personally also add: expand seats on the Supreme Court; but starting with Stacey Abrams's top three priorities is a great place to begin connecting with our UU Fifth Principle of democracy.

Now, if you'll stick with me for one final step, let's keep in mind all we've learned about Black women's perspectives on the past and present, and consider how they might lead us together into a better future for all.

For those who don't already know her work, allow me to introduce you to Tricia Hersey. Hersey founded the Nap Ministry in 2016, and calls herself the "Nap Bishop." But let me hasten to say that she is about a lot more than twenty-minute power naps to increase productivity; indeed, that description is perhaps the opposite of her overall mission. From the perspective of Black women's history, Hersey invites us to reflect deeply and subversively about "rest as resistance" to 24/7, non-stop "grind culture"—the relentless demands undergirding what bell hooks has called the "White Supremacy, Capitalist Patriarchy." In Hersey's words: **"Grind culture wants us to keep going no matter what. I sit my ass down and daydream. The answer is NO."**

Among many things she's trying to accomplish: she is inviting us to subvert the idea that being well-rested is laziness. It's important to recognize that she isn't writing out of nowhere; rather, she is writing out of a deep immersion in the tradition of Black Liberation Theology. Hersey also holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Public Health, and a Master of Divinity from Emory University's Candler School of Theology. She is also an artist and public theologian, who has transformed many public spaces into what she calls "sacred, safe spaces for attendees to publicly nap and benefit from the healing and revolutionary power of sleep."

The Nap Bishop challenges us to consider that, because *oppressing Black bodies* has been at the center of 400 years of enslavement, Jim Crow segregation and the ongoing New Jim Crow regime of racially-biased mass incarceration, *well-rested black bodies* will be one key part of creating a new way of being in the world that “centers liberation, equality and justice.” In her words, **“A Black woman in a rested state is a radical act.”** As we explored a few weeks ago in regard to prison abolition, another world *is* possible, but it requires *systemic* change. As Audre Lorde said, “You can’t dismantle the master’s house using the master’s tools.”

Hersey was inspired to create the Nap Ministry during the three years she spent working as a graduate assistant in Emory University’s African American archives. Being deeply immersed in historical documents, she learned in great detail about the daily lives of her enslaved ancestors, who were so often treated as if they were:

human machines. They were working 20 hours a day. Women were giving birth, then the midwife came to take the baby and the mother returned to work the same day. That shook me to my core, being a mother and having given birth. I could barely lift my head up [after I gave birth]. The details that people usually gloss over became important to me. They haunted me. But **what would [my ancestors] have experienced or done if they were allowed a space to rest?** (“[Testimony on Liberation Theology and Rest as Inheritance](#)”)

To quote one of Hersey’s many powerful one-liners about how this can apply in our lives today, she says, **“People need to take a nap so that they can wake up.”** She, of course, means that statement on multiple levels, including the level of consciousness raising.

There’s so much more to say about the profound implications of Hersey’s Nap Ministry, and you can learn a lot by reading through the archives of her [Instagram posts](#). For now, I’ll move toward my conclusion with three quick quotes from a recent Hersey [interview](#):

- “Our goal is to uplift sleep deprivation as a racial and social justice issue.”
- “I realized I had been navigating decisions from a space of toxic urgency. I began to experiment with the radical notion of deliberately and forcefully slowing down. My

rest practice became a place of solace, restoration, resistance, reparations and connection. The refusal to grind thus became a political act.”

And in this third and final quote, notice how Hersey brings in the perspective of Black women’s history—and emphasizes that she’s calling us to *systemic change* far beyond individual self-care:

“We exist in a culture that supports sleep-deprivation; we have been brainwashed by capitalism to work at a machine-level pace, and to equate our worth with how much we can produce. The same engine that drove millions of enslaved people into the forced terror of brutal labor on plantations is the same engine driving grind culture today.... **Rest is a form of resistance because it disrupts and pushes back against capitalism and white supremacy.** It says, “No, I am enough now, and I am not a machine.... Our collective rest and radical care will save us and will be the foundation for a new world rooted in liberation for all. We will rest.”

I’m excited to see where the Nap Ministry goes in the future.

Finally, I want to loop us back to The Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis. Earlier we considered her powerful reflections on current events from Black women’s historical perspectives. Even more importantly, Lewis’s primary focus is bringing together diverse coalitions to co-create a better future. So for those of you who are curious to go deeper into how we might partner together for collective liberation, I highly recommend the annual Revolutionary Love Conference that Lewis has been hosting for many years now, which will be fully online this year in mid-April. A number of you—as well as many other UUs and other progressives—have attended Lewis’ conferences in the past, and I know a number of you, including Intern Minister Jen, are already planning to attend this year.

The stories we choose to tell matter. And if we choose to live into stories of revolutionary love, we can learn from the past to transform the present, and co-create a better future for us all. And regarding how we might come together for collective liberation (when we all get free), I’ll give the last word to the Black poet and activist Amanda Gorman:

For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it
If only we're brave enough to be it