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Racial Imaginary

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A Letter to Abigail on Education and Black Liberation

Dear Abigail,

I would like to begin this letter with a brief memory. A memory which will contextualize this letter and why I have written it to you in particular. It was a week before Ohio's History Day, a tradition in Ohio public schools where students dress up as prominent figures from American history. My history teacher was behind her desk, preparing to project a list of American historical figures on the whiteboard. She was retrieving the list from the Ohio Department of Education's website, as per tradition for the annual event. The class coalesced around the board with giddy anticipation, eyes darting and body parts fidgeting as we waited. Figures were assigned on a first-come, first-served basis, therefore students were prepared to bolt to the teacher's desk once the list was revealed. As the list came into focus my joy faltered. While my white peers around me jumped from their seats and dashed into line to make their requests, I stood up with a sigh. It was clear that people that looked like me weren't considered important to American history. Of the list of dozens of individuals, only two were black: Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. I asked myself, "Why am I surprised?" It was apparent in our textbooks that, in the history told by colonizers, those who dared to explore, to defy, and to innovate were white.

In that moment, I was resigned to that version of history, but upon reflection, I am enraged. It has taken me years to come to terms with how institutionalized education has affected how I perceive the value of my blackness and my voice. I am now still in the process of unlearning the colonizer's perspective and reclaiming American history as my own. As your older cousin, I felt that it was my responsibility to produce a guiding text for when you begin this process. To detail for you my present and most intimate experiences and thought process surrounding this effort to decolonize my education. This is that text.

I tell you this with sincerity Abigail, traditional American schools will not teach you your history. As I experienced in the fifth grade, institutional education chooses to cage black Americans in two time periods: the era of slavery and the Civil Rights Movement. These schools would have you believe that black history solely consists of our subjugation and our responses to it. While these periods of momentous struggle are crucial to our learning, this telling of history erases our cultural achievements and contributions to society. Black people are also change makers and creators, but because of their blackness, their accomplishments aren't deemed as valuable, and therefore aren't included in traditional education. Our confines are even more narrow than they appear as a majority of the most prominent figures in these movements are erased. As a child, I never learned about the radical and magnificent Ella Baker, Huey P. Newton, or Malcom X. These individuals were only mentioned in contrast to a whitewashed, incrementalist depiction of Martin Luther King Jr. Their visions were revolutionary and challenged the ways wealth, power, and jobs were distributed in our country. They recognized racism as systematic, not as acts of individual evil. Rather than acknowledge the variety in their

demands and in their methods of activism, schools have minimized the Civil Rights Movement to one man. The words of King were cherry-picked and distorted into a singular message of colorblindness. By the time you finish elementary school, you will have learned King's phrase which advocates for being judged not by the color of your skin, but by the content of your character. But you will never learn about King's urgent call to take action on police brutality and examine "the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers" ("Eulogy for the Martyred Children"). Forms of black resistance which are considered unacceptable by the white public are excluded from your textbooks.

This is why I encourage you to seek an alternative education, an education built on the personal narratives of our community. We must reclaim our education and we must do so with the documentation of our and our people's experiences.

This alternative education can be found in narratives like Catina Bacote's "Up North." In this text, Bacote challenges traditional storytelling by centering her story around a black woman and her family. Bacote crafted a story which valued the perspective of black women and described her grandmother's experiences with a blunt clarity. I learned more about black perseverance in America in this text than I ever did in my textbooks. A particularly powerful moment was when Bacote's grandmother Louise boarded a Greyhound to the city that would become her future home. Along this journey, Louise gets off the bus in a small, rural town to get milk for her baby. She is met with hostile stares and palpable tension from the white residents around her. The reader is immersed in flashbacks of klan robes, white terror, and her time as a sharecropper. That same powerlessness she felt as a child, tied to a plantation she was forced to maintain for its white owner, came back to her. But so did a story her grandmother told her about

small forms of resistance. There was this dipper, a tin cup, which was supposed to be used to provide water for her grandmother's white slave owners. Her grandmother, as an act of defiance, would drink from that same cup when she was alone or with friends. Although this resistance wasn't explicit, it was a way to take back some power and assert her humanity. This story gave Louise the strength to enter the gas station, buy what she needed, and get back on her bus. She came from a line of strong women who in their own ways stood up against racism, and this knowledge guided her. This is the power of the stories of your ancestors and your people. These stories will empower you and provide you with the foundation you need to see beyond American myths of democracy and freedom. This type of education will show you what it means to be black and American.

By consuming the narratives of your ancestors and your black brothers and sisters, you will learn of your own identity. You will learn how you fit into this country and what those before you have gone through to figure this out as well. By being grounded in your identity, you will be able to make your own decisions and judgments about our society. So, ask your parents and grandparents about their history. Take in their tribulations and triumphs and their experiences living in this world as black and as Ethiopian. Read about the lives of others who, like you, do not have their stories represented in institutional education. Reclaim your education.

Love, Mel

Works Cited

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