

Majesty and misery: The richness of lift every voice

Written by Julianne Malveaux, NNPA Columnist
Monday, 02 March 2009 17:56

When I learned that Senator Dianne Feinstein would be charged with the inaugural arrangements I prayed. I prayed that our San Francisco sister would be as sensitive, as I was, to the moment and the meaning of the Negro National Anthem and to the possibility that the San Francisco Boys and Girls Choir might sing that song.

Yes, I know that I was delusional. President Barack Hussein Obama is the president of the United States of America, not of Black America. That means that our president might demur on making racial gestures, singing the right song, in the right tenor. I did not expect President Obama to sing the Negro National anthem. But I prayed someone would sing it.

While no one sang it, one many parsed it. The Rev. Joseph Lowery was the unwitting answer to my prayer. When he lifted up the words, God of our weary years God of our silent tears, he put the words of the Negro national anthem in the inaugural mix.

I will always be grateful to Rev. Lowery for his words, but also to president Obama for bringing Rev. Lowery to the table. I revel in the history, in Black history, in the afterglow.

While I revel, media colleagues align themselves in a different space. They write that they don't need Black history, and as I read them, I swear I am going to go running down the streets and sidewalks in sheer hysteria.

Of course we need Black history, this manifestation of Dr. Carter G. Woodson's vision. Now we are actually openly talking about African-American people, history and possibility. Should we just forget Black history because an African-American man is president of the United States? Or should we wait until our nation's statuary, and our K-12 curriculum begin to reflect our cultural energy.

If you ride around our nation's cities and towns you will find statues that suggest that we lift up those who make outstanding contributions. Why are there not more African-Americans in the mix? Even if there is someone to concede that history is being made right this minute, who will correct the statuary? When do we get to lift up the likenesses of Ida B. Wells, Sojourner Truth, Patricia Roberts Harris, and the other African American women who have made a difference in our world?

Until these women are as elevated as George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, it makes no sense to consider eliminating Black History Month.

Why would some eliminate? They say that Black history month means segregation. The real segregation is the way our history books were written, the fact that every high school book had a page or two on slavery, usually illustrated as a Black man who looked like a recent escapee from an uncle Ben's rice box, a page that had aunt lemma's closest companion illustrated, a book that reduced slavery into a paragraph or two, a book that failed to capture the nuances of slavery – the reality of those slaves that purchased themselves, the complexities of the lies of those who navigated freedom, the challenges of those who were related to those who actually owned them.

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Attorney General Eric Holder was on point when he indicated that we are afraid to confront our very foundations. And our fear has given fuel to the fear of others, cowards, who would suggest that we should eliminate Black history month because they think the racial world is now flat.

Not flat, our world begs for a conversation, and until we clear the air the conversation will be, perhaps, approached during Black history month. We have elected an African American man as president of the United States, but we have not fixed every history book nor captured all of the nuances of African American heritage and history.

How many white folks know the words of the Negro National Anthem – Lift Every Voice and Sing. How many of those trying to slam the door on Black history – Black and White – understand the richness and reality of the Negro National Anthem?

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