

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/dont-steal-these>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Im outside a coffee shop taking a work call on my laptop.

I have headphones in my ears and I am wearing a buttoned-up shirt, slacks, and dress shoes. A white lady, also dressed up in business clothes, comes out with lots of to-go boxes and stacks them on a wooden table twenty feet in front of me. I half smile at her as an acknowledgment, but also knowing that shes supporting a new, black-owned coffee shop maybe intentionally, maybe not.

As she puts her boxes down, she looks at me and says something. I am on a call so I dont hear her. I pull out the right earbud-- "excuse me?"

She repeats herself, "don't steal these." She jokingly smiles and walks back in.

. . .

A wave of thoughts, emotions and questions flow through my mind and body. Why did she feel the need to say that? Would she say that to me if I were white? Though the work call is still talking in my left ear, the voice fades. Through the right ear flow my thoughts on how to engage this woman when she comes back outside.

Maybe I am wrong to assume that my appearance had any influence on her choice of words. But, before her directive I was in a healthy, proud space. At 8:27 AM, on this seventh day of Black History Month, I was enjoying my continuing streak of mornings attending the black, woman-owned Magnolia Yoga Studio next door. I was enjoying being a patron at a fraternity brothers coffee shop. I was just enjoying myself. Until she interrupted.

I felt that woman saw me, not as a fellow customer, but as a danger though not enough of a danger to give her any serious concern. But at some frequency in her mind, the simple act of me existing gave her the impression and the association that I might be a thief. Her perspective of me could likely have been rooted in implicit bias the bias in judgment or behavior operating on a subconscious level of our brains. That perception implicitly associating black people with criminality is one held by a majority of Americans. This view of who black people are, who we have been, and who we can be in this country has been partially influenced by lessons taught, and not taught, in our classrooms.

The typical American curriculum, historically, teaches on the topic of black people in America through the lens of slavery and the civil rights movement. These are important parts of our history but they are not exhaustive. As Malcolm X said, Our history did not begin in chains. Yet, most black history timelines start with slavery. This creates schemas and fuels biases both implicit and explicit that normalize the idea of black people remaining in chains. This normalization continues through the disproportionate representation of black people in our criminal justice system today.

However, the true connections linking black people in America are not chains, but prized experiences of resilience. How would we see black people and their history differently if our classrooms taught about the strategic and tactful leadership of [Queen Nzinga](#)? Or the riches of [Mansa Musa](#)? More currently, what could change if we all learned about the [Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks](#) and her contributions to medicine? Or the story of Americas youngest African-American millionaire [Sarah Rector](#) at twelve years-old? We could ask the same questions for other people of color whose histories are also not completely taught in classrooms.

It makes one wonder if we all learned different parts of black history, and celebrated it, what impact could that have on how black people are seen in America? Or how we see ourselves?

When history is told only through the lens of slavery, we simultaneously desensitize our country to the historical pain of black people and reinforce the image of us being deserving of subservience. Black people have a history that is inspiring, motivating, and encouraging. It should be revered as such. But until that history is fully told, we will be seen as a threat, instead of what we actually are: our [ancestors wildest dreams](#).

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