

DISCOURSE

We Are Too Good for DEI

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My impetus for dedicating the bulk of my career to combatting diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives began on a listserv for Rhetoric and Composition, the field in which I teach as a professor. Upon hearing a well-received speech claiming that the teaching of Standard English to Black students was a form of racism, I wrote an email questioning the efficacy of that argument. My inquiry induced a level of opprobrium I did not expect. I was called a white supremacist, and blatant lies were spread about me on social media.

Besides these robust attempts to degrade me, I noticed a consistent infantilization of anyone Black who was “brave” enough to speak up against me. Mind you, this extremely woke listserv was a safe place to voice disdain for anyone who refused to embrace a victim narrative—no bravery required—but in order to abide by that narrative, anyone Black had to be cast as a downtrodden victim punching up and speaking truth to power. Anyone Black except me, of course. For wanting Black students to have the utmost agency and to flourish in today’s society, I, a Black man, was shunned by whites and Blacks alike.

The U.S. is currently celebrating Black History Month, and I’ve been asked to share my thoughts about how this month of celebration aligns with DEI initiatives. The answer to that question depends on the type of DEI. Some DEI initiatives align with the classical liberal values of the civil rights movement, and indeed of America’s founding, such as freedom and equal opportunity for all, regardless of skin color. Other versions of DEI, however, are undergirded by critical social justice (CSJ), an ideology that pits whites and Blacks against each other; whites are perpetual oppressors, and Blacks are perpetually oppressed. This variation of DEI, which I refer to as CSJ-DEI, is the ideology that was on display during the aforementioned listserv debacle. It insists on the perpetual victim status of Black Americans and, in so doing, is ideologically opposed to the celebration of Black Americans because it focuses on their trials, not their triumphs. Black History Month is supposed to be about Black empowerment, but CSJ-DEI depends on Black disempowerment.

One can get the gist of CSJ by understanding its primary tenet: “The question is not ‘*did racism take place?*’ but rather ‘*how did racism manifest in that situation?*’” This philosophy assumes that racism is always already a part of any interaction between whites and nonwhites; one just has to find it. Assessing the facts of a particular situation is considered unnecessary, even naive. One

need not *think* when it comes to racial justice; the narrative—the script—does the thinking. Does this lack of agency, this deference of volition to a pre-scripted narrative, sound empowering?

CSJ-DEI is about leaning into to the “downtrodden Black person” narrative, but that narrative does not align with the reality of today’s America. Forget about the growing presence of current or recent Black immigrants and the enhanced socioeconomic status of many Black Americans today. According to the altered reality of CSJ-DEI, Black people must still be seen as irredeemably oppressed. Scholars Julian Adorney and Jake Mackey call this altered reality a “virtuous lie,” defined as “a false or dubious claim that is asserted without qualification because it is thought to advance an ethical agenda.” Exaggerated police statistics and the insistence that Black Americans are still caught in a form of slavery are just the tips of this “virtuous” iceberg.

Virtuous lies are anything but virtuous in these situations, but they show up in traditionally virtuous places, such as scholarly journals. In the scientific journal Cell, prominent scientists insist that the Black individuals among their ranks “continue to suffer institutional slavery.” In addition, a philosophy professor argues that the “years 1492 and 1619 and 1857 and 1955 are still now” and insists she means this in “a meaningful, *non-metaphorical* sense” (my emphasis). The absurdity of these statements is matched, if not eclipsed, only by the fact that these authors were confident their arguments would be taken seriously. Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez was emboldened enough to say that a false narrative is acceptable if it feels “morally right”; to insist on facts is to be misguided.

Black History Month is too good for CSJ-DEI. It is about the celebration of figures in Black history who beat seemingly insurmountable odds. It is about figures like educator Mary McLeod Bethune, lawyer Samuel J. Lee, congressman Josiah T. Walls and many others of whom most are unaware. I firmly believe that these figures would scoff at CSJ-inspired ideas such as equitable math, the demonization of debate and the violence of teaching Standard English to Black students.

The misalignment of Black History Month with CSJ-DEI is exemplified by one of the most consistently celebrated figures of Black history: Frederick Douglass. As a slave, Douglass taught himself to read despite the fact that it was illegal. He had to be astute enough to be autodidactic and clever enough to do it without getting caught. When he escaped into the free states, he rose to become the most sought-after orator of the 19th century. Douglass’ life is an implicit counterargument to the CSJ-DEI narrative: If Douglass could accomplish this as a slave two centuries ago, what excuses do Black people have for embracing victimhood today, in a truly free society of which Douglass could only dream?

Ultimately, CSJ-DEI not only counters the spirit of Black History Month, but it insults the figures celebrated during that month. To pretend things are just as bad now as they were throughout American history is to disrespect the accomplishments of Black Americans. Black Americans today are here and thriving precisely because of their power and ability to rise above adverse circumstances. To insist we remain disempowered at all times is risible at best.

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