

Beyond Black History Month

An interview with Michael Thompson

Recently Pact's adoptive parents of color discussion group invited adoptive parent and history instructor Michael Thompson to speak to them, along with some transracial adoptive parents, on the significance of Juneteenth. In addition to shedding light on this particular holiday, and the complicated history it honors, the discussion also covered the broader topic of how US history is taught—what we learn, and what gets left out. The conversation continues here.

POV: In your presentation, you touched on the fact that many of us remember learning about Abraham Lincoln as “The Great Emancipator.” In what way is this interpretation of Lincoln a distortion of history?

Thompson: When I teach American history, it is very important to me to present events, ideas and people in their fullest sense—that is, as complicated and often contradictory. History, considered this way, isn't so much a progressive march forward as a complex negotiation. For me, presenting Lincoln as “The Great Emancipator” is an incomplete portrait of a moment in time. Juneteenth, the celebration of African American freedom in Texas, is in some ways an attempt by African Americans to insert and make visible their slave past in American history as a corrective to this incomplete narrative.

One reason I'm uncomfortable with the “Great Emancipator” concept is that it tends to hide Lincoln's real ambivalence about slaves and slavery. Certainly, by the late 1850s Lincoln felt that the nation could not survive much longer as half free, half slave. For him, this was largely a political question. He may have had some moral reservations about the institution of slavery, but Lincoln was a politician. Once the Civil War begins, his attitude toward slavery is completely tied to preserving the Union. The Emancipation Proclamation reflects this. When discussing this document with my students, I usually begin by asking them “What does the Emancipation Proclamation do?” Their usual answer, reflecting the “Great Emancipator” view of Lincoln, is that it “frees the slaves.” Showing them the actual document reveals that the Emancipation Proclamation only “frees” the slaves in the areas of the South that are in open rebellion against the Union. That is, Lincoln is attempting to free slaves in precisely those areas in which his political authority is not recognized. Those states

that practice slavery and remain in the Union are, according to this decree, legally allowed to keep their slaves. Given these constraints, who is Lincoln actually freeing? This question doesn't suggest that the Emancipation Proclamation isn't an important document. It is an important step toward the Thirteenth Amendment that ends the institution of slavery in the United States. The question does, however, attempt to present history as less a simple story of events and more of a multi-layered, contested, ongoing interpretive project.

Juneteenth is important in that project because it shows African Americans to be active participants in their own history. In celebrating this one day, a door is opened to an entire history of slavery and freedom. What is revealed in walking through that door is that freedom was not a gift given, but a right taken. African American slaves began seizing their freedom long before a presidential proclamation. Even in those states in which Lincoln preserved the “peculiar institution,” slaves took it upon themselves to take their freedom and fight for the freedom of others. Viewing the Emancipation Proclamation in this context, we see a document that is merely recognizing the historical reality of that moment: African American slaves were day by day, battle by battle, from plantation to plantation, refusing to be slaves any longer.

POV: Most of our kids now learn about George Washington Carver, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King in school—but that doesn't feel like enough. And some of us may not feel particularly well-equipped to fill in the gaps. Can you recommend some key texts for parents who want to develop a more in-depth understanding of African American history?

Thompson: For most parents, I would recommend starting with a textbook. In the past, there were very few African American history textbooks. Slowly, however, more have been published. African Americans: A Concise History by Darlene Clark Hines (Prentice Hall, 2009), From Slavery to Freedom by John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Higginbotham (McGraw-Hill, 2010) and The Struggle for Freedom by Clay Carson (Prentice Hall, 2010) are all good textbooks.

From there, I think it is important for parents to discover their own interests within African American history. It is unrealistic to expect any parent to become an expert on all aspects of this vast subject. Discover your own interests within African American history and communicate those interests to your children. At the end of most textbook chapters are short bibliographies that provide readers with additional titles to follow-up on specific issues and topics.

POV: Beyond books, are there other resources you recommend?

Thompson: There are several documentary series that are quite good. I think the "Eyes on the Prize" series, while over twenty years old, is still one of the best histories of the Civil Rights movement. The PBS series "American Experience" includes a number of films that focus on people, eras and episodes in the history of African Americans--ranging from the Underground Railroad to early independent Black film (even during the silent era), to the biographies of Ida B. Wells and Malcolm X. The PBS series "Africans in America," and "Slavery and the Making of America" are both good introductions to the history of slaves and slavery in what becomes the United States of America. Pre-teens could probably watch these programs along with their parents.

The arts and culture are important expressions of African American heritage (Ken Burns' "Jazz" series does quite a good job articulating the deep African American roots of "America's classical music"). Musical performances, dance concerts, and museum exhibits can all provide more interactive experiences to engage your child. Most important, I think, is to make African American history a part of your everyday lived experience, as opposed to isolated, educational expeditions. For parents of younger children, this might be as simple as dancing in the kitchen with your kids to the music of African American artists.

POV: In your presentation, you sought to question or complicate a number of commonly-held perceptions about Africa, slavery, and the Civil War. In your college courses, when you teach African American students about the history of their people, what are some of the key lessons you hope they will come away with?

Thompson: I want my students not only to see history as messy and complex, but also to see that it involves people

in the past doing things that people in the present (including themselves) have to interpret and try to understand. For me, history is a verb connecting the past and present.

In connecting students to their histories, I attempt to get them to question their assumptions about those histories. For African American history, this involves questioning what they think they know about Africa, slavery, race, and America. It means seeing Africa as a continent (not a nation) occupied by peoples who see and experience differences among each other and attach meanings (good and bad) to those differences. It involves discussing the practice of slavery in Africa by African peoples before the arrival of Europeans. It means exploring the history of race and the implications of its constant refiguring. What we "know" to be race is different from what was "known" one hundred or two hundred years ago. It also requires reimagining the history of peoples of African descent as a diasporic history involving many different peoples in many different locations—not just the United States.

I want students to push beyond the history of what was (and is) done to people of African descent in America. Certainly, this is a long, troubled history. If, however, I simply taught African American history as the history of racial oppression, I would be doing a disservice not only to those many African Americans who fought and fight this oppression, but also to the key role African Americans played and play in shaping the nation's history. It is important to me that my students see African Americans as historical actors, not simply objects who were/are acted upon.

What is difficult in trying to achieve these educational goals is simultaneously teaching students to view African Americans as active participants in their history while also pushing them to view the complicated and conflicting history of race (particularly "blackness") and its impact upon African Americans. How is blackness historically defined and redefined? How do racism, AND African American efforts to contest this racism and define their own identities, represent a continuous struggle? What are the political, social, economic and cultural implications and outcomes of this struggle? These are the types of questions I want my students to confront.

Michael Thompson is an adoptive parent who teaches African American and US History at Chabot Community College in Hayward, CA. He completed his undergraduate and graduate studies in history at UC Berkeley.