

Local History Report

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In addition to the usual monthly duties of answering history and genealogy inquiries, I had the honor of sitting in on a lecture from Dr. Alphonso Simpson on February 15. We had invited Dr. Simpson back after a great talk last year on Juneteenth, and this time he used “Black History Month” as the jumping off point for the discussion.

The professor’s credentials speak for themselves. He is the Program Director of African American Studies at University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, as well as the vice president of the National Council for Black Studies (NCBS). This latter position has him traveling around the country (and the world) meeting with universities developing curricula. If there’s an influential scholar or author in the field, Simpson has them on speed dial. On a personal level, he is a third-generation college graduate, with his grandfather studying under none other than Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee University.

Dr. Simpson explored a number of concepts that I found very thought-provoking, and managed to squeeze hours’ worth of material into a single 45-minute talk. Chiefly among them is the idea of the “hyphenated American.” In this specific case, the focus was African-American, but in many ways this applies to Asian-American, Native American, etc. and even has parallels with being female.

We take whiteness (and maleness) to be the default situation. We do not refer to white people as Caucasian-American. Dr. Simpson noted that students will say they had a “black professor” but when they have a white professor, they simply say “professor.” Although this may not be done out of malice, it intrinsically makes anyone non-white an “other.” Similarly, by using terms like “minority” we are implicitly saying “less than” or “not as important,” even if that is not our intention. Race (and gender) should not be invisible – differences are very real – but by centering one, we automatically move others to the fringes.

Dr. Simpson used a great analogy of jumping rope. For many of us, learning to navigate American society is as simple as jumping rope. Once we learn the basics, we’re ready to go. But *minoritized* people are jumping two ropes simultaneously – they have to meet the standards of both being American, as well as being whatever “hyphen” they’re born with. A black man who stumbles may hear something like, “Of course he failed – they’re lazy!” No regard is given to the fact one must run twice as fast simply to stay still. Or, if one black person makes a mistake, it is a reflection on millions of others. A black man being arrested is “typical” while a white man being arrested is “unfortunate.” Again, this can be analogized for many groups. Women in leadership roles is an obvious example – they are expected to hit the same goals as men, but will be criticized if they aren’t simultaneously being women. A woman may be expected to take on mother/wife duties a husband/father would not, as well as the expectation that being overly aggressive/ambitious would make them unladylike or “bitchy.”

A related topic I encourage people to read up on is European Paradigm Domination. I don't want to go into it here for fear of misrepresenting the concept, but as a historian, the ideas expressed around the failings of Eurocentrism ring strongly.

One last idea: the concept of un-learning. We learn many things in our lives, right or wrong. But it is very hard to un-learn. Can you forget how to drive? How to get dressed? How to tie your shoe? The hardest part of learning African-American History is un-learning all the things we were taught incorrectly or incompletely. Dr. Simpson provided a long, rapid list of advancements that came to us from people of color: automotive improvements, rail advances, medicine, hygiene, food preservation, and many more. How many can you name? Maybe no more than George Washington Carver, who has been reduced to the "peanut guy."

Locally, Oshkosh has taken the forefront in promoting Black History. UW-Oshkosh created their African-American Studies program in 1969, only the second in the nation to do so (behind San Francisco). This was an outgrowth of "Black Thursday," a demonstration by ninety-four students of color (the "Oshkosh 94") who were encouraged by the turbulent changes sweeping the nation. Frankly, I had never heard of the Oshkosh 94 until Dr. Simpson spoke, and it has me wondering... how many other local events have occurred that are not part of the public consciousness? (For more, please see <http://www.blackthursday.uwosh.edu/index.html>)

My apologies for such a long report on a single program, but such a program as this warrants it. Dr. Alphonso Simpson is one of the best presenters I've had the pleasure to hear at KPL or elsewhere, and I truly we hope we continue to invite him back to explore more of these important topics.