

Shur Fellow Guidance
July 2019
Celebrating U.S.A. History without White Washing it

Often when celebrating holidays like Thanksgiving and Fourth of July we are caught between celebrating the United States' history for all its goals and achievements and/or acknowledging the havoc racism wreaked on people of color throughout history. As we've just celebrated the Fourth of July we want to explore how we can celebrate American history without erasing the crimes committed against people of color. So often, there are traditions and holidays that we want to hold on to but don't want to perpetuate racist ideologies or as Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it, "national amnesia."

What do we mean when we say "erasing people of color from our history"?

When the story of how our country began is recounted, the narrative usually includes how the America's Native people greeted the pilgrims with open arms and corn. This narrative, however, does not capture the whole story. Native people have diverse stories and no one nation (or tribe) has the same story from another. For more information on Native nations in your hometown follow this link: <https://native-land.ca/>

We can celebrate the Fourth, but are we neglecting to mention the role slavery played in the formation of our country? White colonists kidnapped Africans from their homes and took them as slaves to then colonize the Americas and take over Native lands.

When celebrating the Fourth, we often praise the nation we live in without critique. Some may find it difficult to call our Nation great when its inception is founded on the oppression of others. Two things can be true at once: that the U.S. has great objectives ("all men are created equal") and we have a racist past and present.

How to avoid it

Acknowledgement of all aspects of our history and educating ourselves on the problematic aspects of it is a necessary place to start. When using social media, celebrating with friends and family, or thinking to yourself, remember the people who were forced to undergo genocide, torture, and/ or enslavement. By acknowledging and educating ourselves we can move forward to do more to deconstruct current racism and make people of color feel more included in our work at the League and in our everyday life.

Here are some ways to go about celebrating our national holidays without ignoring the racism intertwined in such holidays:

- Make a statement! Post on social media about how excited you are to celebrate, but mindful of the mass genocide of Native people and/ or the enslavement of Africans that came with the conception of the Nation.
- Be an ally to other organizations within your community who focus on the lives of diverse communities.
- Call it out! If you see someone who might be unaware and/ or neglecting the full truth common history, politely but firmly provide them with resources to educate themselves.

Moving forward

How can we celebrate U.S. history without erasing people of color from our collective memory?

Be genuine: It can be unproductive when actions are done without real desire to change. As leaders it is important that we take steps to include everyone. Authenticity provides people with a space to feel heard, listened to, and speak their mind. Undoing years of oppression doesn't happen overnight, therefore it's important to remain diligent in making space for a range of feelings/ emotions about the holiday.

Make mistakes! No one is perfect and this, like anything is a process. When we make mistakes we have the opportunity to learn and grow. No one is perfect. Acknowledge these mistakes out loud and apologize. Most importantly, learn and be open. Refer back to our DEI Webinar where we utilize the calling in method in which you pull someone aside to call attention to a problematic behavior.

Again, acknowledge: Continuing to learn and listen allows us to continue to provide space and develop a deeper understanding on the pervasive nature of racism.

A list of resources on understanding U.S. racism is available here:

- <https://www.soundvision.com/article/a-brief-history-of-racism-in-the-united-states>
- Read Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* and *We Were Eight Years in Power*
- http://masshumanities.org/files/programs/douglass/speech_complete.pdf
- Honoring Your Native Land

Remember: this is by no means a complete guideline on how to end racism or absolve yourself of individual racism. Rather it is a list of suggestion on how and when to expel our prejudices and lean in to deconstructing racism.