

Getting the Stories
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January 17, 2016

“[In Paris] it occurred to me that I really was in someone else’s country and yet, in some necessary way, I was outside of their country. In America I was part of an equation—even if it wasn’t a part I relished. I was the one the police stopped on Twenty-third Street in the middle of a workday. I was the one driven to The Mecca [of Howard University]. I was not just a father but the father of a black boy. I was not just a spouse but the husband of a black woman, a freighted symbol of black love. But sitting in that garden, for the first time I was an alien, I was a sailor—landless and disconnected. And I was sorry that I had never felt this particular loneliness before—that I had never felt myself so far outside of someone else’s dream.”
From Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel & Grau, 2015)

Just over a year ago, the movie “Selma” brought to life one of the most iconic stories of the Civil Rights era. Black people from that Alabama city, along with activists from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, led by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and eventually joined by white religious leaders and others from across the country, confronted the forces of segregation on the Edmund Pettis Bridge. One part of the movie that some people took issue with was its portrayal of President Lyndon Johnson as a sometimes frustratingly reluctant and maybe not completely trustworthy ally to the movement for black liberation and voting rights.

Articles were written; talk show and news hour appearances were made, mostly by indignant white liberal historians arguing that the director Ava DuVernay had neglected or misinterpreted the strategic reasons for LBJ’s actions, and arguing that the experienced and skilled white politician was totally committed, but simply had a better understanding than Dr. King of the political timing and dynamics that would get the best possible outcome in the end. I remember hearing Ava DuVernay respond in an interview: “I’m not telling Lyndon Johnson’s story; I’m telling the story from the perspective of the people who walked across that bridge.”

And I thought, yes—however noble or pragmatic his intention was, the impact of Johnson’s control over the timing for moving the Voting Rights Act forward was very different depending on whether or not it was *your* right to vote that was being strategically delayed. As the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote: “No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own.”

Whose interpretation was true? Who owns the story of Selma, the story of the Voting Rights Act?

It’s been said that history is written by the winners, but I think that’s an overly simplified view. It assumes that any great historical watershed is ever “won” or “lost” definitively, once and for all. In fact history is written and rewritten, interpreted and reinterpreted; the narrative of how the past became the present is told and retold as new voices are heard, untold stories are brought to light, and new ways of understanding old choices and actions are discovered and

developed. There is never a single story that can hold the fullness of what really happened—that simply isn't how human experience works. To know as much as possible of the truth, we have to get as many stories as we can—especially the stories of those most directly affected.

On this Martin Luther King Jr. weekend every year, in celebrations, essays, speeches, and sermons, there's a deep struggle over what Dr. King's message and legacy, his *story*, really is. How should he be remembered; how should he be honored? Just to pick out a few I have personal connections with: In Charlottesville, Virginia tomorrow, a network including young black professionals, the local NAACP chapter, and other leaders is sponsoring an African American Town Hall to discuss and promote changes needed in their city and county. In Oakland, California tomorrow, the second annual March to Reclaim Dr. King's Radical Legacy, organized by a broad multiracial, multigenerational coalition of groups led by the Anti-Police Terror Project, will walk from downtown Oakland to a large shopping mall nearby, seeking to shut down business as usual for a set period in the name of dozens of people killed or injured by police in the Bay Area in 2015. Here in the Outer Banks, yesterday a group gathered at Manteo High School for what I was told is the 27th annual Martin Luther King Celebration, a service and luncheon under the leadership of members of the historic Haven Creek Missionary Baptist Church, sharing an evangelical message focused on the importance of Jesus in Dr. King's message and legacy, as well as in the work of justice that remains to be done.

Which version of Dr. King is true? Who owns his story?

This question about who owns the story came back to me as I was reading about Outer Banks history, wanting to lift up some significant figure from the story of the African American experience here for *our* Martin Luther King weekend service. I was particularly struck by a man who's no doubt familiar to most of you already: Richard Etheridge. Now, I don't want to turn this into a history lecture, especially since I'm the newcomer here and you all probably know more about this than I do, but let me share a few things I learned.

Richard Etheridge was one of the approximately 170 black residents of Roanoke Island noted in the 1850 census. Along with many other African-descended Americans on the island, he shared a name with his white slave-owner—familiar historic Outer Banks family names like Baum, Tillett, Midgett, Dough, Meekins, and Wescott. Rapidly outnumbered by the slaves brought when the Confederates garrisoned the Island, many of those Roanoke Island-born people remained here, and were freed when the Union Army took over after the Battle of Roanoke Island. Etheridge and others joined the Union Army. Their families remained on the Island, and became part of what's come to be known as the Freedmen's Colony, established partly as a way to accommodate several thousand newly liberated people who fled toward this thin swath of Union-controlled land and partly as a social experiment in how formerly enslaved people might gain self-sustaining independence along with their freedom.

The freedmen who had become soldiers were promised that their families would be taken care of by the occupying Union forces, but conditions in the Freedmen's Colony were harsh and a number of letters exist showing that the men raised concerns about their families. Richard Etheridge wrote one with another soldier named William Benson from the Battle of Petersburg,

complaining about conditions and about the behavior of the people responsible for the welfare of the colony.

After the war, when President Andrew Johnson's amnesty effectively returned the land of the Freedmen's Colony to its former white owners, most of the colony's residents were removed. But many of those who had lived here before the War insisted on remaining, even without really knowing where they would live. A few, including Richard Etheridge, managed to purchase some property, and established communities that still exist today. Etheridge appears again a few years later as one of the surfmen who were part of the famous U.S. Lifesaving Stations, and when it was decided to bring all the black Lifesavers together in one station, he was made the Keeper of the Pea Island Lifesaving Station, famous both as the only all-African American station and as one of the most effective of them all. Richard Etheridge was also one of the commissioners of the African American school called the Roanoke Academy; he was a Dare County Commissioner during the Reconstruction era. He died in 1901.

In the years after the Pea Island Lifesaving Station was closed in 1947, the story of this man whose name pops up all over 40 years of local history was largely forgotten. Rediscovered when the story of the Pea Island Station was resurrected in 1996, Richard Etheridge became a heroic face of the station, of the Freedmen's Colony, and of the post-Civil War establishment of Manteo's African American community. His was the one name everyone knew—and if you're doing casual research, as I've been doing recently, his is the only name you'll find mentioned with any prominence.

Recently, though, when the Exhibits Technician at the Aquarium began working on a series of panels about Etheridge and the Pea Island Lifesavers to place outdoors at the cemetery where Etheridge's grave had been discovered, there were murmurs from the African American community: "He wasn't the only one." A whole series of other keepers followed Etheridge in the 46 years after his death that the station remained active; dozens of other men served there with courage, dedication and distinction. What about Lewis Westcott, Maxie Berry Sr., Herbert Collins; what about Theodore Meekins, or George Midgett, who was also a Dare County Commissioner and a Justice of the Peace during Reconstruction? Why weren't they important enough to be remembered?

It became clear that in the eyes of the community, this isn't just one individual's story; that's just how the first interested historians happened to tell it. It's actually a community story. And it matters to the community how the story gets told. Is it a story of segregation and neglect, of a "separate but equal," second-class station created so white lifesavers wouldn't have to serve with their black counterparts? Or is it a proud heritage, a sign of a people's courage and determination to serve honorably in a difficult, dangerous, heroic calling? Or might it be both? Who gets to decide?

It matters how the stories are told; it matters who the stories belong to. Is the history of the Civil Rights movement the story of one eloquent leader who single-handedly changed the world, or of a collective of tough-minded, strategically brilliant leaders who chose a spokesperson; is it the tale of a few people sitting at counters or in the front seats of buses, or of a whole people standing up, walking forward in the face of white terrorism?

When Ta-Nehisi Coates realized in Paris that for the first time in his life, he was not “part of someone else’s dream,” it was a moment of liberation and a call to do something urgent. Much of his book *Between the World and Me*, crafted as a letter to his fifteen-year-old son, talks about how black people in America are trapped inside a story about who they are, about what their life should be, about their worth as human beings. That story is told by the people, as Coates puts it, “who believe they are white.” Escaping that story, which he calls The Dream, and learning how to tell his own story, is a basic necessity of sanity and survival.

I believe that escaping The Dream is equally necessary for those of us who have been raised to be white in a culture where white is the color of dominance and power. We escape it, first, by learning how to hear the stories that have been hidden, unheard, or disregarded. We escape it by building enough trust and credibility as allies for justice that we might even hear the stories that have been kept from us out of fear born in experience that we will take them over and make them ours. We escape it by learning the ways, visible and invisible, in which the idea of whiteness distorts and disfigures our history, our culture, and our own lives.

It’s hard to do this. Why bother? Well, as a religious community, we have a dream of our own. We have a vision of a human family that is blessed and enriched by its differences and diversities, even as it is united in its commitment to freedom, equality, and justice. We dream of breaking down the centuries-old walls that divide one group from another, and of living in a single beloved community.

We can’t do that without getting the stories. We need to know the stories of our personal, communal, and institutional ancestors that are hard for us to accept, as well as those we can be proud of. We need to know the stories of individuals and communities who found ways to live in the face of overwhelming challenges, as well as those who were broken and lost. We need to know the stories that belong to people whose history in the great American saga of racial inequality has been a long chronicle of determined, indomitable dignity, resistance, and resilience.

We are a people called by our faith to be committed to justice in this world, in this life. The most effective work for justice arises in relationship with people whose lives are affected by injustice. The most powerful tool for building those relationships is getting each others’ stories. Only then can we begin to craft the new story, the story of the undivided human family.

It’s ours to tell—but no one can ever tell it alone.