

Let's Talk About...Black History

Let's talk about Black history. February is our national Black History Month, but of course we can (and should!) talk about Black history any time of year. There's a great masterclass resource called "Black History, Black Freedom, and Black Love" that streamed on Amazon Prime during February. It's not currently available, but plenty of other [resources](#) are out there. Check the local library; librarians LOVE questions like this!

But for today, let's talk about how much words matter when we discuss Black history. When we think of slavery in the American South, we often think about plantations. Where I grew up, we distinguished between a Southern plantation accent and an Appalachian redneck accent, among many others. The plantation accent is an upper class, highly respectable one with the perfect hint of a southern lilt. That reveals something about how we think of plantations: They're rich white people's homes from the slaveholding South. The word may remind us of ballgowns and fancy dinners and flowers. But the truth was that the vast majority of a plantation's inhabitants were enslaved. In other words, what we recall as plantations could more accurately be named slave labor camps.

That terminology makes it a lot harder to ignore just how inhumane American slavery was. Now let's try another one: Jim Crow. Jim Crow laws created the "separate but equal" system of segregation that separated everyday living by race. Having recently rewatched the Disney movie "The Color of Friendship" about a black American family and a white South African girl's experience during the last years of South African apartheid, it's undeniable that Jim Crow laws were American apartheid. Apartheid simply means a set of laws discriminating on the grounds of race.

So, words matter, and American history classes and textbooks can often choose nicer words to describe our nation's human rights failures than we might readily use to describe the failures of other nations. But most of us aren't in school anymore, so what can we do about this?

1. Get involved in your local school district. School board meetings are typically open to the public, and book bans and parental controls on what can and cannot be taught in public schools seem to be painfully popular these days. If you find out these things are happening near you, go to a meeting and speak up for the value of knowing our honest history. And if you have friends or family in a contentious district, you could reach out to them and encourage them to speak up.
2. Be mindful of the words we use to describe racial realities. Maybe you won't find a lot of plantations around here, but we have reservations nearby. What other words might mean the same thing as a reservation, and would we think about them differently if we used different words?
3. Go to the library (or the video streaming service of your choice) and learn something new! Read Black authors in whatever genre you like. Read or watch a piece of our history as told by marginalized voices. The more we understand our cultural world as it is experienced by our Black neighbors, the better we can make others feel welcome in our community.