

WHO ARE BLACK AMERICANS?

A PRIMER FOR EDUCATORS

By Ivory A. Toldson

Persons of Black African ancestry live as citizens, foreign nationals, and indigenous populations on every continent as a result of immigration, colonialism and slave trading. Today, most Black people in the Americas are the progeny of victims of the transatlantic slave trade. From 1619 to 1863, millions of Africans were involuntarily relocated from various regions of West Africa to newly established European colonies in the Americas. Many different African ethnic groups, including the Congo, Yoruba, Wolof, and Ibo, were casualties of the transatlantic slave trade. The Black American population is the aggregate of these groups, consolidated into one race, bound by a common struggle against racial oppression and distinguished by cultural dualism (Toldson, 1999).

Importantly, the historic legacy of Black people in the Western Hemisphere is not limited to slavery. The Olmec heads found along the Mexican Gulf Coast is evidence of African colonies in the Americas centuries before Columbus arrived in the Caribbean (Van Sertima, 2003). Black people were also responsible for establishing the world's first free Black republic, and only the second independent nation in the Western Hemisphere, with the Haitian Revolution (Geggus, 2001). In the United States, almost 500,000 African Americans were free prior to the Civil War and were immensely instrumental in shaping U.S. policy throughout abolition and beyond. Post-Civil War, African Americans influenced U.S. arts, agriculture, foods, textile, language, and invented technological necessities such as the traffic light and elevators, and parts necessary to build the automobile and personal computer. All of these contributions were necessary for the U.S. to become a world power by the 20th Century.

Racism and oppression are forces that have shaped the experiences and development of Black people worldwide. Although European colonialists initially enslaved Black people because of their agricultural expertise and genetic resistance to diseases, they used racist propaganda to justify their inhumane practices. During periods of slavery and the "Scramble for Africa," European institutions used pseudoscience and religion (e.g. the Hamitic myth) to dehumanize Black people (Toldson, 2008). The vestiges of racism and oppression survived centuries after propaganda campaigns ended and influence all human interactions today.

Today, racism is perpetuated most profoundly through the educational system (Loewen, 1996). Black students are taught to revere historians, such as Columbus, who nearly committed genocide against the native population of the Dominican Republic; and Woodrow Wilson who openly praised the Ku Klux Klan. Although many of these facts are not well known and purposefully disguised in history texts, children often leave traditional elementary and secondary education with the sense that aside from a few isolated figures (e.g. Martin Luther King and Harriet Tubman) Black people had a relatively small role in the development of modern nations (May, Willis, & Loewen, 2003).

Survey data often indicate that African Americans have the highest incidence and mortality of any given mental or physical disorder, are more deeply impacted by social ills, and generally have the lowest economic standing. While some of the data are accurately presented, rationales are usually baseless and findings typically lack a sociohistorical context. In addition, studies on African Americans unfairly draw social comparisons to the social groups that historically benefited from their oppression.

Historical distortions accompanying dismal statistics have resulted in many educators and counselors perpetually using a deficit model when working with Black students (Jamison, 2009). The deficit model focuses on problems, without exploring sociohistorical factors or institutional procedures. Persons of Black African ancestry have a distinguished history, are immeasurably resilient, and have developed sophisticated coping mechanisms throughout centuries of oppression. Appreciating and celebrating a Black people's legacy, contextualizing problems, and building on strengths instead of focusing on deficits are universally appreciated counseling strategies, which merit greater prudence when working with Black students (Amatea, Smith-Adcock, & Villares, 2006).

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