

Column: Why America can't get over slavery, its greatest shame

USA TODAY NETWORK Rochelle Riley, Detroit Free Press Columnist Published 9:00 p.m. ET Feb. 8, 2018



(Photo: Associated Press)

Slavery. It is America's open wound. It is the painful injury that a third of America lives with and the rest of the country attempts to ignore because, for them, it is an ancient scar and, well, hasn't it healed by now?

Its very name evokes emotions so strong that many Americans demand that we no longer speak of it, while others — those who live with its enduring impact — cry it aloud in hopes that America will finally have the conversation about it that it has refused to have for nearly 400 years.

Slavery's long legal existence created the American caste system that endures today, one that maintains a false white superiority and black inferiority built on an unfair education system, unfair employment system and social institutions that support this notion while appropriating black language, music and fashion.

No amount of complaint or discrimination has led to a real discussion of slavery and its aftermath — and of what is owed to a people who helped build America. The cost, some say, would be too great.

The long, hard road to King's Resurrection City.

(<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2018/02/07/poor-peoples-campaign-resurrection-city/1015708001/>)

MLK's America still a world of trouble

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Voices: In the shadow of King's mountaintop

(<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2018/02/01/voices-black-history-month-2018-king/1081229001/>)

"There are two reasons that we don't talk about slavery: The first is it's a subject that makes us have to face the ugliness of our history against the beauty of American history," says Michael Simanga, adjunct professor of African-American studies at Georgia State University. "It forces us to then commit to structural changes that the country has not yet gotten ready to address, changes having to do with discriminatory practices — an unequal education system, unequal employment, unequal housing and how we teach our history without including all Americans."

Talking about slavery "would require us to embrace a completely different American narrative," he said, "and we're not ready to let go of the old one."

The unheld conversation is woven into the fabric of 1968, arguably one of the most important years in history as far as race and slavery are concerned. That is the year the British Parliament passed the Race Relations Act making it illegal to refuse housing, employment or public services to a person on the grounds of color, race, ethnic or national origins — and created a Community Relations Commission to promote "harmonious community relations."

America did neither, instead passing, over time, a series of civil rights laws that do not mention race in their titles and that black Americans still must fight to get the government to enforce.

Our rules, our policies, our attempts at equality have all been just a series of poor attempts to hide the origin of this country's poor race relations when the world knows that origin was slavery.

Why don't we talk about it? Because talking about it makes it real, makes it impossible to ignore.

There are still people in America who believe that slavery was a gift to African Americans and that two and half centuries of horror were a small price to pay to escape Africa — a continent they feel was so much worse that slaves' descendants should be honored by the capture. Because there is no education about slavery in America's public schools, there has been no discussion about what the massive residential theft did to Africa or what centuries of maltreatment did to generations of African Americans.

America is defined by continuing injustice rooted in slavery. The lack of education and conversation about it constitute a deficit that shackles our country. It makes America fertile ground for myth and revisionism that attempt to teach schoolchildren that slaves were just immigrant workers, sharecroppers who tended land in exchange for a place to live. The unmentioned rape and torture and maiming and poor nourishment and killings — and even the legally maintained ban on slaves learning to read — were all just minor inconveniences.

Every attempt to discuss some recompense for those years of horror is met, mostly, with outrage by white Americans who say, "It wasn't me."

Yes, it was.

It was America.

It was us.



The quiet beginning of the slave trade in the United States is pictured in this undated engraving. The setting is Jamestown, Va., where in 1619 the captain of a Dutch ship traded 20 Africans for food in a deal with John Rolfe and other settlers. The Africans probably had been hijacked from a Spanish vessel. The 20 slaves were to grow to more than 15 million Africans imported and enslaved before the trade was stopped. (Photo: ASSOCIATED PRESS)

And by rights, that means it was all of us who continue to pretend that it didn't happen and do not face that something must be done to repair it, or America's problems with race will never go away.

Slavery endures in a legal system that allows black voter suppression and housing restrictions and education policies that continue to make life harder for blacks than whites in America.

Slavery endures in an injustice system that continues to jail more black men than white people for the same crimes.

And slavery will endure a little more than a year from now when we commemorate the 400th anniversary of the first enslaved Africans' arrival in Jamestown, Va.

Those slaves' arrival in 1619, according to historical accounts, was described in a letter by John Rolfe, whom schoolchildren are taught was the husband of Pocahontas but who is rarely mentioned for his eyewitness account of the birth of the transatlantic slave trade to the United States. He wrote in a letter to Sir Edwin Sandys, treasurer of the Virginia Company of London, of the arrival of "20. and odd Negroes." These kidnapped people were purchased to be used as involuntary laborers, sold after making a voyage they didn't plan that lasted usually six to 13 weeks, chained in the bowels of ships they'd never seen.

Virginia's first Africans, according to various historical accounts and a 2006 Washington Post analysis, spoke the Bantu languages Kimbundu and Kikongo and were believed to be from the kingdoms of Ndongo and Kongo, regions of modern-day Angola and coastal regions of Congo. They joined 15 black men and 17 black women

already "in the service" of Jamestown planters.

One of the greatest — and most often cited — deterrents to having a discussion about slavery is that slavery wasn't just America's problem. It was recognized as early as 6800 B.C., according to various research projects, when enemies of war were enslaved in Mesopotamia, or 1000, when slavery was routine in England's rural, agricultural economy, or 1444, when Portuguese traders brought slaves from West Africa to Europe.

But citing slavery's historical existence does not change America's participation in it. Massachusetts became the first British colony to legalize slavery in 1641. One hundred and 35 years later, when the country's forefathers declared independence, they did it knowing they were not declaring it for all Americans — and most did not care.

There was even widespread belief that the historic election of 2008 signaled an end to America's race relations problem, and some believed it would open the door to a national discussion of slavery — and possible reparations for it.

Henry Louis Gates, the noted Harvard historian, wrote in a 2010 New York Times opinion article that "thanks to an unlikely confluence of history and genetics — the fact that he is African American and president — Barack Obama has a unique opportunity to reshape the debate over one of the most contentious issues of America's racial legacy: reparations, the idea that the descendants of American slaves should receive compensation for their

ancestors' unpaid labor and bondage.”

But such a task was not high on Obama's gargantuan list of missions, and America would not deal with the nation's greatest shame during his tenure.

That has been the sad fact of slavery. Conversations begin and end with who was responsible — and as long as the blame game continues, no real conversations happen.

Meanwhile, slavery remains, as Jamelle Bouie and Rebecca Onion put it in a September 2015 Slate analysis, “a massive institution that shaped and defined the political economy of colonial America, and later, the United States” ... an “institution (that) left a profound legacy for the descendants of enslaved Africans, who even after emancipation were subject to almost a century of violence, disenfranchisement, and pervasive oppression, with social, economic, and cultural effects that persist to the present.”

Slavery remains the subject of a conversation that only one side wants to have and the other side continues to put off, decade after decade after decade.

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Rochelle Riley is a columnist at the Detroit Free Press and author of “The Burden: African Americans and the Enduring Impact of Slavery” (Wayne State University Press, February 2018).

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