

“The problem of the Twentieth Century is the color line.” (W.E.B. Du Bois)

The past three months has seen America face a difficult pandemic and now the issue of racism is again roiling the citizenry to take to the streets, exercising their First Amendment right of peaceful protest and petition.

The following books and films are a short sampler focusing on the issue of racism in the U.S. both past and present. Last August THE NEW YORK TIMES began its 1619 project, marking the 400-year anniversary of the first importation of slaves to the colonies. This project is ongoing and a useful resource.

Books past and present:

- FREDRICK DOUGLASS, WRITINGS AND SPEECHES, Fredrick Douglass (probably the most influential 19th century Black author and activist)
- THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF W.E.B. DU BOIS, W.E.B. Du Bois (20th century Black sociologist and historian)
- BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY, MALCOM X SPEECHES AND WRITINGS, Malcom X (mid-20th century Black critic of American society)
- SOUL ON ICE, Eldridge Cleaver (mid -20th century Black critic of American society)
- A TESTAMENT OF HOPE: THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS AND SPEECHES OF MARTIN LUTHER KING JR, Martin Luther King Jr. (best compendium of the ideas of an American Icon)
- INVISIBLE MAN, Ralph Ellison (a seminal Black writer during the middles of the 20th Century)
- GO TELL IT ON A MOUNTAIN, James Baldwin (a brilliant Black writer who captures the psychological/social injustice of racism)
- THE BLUEST EYE. Toni Morrison (first Black woman author to win the Noble Prize for literature; a number of her books have been banned in schools and libraries)
- I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS, Maya Angelou (the bookend to Toni Morrison as one of the finest writers of the second half of the 20th century)
- THE NEW JIM CROW: MASS INCARCERATION IN THE AGE OF COLOR BLINDNESS, Michelle Alexander (arguably the best book on the Black experience related to the criminal justice system)
- AMERICA’S ORIGINAL SIN: RACISM, WHITE PRIVELEGE AND THE BRIDGE TO A NEW AMERICA, Jim Wallis (a white evangelical minister/founder of Sojourners who shows another side of Protestant evangelicals)
- TEARS WE CANNOT STOP: A SERMON TO WHITE AMERICA, Michael E. Dyson (probably the best current book on racism by a Black Baptist minister)
- THE GUARDED GATE, Daniel Okrent (Okrent shows how racism and eugenics led to the 1924 Immigration law essentially stopping immigration of Jews, Poles, Italians and other East Europeans from coming to the US for the next 40 years---most striking is the contention that all the aforementioned groups were non-whites!)
- HOW TO BE AN ANTIRACIST, Ibram Kendi explains in effective detail how and why not contributing to racism is not equal to nor acceptable enough compared to being a deliberate, and conscientious advocate against racism.
- RACISM WITHOUT RACISTS: COLOR-BLIND RACISM AND THE PERSISTENCE OF RACIAL INEQUALITY IN AMERICA, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva traces the legacy of the U.S. past into the present, exploring how institutions perpetuate racial inequality in housing, education, political life, the prison system, and other areas.
- BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME, Ta-Nehisi Coates (following the footsteps of James Baldwin, Coates writes this book to his son focusing on American history and the current crisis)

- BREATHE A LETTER TO MY SONS, Imani Perry (Princeton Professor of African American Studies writes a letter to her sons in the same tradition of Ta-Nehisi Coates)
- I'M STILL HERE: BLACK DIGNITY IN A WORLD MADE FOR WHITENESS, Austin Brow (the title says it all)
- ME AND WHITE SUPREMACY, COMBAT RACISM, CHANGE THE WORLD AND BECOME A GOOD ANCESTOR, Layla Saad (how might whites move in a new direction---title of book indicate where)
- THE COLOR OF LAW: A FORGOTTEN HISTORY OF HOW OUR GOVERNMENT SEGREGATED AMERICA,
- WHY ARE ALL THE BLACK KIDS SITTING TOGETHER IN THE CAFETERIA AND OTHER CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE, Beverly D. Tatum (again the title is a great starter)
- THE WORLD OF OTHER SUNS, Isabela Wilkerson (story of the migration of Blacks from the South to Northern/Western cities in search of a better life).

Films over the past century:

- BIRTH OF A NATION---one of the most horrific films justifying the KKK and depicting Blacks as sub-humans and was shown quietly in Woodrow Wilson's White House. While a political progressive, he was a racist through and through.
- GONE WITH THE WIND---highly reflective period piece which helped to support the Civil War "lost cause" theme.
This film romanticizes the slave south and bolsters some of the worst anti-black stereotypes helping them become embedded in American culture
- GUESS WHO IS COMING TO DINNER? --film was made before the Supreme Court struck down miscegenation laws in 1967.
- 12 YEARS A SLAVE---based on the true story of a free Blackman who is kidnapped and sold into slavery for 12 years.
- AMISTAD---unusual Supreme Court case freeing African slaves. The role of an ex-President, serving as defense counsel and the support of abolitionist churches helps to lead to an unusual Supreme Court ruling.
- LINCOLN---Spielberg's picture captures Lincoln who is convinced that the 13th Amendment freeing all slaves is crucial to a post-Civil War Reconstruction. Lincoln's skills as both a transformational leader and a transactional leader are brilliantly captured.
- SELMA---brilliantly shows MLK Jr's non-violent march to secure voting rights for Blacks---the scene at the Pettus Bridge is one of the great inflection points in the struggle for Civil Rights.
- FOUR LITTLE GIRLS---a devastating picture of a church bombing leading to the death of four little girls in the church.
- MALCOM X--- (official title is "X") captures the evolution of the activist and civil rights leader who was a contemporary of Martin Luther King Jr. and an early film by Spike Lee one of the film directors of our times.
- HIDDEN FIGURES---the remarkable tale of three Black women mathematicians who despite overt racism are employed by NASA to help with our first space launch---a role model for all young girls.
- THE BUTLER---an unusual film chronicling the career of a Black White House butler over 34 years.
- RUBY BRIDGES---a six year old girl sets off the school in 1960 in New Orleans, ostracized by everyone except her teacher---parents of her would be classmates refused to let their children

be in the same room. An inspirational film about how a six year old child deals with hatred and how a teacher can make all the difference.

- GHOSTS OF MISSISSIPPI---a film that shows justice even though it takes 30 years is worth the effort (focuses on the bringing to justice of the killer of civil rights leader Medgar Evers.
- BLACKKKLANS MAN---focuses on the true story of the first Black police officer in Colorado Springs who successfully infiltrates and exposes a secret KKK cell. One Spike Lee's best films, and he has a 30 year career of them!
- ROOTS: THE SAGA OF AN AMERICAN FAMILY --- is an award-winning mini-series based on Alex Haley's family history. Beginning with the enslavement of his ancestors, it chronicles the experiences of multiple generations of Haley's family through major events in U.S. history including the Revolutionary War, major slave rebellions, the Civil War, and emancipation. The original 1977 series was recently remade.
- EYES ON THE PRIZE --- a very well-done documentary series that reveals and provides expert commentary complimented by profoundly personal testimony of the Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950's and 1960's - excellent use of documentary footage.
- JUST MERCY, based on Bryan Stevenson's book chronicling his Equal Justice Initiative.
- LOVING---biopic on the Lovings, an interracial couple, who convinced the Supreme Court in 1967(the year I graduated with my history BA) to overturn Virginia's law banning interracial marriage.

The aforementioned books and films are but a very small sampler of a much richer cache of materials which can help white people gain a better understanding of the Black experience from 1619 to the present.

James Baldwin observed "It is certain that ignorance, allied with power. Is the most ferocious enemy justice can have." We are an increasingly diverse society and it is imperative that we learn how to both talk but more importantly listen to all.

Any questions/observations about this column maybe directed to SUNY Broome Professor, Doug Garnar at: garnardc@sunybroome.edu

1368 words