

“Sugar coated civil rights history”

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Tyson, Timothy B. *Blood Done Sign My Name*. Crown Publishing Group, 2004. Reprint, Three Rivers Press, 2004.

Our perception of historical events is affected to a great extent by those we learn our history from. Tyson explains that “Though whites typically grew up hearing that their slaves had been treated kindly, the inherited memory among African Americans included many stories of brutality and abuse.”(30) Most white people had considered that life before the civil rights marches and riots quaint and prosperous. Their own inability to accept the actual brutality of slavery and inability to admit that the civil rights movement was not just a peaceful protest infuriates me.

Inconsistencies exist in our understanding of the fight for equal rights in our country because most people would rather ignore or destroy an undesirable past. America land of the free, home of the brave, that suppressed various races for generations. America where you can live your dreams, so long as you’re not Black, Hispanic, Indian or Asian. America where you can fight for your country and return home only to be murdered in the street because you’re black. The history of the civil rights movement I feel will always be an incomplete story because as the author stated: “White supremacy permeated daily life so deeply that most people could no more ponder it than a fish might discuss the wetness of water.” (17)

Media downplayed the events of the civil rights movement to the white readers. That the reality of the events were not as bad as they seemed. Most newspapers were only reporting events from a white perspective. The school system even supported outright lies regarding the civil rights movement. Tyson felt that “The intent of formal education was to inculcate obedience to a social order that did not deserve my loyalty.”(275) White people accepted what they heard and what they were taught at face value.

The author mentions that some white people had a sense of the moral injustice but not the courage to stand up for fear of retaliation or being alienated from people around them. This is evident in the incident where a black man named Lyons was being chased by white men after a dinner sit-in. Lyons ran into the police station and instead of the police officer stopping the white assailants, he began “kicking and stomping Lyons in full view of the crowd, but using the flat side of his foot and making only light contact.”(94) Instead of the officer standing up for Lyons he openly abused him in front of the other white people. Only after the other white people left the station did he help Lyons.

Even history as passed down from one black generation to the next seems to be distorted in one way or another. The struggle of the civil rights movement noted by some as unnecessary. The federal government was at any moment going to come to town and liberate the downtrodden black man. I am confused as to how African Americans came to such an opinion of the federal government. Considering the government's long history of openly oppressing not just the black community but many other races.

Our great nation that proclaims justice and liberty for all, yet is too ashamed to admit that it willfully ignored such justice for generations. I want to believe people as a whole wanted to change. However, the will of those in power over us had made little effort to enforce change. Our nation had decided not to be honest about our history and the sacrifices made to progress to where we are today as a nation. As Tyson explained, the tourism and romanticism of the antebellum south, with women in big skirts and large plantation homes displays how white people want to remember the South in that era. No mention of the history of the Negroes that revolted, marched, lived or died there. The history of those places altered in order to pacify our

conscience. (314) That we [white people] admire Dr. King “because we want to transcend our history without actually confronting it.” (318)

In Tyson’s book, Mayor Currin stated “Oxford’s no different from most any town. Things were going along real well until the shooting” (209). This is the mindset of most white people during that time that everything was fine and doing well until the Negroes just suddenly decided to riot. Even in the middle of a race war they could not comprehend that everything was not fine before. Watkins demonstrated this by explaining the “relations were always good here.” (297) Watkins continued on by explaining he had black people take care of his horses and that blacks stayed on his farm for 50 years or more. “Paternalism strengthened the system of white supremacy by softening its sharper edges and covering its patent injustices with a patina of friendship. Accepting black expressions of gratitude at face value, whites congratulated themselves on their friendly relations with “their” Negroes.”(25) Many white people felt that destruction and riots, at that time, were not necessary just because a black man was shot. To the white people living in Oxford life might have been good, but the Negroes of the city lived impoverished, desperate lives.

If everything had been fine in Oxford before, then Dickie Marrow would not have been chased down, beaten and shot like a dog. Nor would his assailants have been set free. It was not just the murder of Dickie Marrow, it was the visible display of white supremacy. A culmination of all of the worst fears of black people. That a black man could be murdered without justice under the law. A law that was supposed to protect everyone regardless of race.

Black people handled the murder of Dickie Marrow in different ways. For those like Ben Chavis sought to have remedy through protest, not willing to resort to violence. Even when

presented with ideas or opportunities of violence he would not participate. “Chavis’s political strategy was economic pressure against the most wealthy and powerful whites.”(201) Others such as Eddie McCoy used methods that required active violence to get people to notice the injustice. Tyson quoted McCoy as stating “When nonviolence did work, mostly it was because white people were afraid we was gon’ burn the place down.”(166)

Dr. King’s methods of nonviolence fell on deaf ears. Marches by the black community not even acknowledged. Previous attempts to bring to light injustices in the city of Oxford were only met with contempt. As an example, instead of segregating public parks the city just shut them down to keep the black folk out. In some strange turn of humor, the white people of Oxford thought that better communication was the answer. Like most Southern towns “better communication” was the solution, as if “slavery and segregation had been some terrible misunderstanding.”(97) Even Tyson’s own father saw himself as trying to bridge the gap between blacks and whites. Hoping that whites sympathetic to blacks could “better understand” black people and their movement. In contrast, Ben Chavis felt that white people were the root of the socialist problem and could not lead black people to freedom. (267)

It was not until the white community felt a tangible sense of danger that the city would even consider a change. “Sometimes it was necessary to escape from an endless and pointless conversation with white paternalism by striking hard and sometimes violently against the architecture of the oppression.”(249) The burning of the tobacco barns, vacant homes and store vandalism representing that aspect. That if verbal communication was not getting the point across then violence would. Some black people would even threaten other black people in the community if they refused to participate. The idea being that all black people needed to work

together show a solidified front. As Tyson noted in his book, some black people were either too afraid or too “attached to their white folks” to participate in the demonstrations or boycotts. (251)

In thinking about the violent protests that have occurred in my lifetime, I am jaded on the issue. Having worked in law enforcement for thirteen years, I have seen different sides of the race struggle. For me to deny that there are those that abuse their power would be disturbingly ignorant. To not also note that there are those that abuse race issues solely to push a political agenda would be as equally ignorant. To me, the beating of Rodney King was purely police brutality. The suspect should have been taken into custody not beaten brutally while lying on the ground. As a law enforcement officer, you agree to hold yourself to a higher standard. To rise above your initial reactions or feelings in a situation and ensure public safety. The riots that followed were, to me, was proof that the black community had enough and lashed out.

The outrage for events involving Michael Brown and Freddie Gray differ from Rodney King. Michael Brown had also just committed a crime, like King, when the police officer blocked the road to question him. However, to approach a police car, reach into the window and fight with an officer now puts the officer in the predicament of fighting for his life. Brown fled the scene and then turned around to approach the officer again leading to the fatal shooting. Considering the amount of reported violence against police officers, I feel the officer responded appropriately. Freddie Gray’s arrest and subsequent death are a bit more difficult to determine. At minimum negligence for not securing the passenger and seeking medical help. In both Brown and Gray events, riots and protests ensued.

The protests for both Brown and Gray seemed genuine to me. A community voicing their opinions about a social wrong. I strongly feel that the violent riots that also occurred were not in

outrage due to police brutality on blacks. The rioting seemed more like an excuse for youth to loot and vandalize under the guise of racial outrage. The rioters didn't target white businesses or empty buildings to demonstrate a point. They looted and robbed businesses in their own communities, some of which were owned by black people who had spent their entire lives building up. In both of these cases, I felt the families deserved a better memory of the deceased.

The research for this class has made me reconsider preconceived notions I had about the civil rights struggle. I now question the thoughts I had on the subject. I often wondered when reading my textbooks for this class if they were written from some liberal perspective because it was so hard for me to believe the history laid before me. This has only tasked me with the will to dig deeper. To seek the truth of the matter and search these documents of history out. I could find no better way to sum up my feelings on this topic than to quote the author "The sugar-coated confections that pass for the popular history of the civil rights movement offer outright lies about most white Americans' responses to the freedom movement instead of reminding us how profoundly it challenged American practices of justice."(106)